

# LoudounNow

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## Oak Hill Park Plan Killed in Senate, Hopes Turn to Youngkin

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The effort to establish President James Monroe's 1,240-acre Loudoun estate as a state park hit a roadblock last week when the chair of the Senate Finance and Appropriations Committee killed a bill that would authorize the state government to accept a gift of the land.

Advocates of the project are now working to persuade Gov. Glenn Youngkin to save the deal through a state budget amendment.

Monroe's Oak Hill estate, located on the west side of today's Rt. 15 north of Gilbert's Corner, is the only home of a Founding Father still in private ownership. Monroe inherited the land in 1808 and constructed its large mansion between 1820 and 1823. He retired there at the end of his second term in 1825. Around fifty enslaved African Americans lived and worked at the plantation.

Today, the property is owned by Tom and Gayle DeLashmutt, whose family has owned the property for 70

**OAK HILL**  
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Hanna Pampaloni/Loudoun Now

Purcellville Vice Mayor Carl 'Ben' Nett, left, and Mayor Christopher Bertaut, right, listen to town staff during a Feb. 25 meeting.

## Purcellville Turmoil Continues Nett Faces Internal Affairs Investigation, Town Manager Search Garneres 60 Applicants

BY HANNA PAMPALONI  
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Purcellville Police Officer Carl "Ben" Nett, who also serves as the town's vice mayor, has been pulled from active duty and is subject to an internal affairs investigation being conducted by the Prince William Police Department.

The action comes at a time when the

Purcellville department is facing staff shortages in the wake of a series of retirements and resignations.

The nature of the internal investigation is unknown, but Nett's placement on administrative leave appears related to questions about whether he provided required information regarding sick leave after informing the department on the weekend of Feb. 8 that he would be out sick indefinitely.

ly. Nett attended the Town Council meeting Feb. 13.

"A physician's statement or examination by a physician designated by the Town may be required by the Department Director when frequent sick leave occurs. Abuse of sick leave is considered a serious matter

**PURCELLVILLE TURMOIL**  
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## Purcellville Turmoil

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by the town and may result in disciplinary action, up to and including termination," according to the Purcellville employee handbook.

Former Town Police Chief Cindy McAlister confirmed that during her tenure the department took abuse of sick leave seriously.

"It would be normal protocol and expected to conduct an administrative investigation on an officer if there was an allegation they were violating policy, even to include not following sick leave policy," she stated. "If an employee utilizes sick leave when not sick, this is a form of time and attendance fraud, which equates to embezzlement."

Officers with a history of dishonesty, criminal convictions or other credibility issues are included on a commonwealth's attorney's "Brady List," which means their testimony may be considered unreliable and must be disclosed to the defense in a criminal case, according to legal precedent set in a Supreme Court case. When asked about the status of Commonwealth's Attorney Bob Anderson's Brady List, a department spokesperson said they were not able to release any documentation. However, the spokesperson confirmed that the office "upon review of certain documents will no longer be able to rely on Officer Carl Ben Nett" when prosecuting cases.

Since Nett announced his candidacy for the Town Council last year, town residents have questioned the ethics of a council member while he also works as a town employee. Critics noted that as a council member, Nett would have oversight of his boss, the town police chief.

During a Jan. 14 meeting, Council Member Kevin Wright raised concerns with Nett's appointment to vice mayor because of his position as a town police officer. Without a town manager in place, the mayor assumes the responsibilities of running the town. If the vice mayor were required to step into that role, Nett would become the supervisor of his boss. That is a

conflict of interest, Wright said.

But Nett has consistently defended his position under Virginia Code Section 15.2-1512.2, a law that says a locality may not prohibit an employee of the town from participating in political activities while off duty, out of uniform and off the premises of their employment.

Two days after that council meeting, Police Chief Barry Dufek announced his early retirement after being promoted to the position seven months earlier. Since then, at least two other officers have either retired or resigned from the department, which is authorized for a force of up to 21. The department declined to reveal the number of officers currently on staff within the department due to safety concerns.

Lombraña, then deputy chief, was appointed to act as interim chief during the recruiting process for a replacement.

Friction publicly surfaced between Lombraña and Nett during a Feb. 13 meeting when Lombraña was asked to weigh in on the status of staff retention within the department.

"I think the officers right now especially are dealing with low morale and I don't have to go into why," she said. "I think everybody understands why ..."

"Excuse me, I'd like to hear you elaborate on that," Nett interrupted. "What is the purpose of..."

Other council members interrupted Nett to remind him that he had recused himself from the discussion on police officer compensatory leave.

An email obtained by Loudoun Now sent by Nett includes a draft Town of Purcellville press release announcing Lombraña's removal from the position as interim Police Chief and the appointment of another officer to the position.

No such announcement has been made as of Feb. 25.

*Loudoun Now* reached out to Interim Town Manager Kwasi Fraser regarding Nett's actions but has not received a response.

During a Feb. 25 Town Council meeting, Fraser, who was appointed after the newly elected council fired former Town Manager Rick Bremseth, announced he

would be hiring a third-party consultant to evaluate the department and planned to put the recruitment of a new chief on hold.

Fraser said two members of town staff had raised concerns about retaining officers at the department.

That announcement was opposed by some council members and residents who said management studies were conducted in 2018 and 2022, both when Fraser was mayor.

The most recent analysis, conducted by John Anzivino, who served twice as interim town manager, recommended the department hire two additional officers in fiscal year 2026.

"Purcellville's Police Department is well-organized around traditional police functions and its command structure is relatively simple and highly effective," according to the report.

Council Member Susan Khalil said she did not know who "in their right mind" would object to a third-party assessment of the department.

During Tuesday night's meeting, the council also received an update from Director of Human Resources Ladonna Snellbaker on the status of hiring a permanent town manager, for which there have been 60 applicants.

An amended agenda for the meeting posted late Friday night included a new motion that would have removed the job posting for the position.

Mayor Christopher Bertaut said he had added the motion because the information regarding the qualifications for the position that were included in the job posting had been different than what had been reviewed by council. He acknowledged a concern that Fraser would not meet the posted qualifications.

Snellbaker disputed that, saying she had only changed the formatting of the information.

"The approach I've taken is basically the same as any typical executive level of search," she said. "... To be honest, I'm a little confused as to why this motion has actually been put up here. I have approximately 30 years of experience with HR recruiting and quite frankly I'm insulted

by this."

