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SOUDERTON

A groundbreaking plan

From past to future: Former high school site to be town center
Long time coming: Planners, developers overcame obstacles



BOB KEELER — MEDIANEWS GROUP

Taking part in the Sept. 22 ceremonial groundbreaking at Towne Gate Commons are, from left, Souderton Borough Council members Julie Munden, Daryl Littlefield and Ned Leight; Borough Manager Mike Coli; Mayor John Reynolds; Montgomery County Planning Commission Senior Planner Chloe Mohr; Select Properties Vice President Brian Grant; Souderton Borough Council President Brian Gashow; and Souderton Connects Manager Christina DiVergigelis.

By Bob Keeler
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SOUDERTON » It's been a dozen years since Souderton Area High School moved out of the borough to its current location in Franconia.

"We've come a long way since then. Today we get to break ground on what will be a \$40 million walkable village community that will include new homes, new businesses and job opportunities," Colman-based Select Properties Vice President Brian Grant said as a ceremonial groundbreaking was held Sept. 22 for

Towne Gate Commons at the former high school site. Seventy-four town homes have already been built in the first phase of the development, with another 66 planned. There will also be seven commercial pad sites and a public park including an amphitheater, Grant said. A Dollar General store is slated to be the first of the commercial businesses. A liquor license has already been procured for another of the sites that would be an ideal restaurant site, he said. "We designed Towne Gate Commons with community in mind. Our goal

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COURTESY OF TOWNE GATE COMMONS

When completed, Towne Gate Commons will include 140 townhomes, seven commercial building pad sites and a public park and plaza.

MONTCO COURTS

Jury deliberating fate of Norristown man accused in 1980 murder of ex-girlfriend

By Carl Hessler Jr.
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NORRISTOWN » A Montgomery County jury, for the third time in 41 years, is weighing the fate of a Norristown man accused of fatally shooting his ex-girlfriend during an argument in a car in 1980.

A jury of six men and six women, during a retrial ordered by a federal judge, began deliberating the fate of Robert Fisher at 12:20 p.m. on Thursday. The jury re-

turned several times with questions throughout the afternoon including asking Judge Todd D. Eisenberg to re-read the legal definition of "reasonable doubt." Fisher, now 75, and formerly of the 600 block of DeKalb Street, is charged with first- and third-degree murder in connection with the July 10, 1980, fatal shooting of 26-year-old Collegeville native Linda Rowden, who was his ex-girlfriend at the time.

First-degree murder,

which is an intentional killing, is punishable of life imprisonment. Third-degree murder is a killing committed with malice and is punishable of a maximum of 20 to 40 years in prison. During his closing statement to jurors on Thursday, county First Assistant District Attorney Edward F. McCann Jr. argued Fisher acted with intent when he fatally shot Rowden with a handgun that once belonged to Rowden's father.

"That man, Bobby Fisher,

took Linda Rowden's life. He did it intentionally and he did it with malice," McCann said as he pointed directly at Fisher.

"He killed Linda Rowden with her father's gun. That's how cold-blooded he is. The gun that Linda Rowden was killed with, she gave to him. It was from her father," McCann said.

But defense lawyer Carrie L. Allman, the chief homicide lawyer for the public defender's office, suggested

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MONTCO

County officials spar in meeting

Arkoosh and Gale trade name-calling: 'Racist,' 'dictator'

By Rachel Ravina
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NORRISTOWN » The trio of Montgomery County Commissioners engaged in a war of words Thursday as tempers flared during their board meeting. Commissioner Joe Gale sparred with commissioners' Chairwoman Val Arkoosh and Vice Chairman Ken Lawrence Jr. on several topics. Arkoosh called Gale a "racist." Gale called Arkoosh a "dictator."

The verbal sparring started during opening comments of the in-person meeting on the eighth floor of One Montgomery Plaza. Arkoosh spoke of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and updates surrounding the aftermath of the remnants of Hurricane Ida, which brought destruction to much of the region.

Lawrence, who also serves as election board chairman, provided information about the upcoming general election in November. Gale protested restrictions that have been put in place throughout the COVID-19 public health crisis that began in March, 2020.

