

LoudounNow

VOL. 9, NO. 15

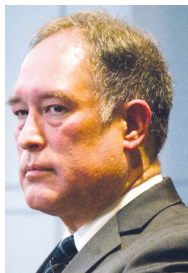
We've got you covered. In the mail weekly. Online always at LoudounNow.com

FEBRUARY 22, 2024

Hemstreet Presents \$5.2B County Budget; Proposes 87.5-cent Tax Rate

BY NORMAN K. STYER
nstyer@loudounnow.com

County Administrator Tim Hemstreet is proposing a fiscal year 2025 budget that totals \$5.2 billion for county government and public schools operations and capital projects.



Hemstreet

Hemstreet's budget is based on holding the real estate tax rate at 87.5 cents per \$100 of assessed value. That would result in a \$275 increase in the annual residential tax bills on average, while fully funding all staffing and program increases requested by county departments.

Holding the tax rate steady would leave the school division \$10 million short in the local tax funding needed to balance the School Board's \$1.8 billion budget. Hemstreet said that gap may be closed by increases in state funding, but he advertised a maximum 88.5-cent tax rate to give supervisors options to add to his

COUNTY BUDGET
continues on page 35



Doug Graham/Loudoun Now

Members of Blue Ridge Fire Company in Clarke County salute as the procession escorting volunteer firefighter Trevor Brown on Rt. 7 passes under Riverside Parkway on Feb. 20, 2024.

'Total Devastation'

Sterling Home Explosion Leaves 1 Dead, 13 Injured

BY HANNA PAMPALONI
hpampaloni@loudounnow.com

A routine call to Loudoun County's Combined Fire and Rescue System on Friday night took a tragic turn when a Sterling home exploded killing one firefighter and injuring 13 other people.

Units from the Sterling Volunteer Fire Company responded to a call about the

smell of gas coming from a home on Silver Ridge Drive in the Seneca Ridge neighborhood just before 7:40 p.m.

Firefighters arrived to find propane gas leaking from a 500-gallon underground tank and evacuated two occupants and their pets from the home.

Thirty minutes later, units on the scene reported a "catastrophic explosion" with multiple mayday calls from firefighters

trapped in the home's basement. Additional units were then brought in from other stations, including from Fairfax and the Metropolitan Washington Airport Authority.

LCFR Chief Keith Johnson on Tuesday told the Board of Supervisors that

STERLING EXPLOSION
continues on page 7

ECRWSSEDDM

PAID
U.S. Postage
Permit #1374
Merrifield VA

HARTLEY
HOME EXTERIORS
ROOFING • WINDOWS • SIDING
540-441-7649
HartleyHomeExteriors.com

ROOF LOCAL

Contact the Best of Loudoun Winning Roofer for your roofing project and receive a free shingle upgrade.

The Best Choice for Roofing Replacement

'Dedicated to the Cause'

BY HANNA PAMPALONI
hpampaloni@loudounnow.com

Community members lined the streets Tuesday as the body of firefighter Trevor Brown was transported from the Medical Examiner's Office in Prince William County to a funeral home in Leesburg under escort by dozens of fire-rescue and law enforcement units.



Brown

Brown was killed in a home explosion after responding to a call for an odor of gas at a Sterling home. He was an eight-year volunteer at the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department.

"We were anxious to get Trevor back into Loudoun County and back into his home and surrounded by his friends and his loved ones and so we are happy to have him back in the county and start the funeral planning," Sterling Volunteer Fire Company Chief David Short said Tuesday.

He said he knew Brown personally and that they served on the same shift for years. He said Brown was a "capital" volunteer and a stay-at-home dad. Brown also served in the United States Marines.



Hanna Pampaloni/Loudoun Now

The Loudoun County Combined Fire and Rescue System Honor Guard removes the coffin carrying the body of volunteer firefighter Trevor Brown Feb. 20, 2024.

"This was his calling, to provide service to the community," Short said. "... Trevor was a very lowkey individual. He didn't like getting attention and the limelight. But I think what we would like people to know about Trevor was that he was dedi-

cated to the cause, dedicated to the community and to serving others."

The Sterling Volunteer Fire Company operates out of two locations and has approximately 80 operational volunteers and 40 support staff.

