

# Commissioners to revamp airport authority

## 4 appointments expected Thursday

**BY RICH CHOLODOFSKY**

The board that oversees operations at Arnold Palmer Regional Airport in Unity is poised to be significantly revamped through a series of new appointments Westmoreland County commissioners are expected to vote on this week.

Commissioners Sean Kertes and Doug Chew said they will appoint four new members to the nine-person Westmoreland County Airport Authority board, which operates the commercial airport near Latrobe and a small commuter

airport in Rostraver.

"We expect they will work to bring in new airlines and improve our numbers and hopefully build on our continued growth through finding uses for the land we own," Kertes said.

Two current board members, Scottsdale businessman Rich Pologruto and Rostraver Commissioner Gary Beck Sr., will be replaced. Pologruto has been on the board since 2021 and Beck since 2019.

In 2021, Chew and former Commissioner Gina Cerilli installed

Pologruto on the board as part of a restructuring. That move resulted in an ongoing disagreement over the process that led to a new contract for the airport's lone restaurant and food provider.

Pologruto, when contacted Tuesday, said he was blindsided by his apparent removal. Beck said he, too, was not officially told of his ouster.

"I enjoyed working at the airport authority. It's their decision," Beck said of the commissioners. "I have no qualms about it and no ill feelings."

The pair is being replaced by former Rostraver volunteer fire department President Brian Sokol, who works as the district director for state Rep. Eric Davanzo, R-Smithton;

**Two current board members, Scottsdale businessman Rich Pologruto and Rostraver Commissioner Gary Beck Sr., will be replaced.**

and Dale Landis II of Mt. Pleasant. According to a resume provided by commissioners, Landis served as a U.S. Air Force pilot and works as a pilot for FedEx.

Chew did not immediately respond to a request for comment and said he would issue a statement later.

Commissioners, who are slated to formally approve their board selections at the next public meeting

Thursday, also said they plan to appoint Latrobe businessman Edward Sobota and Ligonier resident Debbie Irwin to the airport authority board. They will fill terms created by the resignation last year of board member Richard Ridilla and the death of Janice Smarto.

Richard Whittaker, who serves as board president, Mark Gera and Donald Rossi are expected to be reappointed to new five-year terms.

Irwin, a former elected county jury commissioner and chairwoman of the county's Republican Committee, serves as a member of the Westmoreland County Transit Authority board.

AIRPORT · A2

## Feds probe threats made over public safety radio

*Pittsburgh mayor mentioned among antisemitic messages*

**BY JULIA BURDELSKI AND JUSTIN VELLUCCI**

Federal officials and Allegheny County law enforcement are investigating "hateful and threatening messages," some of which included antisemitic vitriol against Pittsburgh's mayor, that were broadcast on two days this week over public safety radio.

The comments, made Monday and Tuesday by what the county said was an unauthorized user, were carried over the radio systems that allow the county and Pittsburgh public safety personnel to communicate.

Kasey Reigner, a spokeswoman for Allegheny County's emergency services, said the system was not hacked.

"The unknown user was able to access the analog radio system and transmit the messages," Reigner said in a statement.

"We have had unknown subscribers show up on our channels in the past," Reigner told TribLive by text message without elaborating.

Officials did not provide details Tuesday about the content or duration of the messages, which are also being investigated by Allegheny County Emergency Services and the Federal Communications Commission.

But authorities said the person transmitting the messages was not using a city- or county-registered radio.

Cara Cruz, a Pittsburgh public safety spokeswoman, said the radio traffic affected city public safety channels but declined further comment.

Officials will release information about "the ownership or origin of the offending transmitting device" only when the investigation is completed, she added.

Mayor Corey O'Connor, whose late mother was Jewish, said he attended an event at a local synagogue Monday evening.

"We know there's been a lot



**O'Connor:** Pittsburgh mayor says every threat is taken seriously.



Dawn Szalay, owner of Song of Sixpence boutique in Ligonier, is worried that if the popular Ligonier Country Market is moved out of town, it will affect foot traffic to all local businesses.

