

First lady to tout 'Bidenomics' in Pittsburgh

Jill Biden's visit part of administration's tour

By Benjamin Kail
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

WASHINGTON — First lady Jill Biden is bringing her husband's "Bidenomics" tour to Pittsburgh next week.

Ms. Biden plans to visit the city as part of the administration's summer tour touting economic gains and investments in America's workforce, Bloomberg reports.

The pit stop by the first lady comes as President Joe Biden talks up "Bidenomics" — his administration's new branding for its efforts to invest in infrastructure,

boost U.S. manufacturing and create jobs in a range of sectors, including biotech and climate. Ms. Biden's visit also comes a month after the White House highlighted that Pennsylvania, a key 2024 battleground state, has received \$9 billion in federal funding for infrastructure and another \$2 billion in private investment spurred by legislation he signed into law.

The White House hasn't yet announced when Ms. Biden will be in Pittsburgh next week, or where she will visit. She also plans trips to Georgia and Ohio over the next two weeks, according to Bloomberg.

Ms. Biden is expected to meet with Pittsburgh officials to discuss workforce hubs. The administration in May named the city as one

of five workforce hub sites across the country to encourage more public and private investment in new and innovative industries. The administration says it will partner with elected and community leaders in hub cities — which also include Columbus, Ohio, Augusta, Ga., Baltimore and Phoenix — to help develop a skilled and diverse workforce.

The White House said at the time that Pittsburgh was singled out for its emerging robotics, biomanufacturing and clean energy industries, along with its "world-class universities." The city also received a federal grant to help ensure that residents of Southwestern Pennsylvania's rural

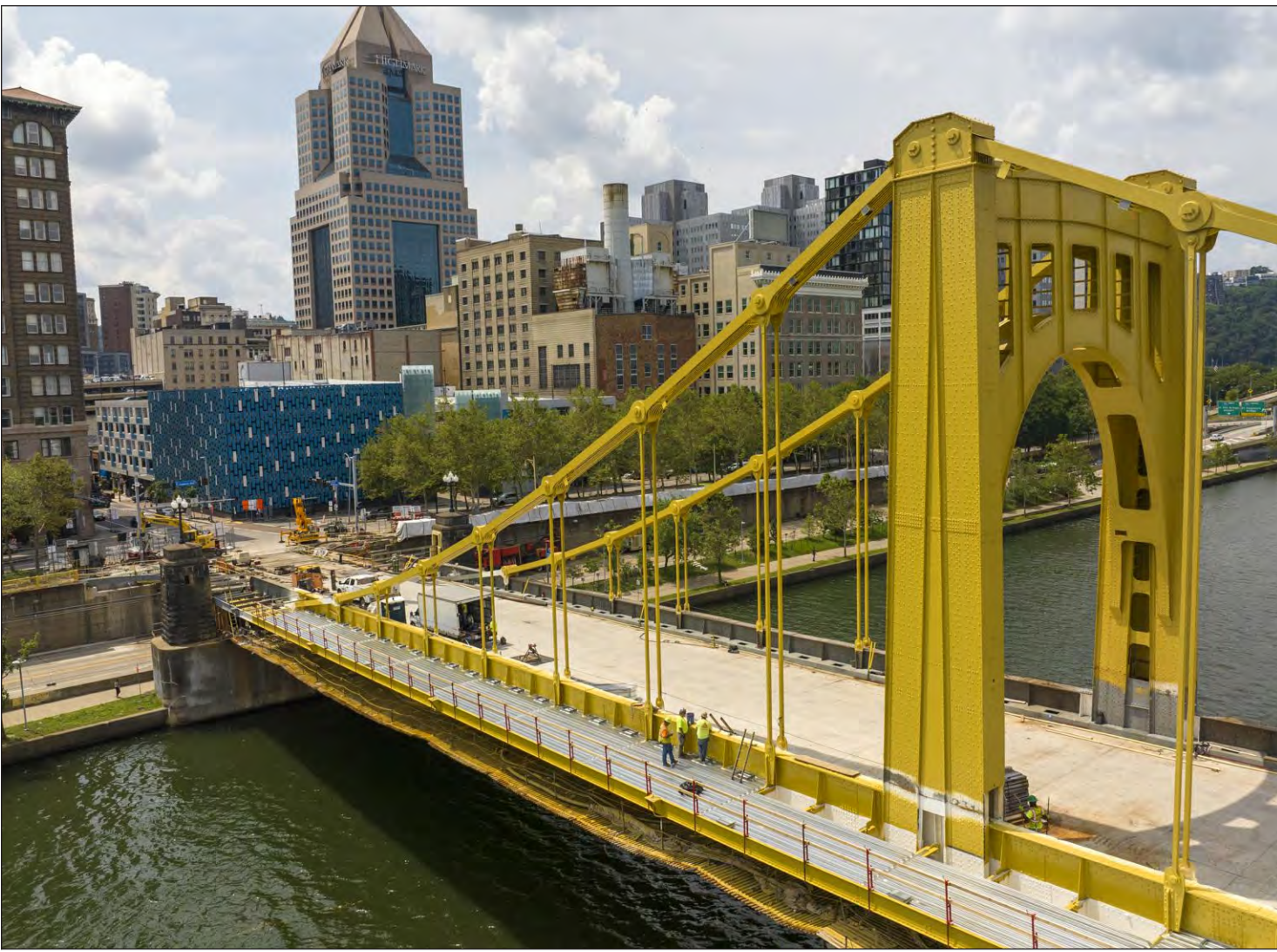
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Associated Press

