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Who will wield the gavel?

Day 20 passes with no House speaker, no clear successor

By Lisa Mascaro
The Associated Press

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

One familiar name to Northeastern Pennsylvania voters is no longer among the contenders: U.S. Rep.

Dan Meuser dropped out of the race on Monday.

With that, eight lower-level Republican lawmakers are now running to be speaker, leader of the House and second in line to the presidency — none with any clear shot for the gavel. Senior-most among the hopefuls is Rep. Tom Emmer of Minnesota, who is disliked by Donald Trump, but who reached out to the former president — as did others.

“They all called asking for support,” said Trump, the Republican frontrunner in the 2024 presidential race who was in New

See SPEAKER | 2A



Meuser



**‘NONPROFIT NURSING HOMES
PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE’**

As part of their ongoing federal American Rescue Plan funding recipient tour, some Luzerne County Council members stopped at the Allied Services Center City Skilled Nursing facility on East Northampton Street in Wilkes-Barre Monday. Allied representatives at left, starting in the foreground, are Jim Brogna, vice president of strategic partnerships; Bob Markowski, vice president of facilities; and Jim Cooney, vice president of skilled nursing. Standing behind the nurse’s station, from left, are: county Manager Romilda Crocama and Council members LeeAnn McDermott, Tim McGinley, Brian Thornton, Matthew Mitchell and John Lombardo.

Jennifer Learn-Andes | Times Leader

Luzerne County officials visit Allied Services’ WB facility on American Rescue funding tour

By Jennifer Learn-Andes
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As part of their ongoing federal American Rescue Plan funding recipient tour, some Luzerne County Council members stopped at the Allied Services Center City skilled Nursing Facility on East Northampton Street in Wilkes-Barre Monday.

Council awarded \$500,000 to install more effective ventilation and air handling systems throughout the facility. This work aims to help mitigate illnesses, such as COVID-19, that are particularly threatening

to the vulnerable nursing home population.

A nonprofit, Allied Services Personal Care purchased the East Northampton Street property and another elder care complex in Wilkes-Barre from the Diocese of Scranton in 2019. The sale ensured these properties would continue to provide residential skilled nursing care on a not-for-profit basis with a local, volunteer board of directors, its American Rescue summary said.

“Nonprofit nursing homes play a critical role in meeting the health and personal care/support

needs of a fast-growing population: the very aged and chronically ill, most of them fixed- and low-income,” the summary said.

The American Rescue-funded air quality improvements coincide with Allied Services’ own \$10 million project to renovate the structure.

Jim Brogna, vice president of strategic partnerships at Allied Services, told council members the nonprofit’s renovation project included the creation of 42 private skilled nursing beds on the third and fourth floors in space that once housed a personal care area.

Added to the 50 already there, the facility has 92 skilled nursing beds, he said.

Brogna said Allied chose to increase skilled nursing beds because they are needed in this community, while the focus of many others has been personal care facilities that attract more lucrative private payments.

The reconfigured fourth-floor space is now open. Brogna and his team are actively working on recruiting more employees needed to open the third floor.

See FUNDING | 2A

ELECTION BOARD

Serniak eligible for another term

By Jennifer Learn-Andes
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Luzerne County Election Board member Audrey Serniak said she will seek another term because the county law office issued an updated opinion that the county home rule charter does not bar her from reappointment.



Serniak

Serniak said earlier this month she was applying for another term but then subsequently alerted the public she could not seek another term based on an opinion from a county assistant solicitor. Serniak said at the time she wanted to make sure citizens knew about the need because there were no other Democrats on the eligibility list.

However, Serniak said she recently received a revised opinion from the law office that she can apply.

“Apparently the office of law took a deeper look and came out with an official opinion that I can reapply, so I am going to reapply,” Serniak said.

In the initial legal opinion, a charter section was cited indicating election

See SERNIK | 2A

Earth Conservancy receives \$17.5M grant for restoration of Nanticoke Creek

By Bill O’Boyle
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Terry Ostrowski, President/CEO of Earth Conservancy, on Monday said the organization has been awarded a more than \$17.5 million grant to support restoration of the upper reaches of the Nanticoke Creek watershed.

Ostrowski said the grant, provided by the

PA Department of Environmental Protection (PADEP) through its Abandoned Mine Lands and Acid Mine Drainage (AML/AMD) Grant Program, underscores a collaborative effort to restore waterways and ecosystems in the anthracite region, many of which still suffer the damages left from legacy coal mining. “This 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,” Ostrowski

said. “The grant highlights the partnerships and support we have had with federal and state agencies, as well as local municipalities and conservation organizations, without whom we could not have been able to accomplish such successful projects.