**Below:** The most recent site of the popular market on the edge of Ligonier is owned by the Loyalhanna Watershed Association. (Photos: Louis B. Ruediger | TribLive)

# MARKET NOT SET



## Lease negotiations continue for Ligonier event as traditional scheduled opening nears

**BY QUINCEY REESE**

With the Ligonier Country Market's May 16 opening day just over two months away, the future of the 50-year-old local tradition remains in limbo as organizers and their longtime landlord attempt to resolve a soured lease dispute.

The Loyalhanna Watershed Association, which has hosted the market on its 9.6-acre property off Route 30 in Ligonier Township for 25 years, recently updated its pitch for a continued partnership. But with the countdown to the regular season officially on,

a final agreement has yet to be signed.

The stakes are high: The vendor showcase traditionally kicks off the first Saturday after Mother's Day and draws between 3,000 and 5,000 visitors each weekend, according to market Director Kelly Svesnik.

Local business owners, like Dawn Szalay of the Song of Sixpence boutique in Ligonier Borough, say their livelihood depends on that crowd.

"I opened my business knowing that (the market) was there," said Szalay, a former market director

and vendor who recently took to social media to urge both sides to settle. "Many of us have opened our businesses knowing that was there. This is what we expect for our summers and fall."

**Lease disagreement started in January**

The dispute was sparked after the Ligonier Township supervisors issued special event permits Jan. 5. The watershed association presented a new lease to the market Oct. 29 — updated following a

LIGONIER · A2

## Secret Service probes \$5M Unity scam as duo indicted in gold scheme

*Federal Trade Commission warns fraudsters might pose as agency workers*

**BY RENATTA SIGNORINI**

The Secret Service is investigating a scam that netted more than \$5 million from a local resident through transactions in Unity.

Meanwhile, two men are facing an indictment in Ohio federal court for a similar multistate scheme that tricked senior citizens, including

a West Newton man who reported losing \$336,000, into handing over cash and gold bars.

Investigators in both cases reported the scammers posed as Federal Trade Commission officials.

State police said in a news release they were notified by the Secret Service that a local resident responded last week to a text message about a PayPal transaction and then was contacted again by people claiming to be representing the FTC. Police said the resident later handed over cash and gold bars totaling more than \$5 million. The transactions

happened in Unity, troopers said.

Anyone who has experienced similar circumstances, regardless of whether a transaction took place, is asked to contact state police at 724-832-3288 and ask for Trooper Jason Kinger.

The Secret Service did not respond to a media request.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation handled the Ohio case that charged Tejas Bhupendrabhai Patel, 31, a resident of Toledo, and Navya Umeshkumar Bhatt, 22, a citizen of India, with money laundering conspiracy, concealment money

laundering and promotion of money laundering. Both have been detained since at least late January.

Authorities reported in an affidavit the scammers posed as bank officials or agents from the FBI, Social Security Administration and the FTC to scam people in Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Indiana. Photos included in the complaint show the suspects with cash and gold bars.

A package containing \$44,000 with the West Newton man's name on it appeared in a video investigators found

SCAM · A7

### INSIDE



#### REGION

**ALBERT'S SUIT DISMISSED**

» Westmoreland Sheriff **James Albert** plans to continue pursuing an end to a rule requiring the sheriff's office to transport inmates. **A3**

#### OPINION

**PRIVACY FIRST**

» Protecting the medical records of transgender youth protects the medical records of everyone. **A6**



#### SPORTS

**THE RIGHT MOVE?**

» **Ryan O'Hearn** is working on his long toss in preparation for playing right field for the Pirates more frequently. **B1**

**WEATHER 56 · 51**

Periods of rain today and tonight

**Details, A2**

**INDEX**

Vol. 138 · No. 24

Two sections

18 pages

Almanac A8

Bridge A8

Business B6

Classified B7

Comics A9

Crossword A8

Editorials A6

Financial B6

Horoscope A6

Lotteries A2

Nation/World B6

Obituaries A4

Region A3

Sports B1

Sudoku A8

Television A10

6 47397 11111 9

**\$2.50** PRICE MAY VARY OUTSIDE PRIMARY MARKET

© TRIB TOTAL MEDIA 2026