First lady Jill Biden, pictured last month in Philadelphia, will visit Pittsburgh next week. The date and location have yet to be announced.

CLEMENTE BRIDGE REHABILITATION



Benjamin B. Braun/Post-Gazette

Construction workers take a break while working on the Roberto Clemente Bridge on Wednesday in Downtown. The \$34.4 million rehabilitation project is on target for completion in December, according to Allegheny County, which owns the bridge. Part of the project is adding 1920s-style street lighting. The bridge, a popular way for Pirates fans to walk to PNC Park, has been closed since Feb. 14, 2022.

STATE COURT

Autopsy, toxicology info will be public records

By Michael Korsh
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A Pennsylvania state court handed down a key decision that will allow autopsy and toxicology reports in Allegheny County to become public records, a move that will greatly expand open access to information about deaths in Allegheny County.

The Commonwealth Court of Pennsylvania said on Tuesday that county officials must produce autopsy records for Daniel Pastorek, a 63-year-old inmate at the Allegheny County jail who died in November 2020.

While officials said Pastorek died from heart disease, Brittany Hailer, director of the Pittsburgh Institute for Nonprofit Journalism, sought to obtain county records filed a month afterward to assess if conditions in the county jail contributed to Pastorek's death, court records show.

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New library books at Hempfield Area schools could be reviewed

By Megan Tomasic
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Potential new books coming into Hempfield Area School District libraries could first be reviewed by the public before going on school shelves under proposed revisions to the district's book policy.

The amendment, which would require librarians to submit a

public list of requested books for a 30-day review, is the latest proposal by the school board as they grapple with a year and half-long debate first sparked by a small group of parents concerned over what they called sexually explicit materials.

The review period would allow residents to raise concerns about any of the proposed books.

School directors on Monday put

the latest iteration of policies for selecting resource materials and for requesting the re-evaluation of resource materials on 30-day review. The policies will be up for final approval following that period.

"While it was a challenge to develop a process that is satisfactory to all, I believe the work of the [policy] committee has brought forward a process that everyone can

live with," Superintendent Tammy Wolicki said in an email.

Discussions around library books first started in March 2022 when some parents questioned "All Boys Aren't Blue" by George M. Johnson, which chronicles the author's journey growing up as a queer Black man. "The Black Friend: On Being A Better White Person" by Frederick Joseph was

also challenged. The book discusses Mr. Joseph's experiences with racism.

Since then the board's policy committee has worked to create a plan that would satisfy parents with differing opinions while ensuring students have access to necessary materials.

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Pa. budget impasse could mean higher tuition for in-state Pitt, PSU students

By Brooke Schultz
Associated Press/Report for America

HARRISBURG — A partisan dispute about funding for three of Pennsylvania's state-related universities may mean higher tuition for in-state students as a budget impasse continues further into the summer.