"Since the coronavirus outbreak, incrementally, government has overstepped its bounds, and county employees are being used as political pawns during this process," Gale said.

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UPPER GWYNEDD

Board tables acquiring Martin Tract

Owner of 32 acres wants input

By Dan Sekil
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UPPER GWYNEDD » Township officials and a longtime Upper Gwynedd resident have agreed to keep talking about a potential property acquisition.

Upper Gwynedd's board heard at length Tuesday night from Tom Martin, owner of the "Martin Tract" the township is trying to acquire.

"We do our best to get the word out there, and to make decisions, the best that we can, with the feedback that we get. Tonight, we got feedback, and we'll meet with Mr. Martin," said board President Liz McNaney.

Last week, the board announced plans to acquire the Martin Tract, roughly 32.8 acres located south of Allentown Road, bounded by

TRACT » PAGE 3

SPOTLIGHT

Carlile, Simpson win top Americana awards

The annual awards show returned in-person in Nashville, Tenn., after it was canceled last year. PAGE A2



BUSINESS

Jobless claims tick up from near pandemic low

It's a sign that the delta variant of the coronavirus may be disrupting the job market's recovery. PAGE A6

OPINION

Masks offer kids freedom to be safe

Studies show wearing masks reduces spread of the virus and allows students to gather safely and learn. PAGE A4

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Owen Wilson, Sudeikis, Malek, Kardashian West to host 'SNL'

NEW YORK » Owen Wilson, Kim Kardashian West, Rami Malek and Jason Sudeikis are lined up to host the next four episodes of "Saturday Night Live" this fall.

NBC announced Wednesday that Wilson will host the show for the first time to open its 47th season on Oct. 2. Kacey Musgraves will be the musical guest.

While NBC announced the lineup of hosts and musical guests for the first four episodes, "Saturday Night Live" still hasn't revealed who will be the cast members this season.

Halsey is the musical guest on Oct. 9, when Kardashian West makes her debut as host. Malek will host on Oct. 16, with Young Thug as the musician. Sudeikis will host on Oct. 23.

Britney Spears court filing says conservatorship should end

LOS ANGELES » Britney Spears said in a court filing Wednesday that she agrees with her father that the conservatorship that has controlled her life and money since 2008 should be terminated.

The filing in Los Angeles Superior Court from Spears' attorney Matthew Rosengart says she "fully consents" to "expeditiously" ending the conservatorship, which her father James Spears, who has controlled it for most of its 13 years, asked for in a Sept. 7 petition.

It's the first time Britney Spears has called for an end to the arrangement in court documents, though she has called for its termination in hearings.

Her filing emphasizes, however, that it is more important to her that her father be removed, calling it "a necessary first — and substantial — step towards Ms. Spears' freedom and ending the Kafkaesque nightmare imposed upon her by her father, so that her dignity and basic liberties can be restored."

It is urgent that James Spears be suspended from his role of conservator of Britney Spears' finances by Sept. 20, the next hearing date in the case, the filing says.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Photos and text from The Associated Press



Brandy Carlile accepts the artist of the year award at the Americana Honors & Awards show Wednesday in Nashville, Tenn.

Brandy Carlile, Sturgill Simpson win top Americana awards

NASHVILLE, TENN. » Grammy-winning singer-songwriter Brandy Carlile added another trophy to her shelf as she won artist of the year at the 2021 Americana Honors and Awards show, while country singer Sturgill Simpson took home the album of the year award.

The annual awards show returned in-person on Wednesday at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, Tenn., after it was canceled last year because of the pandemic.

"To be artist of the year after a year like we have all had as a community, there's a weight to it and I know it's profound," Carlile said. "Because it was hard to be an artist this year."

Simpson won for "Cuttin' Grass Vol. 1 — The Butcher Shoppe Sessions," in which he recorded bluesy versions of his songs. Simpson did not attend, so Shooter Jennings accepted the award on his behalf.

