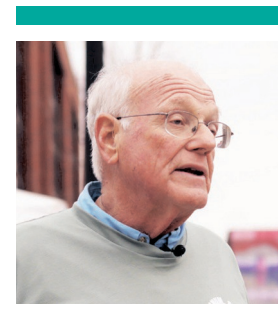


TIMES WEST VIRGINIAN

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TOWN OF WORTHINGTON

Deputies seize content creator's phone

BY ESTEBAN FERNANDEZ
TIMES WEST VIRGINIAN

WORTHINGTON — The arrest of a digital creator outside Worthington Town Hall has turned into a he said-she said moment between opposing sides of the town's sewage crisis issue.

And the evidence that may untangle it all is in police custody. Michael Bowman, who produces journalistic content for YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, was arrested by the Marion County Sheriff's Department on two counts of obstruction. Bowman posted \$17,000 bail a few hours after his arrest.

The misdemeanor complaint states deputies responded to a disturbance outside Worthington Town Hall.

"On arrival, deputies observed the defendant in the hallway and when the defendant was asked for his identification, the Defendant refused to provide it," the complaint states. "Once the Defendant was told he was being placed under arrest for obstruction

he resisted by extending his arms out and away to keep from being placed in restraints."

Mayor Deb Heflin didn't finish saying no comment before hanging up the phone with a loud thud.

Bowman arrived in Worthington Tuesday evening to observe a town sewer board meeting.

Bowman had come to document the sewage issue that has beguiled both residents and public officials for years. In a video posted to the Worthington WV Sewage Crisis Facebook page, Heflin can be seen prohibiting public comment.

"We're done, there's no public comment, you're trying to do public comments," Heflin said. "We don't know nothing, everyone can leave."

Bowman can be seen approaching Heflin and asking if he can ask questions. Heflin denies the request. Bowman asks if he can come the following day. Heflin asks, "what time." In the video, neither Heflin nor Bowman raise their voices at each other.

From there, accounts differ. Andrea Zaleski, administrator

of the Sewage Crisis Page and community leader of the group opposing Heflin's leadership, said the sewer board meeting only lasted 20 minutes and wasn't particularly informative. After the meeting, Zaleski alleged Heflin said some "(expletive) stuff" to Bowman. Zaleski said she heard Heflin say the city attorney said to leave Heflin alone and that Heflin didn't have to talk to Bowman. Bowman recorded throughout the entire exchange.

Zaleski alleges Heflin called a town sewer employee.

"Derek pulls in, fresh out of Dukes of Hazzard and wants to get out and fight this guy," Zaleski said.

Zaleski said she saw a video Bowman recorded from which it appears the sewer employee tried to run Bowman over. Zaleski had left by this point.

Renee Courtney, the unofficial town spokesperson through which Heflin communicates on a regular basis, posted a different



Michael Bowman, a digital creator, stands outside of Our Lady of Victory Church in Gary, W.Va.

SEE BOWMAN, PAGE 2A

COULD COST MILLIONS

State buys \$876K program to handle SNAP fraud

BY LORI KERSEY
WEST VIRGINIA WATCH

CHARLESTON — The West Virginia Department of Human Services is spending more than \$800K on an artificial intelligence program meant to help decrease the number of mistake payments in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, records show.

The department needs to keep its SNAP error rate down to avoid penalties put in place under President Donald Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act beginning in 2028. An emergency purchasing order for the AI tool said that without the technology, the state could be on the hook for \$55 million.

The state Purchasing Division approved the department's emergency purchase of SAS Payment Integrity for Food Assistance last month for \$876,259, records show.

In West Virginia, the cost of SNAP benefits is \$565 million annually, Budget Director Mike McKown told lawmakers earlier this year. About 275,000 West Virginians, or 1 in 6, rely on food stamps. Currently, the federal government pays 100% of the cost of benefits paid to recipients under SNAP. The state and federal government evenly split the cost of administering the



A sign for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is displayed at the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington, D.C.

program.

Under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which Trump signed into law last year, beginning in the next federal fiscal year, states will pay a higher percentage of the administrative costs — 75% instead of 50%. West Virginia's approved budget for the 2027 fiscal year included a \$13.5 million increase for SNAP to cover the increase for the first nine months of next year.

States could be on the hook for some of the cost of benefits in their state, depending on the payment error rates for their SNAP program. Payment errors include overpayments and underpayments.

Beginning in 2028, states with a payment error rate exceeding 6% will be required to pay between 5 and 15% of the cost of benefits to their states depending on their individual error rates.

In 2024, the latest numbers available from the federal Department of Agriculture, West Virginia had a SNAP error rate of 9.43%. In 2023, the error rate was 10.98%.

Angel Hightower, a spokeswoman for DoHS, told West Virginia Watch earlier this year, the agency is using a "multifaceted approach" to address the payment error rate, including enhanced local

monitoring, increased quality control and targeted training.

The agency also will change most SNAP cases with a 12-month reporting period to a 6-month period, which will provide greater flexibility and coordination for the Department of Human Services, while reducing required paperwork for most SNAP households, Hightower said.

Hightower said the agency's payment error rate had declined to 6.37% for fiscal year 2025 since the plan was implemented.

According to DoHS's application for emergency purchase, the SAS program uses "advanced analytics" to monitor active cases, flagging high-risk cases likely to have errors. Using the program will allow the DoHS staff to focus on "preserving accuracy, reducing overpayment and ensuring families receive the support they need," the DoHS said in its application for emergency purchase.

"DoHS plays a critical role in ensuring SNAP benefits reach the families who need them most," the application says. "Traditional case review methods can leave errors undetected, risking higher state costs if federal funding is reduced due to elevated error

SEE SNAP, PAGE 2A

GRANT TOWN

Power plant believed to be mining cryptocurrency

BY ESTEBAN FERNANDEZ
TIMES WEST VIRGINIAN

FAIRMONT — Grant Town Power Plant appears to have two cryptocurrency mining containers on its premises.

The West Virginia Public Service Commission shot down a \$200 million proposal from American Bituminous Power Partners to buy out its power purchase contract from MonPower so it could find other ways to monetize the plant besides selling energy to the electric grid in 2022. AMBIT operates the plant for its owner, Horizon Ventures. Among the ideas the floated to monetize the plant was cryptocurrency.

The Times West Virginian obtained a photograph of two discrete looking containers. A Google reverse image search reveals a company called BIT-RAM Technologies, which sells "Custom Modular Data Centres. One of their products is the BIT-Ram MightyPOD, a 40 foot power cryptomining container that appears to be an exact match for the ones seen at Grant Town Power Plant. The crypto containers at the plant can also be viewed through Google Satellite Imagery.

Roberta Green, counsel for AMBIT

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