Brown is survived by his wife and three children.

A funeral service is scheduled for Monday, March 4 at 11 a.m. at Cornerstone Chapel located at 650 Battlefield Parkway SE in Leesburg. ■

Sterling Explosion

continued from page 1

Trevor Brown, 45, who was standing outside the home, was killed immediately. Crews worked to locate and rescue the trapped firefighters from the home and by 9:15 p.m. all crew members had been rescued or accounted for.

Ten firefighters were transported to area hospitals and the Burn Center at Medstar Washington Hospital Center in Washington, DC—one by AirCare helicopter. Two civilians and one Loudoun County Sheriff's Office deputy also were taken to hospitals. Two firefighters were released from the hospital on Monday and Tuesday this week, while two more are still receiving care in the Intensive Care and Step-Down units.

The home was leveled in the explosion, which also caused damage to neighboring houses. At least two were deemed uninhabitable.



Contributed

The scene of a Feb. 16, 2024, home explosion on Silver Ridge Drive in Sterling.

Assistant Fire Chief James Williams who was on the scene directly following the incident called it "total devastation" with debris being blown into the street. Over 100 first responder units responded to the incident, according to Johnson.

Brown was a volunteer firefighter and had been affiliated with LCFR since 2016.

Johnson said on Tuesday that the explosion was caused by the 500-gallon propane tank on site that had leaked, allowing propane to fill the house and cause a flammable atmosphere. During the evacuation, something still unknown caused it to ignite resulting in the explosion.

He is also encouraging the community to call 911 if they smell gas and recommends homeowners have their systems serviced.

The Fire Marshall's office is investigating the incident in coordination with the Sheriff's Office and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

A Significant Incident Review will be conducted beginning this week, led by Frederick County, MD, Fire Chief Tom Coe. The investigation will receive assistance from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

The Significant Incident Review is used to reconstruct the major incident to determine if the system had appropriate plans, policies, and procedures and if those were followed. Every component of the inci-

dent will be analyzed to determine what went well, to suggest needed improvements, and to explain why those improvements are needed, according to the LCFR website.

Sterling Volunteer Fire Company Chief David Short said during a press briefing Tuesday afternoon that the toll of the incident on the department and himself is "tough."

"Every day I thought I saw the hardest day I could see, and then there's tomorrow," he said, adding that he was encouraging his volunteers to "focus on the mission" and take it 24 hours at a time.

Short said with an operational crew usually of about 80 volunteer firefighters, the Sterling company is now operating eight firefighters short.

"That's an entire shift down. So, that's a major impact on our operations, so we're feeling that operationally," he said. "... the work of the fire system still goes on despite these activities." ■

Community Support ‘Overwhelming’ Following Home Explosion

BY HANNA PAMPALONI
hpampaloni@loudounnow.com

Community members, firefighter communities across the country, and state and federal officials—including President Joe Biden and Gov. Glenn Youngkin—have rallied to support Loudoun County Combined Fire and Rescue following a fatal home explosion Feb. 16.

The incident left volunteer firefighter Trevor Brown dead and 13 others injured.

The Sterling Volunteer Fire Company announced only one day after the incident that they were “overwhelmed” with food donations. Children drew messages of support on the sidewalk in front of the station.

“It brings grown men to tears,” Sterling Volunteer Fire Company Chief David Short said at a press conference Tuesday. “That means a lot to the fire department, that the community understands our grief, and understands our sacrifice.”

LCFR Chief Keith Johnson and Short said they were thankful for the support shown by both Biden and Youngkin who called Brown’s widow this week. Biden also offered a visit to the White House to Brown’s family and Youngkin is planning on visiting the two injured firefighters still hospitalized, according to Johnson.

“That means a lot to the family, but it also means a lot to the organization to know that there’s someone else out there that understands what’s going on and offers their condolences,” Short said.

Johnson said it was an “unbelievable display of support.”

Members of the Board of Supervisors and County Administrator Tim Hemstreet also voiced their support and condolences to the Brown family, the injured firefighters and their families during a meeting Tuesday night.

Vice Chair Juli E. Briskman (D-Algonkian), whose district includes the Seneca Ridge neighborhood where the explosion occurred, said Sterling Volunteer Fire Company was an integral part of the community.