“We hope that this work, which aims to promote aquatic habitat throughout the watershed,



Submitted photo

Significantly eroded banks are seen along Nanticoke Creek.

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.”

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Speaker

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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, 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.

'Embarrassing' spectacle

Late Monday, House Republicans were retreating behind closed doors, as they have most days since the ouster of Kevin McCarthy, to hear from

the candidates ahead of internal party voting.

McCarthy himself calls the whole spectacle "embarrassing" for the House Republicans whose majority is being wasted away and for the U.S. government that cannot fully function.

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. And more immediately, President Joe Biden has asked

Congress to provide \$105 billion in aid — to Israel and Ukraine amid the overseas wars and to shore up the U.S. border with Mexico. Federal aviation and farming programs face expiration without action.

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.

Launched over right-flank complaints over McCarthy's leadership in budget battles, the speakership fight is now a string of political and personal grievances over various leaders, factions and personalities.

"Is there anybody that can get there? I don't think there is," said Rep. Troy Nehls, R-Texas, who has repeatedly suggested Trump should be elected House speaker.

Trump himself has largely stayed in the background, but his presence is everywhere. Trump also spoke over the weekend to longshot candidate Rep. Pete Sessions, R-Texas, according to a person who insisted on anonymity to discuss the private conversation. Early on Trump helped sink Scalise's nomination by backing Jordan instead.

But when more centrist GOP conservatives in the House refused to back Jordan, worried about elevating a far-right Freedom Caucus founder as speaker, Trump was unable to salvage the Ohioan's nomination. The House Republicans dropped Jordan as their nominee late Friday.

Serniak

From page 1A

board members must wait for a period of one year after leaving office to be appointed to a county authority, board or commission.

Serniak said the follow-up opinion indicated that did not apply to reappointments.

Two seats will be open on the five-citizen, volunteer board at the start of 2024.

Board Vice Chairman James Mangan's term also expires the end of this year, but he had said he would not be interested in remaining on the board in 2024. Mangan is in a Republican seat.

Council appoints two Democrats and two Republicans, and those four select the fifth seat, with that person serving

as chairperson.

Prospective applicants must be publicly interviewed, and applications are posted on council's Authorities/Boards/Commissions section at luzernecounty.org.

In addition to preparing for and attending regular evening board meetings, election board members must be available on Election Day and during the day for a little over a week to two weeks after each primary and general election for the adjudication process.

Serniak is the most veteran seated board member, serving since July 2019. She said she cares about elections and has flexibility to fulfill the unpaid role because she is retired.

"I believe in free and fair elections," Serniak said. "I have the time and will and desire to do this."



Jennifer Learn-Andes | Times Leader

Allied Services Vice President of Facilities Bob Markowski, at right, speaks with Luzerne County officials Monday in a new outdoor space at the Allied Services Center City Skilled Nursing facility on East Northampton Street in Wilkes-Barre. From left, are: county Council members Matthew Mitchell and John Lombardo; county Manager Romilda Crocamo; Jim Cooney, Allied's vice president of skilled nursing; Councilman Tim McGinley; county grant writer Michele Sparich; and Councilwoman LeeAnn McDermott.

Funding

From page 1A

Council members visited the unoccupied third floor Monday so they would not jeopardize residents' privacy.

All the furnishings and finishes are new, and Brogna demonstrated a late evening hallway night-light feature that is more conducive to rest than the typical jarring institutional lighting.

"Whether they're coming for a week or the rest of their life, it's their home," Brogna said.

Downstairs, the chapel was relocated, freeing up space for a new therapy gym designed to help residents with mobility,

including an area to practice on appliances they would need to operate if they return home.

Passing through a refreshed dining space, council members checked out a revamped outdoor area that Brogna said has been described as "an oasis" for its new landscaping and a privacy fence that blocks out much of the surrounding city bustle.

Council members John Lombardo, LeeAnn McDermott, Tim McGinley, Matthew Mitchell and Brian Thornton participated in the tour along with county Manager Romilda Crocamo and county grant writer Michele Sparich, who has been assisting with American Rescue management.

The visits were scheduled to show the public the uses of \$55 million in American Rescue awards to 113 outside entities.

Lombardo, council's vice chairman, said he was impressed by the overall operation of the Allied Services Center City facility and the transformation of the 1971 building into a modern nursing home.

Through his work in emergency services, Lombardo said he routinely interacts with skilled nursing facilities.

