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BACK MOUNTAIN

Dallas grad fabricates school shooting story



A screenshot of Calvin Polachek

By Ed Lewis
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A story in a Kentucky newspaper published online Feb. 12 included quotes from a Dallas School District graduate claiming he survived a school shooting at the high school in 2017. The claims of a school

shooting at Dallas High School were false, resulting in the school district and Dallas Township Police Chief Doug Higgins to issue separate statements Wednesday. “The district is aware of a video clip and accompanying article that appears to depict a former Dallas student

speaking about a school shooting at Dallas in 2017. Thankfully, that never happened. The discussion on the clip about Dallas and school violence is not factually accurate. Our District Solicitor is supporting an investigation and communication regarding the circulating clip,” the statement from

Dallas School District says. The statement from Dallas Township Police Chief Doug Higgins was more vocal condemning the fabricated story. The Kentucky Lantern newspaper attributed information of a school shooting at Dallas to Calvin Polachek, a 2020

graduate of Dallas. Polachek, who was identified as a master’s student at the University of Louisville, spoke at a gun safety rally held at the Kentucky capitol building. As he spoke, Polachek claimed he was involved in a school shooting and

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LUZERNE COUNTY

Study commission approves election board recommendation

By Jennifer Learn-Andes
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A Luzerne County Government Study Commission majority approved a recommendation Wednesday that would give county council authority to determine if the five-person county election board should remain composed of five citizen volunteers. The commission is drafting a revised charter that will come before voters for possible adoption in November. Its Wednesday recommendation would keep the board at five members, require at least two Democrats and two Republicans and allow the four council-appointed members to then choose someone to serve in the fifth seat — all provisions in the charter in effect since 2012. However, it would permit council to eliminate prohibitions barring county employees and elected officials from serving in these board seats. To make such a change in composition, council would have to amend its administrative code. Majority-plus-one council approval would be mandated for code changes related to the election board, which would be five votes under the commission’s recommendation to reduce council from 11 to seven members. Supporters of the proposal reason that council must have flexibility to change from an all-volunteer board if the board’s powers increase. Earlier this month, commission solicitor Joseph J. Khan, of Curtin & Heefner LLP, said the Pennsylvania Election Code, or Title 25, is clear

that election boards have employee appointment authority and other responsibilities currently performed by the county administration. Among the board powers cited at commission meetings: hiring the election director, choosing the voting system and preparing annual election budgets. Concerns were raised about granting such control over elections to five unelected people, which could equate to a board majority of three citizens from one political party. Four of seven commission members in attendance Wednesday approved the election board recommendation: Chairman Ted Ritsick, Vice Chairman Vito Malacari, Secretary Matt Mitchell and Stephen J. Urban. Commission member Tim McGinley was absent, and Commission Treasurer Cindy Malckemes and member Mark Shaffer voted no. Ritsick said after the meeting the recommendation allows council to weigh all legal analysis to ensure the county is in compliance with election law. Wednesday’s recommendation included a clause stating nothing in the charter, administrative code or any other county ordinance or resolution “shall be construed to deprive the (election) board of its powers to appoint, procure or otherwise act to protect the elective franchise as required by state law.” “Rather than us taking a side, we’ve equipped council to handle whatever interpretation becomes a reality,” Ritsick said.

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Submitted Photo

Earth Conservancy will use a \$6.7 million DEP grant to reclaim this 30-acre Hanover 7A site and transform it into a new community park serving the Lower South Valley.

Reclaimed for community

Earth Conservancy secures \$6.7M grant for land reclamation and park development

By Bill O’Boyle
boboyle@timesleader.com

HANOVER TWP. — A former strip mine once used for debris disposal from Hurricane Agnes in 1972 will be transformed into a vibrant community park, thanks to a \$6.7 million grant from the PA Department of Environmental Protection, Terry Ostrowski, president/CEO at Earth Conservancy, announced Wednesday. Ostrowski said Earth Conservancy will use the grant to reclaim its 30-acre Hanover 7A site and transform it into a new community park serving the Lower South Valley. Funded through DEP’s



Ostrowski



Submitted Photo

This aerial view shows the location of the 30-acre Hanover 7A site that Earth Conservancy will transform into a new community park serving the Lower South Valley.

highly-competitive Abandoned Mine Land Economic Revitalization (AMLER) Program, Ostrowski said the project highlights the power of partnerships in returning long-abandoned mine lands into valuable community assets — promoting both economic growth and environmental renewal. Located in Hanover Township directly off State Route 29, Ostrowski said the site’s accessibility makes it especially well-positioned to serve as a regional hub for outdoor recreation and com-

munity engagement. “Earth Conservancy is incredibly grateful for the continued support from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, as well as from our local representatives,” Ostrowski said. “The site’s accessibility and size make it ideal for a variety of outdoor activities. We genuinely believe it will not only provide a wonderful resource for residents, but also attract regional athletic tournaments, boosting our economy and fostering community engagement.”

