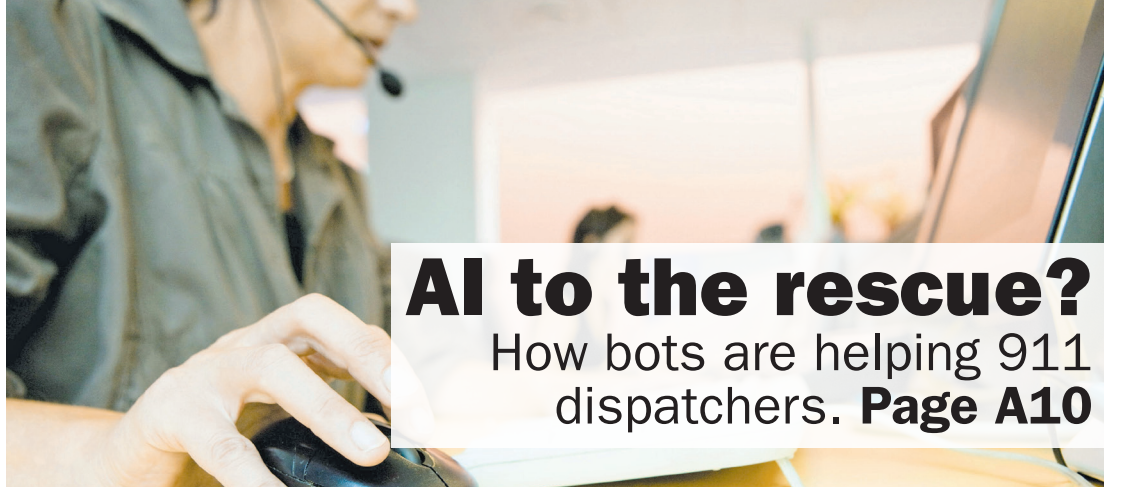


THE CITIZENS' VOICE



AI to the rescue?
How bots are helping 911 dispatchers. **Page A10**

OPIOID LAWSUIT PAYMENTS DIFFER ACROSS PA. A15

We're *All* About It

Tuesday, October 24, 2023

\$1

ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR



HATEM ALI / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Palestinians look for survivors of the Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip in Rafah on Monday.

Grant will restore local streams

The project will aid the Nanticoke Creek Watershed, which was impacted by mining.

BY BOB KALINOWSKI
STAFF WRITER

More than \$17.5 million in state grant funding has been awarded to a project to restore the Nanticoke Creek Watershed, which flows through four South Valley municipalities into the Susquehanna River, officials with Earth Conservancy announced Monday.

Meanwhile, in a separate announcement, conservation officials announced 1,400 acres in the same region — including Little Wilkes-Barre Mountain and Hanover Reservoir — would be transferred to the Pinchot State Forest system for preservation under the Department of Conservation of Natural Resources.

The grant, through the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection's Abandoned Mine Lands and Acid Mine Drainage Grant Program, will combat "numerous impairments due to the legacy of anthracite coal mining" such as obstruction, dry stream beds and acid mine drainage, Earth Conservancy said in a news release.

"The funding provided through the AML Program Grant will ensure Earth Conservancy can accomplish our goal of reconnecting the Nanticoke Creek headwaters to allow flow to once again reach the downstream areas of the watershed, while eliminating a major source of water to the underground mine pools which resurfaces as acid mine drainage in the lower reaches of Nanticoke Creek," Terry Ostrowski, president and CEO of Earth Conservancy, said in a statement.

The Nanticoke Creek Watershed flows through Nanticoke City, Hanover and Newport townships, and Warrior Run Borough.

Please see **GRANT**, Page A4

2 MORE FREED

Hamas releases two women as US advises delaying ground war to allow talks on captives

BY NAJIB JOBAIN, SAMY MAGDY AND JOSEPH KRAUSS
ASSOCIATED PRESS

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Hamas on Monday released two elderly Israeli women held hostage in Gaza as the United States expressed increasing concern that the escalating Israel-Hamas war will spark a wider conflict in the region, including attacks on American troops.