Sen. Suhas Subramanyam (D-32) also honored the Brown family during legislative session Feb. 19, requesting the Senate adjourn in honor of Brown.

“We hope that all the others who are impacted in that incident, have a speedy recovery, but most all of our prayers are with firefighter Brown and his family and our community will never forget his courage,” he said.

“That means a lot to the fire department, that the community understands our grief, and understands our sacrifice.”

— Chief David Short,
Sterling Volunteer Fire Company

LCFR is requesting that community members wanting to make donations supporting Brown’s family or the other firefighters injured in the explosion do so through the official Loudoun First Responders Foundation website at lfrf.org.

The LFRF serves Loudoun County by providing immediate financial support to active first responder personnel in their time of need. To donate directly to the Brown family add “Brown Family” in the memo line. If it is not specified, donations will benefit injured firefighters.

The organization has repeatedly cautioned residents against donating to the firefighters through GoFundMe accounts and said they have not organized any.

Community members who wish to donate goods and services, may email LC-CFRSdonate@loudoun.gov. Those interested in offering condolences to the Brown family and the injured firefighters can email LCCFRScondolences@loudoun.gov to have those messages shared.

Johnson said that the organization had chosen LFRF because it is able to equally provide for both career firefighters and volunteer firefighters. While career firefighters injured in the line of duty will receive paid leave, volunteer firefighters must request time off from their full-time jobs.

“[Brown] gave his life for his community for free,” Johnson said.

GoFundMe accounts have been organized for the two residents whose home was destroyed in the explosion – Kelley Woods and Maria Pia Apolonio.

“I remember getting into my car. Before I could close my door, the house exploded.” Apolonio stated according to the account.

Donate at gofund.me/35ba6f2d and to gofund.me/fla8d435. ■

Silver Ridge: A Timeline

When crews from the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department were dispatched to investigate an odor of gas outside a home on Silver Ridge Drive in Sterling’s Seneca Ridge neighborhood, it was a routine call—similar to others happening that Friday night. Around the same time across the county, there were calls for a heart attack, an outside fire, and to help the Sheriff’s Office with an emotionally disturbed person.

But in an instant, the assignment turned into one of the largest tragedies in the history of Loudoun’s fire service. By the time the operation ended, one firefighter was dead and 11 more were injured, as were two civilians.

Here’s a timeline based on radio communications among the fire crews:

7:38 p.m. – Two crews, Engine 618 and Truck 611, from the Sterling Volunteer Fire Department were dispatched to investigate the “smell of natural gas outside the home” at 347 Silver Ridge Drive.

7:41 – They were on the road within three minutes.

7:54 – Arriving units report a leaking in-ground propane tank outside the home.

8:15 – A county dispatcher requests a status report.

Engine 618 responds: “We’ve located a 500-gallon exterior propane tank that is leaking. Still Investigating.”

8:17 – Engine 618 escalates the incident requesting a Hazardous Materials response and second engine crew. Reports the leaking tank has 100 gallons of propane.

8:18 – Engine 618 establishes a command status in preparation for a prolonged response. A battalion chief is called to lead the operations.

8:24 – Battalion Chief 601 is enroute to the scene and requests information about the propane tank.

8:24 – Seconds later the home explodes.

“We’ve just had a catastrophic explosion,” a unit reports from the scene.

That is followed by mayday calls from two firefighters trapped in the basement of the home. “I’m in the basement trapped by debris,” one reports.

8:26 – Work begins to account for crew members.

Engine 611 arrives on the scene and reports, “We’ve had a house explosion. Significant damage. ... The house is pretty much leveled.”

Another mayday call is heard: “I’m trapped in the basement. Can someone get me out?”

8:28 – Battalion Chief 601 arrives on the scene. He quickly calls for the Rapid Intervention task force and a second alarm for more manpower.

“Confirming people trapped in the basement and a large debris pile everywhere. We’re going to work on getting the firefighters out of the basement.”

8:29 – The death of one firefighter is confirmed. He was later identified as Trevor Brown, a 45-year-old volunteer. An EMS task force is requested to bring ambulances and medics to the scene.