Carlile made the most of her pandemic year, releasing a memoir and working on a follow-up to her breakout 2018 record "By Your Side." The album "By Your Side" is her second artist of the year trophy, after winning in 2019.

The Washington native and musical multi-instrumentalist has worked as a producer and writer for Tanya Tucker's Grammy-winning comeback record and as a member of The Highwomen. Carlile sat at the piano to sing "Right on Time," a song from her forthcoming album "In These Silent Days," and also performed with the Highwomen's Maren Morris, Amanda Shires and Natalie Hemby with special guest Yola.

The late folk singer John Prine, who Carlile called "the godfather of Americana," won song of the year for "I Remember Everything."

TODAY IN HISTORY

1789
President George Washington signed a Judiciary Act establishing America's federal court system and creating the post of attorney general.

1869
Thousands of businessmen were ruined in a Wall Street panic known as "Black Friday" after financiers Jay Gould and James Fisk attempted to corner the gold market.

1929
Lt. James H. Doolittle guided a Consolidated NY-2 Biplane over Mitchell Field in New York in the first all-instrument flight.

1934
Babe Ruth made his farewell appearance as a player with the New York Yankees in a game against the Boston Red Sox.

1955
President Dwight D. Eisenhower suffered a heart attack while on vacation in Denver.

1960
The USS Enterprise, the first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, was launched at Newport News, Va.

TODAY'S BIRTHDAYS

R&B singer Sonny Turner (The Platners) is 82. Actor Harriet Walter is 71. Songwriter Holly Knight is 65. Actor Megan Ward is 52. Actor Ian Bohan is 45. Actor Justin Bruening is 42. Actor Greg Damon is 34. Actor Ben Platt is 28.

Montco

FROM PAGE 1

He blasted a recently issued mandate requiring Montgomery County's roughly 2,600 employees to be vaccinated against COVID or get tested weekly. According to an email sent out to county workers, the directive is set to take effect on Oct. 18.

"So my phone rings off the hook from county employees that are afraid to approach their supervisors, the two Democrat county commissioners, anyone in the senior staff, because they're afraid of losing their job," Gale said. "And this is all being done for political purposes, and it's wrong."

"So as is often the case, Commissioner Gale has his facts wrong," Arkoosh said. "First of all, our county employees have the option of being vaccinated or being tested. They're not required to be vaccinated."

Gale went on to criticize his fellow elected officials in his opening remarks while he broadcast live on Montgomery County's Facebook page.

"I face consequences for being an outspoken minority commissioner," he said, taking issue with being left out of county business, namely proclamations, press releases and photos.

"You exclude my name. And the senior staff and people in this room are guilty of it as well. You know it's wrong," Gale said. "I'm twice elected commissioner. I wasn't originally appointed to be commissioner. I was elected without the support of either major party, and people put me here to be the watchdog for them, and to provide checks and balances."

"And I'm not gonna shut up and just go along to get along with you guys. I'm gonna continue to provide those checks and balances, and you all should be thankful for my services. And that concludes my comments. Go along with your dog and pony show."

After finishing his remarks a handful of claps could be heard from the audience.

Arkoosh shot back: "Commissioner Gale, I want to be very clear, and I'm just

speaking for myself, but I won't stand next to you ... unless it's statutorily required because you're a racist. You're a COVID denier. You refuse to pay any attention to the science or the facts and I will not dignify you by putting my name next to yours or standing in a picture with you when you continue to spout this kind of nonsense."

The two continued talking over each other during their exchange.

"Commissioner Gale, you're the racist and I am speaking and I have an announcement from our Department of Public Safety," Arkoosh said.

The meeting progressed, following public comment, with the approval of the minutes from the previous session and resolutions. Then came the per-

sonnel presentation from Donna Pardieu, Montgomery County's director of human resources. Arkoosh moved to approve the list of new hires and status of employees, which Lawrence seconded.

Gale expressed his opposition to the hiring of Donna Richemond as the county's director of diversity, equity and inclusion. "I'm not supporting a budget that includes higher spending, and tax increase, and spending that's not necessary, and the position of chief diversity and equity and inclusion officer is not necessary for this county government, and it's a cost of \$127,472.89 a year to the taxpayers," Gale said. "And I'm against it. So we'll need a roll call vote. It's political theater, too."