The state government approached two weeks without full spending authority on Wednesday, while loose ends remained

untied. Snarled in limbo is funding for three Pennsylvania universities that receive state subsidies — Penn State, the University of Pittsburgh and Temple. Gov. Josh Shapiro and his Democratic allies have supported increasing state aid to the three schools by 7% to \$623 million, collectively.

Republicans, however, have balked. House Republicans repeatedly rejected efforts to

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Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

In a letter to his counterpart in the House of Representatives, state Senate Majority Leader Joe Pittman placed the onus on the Democratic-controlled House to end the budget impasse.

Post-Gazette wins top features journalism award for second year in a row

By Emily Costantino
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette staff has won the Division 2 sweepstakes award in the Society for Features Journalism Excellence-in-Features competition for the second year in a row.

The staff earned 16 awards: five first places, three second places, six third places and two honorable mentions.

"We are extremely proud of the high quality of writing reflected in the Sweepstakes Award, and it's doubly gratifying to see journalists from literally every corner of the newsroom honored for their exceptional journalism," said Stan Wischnowski, executive editor of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

The SFJ's annual contest, one of the nation's most competitive for

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County gains access to more medical records

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“This is a big win for transparency,” said Melissa Melewsy, media law counsel at the Pennsylvania NewsMedia Association.

Because Pastorek had no next-of-kin, and died in the custody of a public agency, “it falls to the community to figure out whether that death calls for a policy change at the county or state level,” she said. “The autopsy report is a critical tool.”

Since April 2020, more than a dozen inmates have died either at the county jail or a hospital nearby, leading to calls for the Allegheny County’s Jail Oversight Board to increase its scrutiny of the facility.

In the fight over the autopsy records, county officials argued that because of Allegheny County’s status as a second-class county — a distinction based on its larger population — it is exempt from the state’s Right-to-Know Law or Coroner’s Act. In 2021, Allegheny County Common Pleas Judge W. Terrence O’Brien sided with the officials, allowing the reports to remain secret.

But in the majority opinion for the 6-1 decision, Commonwealth Judge Ellen Ceisler wrote that nothing in state law banned the release of the reports. “There is no language in the Right-to-Know Law or the Coroner’s Act to suggest that access to certain public records depends on the county class in which the records are located,” Judge Ceisler wrote.

A spokesperson for the county Law Department said officials are “presently reviewing the decision” and “will assess the county’s options.”

University of Pittsburgh law professor David Harris said the decision will advance Allegheny County’s standing nationally in terms of transparency, as Pennsylvania’s Right-to-Know laws are not as robust as other states.

Many states — such as Florida, Ohio, Maryland and New Jersey — have allowed autopsy records to be publicly accessible for years, usually upon the conclusion of a medical examiner’s investigation. In others, like West Virginia, the reports continue to be considered classified medical records with limited disclosure.

Overall, when compared to other states, Pennsylvania’s public records law is underpinned by one crucial principle: the presumption that government records belong to the public, Ms. Melewsy said.

But she also pointed out that public records laws in the state allow for broad exceptions when it comes to records related to criminal and noncriminal investigations, putting the state “way below average” when it comes to transparency.

“Those are extremely problematic,” she said.

Mr. Harris said the ruling will open the way for reporters and others to gather information in death cases where law enforcement is often the sole source.

“Too often, when somebody dies in police or jail custody as an example, we only have one story, and this can go some distance — in the same way that body camera video could and does in certain cases — to give the public a fuller account.”

Mr. Harris, a longtime law enforcement scholar, said the ruling was “a positive move” that will expand transparency among law enforcement agencies in the county.

“Control of information can mean control of the narrative; it can mean control of the course of an investigation. And that can be used by people who have power, and that is not in the public interest generally.”

Post-Gazette Assistant Managing Editor Mike Wereschagin contributed to this report. Michael Korsh: mkorsh@post-gazette.com.

District proposes policy revisions for library books

LIBRARY, FROM B-1

The latest proposed changes to the district’s policy around the selection of resource materials include defining sexual content as “offensive representations or descriptions of ultimate sexual acts, normal or perverted, actual or simulated” as well as ethnic intimidation.

It also lays out the additional step for librarians.