8:31 – Another call is heard from a firefighter trapped in the basement. “I’m trapped in the basement under heavy debris. I’m in a blind space, however I’ve got fire going on down here and it is slowly making its way toward me. I am unable to make my way out. I need you guys to get down here and put this fire out ASAP!”

8:34 – With the fire under control units begin digging through debris in the basement to rescue the trapped firefighters.

8:38 – Contact is made with first trapped firefighter. Outside, one of the fire hydrants failed, forcing crew to hook up to one farther away. Preparations are made for the treatment of trauma patients, including alerting AirCare that a helicopter transport may be needed.

8:42 – The first trapped firefighter is rescued from the basement. Another firefighter reports he is trapped with about one-third of the air remaining in his breathing tank and he is under quite a bit of debris. Although he says, he can’t hear their communications, he tells the rescuers he is going to relax and control his breathing to conserve oxygen.

8:45 – A second firefighter is pulled from the basement.

9:02 – A third firefighter is rescued from the basement.

9:14 – Rescue operations wrap up with all personnel accounted for.

Eleven responders and two civilians were treated for injuries. Four firefighters remained hospitalized Saturday, including one flown to the burn center at Medstar Health.

More than 100 fire-rescue units were called to the scene to assist in the incident. ■

Next Steps: Significant Incident Review

BY NORMAN K. STYER
nstyer@loudounnow.com

As members of the Fire Marshal's Office and federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives this week continue to sift through the remains of the Silver Ridge Drive home that was destroyed in a Feb. 16 propane explosion, their work is only the beginning of the investigation.

Already, the Loudoun County Combined Fire and Rescue System has secured the commitment of Frederick County, MD, Fire Chief Tom Coe to conduct a Significant Incident Review with assistance from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

The detailed third-party review will reconstruct every aspect of the incident to determine whether the system had appropriate plans, policies, and procedures and whether crews on the ground followed them. The final report—to be completed months from now—will determine which elements of the response went well, which didn't, and suggest policy and procedural improvements, if needed.

The findings of that report will be monitored by fire-rescue leaders across the country.

The detailed study of previous tragedies resulted in changes to improve emergency response and public safety.

The most recent Significant Incident

Review involved the June 4, 2020, drowning of a Lansdowne teen who was swimming with friends in Goose Creek near the Potomac River. In that case, changes to dispatching procedures were implemented after the investigation found that 911 calls from the scene were being transferred to authorities in Maryland, delaying the response of rescuers.

Prior to the Feb. 16 explosion, the incident most impactful to the county's fire service was a 2008 house fire near Leesburg when the home collapsed with crews inside. Seven firefighters were injured. That Significant Incident Review resulted in new policies for when firefighters can enter—or must evacuate—burning homes, and calls for changes to the statewide building code to require homebuilders to use materials that would better hold up in fire conditions.

Unfortunately, Loudoun also has experience with a prior fatal home explosion from a gas leak. On July 7, 1998, a South Riding family of four was spending the first night in their newly built home when it exploded, killing the mother and seriously injuring the father. That gas leak, investigated by the National Transportation Safety Board, was determined to have occurred in part because in exterior natural gas pipeline may have been damaged by crews installing electrical lines too closely in a trench. ■

Two Firefighters Return Home from Hospital

BY HANNA PAMPALONI
hpampaloni@loudounnow.com

Two of the firefighters injured in last week's home explosion that killed one volunteer firefighter and injured 13 other people were discharged from care on Monday and Tuesday.

Nancy Cortez, who returned home Monday, was one of four firefighters hospitalized following the incident. A second firefighter was released from Inova Loudoun Hospital Tuesday afternoon.

Several firefighters became trapped under debris following the explosion last week after responding to a call about a gas leak.

Sterling Volunteer Fire Company Chief David Short said Tuesday that two other firefighters are still receiving hospital care in Intensive Care and Step-Down units.

"They've got a positive but long road ahead of them," Short said. "We're continuing to monitor and support them and their families."

One of the volunteers still recovering from second and third-degree burns is Loudoun County Public Schools teacher Brian Diamond. He teaches eighth grade English and Social Science at J. Michael Lunsford Middle School.

Loudoun County Combined Fire and Rescue Chief Keith Johnson told the Board of Supervisors during a meeting Tuesday night that 10 firefighters, one Loudoun County Sheriff's Deputy and two residents received care following the explosion.

