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## W.P.A.'S MUSCLE BEHIND BUDGET BATTLE

**'Tough as nails' Kim Ward not shy about her pivotal role in the high-stakes drama**

By Ford Turner  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

HARRISBURG — With little fanfare and away from the gold-trimmed elegance of the Capitol Rotunda, two key players in the muddled drama of Pennsylvania's 2024 budget took action Thursday.

Sen. Joe Pittman spoke for Republicans in a brief session where the main budget bill was signed. Then Gov. Josh Shapiro, a Democrat, signed the same bill, essentially in private.

Kim Ward went unseen. But it was the political force of Ms. Ward, as much as anything, that has helped steer the budget drama and is likely to continue to do so in uncharted territory ahead. A big chunk of budget spending — Republicans put it at more than \$1 billion — legally cannot happen without the passage of other legislation.

Ms. Ward, a Westmoreland County Republican, is Senate



Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette  
Senate President Pro Tempore Kim Ward, R-Westmoreland, with her granddaughter in Greensburg.

**The main Pa. budget bill is done, but the spending fight isn't over**

By Ford Turner  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

HARRISBURG — Gov. Josh Shapiro's signing on Thursday of a \$45.45 billion spending bill erased growing concerns about delays in funding for schools and other organizations, but it also opened a new and potentially messy phase of state budget negotiations.

A major slice of the spending

— Republicans put it at more than \$1 billion — cannot happen unless other budget-related legislation is passed by a deeply divided legislature. The money covers programs popular with many lawmakers and Mr. Shapiro, including one that doles out home-improvement grants to income-qualified homeowners and another that directs

SEE **BUDGET**, PAGE A-6



Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette  
Marty McKinney monitors the Route 19 and Route 228 corridors from Cranberry's Traffic Operations Center late last month. Butler County saw the largest population growth in the region between 2020 and 2022, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

**POST-GAZETTE SPECIAL REPORT**

## BUSTLING IN BUTLER

**Butler County population surge is creating a boomtown vibe — and some speed bumps**

By Michael Korsh  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

From Cranberry's Traffic Operations Center, Marty McKinney peers at the array of 12 flat-screen televisions that monitor dozens of traffic signals along the community's roads.

The township's longtime traffic communications manager each day sees about 80,000 vehicles cross the intersection of Routes 19 and 228, where five lanes traverse four directions.

In the event of a signal outage, the big intersection can become gridlocked within a matter of 10 seconds, he said.

"There's not a lot of places in Western Pennsylvania that have the information and the ability to deploy in a remote capacity like us," said Mr. McKinney.

The cutting-edge traffic management technology — capturing millions of data points at tenth-of-a-second intervals — has become a vital tool in managing the arteries of a township that has swelled at its core.

Since the industrial collapses of the 1970s, much of Western Pennsylvania has consistently bled population — including urban centers like Allegheny County, which saw one of the steepest drops in population in the U.S. last year.

But Butler County saw the largest population growth in the region between 2020 and 2022 — adding 3,200 residents, according to new data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

With this influx, officials across the county have been given a new set of

SEE **BUTLER**, PAGE A-4

## New Light closes an emotional chapter

**Congregation gathers for 1st Shabbat since verdict**

By Anya Sostek  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Midway through the New Light congregation's Shabbat service Saturday, Carol Black read a list of names of those suffering from illness along with the recitation of the Mi Sheberach, a prayer for healing.

Before she moved on with the service, Ms. Black — a survivor of the 2018 synagogue shooting — paused. "I'd like to add Tim Matson to the list," she said, referring to a Pittsburgh police officer seriously injured in the shooting. "He has another surgery in the fall."

For the New Light congregation, it was the first Saturday service after a jury announced a death sentence Wednesday for Robert Bowers, who killed 11 Jewish worshippers the morning of Oct. 27, 2018.

On that day, the New Light congregation

SEE **SHABBAT**, PAGE A-9

**SYNAGOGUE SHOOTING VICTIMS**



**CELEBRATING THEIR LIVES**  
We share photos of the joyous parts of the lives of those lost in the synagogue shooting and hear the voices of those who miss them and are preserving their stories, Pages A-10 & A-11.

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Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette photos

Heavy traffic is a frequent sight on Freedom Road near the intersection of Route 19 and Route 228 in Cranberry. Southern Butler County continues to be one of the fastest-growing areas in Pennsylvania. Managing infrastructure and school facilities could prove challenging with continued growth projections.