When asked by Council Member Caleb Stought to list the changes allegedly made by the staff, Bertaut was unable to cite one during the meeting.

A motion by Nett to "recognize and accept as presumptively qualified for permanent appointment as town manager any individual who currently serves or has served as town manager or interim town manager" passed 4-3 with council members Stought, Erin Rayner and Kevin Wright opposed.

The job posting will close March 4.

The council also made a last-minute change to the agenda to convene a closed session to discuss personnel matters relating to Zoning Administrator Summer Wilkes.

After the closed session Wright, Rayner and Stought declined to certify that the information discussed during the closed meeting met the requirements protected by Virginia Freedom of Information Act. Rayner and Stought told Loudoun Now that they were concerned that information reviewed by the council that did not meet legal or personnel requirements for a closed meeting.

Wilkes was recently caught up in a controversy with Planning Commission Chair Ron Rise Sr. when during a Feb. 6 commission meeting, she requested a point of order to correct the structure of a motion that had been made regarding the extension of appointing a chair and vice chair.

The motion had been improperly made and she was intending to provide the proper verbiage, she said.

However, Rise refused to allow her to speak, interrupting her by banging the gavel.

"No, thank you," he said, adding later that she could correct him at a later time.

At the next council meeting, council members and residents spoke about the interaction and apologized to Wilkes.

"It just lacked courtesy, and I'm looking at the Code of Conduct of [commissions, committees and board] members right now and it violates multiple ones," Rayner said. ■

## Oak Hill

*continued from page 1*

years. As they make plans to downsize in retirement, the family has been working with The Conservation Fund to put the historic property in public hands, with a goal to complete the transaction by year's end.

Last year, the Board of Supervisors committed \$22 million to support the acquisition of the land. Also, an endowment, with more than \$20 million in commit-

ments, is being established to support the park's ongoing operational costs.

The bill authorizing the commonwealth to take ownership of the land cleared the House of Delegates without objections. Last week, members Senate finance committee balked, raising concerns that it could leapfrog park proposals that are under consideration in other parts of the commonwealth. The bill's sponsor, Del. Alfonso H. Lopez (D-3), of Arlington, headed off a subcommittee push to kill the bill and initially secured support for an administrative study of the park's costs and

funding options.

"This is the last chance to get this property. The family that has been taking care of this land for a generation. They cannot take care of the property any further. They've turned down requests over \$55 million from developers for it. They want this to be a park. It's the last homestead of a founding father in the United States that is not either a state park or a federal park, and the fact that this could be developed for townhouses is offensive," Lopez told the subcommittee during a hearing Feb. 17.

However, when the study plan came to

the Senate floor Thursday afternoon, Finance Committee Chair L. Louise Lucas (D-18), of Portsmouth, sent the issue back to her committee, which would not meet again during the session, killing the bill.

During the Feb. 19 Board of Supervisors meeting, Supervisor Matthew F. Letourneau (R-Dulles) asked what the counter argument to the senators' concerns would be.

"No other state park in the commonwealth has an endowment," Legislative

**OAK HILL**

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# Purcellville Vice Mayor Tells Independent Assessor He Expects Next Police Chief Appointment

BY HANNA PAMPALONI  
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“I do intend to emerge from the current turmoil affecting our department as the permanent Chief of Police.”

That is a statement of Purcellville Vice Mayor Ben Nett in a letter to the newly hired consultant charged with conducting an independent review of the town's Police Department.

Nett, who works as town police officer, although he is currently on administrative leave, was elected to the Town Council in November. In January, he was appointed by his fellow councilmembers as vice mayor. Since then, residents have raised conflicts of interest concerns about his relationship with the department as a sitting councilmember since the police chief reports to the town manager who reports directly to the council.

While Nett has, during some council meetings, read a public disclosure highlighting his position as a town employee

and on at least one occasion recused himself from council discussion involving the Police Department, he has refuted conflict of interest criticisms.

He has repeatedly pointed to a state statute saying it permits him to serve as councilmember and work for the town.

“No locality shall prohibit an employee of the locality, including firefighters, emergency medical services personnel, or law-enforcement officers within its employment, or deputies, appointees, and employees of local constitutional officers as defined in § 15.2-1600, from participating in political activities while these employees are off duty, out of uniform and not on the premises of their employment with the locality,” according to the statute.

In February, Fraser told the council he would be hiring an independent third-party to conduct a review of the Police Department. There was no public discussion about a desire to hire a contractor and it is not clear what role, if any, Nett played in the decision.



Hanna Pampaloni/Loudoun Now

**Purcellville Vice Mayor Ben Nett speaks to residents during a Jan. 8 special Town Council meeting.**

Twelve companies applied for the contract, Fraser said during a Feb. 25 meeting. He selected Michael Jones of Major Security Consulting and Design for the \$12,000 contract.

The terms of that contract lay out a

four-week process for the consultant to assess and provide a report on the efficient and effective operation of the department. Key requirements of the assessment listed in the request for proposals are to conduct a survey of all police employees, ensure the integrity of the assessment and sign a confidentiality agreement specifying no disclosure of any aspect of the review or final report.

Nett wrote a six-page memo to Jones. In that document, Nett describes his vision for the department including his ultimate appointment as chief. He also requests to operate as Jones' “second-in-command” during the assessment process.

Nett was recently the subject of an internal investigation conducted by the Prince William Police Department and placed on administrative leave by Interim Police Chief Sara Lombrana. He was also placed on the Commonwealth's Attorney's Office's

**POLICE CHIEF**

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## Eagle Released to the Wild After Treatment for Lead Poisoning

BY NORMAN K. STYER  
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A month after a Loudoun County humane law enforcement officer was called to a wooded area south of Leesburg to aid a bald eagle that was unable to fly, the raptor was returned to the wild Saturday at the Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve.

The eagle, suffering from lead poisoning, was taken by county officers to Kristi's Caring Hands Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education and then to the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center for treatment.

Officer Acosta said the Department of Animal Services received the call on Feb. 21 about an eagle that was hopping around in a field.

“I got there and I saw the eagle still on the ground. I chased the eagle in a field of thorns for about quarter of a mile. Once I got to the eagle, he was just hopping around between bushes and trees. Finally, I got him on the net,” Acosta said.

“He was very active, but not flying, which is never a good sign,” he said. “That's usually lead poisoning. We were hoping for lead poisoning and not avian flu. It's easier to treat and it is not contagious.”