Johnson said he had followed up with each injured firefighter personally on Tuesday and he is "positive all are doing better." ■

COMMERCIAL SPACE NOW AVAILABLE IN HISTORIC DOWNTOWN LEESBURG

FLEXIBLE PRIME LOCATION OFFICE SPACE SUITABLE FOR A WIDE RANGE OF USES. LOCATED IN THE HEART OF HISTORIC DOWNTOWN LEESBURG, RIGHT ACROSS THE LOUDOUN COUNTY COURTHOUSE, WALK TO SHOPS AND RESTAURANTS, CONVENIENT CLIENT PARKING LOT BEHIND BUILDING



- ENTRANCE ON KING STREET & PRIVATE ENTRANCE OUT TO PARKING LOT FOR CUSTOMER PARKING
- INCLUDES PRIVATE RESTROOM
- SIGNAGE ON FRONT & REAR OF BUILDING
- SEPARATE HVAC SYSTEM
- WALKING DISTANCE TO COURTHOUSE
- OVER 1000 SQ FT

703-596-9900 info@15NorthKing.com 15 N. King St. Leesburg, VA 20176

4.99% APR*
Home Equity Special

Bank of Clarke

**Love the way
you live with a
HELOC!**

- Special **4.99%** Annual Percentage Rate (APR) for 1st 6 billing cycles- the rate will not increase during that period of time.
- **Minimum** initial advance of \$10,000
- Eligible for **NEW** Home Equity Line of Credit applications received from **February 1, 2024 - February 29, 2024**

Refinance of an existing Bank of Clarke Home Equity Line is not eligible for this offer.

*Subject to credit approval. This is a variable rate loan. Refinancing of existing Bank of Clarke Home Equity Lines of Credit are not eligible for this offer. All rates and terms are subject to change without notice. Please contact us for more information. Bank of Clarke will pay all closing costs for HELOCs up to \$500,000 unless the HELOC is terminated within the first three years of origination. Closing costs start with a \$250 origination charge plus any attorney's fees, appraisals, recording costs, credit report fees, as well as any other fee that may be assessed in association with the loan origination. Closing costs generally range between \$300 and \$4,500. The introductory rate is fixed for six months and, after the fixed period, will change to a variable rate transaction which means the APR, minimum payment amount, and final payment amount may change monthly. During the variable rate period, the APR will be determined based on the Wall Street Journal Prime Rate plus a margin and will be rounded to the nearest 0.125%. As of **January 1, 2024**, the Wall Street Journal Prime Rate is 8.50%. The margin is based on several factors including credit score, loan to value, and loan amount. The APR does not include costs other than interest. Under no circumstance will the APR go below 4.00% or exceed 24.00%.

Call (800)-650-8723
or visit www.bankofclarke.bank

Loudoun Now



Published by
Loudoun Community Media

15 N. King St., Suite 101
Leesburg, VA, 20176

PO Box 207
Leesburg, VA 20178

703-770-9723

NORMAN K. STYER
Publisher and Editor
nstyer@loudounnow.com

EDITORIAL

ALEXIS GUSTIN
Reporter
agustin@loudounnow.com

HANNA PAMPALONI
Reporter
hpampaloni@loudounnow.com

ADVERTISING

SUSAN STYER
Advertising Manager
sstyer@loudounnow.com

TONYA HARDING
Account Executive
tharding@loudounnow.com

VICKY MASHAW
Account Executive
vmashaw@loudounnow.com

Online always at
LoudounNow.com

CIRCULATION AUDIT BY



Loudoun Now is mailed weekly to homes in Leesburg, western Loudoun and Ashburn, and distributed for pickup throughout the county. Online, **Loudoun Now** provides daily community news coverage to an audience of more than 100,000 unique monthly visitors.

Opinion

No Routine Calls

Emergency calls reporting an odor of gas in a building or in a neighborhood are among the most common fire unit responses. They occur almost daily; many times there are several a day.

On Friday, we were reminded that frequent calls are not routine calls.

Each time a fire crew rolls into action they are heading into a potentially dangerous situation. Yet, we don't expect it to be a deadly situation. That's in large part due to the extensive training required of every career and volunteer as part of a combined system that

continues to serve as a national model.