“In selecting resource materials for high school students, the selectors shall seek to prioritize the selection of materials which do not contain other sexualized content, even though permitted, such as visual depictions of nudity,” the proposed revisions read.

Once librarians post the list of requested books for 30-day review — which will be publicized as a report not requiring board action — district residents are able to comment. After a review period, the assistant superintendent would share whether those books would be purchased.

The policy was put on 30-day review in a 6-2 vote. School directors Diane Ciabattini and Jeanne Smith voted against it. Vince DeAugustine was absent.

Minor changes were proposed for the policy

pertaining to the re-evaluation of resource materials. It was put on review in a unanimous vote.

Proposed changes to Hempfield’s book policies comes as library materials are being challenged at unprecedented rates. According to the American Library Association, there were 1,269 attempts to ban or restrict library materials in 2022. That’s the highest number of attempted book bans since the organization began compiling censorship data more than two decades ago.

Several attempts have been made in Western Pennsylvania school districts.

In addition to Hempfield, Norwin School District recently fielded complaints about the book “Al Capone Does My Shirts” by Gennifer Choldenko, which is read by fifth graders. Some board members were concerned over what they deemed sexual innuendos, references to rapists who are in the prison and the use of the outdated word when describing a person with special needs.

The book was ultimately permitted to remain as a resource material.

Final votes on revisions to Hempfield’s book policies will take place in August.

BIRTHDAY REMEMBRANCE



Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette

Jacky Carter, 54, of Clairton, hugs Antwon Rose II’s mother, Michelle Kenny, at a birthday celebration in Rose’s honor Wednesday in Highland Park. Rose, who was shot and killed by police in 2018, would have been 23. The event included food, face painting, music, guest speakers and a memorial balloon release.

Group that favors term limits keeps heat on Pa. lawmakers

By Benjamin Kail
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Reschenthaler

WASHINGTON — Four U.S. House members from Pennsylvania have promised to support term limits for members of Congress if a proposed constitutional amendment comes to a vote.

A group that favors term limits wants to make sure they don’t forget it.

U.S. Reps. Guy Reschenthaler, John Joyce, Scott Perry and Dan Meuser, all Republicans, are among more than 100 lawmakers who have signed a bipartisan pledge organized by the nonprofit group U.S. Term Limits. The signatories pledge to support term limits that would cap lawmakers’ time on Capitol Hill to three two-year terms for House members, and two six-year terms in the Senate.

Whether such an amendment ever comes to a vote remains to be seen. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., agreed to bring such a vote to the floor during his prolonged fight to win the speaker’s gavel earlier this year. But elected officials have a long history of resisting anything that would limit their own time in

office. And with about two weeks before the 118th Congress goes on summer recess, advocates for term limits on Wednesday urged the 112 lawmakers who signed the pledge to keep their word — and to buck what they described as Mr. McCarthy’s push to rally around a six-term House limit instead.

“These members made a signed commitment to their constituents that they would support no longer limit than three House terms,” Howard Rich, the chair of U.S. Term Limits, said in a statement Wednesday. The group likened a potential six-term House limit to a 150-mph speed limit: “much too weak to have a real impact.”

Mr. McCarthy’s office did not respond to a request for comment. Neither did the Pennsylvania lawmakers. Mr. Reschenthaler, R-Peters, the chief deputy whip, Mr. Joyce, R-Blair, and Mr. Meuser, R-Luzerne, are serving their third terms. Mr. Perry, R-York, has been in

office since 2013. Neither of Pennsylvania’s Democratic U.S. senators, John Fetterman or Bob Casey, have signed the pledge, nor have Reps. Summer Lee, D-Swissvale, and Chris Deluzio, D-Aspinwall.

Mr. Fetterman, Ms. Lee and Mr. Deluzio are serving their first terms. Mr. Casey in April announced he’s running for his fourth.

U.S. Rep. Ralph Norman, R-S.C., introduced a constitutional amendment in January that calls for three-term limits in the House and two terms in the Senate. Terms served before the amendment’s ratification would not count. The bill now has 100 co-sponsors, most of them Republicans.

U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, introduced a Senate version in January with 17 co-sponsors, but no Democrats. Mr. Cruz is currently seeking his third term in office.