Lawrence paused before giving his response: "The bid on behalf of the county government is on here Commissioner Gale is you, and you're a bad actor," he said. "There are disparities within our county government on how we provide services to people. There are disparities with how we treat our employees. That is what this position is to address."

"We've seen it through the pandemic. We're seeing it now in the aftermath of Hurricane Ida," Lawrence continued. "So you know, you can use your check to stand against diversity, to stand against inclusion, to stand against equity. But by doing that you're perpetuating disparities and inequities for our citizens."

"All this could be done without [a] \$127,000 salary. We can do it within our own means. Give me a break," Gale replied.

The personnel list passed 2-1, with Arkoosh and Lawrence voting in favor, and Gale voting against it.

Quarreling continues
As the meeting continued, four requests for proposals were presented by Montgomery County's Deputy Chief Operating Officer Barbara O'Malley, including one for water services for equipment.

"We also need a roll call vote on this, and I ask that you amend your motion to separate RFP number four."

"I'm not voting for mail-in ballot drop boxes," Gale told Arkoosh, referencing his previous opposition to ballot boxes.

"I'm not gonna take that amendment. We'll just have a roll call," Arkoosh said.

"Because you're a dictator," Gale replied. "And you know what else? Starting this year, the new thing is instead of asking for a motion from the board, you make the motion every time."

"Ms. Washington," she said, addressing Board Secretary Staci Washington. "So it's little vindictive things to be spiteful," he said.

"Mr. Gale, I am the chair of this meeting, and I am speaking," she said. "It's Commissioner Gale," he said. "That's another thing you do — you say Mr. Gale."

"Ms. Washington, please proceed with the vote," she said.

The package of request for proposals passed in a 2-1 roll call vote.

Souderton

FROM PAGE 1

is to blend what people already love about Souderton with the conveniences and accessibility of an urban center," Grant said.

Other groundbreaking speakers included Souderton Borough Council President Brian Goshow.

"It has taken us some time to get here, there's no doubt of that, but maybe that is just a little bit of the spirit of this property," he said.

He remembered being a 10th grade student at the school in 1988 when there were major renovations. A fundraising T-shirt at the time said, "Temporary inconvenience for permanent improvement," he said.

There was temporary inconvenience and patience needed in the Towne Gate Commons project, which came in the wake of the 2008 economic collapse and had to deal with the labor and materials shortages of the pandemic and revisions to the plans to meet the borough's goals, he said.

"The spirit of working together was one that really served us all well," Goshow said.

Mayor John Reynolds said his son was part of the class of 2009, the first to graduate at the school before it moved.

While town homes have been built, the borough has been waiting for commercial development at the site, he said.

"It is finally coming to fruition," he said.

"It's been a long process,"

Reynolds said. "I'm glad to see it's finally coming to a groundbreaking here today."

Montgomery County Planning Commission Senior Planner Chloe Mohr drafted the agreement between the borough and developer for the plans and was part of the discussions leading up to it.

"They were sometimes complicated, sometimes messy, but I really want to commend both the borough and the developer for their patience and their commitment to really coming up with a good design for this property that will be a real asset to the borough and the county as a whole," Mohr said.

"There's a housing crunch in Montgomery County with fewer homes on the market and sales prices rising faster than inflation or

household income, she said.

"The county is glad to see new housing being developed, in particular the housing types that are going to be on this site will be more accessible to middle-income residents or anyone who's looking for a modest size home in the county," Mohr said.

"We're glad to also see this as a walkable development reducing car traffic and emissions if residents can walk to amenities both on the site here," she said, "and within the boroughs of Souderton and Telford, which are all very well connected with the existing sidewalk network."

The property is in the block of Souderton bounded by E. Broad Street (Route 113), School Lane, Chestnut Street and County Line Road.

Online: Check out the Lottery Master's blog <https://www.rslotteryblog.blogspot.com>

PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE AMERICANA HONORS & AWARDS SHOW

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