Norman K. Styer/Loudoun Now

**A bald eagle takes flight at Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve on Saturday morning after completing weeks of treatment to overcome lead poisoning.**

He took the raptor to Kristi Titus, a Loudoun-based wildlife rehabilitation specialist.

She recognized the seriousness of bird's condition and took him to the Blue Ridge Wildlife Center in Clarke County.

They confirmed the diagnosis of lead poisoning and also found a fracture. After

a stay in the hospital's ICU, the eagle was moved to the flying cage to regain strength.

Titus said the mature eagle was likely a male based on his size—although that wouldn't be confirmed unless it laid an egg or genetic testing was conducted.

Lead poisoning, mostly from scavengers eating gut piles left by hunters,

is common.

“That's a big problem in our birds and that's a big reason why they come in,” Titus said.

Loudoun County Animal Services Director Nina Stively said her department is working to address the concern.

“We've actually switched to non-lead ammunition for our work, because when we are dispatching deer. We don't want to be contributing to this situation. We're always encouraging people to not use lead ammunition in any way. They can use copper or any of the other alternatives. That's much better for our environment.”

She noted that bird flu is another threat to Loudoun's wildlife.

“In geese right now, the primary concern is influenza for sure. It's very common in waterfowl and has been documented here in the county. Taking good care of our wildlife is always a priority,” she said.

The eagle was released from a transport carrier in the rear yard of the Education Center at the county's Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve. In front of a crowd of families gathered to watch the event, the eagle hopped to the edge of the carrier, swooped through the yard, and flew off into the distance, disappearing into the forest. ■

## Hiddenwood Delays

*continued from page 5*

totaling 756,024 square feet with a maximum height of 55 feet. This revised proposal would allow 334,000 square feet of light and medium industrial uses and commercial uses with a maximum height of 39 feet.

Project Manager Allison Britain said her team is not able to support the application because the proposal does not fit with what the county's General Plan has envisioned for the area. The revised application also does not include several setback and buffering commitments made previously by the Hiddenwood group to help mitigate impacts by data centers.

The commissioners expressed concerns surrounding the easternmost of the three proposed buildings because of its proximity to Briarfield Estates.

Walsh-Colucci Land Use Planner Michael Romeo said, while the group could not eliminate the building plans, it could work on additional ways to mitigate its impacts.

Included in concerns by Hiddenwood residents are plans for a data center on the

property across from their homes, referred to as JK2. That data center project was permitted through a rezoning application. Residents have expressed concern that the current open space will now become a multi-story data center directly across from their gravel road.

The county's General Plan places an emphasis on the importance of transition areas between uses, Romeo said.

"The transition between the data center on the JK2 site versus the residential on Briarfield through Hiddenwood in what we're proposing is a transition that we've worked hard on and hopefully this is up to the standard of the commission," he said.

Piedmont Environmental Council Field Representative Gem Bingol was the only person to comment during the public hearing. While sympathizing with the Hiddenwood residents, Bingol said she still had concerns about the application.

"This situation represents a profound failure of local zoning to prioritize the residents it's intended first and foremost to serve," she said. "... we feel it is vitally important to address the northern buffer between the site and the neighborhood which will be the greatest impact by such a change in the underlying zoning."

A motion by Commissioner Dale Polen Myers (At Large) to send the item to a future work session to continue amending the project failed 4-4 with Chair Clifford Keirce (Sterling), Vice Chair Mark Miller (Catoctin) and Commissioner Eric Combs (Ashburn) joining her in support. Commissioner James Banks (Algonkian) was absent.

Myers said regardless of whether the commission recommended approval or denial in the end, the residents deserved more time in collaboration with the commission to develop as good an application for the supervisors to review as possible. She also noted the absence of Briarfield Estates residents during the public hearing and said she had not received any calls or emails from them—much different that during the data center talks when she received many and the residents attended every meeting.

"That is so different than last time we were around here and it doesn't feel like anybody is even taking that into consideration," she said.

But Commissioner Madhava Reddy Madireddy (Dulles) in whose district the properties are located, said he felt like the application was going backward because of some of the commitments that were

removed.

"It's a worse application than it was before," he said.

A motion by Madireddy to recommend denial of the application also failed 4-4 with commissioners Robin-Eve Jasper (Little River), Ad Barnes (Leesburg) and Michelle Frank joining him in support.

A second motion by Myers to again forward the application to a future meeting with a specific focus on improving the application surrounding the eastern most building passed 7-0 with Jasper abstaining.

Several commissioners agreed the situation had been created at a county level.

"There's been just a colossal failure at the county level to the folks at Hiddenwood and we owe them anything that we can do to help them mitigate those impacts to the north," Combs said.

Jasper said she felt that the county should be more directly involved in solving the problem.

"I think that we can get to a solution that's an appropriate solution, not a compromised solution. But we can't do it if we accept this application and send it forward export the problem so we're facing the same problem again with regard to Briarfield," she said. ■

## Police Chief

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Brady List – reserved for officers deemed unreliable by the office. Commonwealth's Attorney Bob Anderson, in a letter to Lombrana, said he would no longer be able to rely on Nett's testimony in cases after he was deemed to have taken sick leave from his duty assignments on two occasions to complete Town Council-related business.

Nett told Jones that Fraser had instructed Lombrana to end the suspension, but the chief refused.

"I call your attention to outstanding issues affecting my employment and duty status," Nett wrote to Jones. "In defiance of the Town Manager's directive to reinstate me to full duty status from administrative leave – a directive supported by legal guidance from the Town Attorney - ... Lombrana defied that lawful directive and proceeded with retaliatory IA investigations against me and a resulting notice of intent to terminate my employment."

Throughout the letter, Nett also describes his efforts to replace Lombrana with other members of the police force.

"I suggested that another member of the Purcellville Police Department be named as Interim Chief in order to gain control of this rogue department. Sgt. Ray Starkey, my first choice respectfully declined because – and I take this as a

great compliment – he admitted he isn't as tough as me and couldn't weather the public storm," according to the memo.

Nett also stated he offered the position to Sgt. David Camp, who ultimately declined for the same reasons. That is confirmed by a draft press release Nett sent to Camp from his personal email account announcing Camp's appointment to the position. It was obtained by *Loudoun Now* through a Freedom of Information Act request.

In his letter to Jones, Nett offers eight recommendations for consideration – reduce the force from 22 to 17, reduce command staff from four to three, eliminate the civilian accreditation manager/public information officer position, eliminate the deputy chief position, eliminate the operations lieutenant position, add a detective position, reduce the officer corps from 10 to eight and reduce the sergeant corps from six to four.

