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SPORTS, C-1 & C-6

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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DA makes death penalty case

Cites aggravating factors in the Feb. 6 shooting of McKeesport police Officer Sean Sluganski

By Megan Guza
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Allegheny County District Attorney's Office said Friday it will seek the death penalty against a McKeesport man accused of killing one officer and wounding another early last month.

Johnathan Morris, 31, is charged with homicide in connection with the Feb. 6 fatal shooting of McKeesport police Officer Sean Sluganski. Officer Chuck Thomas was shot in the face but survived his injuries.

Mr. Morris, the son of a former McKeesport officer, was ordered to stand trial after a preliminary hearing Feb. 17 in front of District Judge Bruce J. Boni. Formal arraignment is scheduled for Tuesday.



Morris

To seek the death penalty, prosecutors must show there was at least one aggravating factor involved in the commission of the crime. District Attorney Stephen A. Zappala Jr. cited four in his notice:

- The victim was a police officer.
- The suspect committed the alleged killing during the commission of another felony.
- The suspect knowingly created a grave risk of death to another person in addition to Sluganski.
- The suspect has a significant history of felony convictions involving the use or threat of violence to the person.

Although Mr. Morris does not have a criminal history, if a jury finds him guilty of the charges against him in this case, those convictions will count as a criminal history for purposes of sentencing.

SEE **PENALTY**, PAGE A-2

Pa. court scuttles rental registry

By Michael Korsh and Neena Hagen
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

In yet another setback for housing advocates and city officials who have fought for years to hold shoddy landlords accountable, a state judge struck down legislation Friday meant to establish stricter rental laws in Pittsburgh.

The bill, passed by Pittsburgh City Council in 2021, would have imposed more frequent rental inspections and required landlords to register their properties and disclose proof of ownership with the city.

Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court Senior Judge Mary Hannah Leavitt, who issued the opinion, said the law — which includes mandated training courses and disclosing inspection reports in a public database — placed excessive burdens on landlords.

The court found “the city was without authority to enact the Rental Ordinance in its present configuration,” reversing the Allegheny County Common Pleas Court decision to uphold the registry.

The decision for now delays efforts to crack down on owners who fail to rid their properties of

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PITT 59, IOWA STATE 41

PANTHERS MARCH FORWARD



John Bazemore/Associated Press

Pitt forward Guillermo Diaz Graham reacts Friday after scoring in the second half against Iowa State in the NCAA tournament in Greensboro, N.C. The Panthers move on to play No. 3 Midwest Region seed Xavier in the second round Sunday. Elsewhere, 16th-seeded Fairleigh Dickinson upset top-seeded Purdue in one of the biggest upsets in tournament history. **More coverage in Sports, Section C.**

A ‘surreal’ celebration

Pitt med students find out residency plans on Match Day

By Maddie Aiken
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Crammed in the lobby of the University of Pittsburgh's Petersen Events Center, Maria Evankovich's heart pounded. Tears brimmed in her eyes.

In her hands, she held an envelope that revealed where she would spend the next four years of her life. Ms. Evankovich was joined by her fiancé, Adam Eibel, and roughly 140 of her peers, who held envelopes of their own.

The Pitt School of Medicine students, like medical students across the country, had to wait until noon Friday to open the envelopes, which revealed where they would train for residency upon graduation. The highly anticipated “Match Day” is one of the most important days in a medical student's career.

When the clock struck noon in Petersen Events Center, murmurs of nervous anticipation quickly turned into cheers, hugs and



Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Caroline Heres, center, reveals her medical residency plans during Pitt's Match Day on Friday at Petersen Events Center.

handshakes.

“Once we saw where we were going, I just kind of lost it,” said Ms. Evankovich, who will complete her residency at UPMC

SEE **MATCH DAY**, PAGE A-2

Pittsburgh airport traffic almost all back

By Mark Belko
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Three years after COVID-19 hit, passenger traffic at Pittsburgh International Airport is finally taxiing close to pre-pandemic days.

In February, traffic rebounded to 93.7% of 2019 levels, with 595,800 travelers using the terminal. That's only about 41,000 passengers lower than those who passed through in February 2019.

And airlines operating from the Findlay airport are responding by increasing capacity. Last month, available seats hit 99% of pre-pandemic levels.

Even better news is that the Allegheny County Airport Authority, which runs Pittsburgh International, is predicting that seat capacity in July will be 4% higher than it was in the same month in 2019.

“Things are starting to look better and better,” authority CEO Christina Cassotis told board members at their meeting Friday.