"This one is a very big deviation from many I visit — in a positive way," Lombardo said of the Allied facility. "I would not be upset if I knew a relative of mine was going there."

Earth

From page 1A

Overview

Located in the City of Nanticoke, Hanover and Newport townships, and Warrior Run Borough, the Nanticoke Creek Watershed is a small, 8.2 square mile sub-watershed of the Susquehanna River Basin.

It has numerous impairments due to legacy anthracite coal mining, including obstructions, flow loss, dry streambeds, and AMD discharges.

In fact, only 30% of the streams in the watershed have the hydrological, ecological, and aesthetic qualities/functions of a natural stream.

Over the past several years, Earth Conservancy has worked with a team of consultants and agencies to develop a comprehensive plan to restore the historic alignment of the upper portions of the Nanticoke Creek.

Work will begin near Clarks Cross Road and progress upstream, addressing impairments

on the main stem and both tributaries — the Upper Nanticoke and Leuder Creeks.

In total, nearly 15,000 linear feet of permanent stream and floodway improvements are planned.

General activities will include grading, channel lining and stabilization, reconstruction using natural channel design, and planting of a riparian buffer.

Specifically, restoration activities will include:

Nanticoke Creek – Main Stem

- New alignment for Nanticoke Creek at Clarks Cross Road

- New water conveyance structure at South Main Street

Leuder Creek

- New culvert at Hanover Street

- Removal of Leuder Creek dam

- Replacement of reservoir with natural channel and shallow overflow ponds

- Replacement of buried culvert and deteriorated bridge with new culvert

Nanticoke Creek – Upper Reach

- Replacement of culvert on Hanover Street

- Elimination of existing obstruction and replacement with open channel

- Removal of bridge and stone arch from path of stream

- Re-establishment of channel based on historic alignment to reconnect upper and lower watersheds

- Buried railroad tunnel to be reopened and lined with smaller culvert

- Restoration of deteriorated masonry arch with slip lining

As a whole, Ostrowski said the Nanticoke Creek project offers both hydrological and ecological benefits.

"Increasing channel capacity and stabilizing banks will reduce erosion, sedimentation, and the risk of flooding, which will safeguard infrastructure," Ostrowski said. "Moreover, as the channel will be lined, water loss underground into the mine pools will be prevented, thereby decreasing AMD

Earth Conservancy has been awarded a more than \$17.5 million grant to support restoration of the upper reaches of the Nanticoke Creek watershed.

pollution downstream. Natural channel design and new riparian zones will enhance these effects, plus provide habitat to advance biodiversity and ecological balance."

In June 2023, Ostrowski said Earth Conservancy was notified it had received a \$1,956,427 Brownfields Cleanup grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) for the first phases of the project.

The \$17.5 million AML grant award from PADEP will enable Earth Conservancy to complete the project in whole.

The NCW project follows on the successful completion of the restoration of Espy Run, another tributary to the Nanticoke Creek. For that project, also supported by PADEP and USEPA, over 6,000 linear feet was reconstructed, re-establishing a connection from the stream's headwaters at the Hanover Reservoir to its middle reach.

John Stefanko, Deputy Secretary, PA DEP Office of Active & Abandoned Mine Operations, offered comments about the

project and Earth Conservancy.

"Earth Conservancy has already proved it can successfully complete impactful work after its completion of restoring Espy Run," Stefanko said. "The PA Department of Environmental Protection appreciates the opportunity to once again work with the Conservancy who will continue to exceed in its environmental healing efforts, this time by restoring the Nanticoke Creek and its ecosystems damaged from legacy coal mining."

Stefanko said Pennsylvania 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," Stefanko said. "This federal funding awarded by DEP to the Earth Conservancy is crucial in accomplishing that mission."

State Sen. Lisa Baker,

R-Lehman Township, said, "Because of the long mining history in our region, we continue a concerted effort to reclaim scarred lands and restore polluted streams."

Baker said the Nanticoke Creek restoration project is a tremendous collaboration between environmental advocacy groups, community leaders and officials, and state government.

"Productive land re-use creates jobs and helps build the economic base," Baker said. "Land and stream improvements provide a better quality of life, open up opportunities for recreation and relaxation, and help reduce pollution problems downstream. This positive outcome is a tribute to considerable foresight, planning, and the combination of public and private investment."

State Rep. Alec Ryncavage, R-Plymouth, added, "This project goes a long way in cleaning up mine-scarred land in Hanover Township. When completed it will enhance the land and the environment for the community."

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