"In short, PPD will have a chief, a captain, a lieutenant, 4 sergeants, 8 officers, a detective and 1 civilian," according to the letter.

Nett said the goal was to make Purcellville into a "model police department." He cites the most glaring deficiency in the department as a lack of 24/7 staffing coverage because of a shortage of officers.

The department currently has 13 sworn personnel after losing four officers, including Dufek, following Nett's election

to office.

In a staffing assessment conducted by Management Analyst John Anzivino in 2022, he describes the department as "well-organized around traditional police functions" with a "relatively simple and highly effective" command structure.

Anzivino recommended expanding the department saying two additional officers should be added to the staff in Fiscal Year 2026.

"Staffing in the Purcellville Police Department at the average level of the police departments in the comparison towns would be 22 sworn officers and 27 totals [full-time equivalent]," according to Anzivino's report.

In the memo, Nett tells Jones that he is not an "average" officer, acknowledging that some might "balk" at an officer being promoted to chief.

"An enhanced quality of life is what I want for our personnel as well – and end to pay disparity, more competitive pay with surrounding jurisdictions, a restoration of the compensatory leave bank, individual cruiser assignments, and the building of a new police station on town-owned property. I, as vice mayor, unlike any other potential chief have the power to bring those goals to fruition. As head of our department, I would certainly have the motivation," Nett wrote.

*Loudoun Now* contacted Nett who declined to comment on the matter.

In a joint statement by councilmembers Erin Rayner, Caleb Stought and Kevin Wright, the three members called for Nett to recuse himself from any future council discussions relating to the Police Department or the town manager recruitment.

"When VM Nett voted to terminate Rick Bremseth from the Town Manager position and appoint Kwasi Fraser, he filed a conflict of interest statement with the town clerk," according to the joint statement. "In this statement, he claimed he could consider the matter fairly, objectively, and in the public interest. It is now clear that he can do no such thing. His desire to become police chief, a position appointed by the Town Manager, makes it impossible for him to consider any candidate for town manager 'fairly, objectively, and in the public interest.'"

Rayner, Wright and Stought also called for Nett to recuse himself from any further contact with Jones and said Jones should "publicly disclose, during a town council meeting, all contact he has had with members of town council and the interim town manager since the assessment began."

"Town Council should direct staff to review town policy regarding access to independent consultants, determine if any violations were committed, and determine whether any revisions to the policy are warranted," according to the joint statement. ■

# Purcellville Council Majority to Close Police Department, Votes in Fraser as Manager

BY HANNA PAMPALONI

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In a whirlwind of votes Tuesday night, the majority bloc on the Purcellville Town Council voted to reshape its proposed budget by moving to eliminate the Police Department, funneling all meals tax revenue to cover utility costs while also lowering user rates. It also voted to appoint interim Town Manager Kwasi Fraser to the permanent position without interviewing any of the other 80 applicants for the post.

The move came on the same night that the council recognized the department for being reaccredited with its fifth award from the Virginia Law Enforcement Professional Standards Commission. The department held its VLEPSC reaccreditation onsite assessment Jan. 13-16, with a team of three assessors reviewing the agency's policies and procedures to ensure proper proofs of compliance for 192 standards encompassing the past four years.

VLEPSC Commissioner Michael Kochis traveled up from Charlottesville to present the certificate Tuesday night.

"This re-accreditation is not just a certificate. It really is a statement of resilience



Purcellville Interim Police Chief Sara Lombrana, center, holds a certification of accreditation with from the Virginia Law Enforcement Professional Standards Commission flanked on both sides by former Police Chiefs Cindy McAlister and Barry Dufek.

Hanna Pampaloni/Loudoun Now

and a testament to leadership under pressure," Kochis said. "...It's a shared achieve-

ment rooted in teamwork, training and trust. To the town council and town leader-

ship, your continued support of the accreditation process will send a clear message to the community that professional policing matters, independent apolitical policing matters, that professional policing where process matters and that even in uncertain times, accountability and excellence will not take a back seat, and I'm convinced that your police department won't let that happen."

The motion to prepare the ordinance that would eliminate Chapter 42 of the town's code - the chapter that lays out the Police Department's roles and responsibilities - was made by Councilmember Susan Khalil and passed 4-2 with councilmembers Erin Rayner and Kevin Wright opposed and Caleb Stought absent.

It was met with outrage from town residents in the audience who shouted "shame" at the council.

"I feel really unsafe right now," said Beth Goldsmith, a member of the town's Board of Architectural Review.

"Out of the blue, you're proposing we defund the Police Department ... This is dangerous policy for our town of our size

**POLICE DEFUNDED**

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## 'You are not Alone': Sheriff's Office Highlights Support for Crime Victims

BY NORMAN K. STYER

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The Loudoun County Sheriff's Office put the spotlight on resources available to help crime victims during a candlelight vigil Sunday night at the Douglass Community Center in Leesburg.

Sheriff's Office Sgt. Lorraine Goldberg, who supervises the agency's Victim Advocate and Domestic Violence units, led the program, which kicked off National Crime Victims' Rights Week.

She said the focus this year is promoting the collaborative community "kinship" that is important to protecting victims and securing justice.

"[It] is a call to action to recognize that shared humanity should be at the center of supporting all survivors and victims of crime. Kinship is a state of being with survivors that drives vital connections and increases access to services, rights and healing. Kinship is where victim advocacy begins. Kinship is also what brings



Norman K. Styer/Loudoun Now

Program speakers Nicole Bialko and Jonathan Dickey join in the National Crime Victims' Week candlelight vigil at the Douglas Community Center on April 6.

us together today," she said. "We are one community, one Loudoun, and we are here today to stand in solidarity with local victims of crime and show them that they are not alone in their fight for justice and healing."

The program featured remarks by Jonathan Dickey, a county prosecutor whose law career was inspired by his experiences growing up with an abusive father, and Nicole Bialko, who promotes women's safety based on her experiences as a survivor of stalking.

Sheriff Mike Chapman highlighted the work of his staff to aid crime victims, including the establishment in 2023 of the Victim Advocate Unit to bridge the gap from the time a crime is committed through the court process.

"Part of that making you whole is not only directing you to the resources you may need to try to help you get through a particular situation, but it is preparing you for if we can take a criminal to trial," Chapman said. "We want to make sure

that we're doing everything in our power to hold people accountable."

A key challenge, he said, is helping protect victims during the often-traumatic requirement to testify in court.