It has been a long journey back for Pittsburgh

SEE **AIRPORT**, PAGE A-2

Weinstein denies secret deal to get back on board

By Adam Smeltz
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Allegheny County Treasurer John Weinstein forcefully denied any involvement in a secret attempt to return him to a powerful seat on the local sewer board that he lost last year, saying late Friday that his “goals never were and never will be to advance me.”



Weinstein

In an article first published online Thursday, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reported that County Councilwoman Bethany Hallam floated an offer last year to state Rep. Emily Kinkead: If Ms. Kinkead resigned her Alcosan board seat — creating an opening for Mr. Weinstein shortly after he had been removed — the politically powerful treasurer would stop supporting Ms. Kinkead's opponent in the 2022 Democratic primary. Ms. Kinkead, D-Allegheny, rejected the idea, which raised legal and ethical questions. She won re-election and still serves on the sewer board.

In a blistering statement Friday evening, Mr. Weinstein said he

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Local



Jocelyn Nita, center, sings along to live music Friday at Mullaney's Harp & Fiddle in the Strip District as part of a St. Patrick's Day celebration.

LENDING THEIR VOICES

Accentuating all things green, Ann Wittman enthusiastically joins in with the live music during the celebration.



Pittsburgh Post-Gazette photos

Route 28 ramp slated for long-term closure

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Motorists who take the Highland Park Bridge to Downtown and the North Side via Route 28 are facing another long-term detour starting Monday.

PennDOT has announced the ramp from the bridge to southbound Route 28 will close to traffic around 7 a.m. Monday and continue through mid-May. Crews will complete reconstruction work, bridge rehabilitation, and drainage improvements on the ramp that began last October and kept the ramp closed through mid-December.

Again, the posted detour will keep motorists on Butler Street (Route 8) to the 62nd Street Bridge to the Sharpsburg ramp to Route 28 southbound.

From Freeport Road, PennDOT suggests

taking the ramp to northbound Route 28 and exiting at the Fox Chapel Road/Waterworks Exit, bearing left toward Fox Chapel Road, and re-entering Route 28 southbound.

Additionally, beginning at around 7 a.m. on Monday, the ramp from Virginia Avenue Extension in the Aspinwall/O'Hara area to southbound Route 28 will close to traffic around-the-clock through early August. Crews will conduct ramp reconstruction work, sound wall installation, barrier placement, and drainage improvements. Ramp traffic to southbound Route 28 will be detoured, again by going northbound to Fox Chapel.

The work is part of the \$47.31 million project that will address the existing bottleneck and congested traffic flow on Route 28 at the Highland Park Bridge interchange.

Man sentenced for traveling to have sex with minor

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A federal judge has sentenced a former Virginia man to 10 years in prison for taking a 14-year-old minor from Washington County with the intent of having sexual activity.

A news release from the U.S. Attorney's Office in Pittsburgh said District Judge Joy Flowers Conti also sentenced Akipat Vutipawat, 29, of Alexandria, Va., to 10 years of supervised release.

Vutipawat had pleaded guilty to travel with intent to

engage in illicit sexual conduct, transportation with intent to engage in criminal sexual activity, and obstruction of justice — hindering communication through corrupt persuasion.

Prosecutors said Vutipawat, then 26, was arrested in mid-May 2020 in Washington County on charges related to the sexual abuse of a 14-year-old. He was released on bond and returned to Virginia.

According to the release, on May 29, 2020, Vutipawat traveled back to Pennsylvania "and assisted the minor

in absconding from placement. Vutipawat then took the minor to an apartment in Virginia. Vutipawat's travel from Virginia to Pennsylvania was tracked by his cellular telephone. Other evidence on Vutipawat's cellphone, including his internet search history, indicated Vutipawat's intent to engage in sexual contact with the minor."

The release said Vutipawat originally met the minor on a website called "Secret Benefits" and presented himself as a wealthy businessman.

County executive candidate calls out Weinstein on ethical issues

WEINSTEIN, FROM A-1

could not have actually replaced Ms. Kinkead because her board seat is "exclusively reserved for city-based appointees." Now a leading Democratic candidate in the May 16 primary for county executive, Mr. Weinstein lives in Kennedy, not in the city of Pittsburgh, and had previously occupied an Alcosan seat controlled by county officials.

But there is no residency requirement for mayoral appointments to the body. One of the currently serving city appointees, Shannah Tharp Gilliam, doesn't live in the city and didn't when she was appointed by then-Mayor Bill Peduto in 2019 (she lives in Forest Hills).