The death toll in Gaza rose rapidly as Israel ramped up airstrikes that flattened buildings in what it said was preparation for an event-

al ground assault. The United States advised Israel to delay the expected invasion to allow time to negotiate the release of more hostages taken by Hamas during its brutal incursion two weeks ago.

A third small aid convoy from Egypt entered Gaza, where the population of 2.3 million has been running out of food, water and medicine under Israel's sealed border. With Israel still barring entry of fuel, the U.N. said its distribution of aid would grind to a halt within days when it can no longer fuel its



HOSTAGES AND MISSING FAMILIES FORUM VIA AP

The International Committee of the Red Cross says Hamas militants have released Yocheved Lifshitz, left, and Nurit Cooper, after holding them captive in the Gaza Strip for more than two weeks.

trucks. Gaza hospitals flooded by a constant stream of wounded are struggling to keep generators running to power lifesaving medical

equipment and incubators for premature babies.

Please see **HOSTAGES**, Page A4

Meuser withdraws from speaker's race

He said he wants to focus on Trump 2024 campaign.



MEUSER

BY BOB KALINOWSKI
STAFF WRITER

He was in and now he's out.

he's dropping out of the

U.S. Rep. Dan Meuser, R-9, of Jackson Twp., on Monday evening announced

race to become the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.

A congressman since 2019, Meuser was one of nine declared candidates seeking the powerful position heading into a Monday night candidate

READ MORE

Where the search for speaker stands. **A4**

forum among House Republicans.

Meuser, who declared his intentions to run for

speaker just several days ago, said he instead decided to focus on leading former President Donald Trump's campaign in Pennsylvania in 2024.

Please see **SPEAKER**, Page A4

Group launches Scranton-based EV ad campaign

The environmental group hopes to promote the benefits of electric vehicles.

BY FRANK WILKES LESNEFSKY
STAFF WRITER

A million-dollar, Scranton-centric ad campaign aims to jolt electric vehicle sales.

The Environmental Defense Fund rolled out the campaign last week and will

use television, digital, social media and print advertising to promote the benefits of EVs, including tax incentives, reduced fuel costs and cheaper maintenance compared to their gas counterparts, according to a news release from the New York-based nonprofit group.

Targeting Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C., the ads are set in the Electric City — a nickname Scranton earned for having the first



CHRISTOPHER DOLAN / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Tasca Ford sales consultant Dante Zurenda opens the hood of a Ford Mustang Mach-E electric vehicle Friday in Dickson City.

commercially viable electric street cars in the nation in the 1800s. One commercial, titled "Pennsylvania for EVs," prominently features Scranton Mayor Paige Gebhardt Cognetti, whose administration used \$390,000

in state and federal funds to add EVs to the city's fleet. In March, Scranton unveiled 10 electric Chevrolet Bolts with 10 charging stations for its Code Enforcement Office.

Please see **CAMPAIGN**, Page A4

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SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

GOP continues search for leader

BY LISA MASCARO
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — On Day 20 without a House speaker, Republicans found themselves starting over Monday — bumbling ahead with few ideas about who will lead, what they are fighting over and when they will get Congress working again.

Republicans gathered late in the evening to hear quick speeches from the congressmen seeking the job, though none has a clear shot at the gavel. Eight candidates are in the running for one speaker after one dropped out. Behind closed doors, they made their elevator pitches to colleagues ahead of internal party voting.

Senior-most among the hopefuls is Rep. Tom Emmer of Minnesota, but neither he or the other lower-level Republican lawmakers are expected to quickly secure a majority. Instead he and others are reaching out to Donald Trump for backing ahead of elections to choose a nominee. One, Rep. Dan Meuser of Pennsylvania, dropped out.