Project overview Ostrowski said the history of Hanover 7A (H7A) is like many mine-scarred properties in EC’s portfolio. Once owned by the Glen Alden Coal Company, the land was heavily strip-mined and left unrestored, with large open pits dominating the landscape. Its condition worsened after the Agnes Flood in 1972, when Pennsylvania designated non-operating strip mine sites — including 38 acres of H7A — for disposal of storm debris.

See PARK | 2A

Will you be able to get a COVID-19 shot?

Here’s what we know so far

By Lauran Neergaard and Tom Murphy
The Associated Press

Want a COVID-19 vaccination this fall? For many Americans, it’s not clear how easy it will be to get one — or if they’ve lost the choice.

Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who was a longtime anti-vaccine activist, said this week that the shots are no longer recommended for healthy children and pregnant women, usurping a decision normally made by scientific experts, not political appointees.

The announcement follows an earlier Trump administration step to limit COVID-19 vaccinations among healthy people under age 65.

Until now, the U.S. — following guidance from independent experts who advise the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — has recommended yearly COVID-19 vaccinations for everyone age 6 months and older.

Together, the moves have left health experts, vaccine makers and insur-



AP Photo
Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., left, and Education Secretary Linda McMahon attend a Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) Commission Event in the East Room of the White House, Thursday, May 22, in Washington.

ers uncertain about what to advise and what comes next.

“It’s going to add a lot of confusion overall,” said Ajay Sethi, an epidemiologist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

How can I get a COVID-19 shot for myself or my healthy child?

Some of this season’s vaccine is still available. Insurance industry experts say if people had insurance coverage before Kennedy’s announcement, it’s highly unlikely that would have ended instantly based on the secretary’s video announcement. That means if someone could

find a shot, they’d likely be able to get one for now.

Will I still be able to choose a shot in the fall for myself or my child?

Who will be able to get what vaccines this fall is still unclear.

Vaccine manufacturers plan to issue updated COVID-19 shots in the late summer or fall. But the Food and Drug Administration has said it plans to limit approval of seasonal shots to seniors and others at high risk, pending more studies of everyone else.

Even if the U.S. approves vaccines only for certain groups, it still

may be possible for others to get the shot depending on the outcome of upcoming advisory meetings, regulatory moves and decisions from insurers and employers.

Will my insurance still pay?

Insurers base coverage decisions on the recommendations of that CDC panel, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices. It’s not clear what role that panel now will play. Paying out of pocket could cost about \$200.

But some insurers and employers may decide to still cover the shots regardless of the new recommendations, said Jen Kates, a senior vice president at the non-profit KFF, which studies health care issues. She noted that they may view the expense as worthwhile if it avoids a higher bill from someone hospitalized by the coronavirus.

What’s considered increased risk?

The FDA published a list of health conditions it said would qualify, including asthma, cancer, diabetes, obesity and physical inactivity. The CDC has a more extensive list.

But, again, it isn’t yet

known how this will play out. For example, it could be hard for people to prove they’re qualified. If they’re vaccinated at a drugstore, for instance, the pharmacist wouldn’t normally know about underlying health problems or even ask. Kates said it’s unclear whether Kennedy’s move would affect whether doctors recommend the shot.

And Sethi, the UW-Madison expert, said “this elephant in the room” is that blocking vaccination to the healthy may mean people who have a risk factor and simply don’t know it will miss out.

Adding to the confusion, the FDA included pregnancy and recent pregnancy on the list of conditions that would qualify someone for a shot — but Kennedy said that pregnancy was no longer a qualification in his announcement this week.

COVID-19 complications during pregnancy can include preterm birth as well as serious illness in the mother, and the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine said it “strongly reaffirms” its recommendation for vaccination during pregnancy.

Study

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During Wednesday’s deliberation, Shaffer and Malkemes said they won’t support wording that could allow elected officials to serve on the election board.

The approved recommendation also will allow any election board member to serve as board chair instead of requiring that leadership post to be held by the fifth person selected by the council-appointed board members.

It also gives council authority to decide how the four-year election board terms are sequenced and reduces the period in which appointees have to be registered to the applicable political party from five to three years preceding appointment.

The commission, which was convened a year ago, has now approved a proposed preamble and revisions to 11 charter articles, leaving only a transition section and final report. The transition section must spell out how some changes would be implemented, including the effective date and how council would be reduced over future election cycles.

Park

From page 1A

Following Glen Alden bankruptcy in the mid-1970s, Ostrowski said the land remained neglected until EC acquired it in 1994. At that time, he said no formal closure had occurred. EC worked with a range of agencies and community partners, including DEP, to evaluate and reclaim the 48-acre parcel.

Basic reclamation, including capping and grading, was completed in 2006. The site sat idle until 2019, when 18 acres were sold to a local developer, which became the new home of the Pennsylvania State Police Troop P barracks and training facility.