Mr. Weinstein's campaign did not comment on those details Friday night. Ms. Hallam did not respond to requests for comment Thursday.

"I will no longer accept my more than two decades of service to our taxpayers being dragged through the mud on the basis of rumors, outright falsehoods and innuendos being slung by competitors," Mr. Weinstein said in his statement.

"I look forward to this race moving away from deliberate smear tactics from my opponents and instead turning to a discussion of ideas about how best to move this region forward," he added.

Earlier in the day, the growing questions surrounding Mr. Weinstein's role on the sewer board took center stage in the high-stakes race for county executive, when an underdog candidate seized on news reports to suggest Mr. Weinstein abused official power for his own gain.

Dave Fawcett, a trial lawyer and former County Council member, cast big money in campaigns as potentially corrupting, tempting and dangerous, noting that the sewer board awards hundreds of millions of dollars in contracts to construction and other companies. And he highlighted Mr. Weinstein's own fundraising as potentially problematic.

"It's not a big surprise that some people with bad motives might want to influence how that money is spent, just as it's no surprise that people want to influence judges," Mr. Fawcett, speaking during a news conference outside his law firm's Downtown office, said of Alcosan spending that for years Mr. Weinstein helped oversee. "What is shocking and what is appalling is that a public official is willing to go to such great lengths to keep control and stay in the money game."

The Post-Gazette has also previously reported that the FBI had approached Alcosan about Mr. Weinstein's activity as a board member there, and that a member

of the U.S. Attorney's Office in Pittsburgh had expressed concerns about Mr. Weinstein's work there to county and city leaders.

Mr. Weinstein has not been charged with any wrongdoing or publicly identified as the subject of any investigation.

Mr. Weinstein served on the Alcosan board for a decade. But Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald removed him last year after the interest from federal authorities. That proved to be difficult, due to maneuvering by some of Mr. Weinstein's supporters on County Council. With the help of Ms. Hallam, a bare majority rejected Mr. Fitzgerald's first nominee to replace Mr. Weinstein, an exceptionally rare move that gave him another month on the Alcosan board.

Recent news reports, including by the Post-Gazette, suggest Mr. Weinstein has "engaged in a pattern of illegal activity in a number of contexts," Mr. Fawcett said Friday. He called for limiting the size of campaign contributions in Allegheny County (there are currently no limits for county offices), and for more frequent disclosure of campaign fundraising and spending.

Mr. Fawcett is among six Democrats seeking the party's nomination for county executive in the May 16 primary election. He ended 2022 with roughly \$308,000 in campaign cash — the second-highest total at that point, behind only Mr. Weinstein, according to financial filings. Mr. Weinstein's campaign said more recently that it has raised more than \$1 million total. Mr. Fawcett's fundraising through 2022 included a \$150,000 loan he made to his own campaign.

Democratic insiders generally regard Mr. Weinstein, state Rep. Sara Innamorato and Pittsburgh City Controller Michael Lamb as the leading candidates for the nomination to succeed Mr. Fitzgerald, who is term-limited. Mr. Fawcett is seen as a wild card who could surprise with a strong showing.

Ms. Innamorato and Mr. Lamb did not return messages seeking comment Friday.

Mr. Fawcett challenged coal giant Massey Energy in a series of court cases more than a decade ago, one of which established that judges should recuse themselves in certain circumstances when campaign contributions they have received pose a conflict of interest.

He said Friday that his opponents in the county executive race should voluntarily disclose their large campaign donations sooner than required by law — something he said he would be willing to do.

"People need to be able to trust their elected officials," Mr. Fawcett said. Allowing candidates and elected officials to accept unlimited campaign cash can lead to political corruption and abuse of power, he argued, accusing Mr.

Weinstein of leveraging campaign money "to try to get people to do what he wants so that he can maintain his power."

If the proposal to Ms. Kinkead involved campaign money, that could have violated Pennsylvania law, said Delaney Marsco, senior legal counsel for ethics at the nonprofit Campaign Legal Center in Washington. It's illegal to offer something of monetary value to pursue "improper influence of an official's action or judgment," she said.

Responding to the Post-Gazette report Thursday on Twitter, Robert L. Byer, a former Commonwealth Court judge, said "it's no surprise that [Ms. Kinkead] did the right thing here. She is smart, honest and a dedicated public servant."

"As for the others," he wrote, "we need a grand jury." He tagged the Twitter handle for the state Attorney General's Office.