"I know one of the things that is always difficult is for people that are victims of crimes to want to testify. There's a lot of pressures. There's a whole lot of things that go on behind the scenes that makes them maybe tentative, maybe reluctant to actually get up there in a courtroom and explain what happened to them," Chapman said. "In a way, we have victimized them again, because they already went through the tragedy. Now they got to go through a tragedy all over a second time. So, we work very hard with our Commonwealth Attorney's Office. We have a great Commonwealth Attorney's Office right now."

Dickey, a member of that office, said

**VICTIM RESOURCES**

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## Former Round Hill Councilmember Get His Turkey of Thanks



Norman K. Styer/Loudoun Now

Former Round Hill Town Councilmember Dan Brzezynski, right, receives a frozen turkey from Mayor Scott Ramsey during the April 2 council meeting.

### BY NORMAN K. STYER

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As Round Hill recruits applicants to fill the seat vacated on the Town Council, Dan Brzezynski last week received the town's traditional gift of thanks for his public service—a frozen turkey.

Brzezynski resigned his seat last month because he is moving to a new home outside the town limits. He was appointed to fill a vacant seat in 2023 and won a special election to complete the term later that year.

Brzezynski and his family attended last night's council meeting when councilmembers expressed appreciation for his service.

His experience in the engineering and construction fields was particularly valued by the council members.

"It was a pleasure having you on the council," Mayor Scott Ramsey said. "You've been really great at always keeping a level head and always trying to give us the best advice possible. I always felt like when you chimed in at a council meeting we always have to stop and listen because you know what you're talking about."

Councilmember Isaac Pacheco noted that Brzezynski's first-ever council meeting was on "pitchfork night," featuring a standing-room-only crowd of residents objecting to proposed utility rate increases. "I looked over at you a couple of times and I could just see regret," he said.

"But from those ignoble beginnings your contributions have been so solid. I respected the input. I could always tell you came prepared and just appreciate that you took the opportunity to serve your community."

Brzezynski's parting gift was a frozen turkey. Ramsey said the town tradition is rooted in a long-ago budget debate during which a councilmember objected to having a \$1,000 pool of discretionary funds for the town administrator. When told the money could be used for a staff holiday party or for flowers for an employee or to provide Christmas turkeys, the councilmember said that during his long career in federal government he had never received a turkey.

"That was just the perfect setup, because a couple of years later, when that council member decided not to run again and step down, we did [a turkey] presentation for that councilmember," Ramsey said. "And ever since, it has been a traditional parting gift for all of our retirements."

The council intends to advertise for volunteers to fill the seat through April and vote to make an appointment in May. That volunteer will serve until the town elections in November.

The terms of Brzezynski's seat, along with Ramsey's and those held by councilmembers Paula James and Sean Lloyd expire Dec. 31. ■

## Police Defunded

continued from page 3

and what we're dealing with. We may be the safest town now. We won't be next year," Rayner said.

Wright said the move was "corruption," objecting that there had been no public discussion on the matter at all.

"Where was that discussion had? It wasn't had in the public where it should have been, that's for sure," he said.

Nett said the motion was in the best interest of the town because the department has been consistently unable to provide 24/7 coverage for residents. Eliminating the service would save over \$3.2 million a year from the General Fund, he said.

"The Loudoun County Sheriff's Office will provide exclusive police coverage to the town, just as they do on a 24/7 basis for the neighboring towns of Hamilton and Round Hill and for unincorporated Purcellville," he said.

Councilmembers Susan Khalil and Carol Luke said they had faith that the Sheriff's Office would be able to provide sufficient coverage of the town.

"Purcellville residents are currently paying two police services," Luke said. "Not just the Purcellville police but for Loudoun County police and we do feel that this is double taxation."

Khalil said it did not make financial sense to have the department anymore.

"I believe that we are and will remain one of the safest counties in Virginia," Mayor Christopher Bertaut said. "... In transitioning to the Sheriff's Department, and believe me, we are talking about a transition, we will ensure the long-term financial position of the town."

Bertaut said that Fraser had already had discussion with Sheriff Mike Chapman regarding the impacts to the town.

Interim Police Chief Sara Lombraña declined to comment on the move.

The majority then moved to transfer 100% of the meals tax revenue to the town's utility funds, lower the water rate by 9%, lower the wastewater rate by 11% and increase town staff raises from a range of 1% to 3% to a range of 1% to 5%.

Those actions came a day before a much-anticipated briefing from the town's financial advisors who will provide long-term utility rate models

for the council's consideration – and against the advice of Town Attorney Gifford Hampshire who asked for more time to review the required procedures for the changes.

The council also appointed Fraser to the permanent Town Manager decision during the agenda item titled Town Manager Appointment Process. Human Resources Director LaDonna Snellbaker told the council during a recent meeting that 82 applications had been received for the job posting. Bertaut granted an extension during the council's last meeting giving members more time to review and rank the applications. According to the plan provided by LaDonna, councilmembers were expected to schedule interview with the top candidates over the next few weeks.

Instead, Bertaut asked for discussion on the candidates from the council.

"I did note, when it comes to the current interim town manager, that you were given a rating by someone of zero for municipal government experience," Nett said. "I would think that eight years as mayor would qualify as the highest rate for municipal government experience." ■

"What are we doing?" Wright asked. "We're not going to interview candidates?"

"Please don't waste my time if you're just going to do whatever you're going to do," he said.

Nett made the motion to appoint Fraser to the position which again sparked outbursts from the audience as Wright and Rayner walked out.

"You should be ashamed," one resident said while another added, "it's an abuse of power."

The motion passed 4-0 with Rayner, Wright and Stought absent.

Directly following that, the council adjourned the meeting but leaving councilmembers continued to be confronted by angry residents.

"Do not provoke an altercation with me. Step away from me," Nett told one man following him out of the council chambers.

Lombraña intervened stepping between them as Nett walked away and speaking with the man for several minutes before leaving. ■

# LoudounNow

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APRIL 24, 2025

## Purcellville Council to Retain Police Department

BY HANNA PAMPALONI  
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In the face of strong community opposition, the Purcellville Town Council on Tuesday night reversed plans to disband the police department.

During an unprecedented showing of public support with more than 300 people packed into Town Hall, the Town Council voted to fully fund the Police Department in fiscal year 2026. The council chambers were standing room only as residents overflowed into the lobby, conference rooms and upstairs office. The meeting was streamed into each of the locations and cast via a projector onto a large screen to a community members gathered on the lawn outside.