The community can never repay the Brown family for the loss of a husband and father, or those who suffered life-changing injuries and trauma while working to protect their neighbors.

We can pause to appreciate the commitment and sacrifices made by our emergency responders each day they are on the job. And we can renew our commitment to keeping them safe as they work to save us. ■

LETTERS to the Editor

Wrong Message

Editor:

Supervisor Caleb Kershner (R-Catoctin) recently voted against an accelerated planning and zoning review process for data centers. According to *Loudoun Now* (Feb. 8), the process is aimed at imposing new restrictions on data center development and give the supervisors more control over the industry's rapid expansion.

Against the backdrop of a major power line—solely to serve data centers—being built through rural western Loudoun, Mr. Kershner “said the board was sending the wrong message to the data center industry—that they are no longer wanted in the community.”

If that's the “wrong” message, what does Mr. Kershner envision as the “right” one?

Does Mr. Kershner support the major power line for data centers with its giant towers that's proposed to run through the Catoctin District, harming tourism and agriculture, invading a historic district, and ruining the quality of life for his own constituents?

Does Mr. Kershner support his

constituents being forced to pay for that power line through much, much higher electricity rates, even though his constituents would be harmed, not benefited, by the power line?

Does Mr. Kershner support data centers running 24 hours per day right next to residential neighborhoods, as is currently under consideration in Leesburg, using far more power than the nearby neighborhoods and subjecting the residents to unbearable noise?

I'm hopeful that Mr. Kershner wouldn't support such negative impacts on his own constituents and other Loudoun residents. If that's the case, exactly why should we send the message that data centers are wanted in our community?

To his credit, Mr. Kershner has written to the company overseeing the proposed power line, urging it to minimize the line's impact by, among other things, putting it along established rights-of-way rather than through agricultural and residential properties.

But I note, however, that Mr. Kershner doesn't suggest putting the line under-

ground. Why not? If you'd like to see what putting a major power line above ground along an established right-of-way looks like, take a drive down Dry Mill Road, where giant towers for a power line were constructed within yards of the houses that were already there. Are such towers what anyone would want in the right-of-way running in front of their house?

I realize that data centers pay taxes. But is it worth it for Loudoun residents, especially when any tax benefit will be offset by much higher electricity rates that we'll pay to build new power lines for the data centers? It's as though we're being asked to pay for the data center industry to ruin our quality of life.

I'm hopeful that, in the future, Mr. Kershner will work more closely with the other supervisors on this issue, as well as with the community groups who oppose the new power line (*Loudoun Now*, Feb. 15).

— Kurt Schroeder, Lovettsville

LETTERS

continue on page 33

LoudounNow

VOL. 9, NO. 17

We've got you covered. In the mail weekly. Online always at LoudounNow.com

MARCH 7, 2024

Supervisors Open Western Loudoun Policy Review

BY HANNA PAMPALONI
hpampaloni@loudounnow.com

The Board of Supervisors on Tuesday night launched its long-promised review of planning policies and zoning regulations for rural western Loudoun amid controversy over its scope and pace.

The rural policies were held largely intact over the past eight years as supervisors developed a new comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance, a strategy intended to prevent agricultural land from being opened to increased development.

After the Zoning Ordinance was adopted last year, the rural policies review was cited as a top board priority.

"I think it was a prudent decision by the board to in October to basically make the decision that you were going to pull all this western Loudoun land related ordinances out and address that as a separate project in the future, which is what has brought us here today," planner Brian Wilson said.

The plan recommended by county planning staff, is an 18-month project which proposes creating planning policies and zoning standard changes simultaneously while

WESTERN LAND USE
continues on page 45



Doug Graham/Loudoun Now

First responders from around the region gathered at Cornerstone Chapel in Leesburg on Monday to salute the service of Trevor Brown, the volunteer firefighter killed Feb. 16 while responding to gas leak that resulted in a catastrophic home explosion.

'A Beacon of Light'

Funeral Held for Firefighter Killed in Home Explosion

BY HANNA PAMPALONI
AND ALEXIS GUSTIN

hpampaloni@loudounnow.org
agustin@loudounnow.org

Thousands gathered at Cornerstone Chapel in Leesburg on Monday morning

to celebrate the life of volunteer firefighter Trevor Brown who was killed in a Feb. 16 home explosion that injured 13 other people.