In January 2020,

Ostrowski said EC convened a group of local stakeholders — including municipal leaders, elected officials, and representatives from area schools, colleges, and businesses — to discuss the site’s potential.

“The response was overwhelmingly positive, with attendees envisioning the land becoming a focal point for community recreation and engagement,” Ostrowski said.

In response, EC applied for and received a Community Conservation Partnership Program (C2P2) grant from the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) in 2021. Ostrowski said the funding supported site assessments, community outreach, and planning. Importantly, Ostrowski said the study confirmed

that any reuse of the site — even for passive recreation — would require further reclamation.

To continue progress, Ostrowski said EC applied to DEP for funding through the AMLER Program in 2023.

In May 2025, Ostrowski said EC was awarded a \$6.7 million AMLER grant to complete the next phase of the project. He said work will include bulk earthwork, grading, and subsurface stabilization; installation of basic utilities and parking areas; site revegetation; and construction of initial park amenities, including grass fields, a walking trail, and an inclusive playground.

“Once complete, the H7A project will mark a significant milestone in EC’s mission to foster environmental restoration, economic development,

and improved quality of life in the region,” Ostrowski said. “The transformation of this long-neglected site into a vibrant community space will expand green infrastructure, enhance outdoor recreational opportunities, and serve as a valuable resource for local schools and residents. Additionally, the project lays the groundwork for future phases of development, supporting a healthier, safer, and more connected Lower South Valley.”

Legislators offer comment

Sen. Lisa Baker, R-Lehman Township, said the project represents a terrific combination of conservation and recreation.

“We are fortunate to have a local group like the Earth Conservancy with



Baker



Ryncavage



Guesto

the vision and energy to assemble and carry out a plan that contributes to the physical and mental health of area residents,” Sen. Baker said. “This opens opportunities for those of all ages to enjoy the outdoors.”

Rep. Alec Ryncavage, R-Hanover Township, said the project marks a transformative investment for Hanover Township and the entire region.

“Reclaiming abandoned mine land and turning it into a vibrant public space will not only improve our environment, but also create new recreational

said. “I was proud to support this project and look forward to seeing it come to life.”

Hanover Township Manager Sam Guesto said the township is grateful to the Earth Conservancy for securing these funds for a large recreation park.

“This park will benefit the community and region — fostering health, unity, and vibrant connections that enrich lives,” Guesto said. “The township looks forward to supporting this very important project.”

To learn more, visit www.earthconservancy.org.

opportunities for families and support ongoing economic development,” Rep. Ryncavage

Story

From page 1A

his best friend, his brother and nine others were killed, according to the Kentucky Lantern article published Feb. 12.

The Feb. 12 article and a video clip of Polachek speaking at the Kentucky capitol rally were recently posted on Back Mountain social media sites prompting the Dallas School District and Chief Higgins to respond.

Efforts to contact Polachek were unsuccessful Wednesday morning.

The story in the Kentucky Lantern was updated Wednesday with the removal of Polachek’s quotes.

Below is the statement from Chief Higgins:

The Dallas Township Police Department is aware of recent public statements made by former Dallas High School student Calvin Polachek during a February 2025, rally in Frankfort, Kentucky. The event, organized by the Kentucky chapters of Moms Demand Action and Students Demand Action, supported the introduction of Kentucky House Bill 214

by (Kentucky) State Representative Adam Moore, which promotes gun safety education.

At the rally, Mr. Polachek claimed that in 2017 he survived a school shooting at Dallas High School in Dallas, Pennsylvania, an incident in which he said he lost his best friend, his brother and nine others. These claims are entirely false. Nonetheless, they were reported by multiple Kentucky media outlets, including Fox 56 in Lexington and the Kentucky Lantern, and have since spread nationally across platforms such as MSN, Yahoo News, various online publications and social media.

The widespread sharing of a fabricated tragedy is not only reckless, it is harmful. It fuels unnecessary fear, disrespects the experiences of real victims of school violence and misleads the public with a narrative that has no basis in truth.

Let us be absolutely clear: This event never occurred.

There has never been a school shooting at Dallas High School. Not in 2017, and not at any point in our community’s history. These false claims are

deeply troubling. They undermine the integrity of our school district, erode public trust, and cause real harm to a community that takes great pride in protecting its residents, especially its children.

We support the mission of those working to make schools safer. That work is vital. But effective advocacy must be built on truth. Falsely referencing a tragedy that never happened disrespects the memory of actual victims and distracts from meaningful progress.

The Dallas Township Police Department remains steadfast in its commitment to transparency, public trust, and the safety of our schools. We urge the public and the media to verify facts before sharing serious allegations. Misinformation of this nature isn’t just irresponsible, it has lasting consequences for the well-being of our entire community.

The people of Dallas Township deserve honesty. And we will continue to uphold the values of transparency, accountability and safety for every family who calls this community and our surrounding areas home.

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