The decision to fund the department was in opposition to the draft motion included in the council's agenda, which would have adopted an ordinance eliminating Chapter 42 of the town's code which lays out the roles and responsibilities of the Police Department. That effort was put in motion two weeks ago by Councilmember of Susan Khalil. Since then, elected officials and community members have raised concerns about the action and voiced support for the agency.

**PURCELLVILLE POLICE**  
*continues on page 38*



Commuters ride the bus home from Washington, DC, to Loudoun County after a day of work.

Hanna Pampaloni/Loudoun Now

## Bus Ridership Doubles as Federal Workers Return to Office

BY HANNA PAMPALONI  
hpampaloni@loudounnow.org

Loudoun County's commuter bus ridership levels have doubled since January, bringing the projected March total to 30,781 and sharply increasing the number of buses with standing room only

capacity – causing the Board of Supervisors to reverse action taken last year to reduce the number of bus routes each day.

Supervisors in July last year – in response to a post-COVID period of continuously declining ridership level – voted to reduce the number the bus routes by 10.

After the decision to scale back the

service, President Donald J. Trump issued an executive order mandating that all department heads and agencies within the executive branch terminate remote work and require in-person work instead, once again changing the landscape of

**COUNTY BUSES**  
*continues on page 39*

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## Purcellville Police

continued from page 1

Over the course of the past two weeks, Mayor Christopher Bertaut was suspended from participation in the coalition of local mayors, Sheriff Mike Chapman took a public stance opposing claims by the council that his agency could easily fill the law enforcement void, Vice Mayor Ben Nett, a fired town police officer, was deemed to be violating the Virginia conflict of interest act by Commonwealth's Attorney Bob Anderson and he was placed under investigation by the Virginia State Police under the authority of the Attorney General's office.

Residents spoke for two hours during Tuesday night's meeting saying they wanted to keep the town Police Department.

County Chair Phyllis J. Randall (D-At Large) and Supervisor Caleb A. Kershner (R-Catoctin), whose district includes Purcellville, also spoke in support of the department. Both said they had not been contacted by the councilmembers regarding the decision to transfer law enforcement responsibility from the town to the county.

Randall said the county's budget process for fiscal year 2026 is complete and they did not include funding to support additional deputies to serve Purcellville.

"The sheriff did not request them because he was not informed by any member of this council or administration that he would need them," she said. "In short, the [board] has not allocated positions for extension of law enforcement into Purcellville. ... However, you have repeatedly stated the county will cover the cost of policing in Purcellville. While the county may be required to pick up law enforcement, please remember, the county has allocated almost \$5 million to Purcellville for other services."

Randall said, while the county may be required to provide law enforcement within the town, she asked that the council remember that the county has allocated nearly \$5 million to the town for other services and continues to maintain Fireman's Field.

"As chair of all 440,000 citizens of Loudoun, please know, I can't allow the citizens of Loudoun County to cover this cost made by the Purcellville Town Council," she said.

Kershner said eliminating the department is the "wrong solution" and that public safety should be the council's top priority.

"Purcellville has been one of the safest, as we know, places in Virginia, and that's been true in large part because of the presence of our Police Department," he said. "... I went to bat for you [during the budget process] and secured millions of dollars for Purcellville capital projects, including in part, the shared use path and W&OD Trail, sidewalk improvements along Nursery Avenue, and Route 287 and East Gate Drive intersection improvements. But now without warning, you want Loudoun to cover

your complex and extensive proposal. That was short sighted and as your colleague and your district supervisor, I must expect better from you."

None of the 48 speakers spoke in favor of eliminating the department.

"There's a fundamental truth about democracy. ... It's called we the people. Look at this right here," former Purcellville Sgt. Paul Kakol said gesturing at the crowd. "... These brave individuals have the courage. They came together. They stood up and they firmly said, 'no more.'"

"If you can't do that which we voted for you for, then either resign or we'll throw you out," Douglas Gilbert said.

"Dismantling the Police Department should be a last resort to balancing the budget. There's always another way if you work hard enough. The Purcellville Police officers are the good guys. They get up each morning to protect us and help make this community what it is. You cannot put a price tag on living in the safest town in Virginia," Annie Daley said.

Interim Police Chief Sara Lombrana said she was grateful for the strong showing of support for the department.

"It's really amazing and humbling to be here and to feel that, especially the last few weeks," she said.

Lombrana was hired as deputy police chief in August and appointed as Interim chief following Barry Dufek's retirement from the position after the council voted to fire former Town Manager Rick Bremseth.

"Our police officers are going to continue serving professionally and with integrity so we're here for the citizens," she said.

Concerns about conflict of interest surrounding Nett were also raised during public comment. Nett served as a Purcellville police officer until April 4 when he was fired amid allegations that he misused sick leave to take part in council duties. The following Monday he voted with a council majority to support Khalil's motion.

His firing also came after being placed on Anderson's Brady List, reserved for officers whose testimony may not be relied on by the office, and after sending a memo to a third-party consultant hired to conduct an independent assessment of the Police Department, saying he intended to become the police chief.

Nett was absent from Tuesday's meeting. That followed the advisory opinion from Anderson sent to Stought on April 21.

In the opinion, obtained by Loudoun Now through a Freedom of Information Act request, Anderson stated he believes Nett has violated the State and Local Government Conflict of Interest Act.

Nett is prohibited from voting on behalf of the police department, attending a closed meeting regarding the department, participating in transactions relating to the department, and lobbying or discussing any matter relating to the department with other town officers, according to Anderson.

Anderson said even though Nett was no longer employed by the Police Department

when the April 8 vote was taken, he was still within the window to file a grievance with the town, and he said the vote appeared to be retaliatory after Nett's desire to be appointed police chief was made public.

Town Manager Kwasi Fraser hired a third-party consultant to conduct an independent assessment of the Police Department in March. In a memo to the consultant, Nett laid out his vision for the department, which included a restructuring and an expectation that he would emerge as the department's chief of police.

"In essence, Nett attempted to use his position as vice mayor to influence the independent consultant to recommend him as the chief of police, was subsequently terminated from the department by the acting chief for cause and within a week of that termination, used his role as member of the town council to vote that the police department be disbanded and eliminated. This appears to be a retaliation against the police department for his termination as well as a blatant conflict of interest," Anderson stated.