Brown leaves behind a wife, Laura, and three children. At the request of his family, the theme of the day was a celebra-

tion of who Brown was, not just a mourning of his death, Sterling Volunteer Fire Company Chaplain John Boyle said during Monday's ceremony.

FUNERAL *continues on page 47*

ECRWSSSEDDM

PAID
U.S. Postage
Permit #1374
Merrifield VA

HARTLEY
HOME EXTERIORS
ROOFING • WINDOWS • SIDING

540-441-7649
HartleyHomeExteriors.com

ROOF LOCAL

Contact the Best of Loudoun Winning Roofer for your roofing project and receive a free shingle upgrade.

The Best Choice for Roofing Replacement





Doug Graham/Loudoun Now

Members of the fire and rescue community from around the region gathered at Cornerstone Chapel in Leesburg on Monday to celebrate the life—and mourn the loss—of Sterling volunteer firefighter Trevor Brown.

Funeral

continued from page 1

“A celebration of life is a joyful occasion,” he said. “That doesn’t mean there’s not going to be tears. That doesn’t mean there’s not going to be sobbing, but we’re also going to have smiles and we are going to have laughter.”

The ceremony was attended by Gov. Glen Youngkin, County Chair Phyllis Randall and other county supervisors and state elected officials.

Youngkin called Brown a hero and said his and the hearts of people across the state were breaking with the Brown family.

“It was a night like so many others,” Youngkin said of Feb. 16. “And at the end of a 12-hour shift, he was ready to go home, ready to get home to his wife and his kids. And just after 7:30 p.m. a call came. Trevor, along with his fellow heroes, boarded their trucks and responded.”

Youngkin said being a first responder requires having a “love so immense that you will willingly lay down your life selflessly for others” and said Brown was “a beacon of light” that could not be extinguished.

“This moment, as immensely tragic as it is, is not the end, but holds hope for green shoots to emerge from these tragic ashes,” Youngkin said. “Trevor’s legacy will live on through all the lives he touched. The community of brothers and sisters will grow closer and therefor the fabric of our commonwealth and of our country will grow stronger.”

Randall offered heartfelt condolences to the Brown family, the Sterling Volunteer Fire Company and the Loudoun County Combined Fire and Rescue System on behalf of the Board of Supervisors, County Administrator Tim Hemstreet, the 6,000 members of the county government workforce and the 446,000 citizens of the county.

“Just as it is true for so many career and volunteer firefighters, firefighter Brown held a distinguished lineage of service. For these men and women, firefighting it’s part of your DNA. You understand first-hand the physical and emotional toll that comes with choosing a career that requires you to spend 24 hour shifts away from your family. To routinely rise in the middle of the night at the sound of a tone, to offer comfort while administering first aid. To run towards danger and to choose a career that ultimately requires you and your families to live with the knowledge that no call, no call, is routine because every call could be the last. That knowledge, that daily understanding, that is what makes first responders such extraordinary citizens. They are extraordinary human beings so unique and so inspiring and ultimately it is that knowledge that rightfully earns all of you the title of hero,” she said.

Brown’s father, Thomas Brown also spoke during the ceremony and said he had a “one of kind love for humanity” that he gave freely.

“He had a unique, clever humor which made us laugh uncontrollably at times,” he recalled. “... I so loved our strong goodbye and hello hugs and talks,” he said.

He thanked the community for the

support and kindness shown over the past two weeks.

Sterling Volunteer Fire Company Chief David Short who was friends with Brown, said the stay-at-home father was a family man who spoke of his children often while at the fire station. He said he hated the spotlight and loved serving children in the neighborhood.

Short also read an excerpt from Brown’s journal.

“I’ve always wanted to be involved with emergency services, to challenge myself and learn new things. I see volunteering as a good way to give back to the community, and to help others. I know that I’m mentally and physically capable to do this job and I hope to have a positive impact on at least one person’s life,” Brown wrote.

“Trevor was not just one of my members, he was one of my friends,” Short said.

