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## Onetime rivals join forces

Wayne Williams joins city as Mayor Mobolade's new chief of staff

BY **BRENNEN KAUFFMAN**  
The Gazette

Wayne Williams will be the next chief of staff for Colorado Springs Mayor Yemi Mobolade, turning the two former election opponents into partners in city government.

The two officially an-

nounced the hire Thursday, citing Williams' decades of experience with city, county and state government as skills he would bring to the administration. Williams will not officially start until April 20, but said he was already setting up meetings to hit the ground running.

In interviews on Wednesday, Mobolade and Williams pointed to some lofty company for their new partnership.

One example was James Monroe and James Madison, the Founding Fathers who ran against each other in one of the earliest congressional races in Virginia. Another

was Abraham Lincoln and the "team of rivals" he built for his presidential Cabinet.

"This is the way that people still expect our society to be, which is that we may disagree on issues and candidates but ultimately, serving the people

SEE WILLIAMS • PAGE 7



JERILEE BENNETT, THE GAZETTE

Mayor Yemi Mobolade and Wayne Williams, who were opponents in the last mayoral race, have combined forces for the city. The mayor has picked Williams for his chief of staff. Williams was formerly the Colorado Secretary of State, city councilman and county commissioner.



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

First lady Melania Trump arrives to speak with reporters Thursday in the Grand Foyer of the White House in Washington.

## First lady Melania Trump denies having a connection to Epstein

Reuters

**WASHINGTON** · First lady Melania Trump on Thursday denied having any relationship with disgraced financier and sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, reviving a highly sensitive issue that her husband has repeatedly sought to downplay.

She denied online speculation that Epstein had introduced her to Donald Trump, saying she met her husband at a New York City party in 1998. "I am not Epstein's victim," she said. She also urged Congress to provide public hearings for Epstein victims to tell their stories under oath.

"The lies linking me with the disgraceful Jeffrey Epstein need to end

today," Melania Trump said, reading a statement and declining to take questions.

The extraordinary address, delivered beneath the presidential seal in the White House foyer, brings renewed scrutiny to the Epstein case, which has roiled Trump's presidency as his supporters accuse his administration of mishandling disclosures from government files.

Trump last week fired his attorney general, Pam Bondi, a particular target of ire for Trump loyalists after the Justice Department slow-walked the release of millions of files related to Epstein.

Trump, a onetime friend of Epstein

who said he cut ties with the financier in the early 2000s, is among many famous people — celebrities, politicians and intellectuals — named in the government files.

Melania Trump did not say why she chose to speak out Thursday, as the Epstein saga had largely receded from the headlines amid the U.S.-Israeli war against Iran.

But Marc Beckman, her senior adviser, said in a statement: "First lady Melania Trump spoke out now because enough is enough. The lies must stop."

The first lady said she had never had

SEE FIRST LADY • PAGE 7

### IRAN WAR

## Israel OKs direct talks with Lebanon

Lack of attacks increases likelihood that ceasefire with Iran holds

News Services

**DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES** · In a potential boost to Middle East ceasefire efforts, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Thursday that he authorized direct negotiations with Lebanon "as soon as possible" aimed at disarming Iranian-backed Hezbollah militants and establishing relations between the neighbors.

The two countries have technically been at war since Israel was established in 1948, and Netanyahu later stressed that there was no ceasefire between them. In a video

statement, he said Israel will keep striking Hezbollah until security is restored in northern Israel.

There was no immediate response from Lebanon. But Israel-Lebanon negotiations were expected to begin next week at the State Department in Washington, according to a U.S. official and a person familiar with the plans, who spoke on condition of anonymity due to the delicacy of the matter.

The prospect of talks appeared to bolster the tenta-

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## Some law changes to advance state budget bill are passed

BY **MARIANNE GOODLAND**  
The Gazette

The Colorado House battle over the 2026-27 budget, stalled when Republicans began asking for bills, including a 661-page budget bill, to be read at length, got into some of the more difficult conversations on Thursday about what's on the table to be cut.

The state constitution requires a balanced budget, although that rarely stays bal-

anced for long.

The budget that started in the House on Monday has been tweaked, with the defeat of one of the 65 "orbitals" — bills that change state law to balance the budget. The difference, according to the fiscal note for repealing Medicaid reimbursement for equine therapy, is about \$181,000 in general funds.

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