“They all called asking for support,” said Trump, the Republican front-runner in the 2024 presidential race, who was in New Hampshire registering for the state’s primary ballot.

Of Emmer, Trump said, “I think he’s my biggest fan now because he called me yesterday and told me I’m your biggest fan.”

Trump downplayed, even derided, Emmer, the third-ranking House Republican with whom he has had rocky relationship, while presenting himself as a kingmaker who talks to “a lot of congressmen” seeking his stamp of approval.

“There’s only one person who can do it all the way: Jesus Christ,” he declared.

The House Republicans retreated privately, as they have most days since the ouster of Kevin McCarthy, trying for several hours to

find a path forward. The candidates had two minutes to make opening remarks, then take questions, then sum it up. The Republicans plan to meet Tuesday to choose the nominee.

“We’re going have to figure out how to get our act together — I mean, big boys and big girls have got to quit making excuses and we just got to get it done,” said Rep. Dusty Johnson, R-S.D., a conservative caucus leader.

What started as swaggering bravado when a contingent of hardline Republicans led by Rep. Matt Gaetz of Florida ousted McCarthy at the start of the month has morphed into a full-blown crisis of governing as dysfunction and dangerous, bitter infighting prevent the normal operations of Congress.

The federal government again risks a shutdown in a matter of weeks if Congress fails to pass funding legislation by a Nov. 17 deadline to keep services and offices running. More immediately, President Joe Biden has asked Congress to provide \$105 billion in aid — to help Israel and Ukraine amid their wars and to shore up the U.S. border with Mexico. Federal aviation and farming programs face expiration without action.

As he exited the meeting, Rep. Pat Fallon, R-Texas, urged his colleagues to act quickly, saying voters want them to wrap it up. “Enough is enough. Andale! Andale!” he told reporters.

Yet factional power plays are running stronger on Capitol Hill than any sense of urgency to resolve the standoff as the House Republicans are essentially eating their own — first by ousting McCarthy just nine months on the job, then rejecting the next nominees to take his place. Majority Leader Steve Scalise and hard-edged Judiciary Committee Chairman Jim Jordan.

SPEAKER: Focusing on Trump campaign

FROM PAGE A1

“We must, this week, come together as Republicans and elect a new speaker and get back to work. Growing our Republican majority in the House, winning the Senate, and electing President Trump in 2024 is the best way to move our country forward. To save America, we must rid Joe Biden from the White House. Biden’s policies have been a disaster — foreign and domestic,” Meuser said in a statement released through his campaign. “That’s why I’ve made a commitment to President Trump to help lead his campaign in Pennsylvania. I want to focus on this commitment, as well as the House and PA Senate race, so therefore, I am withdrawing from

the Speaker’s race. I believe the House will elect a new Speaker, and I know we will be in good hands with one of our colleagues running. I’ve spoken to President Trump, and he supports my decision.”

Monday marked the 20th day since the House has been without a permanent speaker after a handful of Republicans led a revolt to oust Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif.

Several leading candidates to replace McCarthy failed to secure enough votes to be elected speaker, leading to the contested race and crowded field.

Meuser’s statement did not say who he plans to support for the speaker position.

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COURTESY OF EARTH CONSERVANCY

Earth Conservancy says streams like this one in the Nanticoke Creek Watershed are often dry because water spills into former coal mines.

GRANT: Land transferred to state control

FROM PAGE A1

The waterways, which flow into the Susquehanna River and eventually the Chesapeake Bay, lose water to underground mines, officials say.

Currently, only 30% of the streams in the Nanticoke Creek Watershed have the hydrological, ecological and aesthetic qualities and functions of a natural stream, Earth Conservancy’s news release said.

“We hope that this work, which aims to promote aquatic habitat throughout the watershed, which had been severely impacted by decades of mining activities, will be seen as the legacy of Earth Conservancy and its long history of abandoned mine land reclamation in the Wyoming Valley,” Ostrowski said.