In a statement Friday, Allegheny County GOP chair Sam DeMarco said the "seemingly quid pro quo alleged in news reports is exactly the kind of backroom politics Allegheny County cannot afford."

He called for Ms. Hallam to resign from County Council's committee on government reform, and seconded Mr. Byer's call for a grand jury.

"I am not a lawyer and will not pretend to know all the nuances of the law," Mr. DeMarco said, "but as a citizen and a member of Allegheny County Council, I know that the allegations raised against both Weinstein and Hallam call for a close examination."

The flurry of developments Friday also followed tension at a Thursday meeting of the Allegheny County Retirement Board. County Controller Corey O'Connor has pushed a measure to restrict political contributions from financial firms that invest the county's pension money, which amounts to more than \$1 billion, Post-Gazette news partner KDKA-TV reported.

Mr. Weinstein, who chairs the retirement board, said the measure wasn't "in the bounds of the law correctly." A committee will explore the matter, including how many fund managers the county needs, KDKA reported.

The crowded Democratic field for county executive shrank by one on Friday, when Olivia "Liv" Bennett withdrew from that race as well as her bid for re-election to County Council, David Voye, an Allegheny County Elections Division manager, confirmed. She won't appear on the primary ballot, but her withdrawal preserves her ability to run as a third-party or independent candidate in November. Ms. Bennett did not return a call Friday evening.

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Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh has sought to establish a rental registry that would hold landlords accountable for their properties.

Court strikes down city's rental registry

RENTAL, FROM A-1

dangerous and dilapidated conditions while continuing to collect rent from tenants at a time the city is steeped in an affordable-housing crisis.

In a news release, Mayor Ed Gainey said he was "deeply disappointed" in the decision, and that the city would appeal to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.

"Pittsburgh is a majority-renter city, and everyone who lives here deserves protection and the knowledge that their rented home meets basic standards of living," Mr. Gainey said in the statement.

Pittsburgh's rental registry program — which forced landlords to abide by the property codes and address outstanding violations — was struck down twice before, when interest groups representing property owners, including the Landlord Services Bureau, mounted legal challenges.

The groups argued before that the fees for inspections amounted to an "unconstitutional" tax on property owners, and that the ordinance violated state law.

"This is a victory we were clearly looking for in the last 13 years," said John Corcoran Jr., the attorney for the Landlord Services Bureau. He said the state's Home Rule Law gives Pittsburgh broad authority in many areas, but not when it comes to a rental registry "and we've raised that every single time."

After passing the most recent version, City Councilman Bruce Kraus said council took the prior roadblocks into account, and he believed "the bill was constructed in such a way that it would withstand any scrutiny in the courts."

In the legislation's latest form, all rental properties built before 1978 must undergo lead testing, as part of Pittsburgh's Lead Safety Ordinance.

City officials also lowered the initial fees to \$14 per unit for inspection, \$16 for application intake and \$5.50 for travel expenses — which Mr. Gainey argued would do "nothing more than recoup the costs to carry out the program."

In 2015, City Council proposed fees between \$45 and \$65 initially for inspection, while it included a caveat that if properties passed the first in-

spection, owners would only pay half the fee to renew their licenses.

The city achieved a breakthrough in 2017, when the county court found that the registry was a valid use of the city's police powers, as it "will positively impact neighborhoods by ensuring rental properties are safe."

For decades, Pittsburgh's failure to regularly inspect apartments has set it apart from other cities in the state.

Erie inspects rental properties every two years. Starting in 2000, Allentown mandated inspections every five years — the same frequency as the proposal in Pittsburgh. And Philadelphia created a rental registry in 2015, allowing the city to track property ownership and compliance with building codes.

A Post-Gazette investigation last year found that hundreds of rental homes across the city were rife with code and health violations, while some of the properties had not been inspected for more than a decade.

On McKee Place, one apartment has racked up 74 health violations in the past five years, including mold, rotted floorboards and electrical hazards.

At a rental on Dawson Street, the ceiling collapsed twice in one year.

Both properties still house tenants.

"It's demoralizing," said Andrea Boykowyc, assistant director of Oakland Planning and Development Corporation, which has long fought for stricter rental laws.

Without the registry, "the city is hamstrung without effective tools to compel compliance," she said.

But not every housing advocate supports more stringent regulations.

"I don't think we do a very good job of enforcing the laws that are already on the books," said Rick Swartz, executive director of the Bloomfield-Garfield Corporation, which restores and rents out properties in the neighborhood.

Even though Mr. Swartz "understands some of the rationale" for the measure, he said more red tape could become "unsustainable" for landlords.

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