Republican lawmakers who support term limits say they were assured earlier this year that a vote would come within a few months. Mr. Norman’s office did not respond to a request for comment on the status of his constitutional amendment.

Even if Congress approved a constitutional amendment for term limits, it would still have to be ratified by a super-majority of state legislatures — something that hasn’t been achieved in decades.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., who has served in the chamber since 1985, has long opposed term limits. During a push for congressional term limits by former President Donald Trump in 2017, Mr. McConnell told reporters that “we have term limits now. They’re called elections.”

Earlier this year, long-time U.S. Rep. Richard Neal, D-Mass., argued that term limits could saddle Congress with too much inexperience.

“The fact that I have had the institutional memory that I’ve had here has always been helpful to the national debate and certainly back home as well,” Mr. Neal told The New York Times in February. “If you want to turn Congress over to the amateurs and the ants and the special interests, embrace term limits.”

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Allegheny County Council votes against term limits bill for county elected officials

By Steve Bohnel
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Allegheny County Council voted against placing a referendum on November’s general election ballot that would have asked voters whether all elected offices in the county should be limited to three four-year terms.

The vote failed in a 13-2 vote during Tuesday’s meeting. Council members Tom Duerr and Suzanne Filiaggi voted for the proposal.

According to the county charter, the only office the three-term limit currently applies to is county executive. County Executive Rich Fitzgerald, a Democrat, is term-limited and his third term ends in December. Sara Innamorato, a Democrat and state representative for Pennsylvania’s 21st district, faces Joe Rockey, a Republican and former PNC Bank executive, in the general election in November.

Mr. Duerr said during Tuesday’s meeting that some members on the council and elected officials in county government had been serving for longer than he’s been alive.

“I believe that in order to facilitate the continuation of the new ideas [and] fresh ideas, as well as trying to cut

through a little bit of the political machinations that come with holding an office uncontested for 30-plus years, putting some type of term limits in place is a better idea,” Mr. Duerr said.

Ms. Filiaggi joined in support, but everyone else on the council did not.

Councilman Sam DeMarco said he appreciated the argument that a lack of term limits could lead to someone forming a political machine-type of operation, but whether elected officials serve for longer than three terms should be decided by the voters.

Councilman DeWitt Walton agreed. Mr. Walton feared that term limits effectively put more political power in the hands of staff members and lobbyists — who may have good intentions, but don’t represent their constituents as directly as elected officials themselves.

“I believe in open government, I believe in honest government and transparent government, but at the end of the day, I believe people should rule, and not lobbyists and staffers,” Mr. DeWitt said.

The council also voted against a measure that would have prevented county residents from

running for multiple elected offices at the same time. Mr. Duerr, Ms. Filiaggi and Mr. Walton voted yes, and the remaining 12 council members opposed it.

Mr. Duerr said the measure would prevent situations such as when Lt. Gov. Austin Davis and U.S. Rep. Summer Lee ran for state House seats in Harrisburg and their current offices — leading to vacancies and then special elections that eventually decided the party in control in the state’s House of Representatives.

Councilmember Olivia Bennett said that one of the reasons she opposed that proposal is because some council members who run for re-election in off-year elections could still run for another county office in a different year. Those whose elections line up with elections such as county executive, county controller or other offices would not be able to run for both, creating a lack of parity in the system, Ms. Bennett said. County Council members run for four-year terms in staggered elections.

Council passes assessment legislation

County Council passed legislation that would allow

for county taxpayers to continue filing appeals to their 2022 property tax assessments.

The county’s assessments board recently refused to grant hearings to those taxpayers because they had reached settlements before the county’s board of viewers on separate 2020 appeals that included the 2022 tax year.

The decision gives a group of taxpayers a chance to appeal assessments. Many of those challenging the decision own property in Downtown and in the Strip District.

On Tuesday, council voted 13-1 to pass the legislation, essentially extending the appeals window. Council President Patrick Catena and Mr. DeMarco were the two co-sponsors. Council member Bob Macey was absent.

Those who supported the legislation have said it allows property owners and taxpayers their day in court to challenge the underlying data that went into the original assessments. Councilmember Jack Betkowski, the lone vote against, said he was concerned about the process of placing a bill onto a full council agenda too quickly, without getting public comment on it.