Work to be done includes creek realignments, channel lining, new culverts, dam removal, obstruction remov-

als, erosion control and more throughout the 20-mile area.

“Our Commonwealth has a rich history of mining, but abandoned pre-1977 coal mines leave behind a blighted landscape and environmental damage. That’s why it is important now more than ever to break this coal mining legacy, restore Pennsylvania’s beauty, and support surrounding communities,” John Stefanko, deputy secretary of DEP’s Office of Active and Abandoned Mine Operations, said.

State Sen. Lisa Baker, R-20, of Lehman Twp. called the project “a tremendous collaboration between environmental advocacy groups, community leaders and officials, and state government.”

In June, Earth Conservancy was awarded a \$1.96 million grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Brownfields and Land Revitalization Program for the Nanticoke Creek Watershed project.

The grant announced Monday will fund the rest of the project, officials said.

Wilkes-Barre Mountain under state control

Another conservation development in the South Valley centers on the transfer of 1,400 acres in Hanover and Newport townships to the Pinchot State Forest system under the supervision of the Department of Conservation of Natural Resources.

The area, known as “Little Wilkes-Barre Mountain” and includes the Hanover Reservoir, now has a “natural connectivity” to Bureau of Forestry lands in Mocanaqua and Arbutus Peak in Mountain Top and other green corridors in the state, officials said.

The land deal was announced as a collaboration between the North Branch Land Trust, Earth Conservancy and DCNR.

“This project — totaling 1,400 acres — will preserve the undis-

turbed ridgeline of the Wilkes-Barre Mountains between Sugar Notch Gap and Alden Mountain Road and protect the gem in those woods — the Hanover Reservoir,” Ostrowski said. “The project also supports Earth Conservancy’s mission of allocating 10,000 of its original 16,000 acres of former Blue Coal land for greenspace and recreation. We now are within a few hundred acres of that goal. Wild areas like these are integral to the character of the Lower South Valley. By transferring ownership to the Commonwealth, we help safeguard the region’s natural beauty and its ecosystems and improve its quality of life.”

The habitat is home to threatened or endangered species, including the Indiana Bat and the Northern Long-eared Bat, a cold-water fishery, and scenic mountain highlands, officials said.

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CAMPAIGN: Tax credit raised popularity

FROM PAGE A1

The second 30-second ad, called “Love for EVs,” focuses on a Monroe County couple discussing cost savings associated with tax credits, fuel and maintenance.

The EDF said its ad campaign emphasizes how federal policies, including the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s proposed clean car standards, along with tax credits and infrastructure investments under President Joe Biden’s clean energy plan, will lead to more choices in EVs for consumers.

“We’ve already reached a tipping point for price parity, with some electric vehicles less

expensive to own than many gas-powered cars,” Elizabeth Gore, the EDF’s senior vice president for political affairs, said in a statement. “Adopting these strong standards will provide drivers with more choices and greater affordability while reducing pollution that harms people’s health and the climate.”

Under the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, buyers of new, qualifying EVs could be eligible for up to \$7,500 in federal income tax credits, and pre-owned EVs that qualify could receive up to \$4,000. For a list of qualifying vehicles, visit fuelconomy.gov.

Sylvester Chevrolet in Blakely saw a surge in EV

sales when the tax credit took effect in January, though it has slowed a bit since then, sales consultant Amanda Ryan said.

“When they released that tax credit, that’s when everything blew up,” she said. “Everybody was like, ‘Oh, I can afford them.’”

With new Blazer and Equinox EVs on the way, Ryan said they are excited, noting the Equinox is a targeted price-point vehicle.

However, home charging setups are a stumbling block for customers, Ryan said, recalling questions about the costs of buying and installing chargers.

Ryan theorized whether local governments could work

with residents and local electricians to offer a rebate to help with the installation of home electric charging stations.

“You don’t only have to just think about the affordability of the car,” she said. “Now you have to think about the affordability of putting the charging station into your home.”