Residents have been working to gather enough signatures to submit a recall petition for Bertaut, Nett, Khalil and Councilmember Carol Luke with the Clerk of the Circuit Court. Recall organizer, Brian Morgan announced during the meeting that they had gathered over 1000 signatures for each of the four councilmembers – double the required amount, he said.

During Tuesday night's meeting, an initial motion by Councilmember Erin Rayner to fully fund the department failed on a 3-3 vote with councilmembers Kevin Wright and Caleb Stought joining her in support.

However, after Town Manager Kwasi Fraser said supporting the department would be an opportunity for the council to listen to the residents, Luke and Khalil supported a second motion by Rayner.

That motion fully funded the department in fiscal year 2026 and planned a strategic meeting to discuss the budget in more detail and passed 5-0-1 with Bertaut abstaining.

Fraser, who served as the town's mayor for eight years, said he was speaking not as a politician, but as the town manager.

"I think there is an opportunity," Fraser said. "You heard the voice of the people tonight and I believe that this, if a decision is to be made tonight from this dais, I believe you can make that decision tonight. And the reason I say that is I've sat here, and I've not heard any opposing views."

Bertaut, Nett, Luke and Khalil have defended efforts to eliminate the departments saying the town needs to use the \$3.2 million money to address other expenditures in the town – primarily water and wastewater costs that are not covered by the current utility rates.

After the previous council voted last year to increase water and wastewater rates by 16% and 18%, Bertaut, Nett, Luke and

Khalil ran for election on a platform to decrease the rates. The April 8 Police Department motion was joined by another to reduce the rates by 6% and 8%.

Some speakers on Tuesday said they would rather pay higher utility rates than lose the Police Department.

They also raised concerns about an investigation authorized by the Attorney General's Office into Nett.

"Because of this open investigation, it is critical that ALL records of the Purcellville Police Department (PPD), including but not limited to personnel records, are preserved as required by the Virginia Public Records Act at section 42.1-88. Additionally, Vice Mayor Nett should be prevented from accessing all police department records, voting on all matters involving the PPD, and attending meetings involving discussion about PPD," according to an April 21 email from Anderson to the council.

During Tuesday night's meeting Bertaut read parts of a letter he had sent to the Attorney General's Office that day expressing "growing alarm" at the investigation.

"The events surrounding this investigation strongly suggest that it is politically motivated, procedurally improper and fundamentally at odds with democratic principles that underpin public service in the commonwealth," he said.

Bertaut said Nett was added to the Brady List before being allowed to respond to the allegations relating to it and that the key witness in the determination was Rayner.

"The push for Nett's dismissal was advanced the then deputy chief of police – a position Mr. Nett had proposed eliminating during his campaign and before that individual became the deputy chief of police, creating a clear-cut appearance of political or personal retaliation," Bertaut said.

He said the claims made by supporters of the recall petition are "weak" and "unsubstantiated."

During the meeting a proposal was also made by Tony Buffington, former county supervisor and member of the Loudoun Water Board. He suggested considering transferring operation of water and wastewater services within the town to Loudoun Water.

"Water and sewer is your problem," he said. "You can't figure out how to fix it so you're devouring yourselves. That's not the solution, because what's next? ... I think you should begin talks with Loudoun Water about a feasibility study of what it would look like for them to potentially take over, maybe at varying levels, but potentially take over your water and sewer for our town. Maybe they just run it. Maybe we give them everything in full authority to decide rates and all that. Maybe the rates could be the same as the people in Eastern Loudoun if we did that. I don't know."

Buffington told *Loudoun Now* that he had discussed the proposal with Bertaut following the meeting and that he "seemed amenable" to Buffington having further discussions about the idea. ■

# LoudounNow

LOUDOUN FAVORITES INSIDE

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JULY 31, 2025

## Purcellville Vice Mayor, Town Manager Arrested After Felony Indictments

BY HANNA PAMPALONI  
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Purcellville Vice Mayor Ben Nett and Town Manager Kwasi Fraser are facing felony charges after a grand jury last week handed down indictments leading to their arrests July 23.

Both were released on \$5,000 personal recognizance bonds.

Nett is facing six charges including four counts of using a computer to gather identifying information through the use of material artifice, trickery or deception; one count of rigged government bidding, and



Kwasi Fraser



Ben Nett

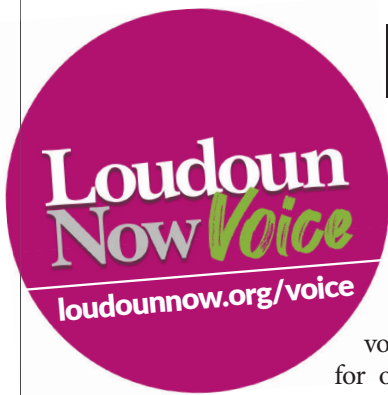
one count of commercial fraud against the government.

Virginia State Police Public Relations Coordinator Matt Demlein told Loudoun Now that the first four charges are related to violations regarding use of the Virginia Criminal Information Network – a state-wide data communications network incorporating computerized links to regional and national law enforcement systems.

Nett, who worked as an officer for the Purcellville Police Department until he was fired April 4, ran for council in November

**INDICTMENTS**

*continues on page 26*



## Introducing Loudoun Now Voice

Loudoun Now Voice, sponsored by POUNCE Solutions, is a new platform for community voices, creating a chance for our community to be heard directly on our platforms. We want to share your stories and elevate local conversations, businesses, experts, and voices, and make it simple to create your own quality programming regardless of your level of experience. And since we have one of the biggest online platforms in Loudoun Coun-

ty, we can help those voices to be heard. What's there to hear and see?

**Tales & Ales on Loudoun Now Voice**

Loudoun's own storytelling event, Tales & Ales, shows that everyone has a story. And now with Tales & Ales on Loudoun Now Voice, we sit down with storytellers to learn the stories behind the stories.

### Loudoun Lately

What's your "one good thing?" Loudoun Lately hosts Renss Greene and Jennifer Montgomery love Loudoun, and they talk off the clock with some of

the interesting and change-making people around Loudoun County to learn about the good news around Loudoun—along with things to do and how to get involved in growing the good.

### Brown's Bag

Margaret Brown is a lifelong learner, and on Brown's Bag, she's learning about everything from photography tips to how to keep your pets safe in a hot summer, all from local experts and personalities.

**LOUDOUN NOW VOICE**  
*continues on page 18*

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## Indictments

continued from page 1

alongside a slate of candidates. The opposing slate included then-Mayor Stanley Milan and current councilmember Caleb Stought.