# Butler County's 2020-22 population gain of 3,200 was the biggest in Western Pennsylvania

**BUTLER**, FROM A-1

challenges to quickly adapt their infrastructures to the needs of a burgeoning community.

"We refer to it as growing pains," said Greg Peaco, the township manager in Adams. "People need a place to live, and they're going to the suburbs, primarily. The population is going to grow, and it has to go somewhere."

## Low taxes, quality of life bring droves of new residents

For some Butler County officials, the surge in residents hasn't come as a surprise.

Lower taxes and suburban communities' quality of life have led areas like Cranberry to undergo consistent expansion — about 1.7% growth per year for the past 20 years, according to township Manager Dan Santorum.

"People generally talk about Cranberry and how fast it's growing — and the truth is, that's not the appropriate sort of description. I think it's growing at a managed and sustainable pace," said Mr. Santorum.

Since the 1990s, Cranberry has adopted a number of initiatives to adapt its roads, sewer and water systems, and recreational facilities to anticipate continued growth.

It was one of the first communities to adopt "transportation impact fees," charged to new developers to adjust for their predicted impact on the roadways using the township's comprehensive traffic model.

"It's that pay-your-own-way philosophy — so that when a new house is built, it's paying for its incremental share improvements' impact that will be necessary," Mr. Santorum said.

While he said developers initially pushed back on the fees, they quickly realized such proactive measures would safeguard their investments against the new roadblocks faced by a swelling community.

"Municipalities can't say no to growth — you can't just pull up the drawbridge and say property owners can't develop their properties. So we can't stop growth; we can only manage it," he said.

Since the fees' passage, Cranberry has reaped about \$50 million. It has combined that money with grants and other partnerships to make \$150 million worth of transportation improvements.

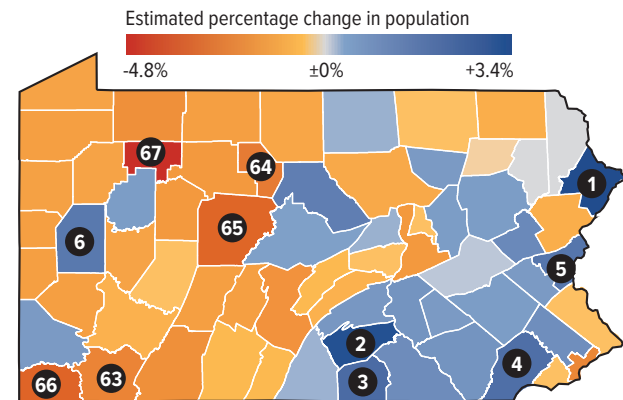
One of its flagship projects has been the Traffic Operations Center, a state-of-the-art facility spearheaded by Mr. McKinney and the public works director, Kelly Maurer.

In the 23 years he's worked there, Mr. McKin-

## Pa. population trends, 2020-22

While most counties in Western Pennsylvania have experienced shrinking populations over the past two years, Butler County is one of very few with consistent population growth.

**ANNUAL ESTIMATES OF RESIDENT POPULATION, JULY 1, 2020 TO JULY 1, 2022**



**CHANGE IN POPULATION: FIVE HIGHEST AND LOWEST AND BUTLER COUNTY**

RANK	COUNTY	PERCENT CHANGE IN POPULATION	POPULATION CHANGE
1	Pike	3.4%	+1,998
2	Cumberland	3.2%	+8,356
3	Adams	2.2%	+2,248
4	Chester	2.1%	+11,040
5	Northampton	1.8%	+5,752
6	<b>Butler</b>	<b>1.7%</b>	<b>+3,244</b>
63	Fayette	-2.2%	-2,814
64	Cameron	-2.5%	-113
65	Clearfield	-3.2%	-2,534
66	Greene	-3.3%	-1,196
67	Forest	-4.8%	-333

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division

Ed Yozwick/Post-Gazette

ney said the township had boosted its number of traffic signals to 42 from 19 and handled a myriad of advancements, such as updated video and radar detection.

Cranberry now partners with the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation and institutions such as Carnegie Mellon University to act as a hub for research and development — with an added "D," for deployment — of cutting-edge traffic control technologies.

"There aren't a lot of places where you can mine this information from in real-time and provide intelligent solutions. We work very hard to operate the best system that is possible — without spending hordes of taxpayer money," said Ms. Maurer.

She said the transportation impact fees have been critical to supporting such developments ahead of time.

"It's 20 cents on the dollar," she said.