The EDF estimates a household level-two charger costs \$1,500 to purchase and install. Household level-two chargers use 240-volt power to charge EVs from empty to 80% in four to 10 hours, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation.

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HOSTAGES: Husbands remain in captivity

FROM PAGE A1

The two freed hostages, 85-year-old Yocheved Lifshitz and 79-year-old Nurit Cooper, were taken out of Gaza at the Rafah crossing into Egypt, where they were put into ambulances, according to footage shown on Egyptian TV.

The two women, along with their husbands, were snatched from their homes in the kibbutz of Nir Oz near the Gaza border during Hamas’ Oct. 7 rampage into southern Israeli communities. Their husbands, ages 83 and 84, were not released.

“While I cannot put into words the relief that she is now safe, I will remain focused on securing the release of my father and all those — some 200 innocent people — who remain hostages in Gaza,” Lifshitz’ daughter, Sharone Lifshitz, said in a statement.

Lifshitz, an artist and academic in London who uses a different spelling for her name, told reporters last

week that her parents were peace activists, and her father would drive to the Gaza border to take Palestinians to east Jerusalem for medical treatment.

Kindness, she said last week, could somehow save them.

“I grew up, you know, with all these Holocaust stories about how all my uncles’ lives were saved because” of acts of kindness, she said.

“Do I want that to be the story here?” she asked. “Yeah.”

Hamas apparently received nothing in exchange for the release of the two hostages, who were freed days after an American woman and her teenage daughter. Hamas and

other militants in Gaza are believed to have taken roughly 220 people, including an unconfirmed number of foreigners and dual citizens.

Israel has vowed to destroy Hamas. Iranian-backed fighters around the region are warning of possible escalation, including the targeting of U.S. forces deployed in the Mideast, if a ground offensive is launched in Gaza.

The U.S. has told Iranian-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon and other groups not to join the fight. Israel and Hezbollah have traded fire almost daily across the Israel-Lebanon border, and Israeli warplanes have struck targets in the occupied West Bank, Syria and Lebanon in recent days.

Walk Wilkes-Barre

This week’s historic building is:

Henry Lazarus Residence/Moses & Gelso Law Offices (1907)
120 South Franklin Street



Wilkes-Barre architects Olds & Puckey designed this urbane Beaux Arts mansion reminiscent of a Parisian townhouse for local department store magnate Henry Lazarus, one of the owners of the Lazarus Department Store, which was founded by Henry and his brother Asher in the 1890s, and which operated on South Main Street until

1980. The Lazarus residences prim brick facade, garlanded in limestone, rises to a balustrade below a steep mansard roof. Today, the Lazarus mansion houses the offices of the Moses & Gelso law firm.

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NEWS IN BRIEF

WILKES-BARRE

W-B man killed in shooting

The man killed in a shooting in the Heights Section last week has been identified as a Wilkes-Barre resident.

Kyle Earl Lee Delect, 30, died of multiple gunshot wounds and the manner of death was ruled at autopsy Monday to be homicide, Luzerne County Coroner Jill Matthews said.

Delect was shot in the area of 230 Coal St. around 6:30 p.m. Friday and was

rushed to Geisinger Wyoming Valley Medical Center in Plains Twp., where he died.

City police say an unknown man was responsible for the shooting.

Detectives are being assisted in the investigation by a state police forensics unit and the Luzerne County District Attorney’s Office.

No arrests had been made as of Monday.

— JAMES HALPIN

Bonnie Raitt to perform at Kirby

Singer-songwriter Bon-

nie Raitt will bring her “Just Like That...” tour to the F.M. Kirby Center for the Performing Arts on April 27.

Tickets go on sale at 10 a.m. Friday with a Kirby member presale beginning at 10 a.m. Oct. Wednesday.

Tickets are \$69, \$79, \$94 and \$125 plus fees and can be purchased at kirbycenter.org, ticketmaster.com, in person from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Kirby Center box office or by calling 570-826-1100.

— STAFF REPORT