“Carl Benjamin Nett on or about May 22, 2024 in the County of Loudoun, did unlawfully and feloniously use a computer to obtain, access, or record, through the use of material artifice, trickery or deception identifying information ... of Caleb Stought and [his wife] Erica Stought,” according to court documents.

A separate charge alleges that Nett also accessed information regarding Milan and someone identified only by the initials “S.G.” on Aug. 22, Sept. 1 and Dec. 9.

Regarding the conspiracy for bid rigging, court documents allege Nett “did unlawfully and feloniously conspire to agree with another to intentionally rig, alter or manipulate, or cause to be rigged, altered or manipulated, a bid submitted to the Town of Purcellville for the purpose of allocating purchase, or allocating sales, or raising or otherwise fixing the price of services, or excluding other persons from dealing with the Town of Purcellville.”

The fraudulent commercial dealing charge is based on allegations that Nett “did unlawfully, knowingly, and feloniously falsify, conceal, mislead or cover up, in any man-

ner, by trick, scheme, or device, a material fact in a commercial dealing of the Town of Purcellville, or did make a false, fictitious, or fraudulent statement or representation, or made or used a false writing or document, knowing the same to contain a false fictitious statement,” according to court documents.

Fraser was also charged with felonies of rigged bidding and commercial fraud against the government following a review by the grand jury. Indictment documents for Fraser list similar accusations as Nett’s.

The indictments do not list the specific circumstances surrounding the charges, however during a May Town Council meeting, information surfaced publicly that Nett and Fraser had met with a consultant later hired to conduct an assessment of the Purcellville Department prior to posting a bid for the contract. Mike Jones, who received the contract, said he had a Jan. 27 meeting with Fraser and Nett at a restaurant in town, where they told him they could spend \$12,000 on an assessment.

Fraser announced to the council Feb. 25 that he would be hiring a consultant to conduct an independent assessment of the Police Department after several officers retired or resigned.

The request for proposals to conduct an assessment was posted to the town website from Feb. 14 to 25 with at least 13 companies competing for the bid. Fraser said he chose Jones’ company because he was the

lowest qualified bidder, but after questioning added that he had not met with any other potential bidders.

Nett also sent a memo to Jones outlining a plan to restructure the Police Department and saying that he expected to be appointed as police chief following the assessment.

Nett and Fraser appeared in court Monday morning, but trial dates were not set in their cases. A date to review the case was set for Sept. 4. In the meantime, attorneys are expected to file motions in the cases.

After Fraser worked at Town Hall Friday, July 25, the council held a special meeting, and after a closed session, voted to place Fraser on paid administrative leave.

Fraser’s attorney, Charles King, on Monday said he plans to file a motion to unseal the transcript from the grand jury and amend the bond conditions to allow Fraser to visit his sick father in New York.

Stafford County Commonwealth’s Attorney Eric Olsen, who is prosecuting the cases, said he also plans to file a motion to join Fraser’s case with two of Nett’s charges.

King said he was also planning to request a recusal from Loudoun’s Circuit Court judges and have a judge from an outside jurisdiction preside over the case.

### ‘Political Persecution’

A day after his arrest, Nett released a statement calling the charges “political persecution.”

“I am stunned and saddened by these events, as my only goal was to stabilize property taxes, lower residential water bills, maintain our small town from the threat of overdevelopment, and streamline local government,” Nett stated. “Clearly, I have made some powerful enemies. I sincerely believe that last night’s events are the culminating acts of over a year of being politically targeted by a weaponized law enforcement apparatus, part of a broader effort to overturn the results of the most recent election.”

Nett said after taking office Jan. 8 he became the target of a “decapitation strike,” referencing two internal affairs investigations of his conduct. He also was placed on Commonwealth’s Attorney Bob Anderson’s Brady List – reserved for officers whose testimony may not be relied on in court. He was then fired from the Police Department in April.

He also referenced a determination by a three-member panel who reviewed his termination grievance that found that he should be reinstated to the department and paid backpay, although the impartiality of the panel has been called into question. Of the panelists, one was chosen by Nett, while the second was chosen by Town Manager Kwasi Fraser, who also faces criminal charges as a result of the State Police investigation. Those two representatives, Brian Wells and Jonathan Wright, chose the third member, David Buss.

The panel raised allegations that

Nett was fired over political reasons and that Councilmember Erin Rayner used friendships with members at the Commonwealth’s Attorney’s Office to impact actions by that office regarding Nett. The group also concluded that the Police Department lacked formal policies related to directed patrol and sick leave and suggested that Interim Police Chief Sara Lombraña improperly opened an internal investigation into Nett.

The final decision must be confirmed by the chief judge of the Loudoun County Circuit Court. That has not been completed yet in this case.

In his statement, Nett pointed to the relationship between Rayner and Chief Deputy Commonwealth’s Attorney Nicole Wittmann, for whom Rayner served as a campaign manager in her 2019 race for commonwealth’s attorney and said the grievance panel found his termination was politically motivated.

“The targeting of me, a small-town councilman, with a weaponized law enforcement apparatus that has conspired to violate my rights under the Code of Virginia and the U.S. Constitution is chilling and has had significant impact on the legislative process and the business of local governance as a whole – not to mention the impact on me and those I love,” Nett stated.

Those accusations were reiterated by Purcellville Mayor Christopher Bertaut and Dick Black, who served as a Republican state delegate from 1998 to 2006 and as a state senator from 2012 to 2020. Black attended the court proceedings Monday morning voicing support for Fraser and Nett and said the charges were an effort by other councilmembers to increase development in Purcellville.

“This is the most outrageous case I’ve ever seen in my life,” Black said. Black said that Nett stood in the way of annexing property that could be upzoned to allow multiple housing units per acre calling the actions against him “lawfare of the most despicable fashion.”

Councilmembers Kevin Wright, Caleb Stought and Rayner released a joint statement said that they also uphold the principle of innocent until proven guilty but that the indictments had “cast a shadow over our beloved town” and calling on Nett to resign from the council.

“The integrity of our local government is paramount, and we believe that the actions of our elected and appointed officials should reflect the values and trust of the citizens they serve. Recent events involving the arrest of a fellow council member are a sobering reminder that actions have consequences—especially for those in positions of public trust,” according to the joint statement.

A recall petition for Nett, Bertaut and councilmembers Carol Luke and Susan Khalil was filed last month and is being reviewed by Olsen. ■

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