Jordan Grady, executive director of the Butler County Chamber of Commerce, said managing the county's growth will require the cooperation of organizations on all levels.

"Managing growth and making sure communities are equipped with proficient infrastructure as well as the population to support living wage jobs will be a top priority for the future," he said.

"Municipalities must be ready for the growth, and that is easier said than done."

## Rapidly growing school districts

Five miles away on Route 228 sits Mars, a once-modest farm community that, like Cranberry, has welcomed hundreds of new residents within the past five years.

And as it prepares for the upcoming school year, the Mars Area School District already is in need of expansion: A study of the district's enrollment projections, presented to district officials in March, found the district's Primary Center and Elementary School have already exceeded their capacities.

Currently, 532 students are enrolled in the Primary Center, which serves kindergarten and first grade. The school's capacity is 506. Mars Elementary home to second, third and fourth grades — is seven students above its capacity of 900, the study found.

Adam Kostewicz, the principal at Mars Area Centennial School, home to fifth and sixth graders said he and other district officials are confident that the buildings can manage their current enrollment. The challenges, he said, come as the district's enrollment study projected the growth in Mars to continue.

"There's a lot of what you



Construction crews work on a major realignment and expansion of Route 228 in Middlesex last month. The \$26.5 million project — expected to be completed in January 2025 — near Mars Area High School is part of the connection from the commercial corridor of Route 19 in Cranberry to Route 8 south of the City of Butler.



Mars Area Centennial School principal Adam Kostewicz, left, and Primary Center principal Jessica Semler will assist district Superintendent Mark Gross as part of a planning committee to address school expansion projects in preparation for further growth. The elementary and primary buildings in the district currently are operating above capacity.

don't see that needs updating," said Mr. Kostewicz. "If you look closely at all those numbers, everything was astronomical — like the roof, wiring and plumbing — because when you start to have to update everything, you end up putting lipstick on a pig."

Now, the school board is considering multiple expansion plans, each with millions in new construction and building renovations.

Because Mars Area's primary education is split among three schools — the Primary Center, Elementary School and Centennial School — each option considers which facilities to upgrade for long-term expansion and which to leave as-is.

"It's almost like a car: Do you want to take a car in for that much money if it's old, or do you just want to go out and maybe spend money on something that's newer, that may last a little longer?" said Mark Gross, superintendent of the Mars Area School District.

One plan includes adding classrooms and a gymnasium to the primary school, plus a potential \$13.8 million expansion of the elementary school that features a two

-story, 12-classroom wing and a cafeteria at the building's rear.

Another would reconfigure the primary school to serve as an office building for maintenance and administration, with the new construction shifting to the elementary and Centennial buildings.

Because the district receives limited state and federal funds, Mr. Gross said it needs millions in revenue to support the ambitious expansions.

"If we're going to expand, it's going to have to come through the tax base, as much as it pains us to say that," he said.

Suddenly, two of the district's key attractions — its lower taxes and high-quality instruction — became its biggest challenges.

"There's no superintendent in the world that wants to recommend raising taxes like that. But right now, we've got to be able to have the foresight to have money to put into our capital funds to be able to pay for what we know is staring us in the face," he said.

On June 13, the school board approved a 2023-24

budget of \$58.8 million that included a 4.15-mill tax increase.

The superintendent said he thought the tax hike would lead to significant blowback from residents, but instead parents have been surprisingly receptive.

"I thought I was walking into the lion's den," he said. "But people are like, 'We get it. It gives us quality — that's what we want.'"

The district also is forming a citizens advisory committee of parents, students, teachers and other community members to assess district needs. The committee will meet with administrators to weigh various options and develop recommendations for the board.

Amanda Massaro said the reduced taxes, proximity to relatives and amenities like the Mars Area Public Library — which she takes her three children to every week — motivated her to move her family to Mars from Allegheny County two months ago.

"I just feel like there's something for everybody," Ms. Massaro said.

Though the area's high-quality schools were also a primary motive, Ms. Massaro remains wary of further tax increases, as she said the cost of living for a family of five has virtually doubled in recent years.

"I can see the reason for raising taxes for school purposes, but I want there to be a plan for the roads and maintenance, too," she said. "I want to know where the money is going."

For Mr. Gross, the anxiety remains in the fact that Mars may outpace its capacity more quickly than the renovations can be completed.

"We're a little bit behind the eight ball. And even to get this going, it's probably still another two years out from actually starting the construction," he said.