At the end of the celebration, members of the Loudoun County Fire and Rescue Honor Guard presented folded American flags to Brown’s family. They also gave his helmet to one of his children, and presented three teddy bears one for each of his children.

Gov. Youngkin presented a folded flag of the state of Virginia to his family.

On Feb. 16, Brown was among a crew of Sterling firefighters who responded to a call for a possible gas leak at a home on Silver Ridge Drive in the Seneca Ridge neighborhood. After evacuating two residents from the home, the firefighters were investigating a leak from a 500-gallon underground propane tank when something caused the gas to ignite. The house exploded.

Brown, who was outside the house, was killed by the explosion. Other firefighters were trapped under rubble in the home’s basement. In all, 14 people were injured in the incident.

Only one, volunteer firefighter Brian Diamond, a Loudoun County Public Schools teacher, remains hospitalized at the MedStar Burn Center in Washington, DC, where he is undergoing treatment for second- and third-degree burns.

The Loudoun County Combined Fire and Rescue System has tapped Frederick County, MD, Fire Chief Tom Coe to conduct a Significant Incident Review of the case with assistance from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. The detailed third-party review will reconstruct every aspect of the incident to determine whether the system had appropriate plans, policies, and procedures and whether crews on the ground followed them. The final report—to be completed months from now—will determine which elements of the response went well, which didn’t, and suggest policy and procedural improvements, if needed.

In addition to the outpouring of public support that was on display during Monday’s celebration of life program, the Loudoun First Responders Foundation continues to raise money that will be used to support the Brown family and the injured firefighters. During a community dinner held as Lansdowne Woods on Friday night \$30,000 was raised. Learn more about the support effort at lfrf.org. ■

‘God Got Me Out’ Firefighter Diamond Heads Home

BY HANNA PAMPALONI
hpampaloni@loudounnow.org

Volunteer firefighter Brian Diamond was released from the hospital last week following a month-long stay in the Med-Star burn unit in Washington, DC, after he was injured in a Sterling home explosion that killed one firefighter and injured 13 other people. He is the last of the injured firefighters to come home.

Firefighters responded to Silver Ridge Drive after receiving a call about a gas odor from a home. They evacuated two people from the home before it exploded from a still unknown ignition source.

Diamond was one of four firefighters that became trapped under debris from the explosion. He was treated for second and third-degree burns.

“I was down in that basement and I said a prayer and God got me out of that. It was crazy down there and terrifying,” he recalled.

He said his stay in the hospital had a lot of “ups and downs” but credited his wife Lisa with staying with him every step of the way.

“She’s crazy steady and I love her so much,” he said.

During the past month, Diamond underwent five surgeries to treat his injuries and now he said his main goal is to be able to play basketball with his four kids again and hopefully continue volunteering at the department.

Sterling Volunteer Fire Company chief



Hanna Pampaloni/Loudoun Now

Volunteer firefighter Brian Diamond is greeted by fellow first responders at the Sterling Volunteer Fire Company station after being released from a month long stay at the hospital where he received treatment for second and third-degree burns.

David Short said the first time he saw Diamond after the accident he said Diamond wanted to get right back on the firetruck.

Being home with his kids is what he most looks forward to.

“We told them last night that I was coming home and they just jumped up, jumping jacks and flipping around the room. It was just so good,” he said.

Lisa Diamond said she supported her husband’s decision to continue volunteer-

ing when he is able.

“The fire department has been so amazing. They keep on talking about the brotherhood and the sisterhood and they’ve been such an amazing support system. I can’t imagine not being part of the fire family so I think we’ll get there when we get there, but I’m ready to support him in

FIREFIGHTER HEADS HOME
continues on page 37

Loudoun First Responders Foundation Raises \$250K

BY HANNA PAMPALONI
hpampaloni@loudounnow.org

After the Feb. 16 home explosion that killed volunteer firefighter Trevor Brown and injured 13 other people, Loudoun County Combined Fire and Rescue pointed a community eager to help toward the Loudoun First Responders Foundation. Five weeks later the organization has raised over \$250,000 to support firefighters impacted by the incident.

“We’ve had an enormous amount of outpouring support,” LFRF President Tina Johnson said.

But she said firefighters, like a Brian Diamond, a school teacher who was the last injured firefighter to be released from the hospital, still have a long road of recovery ahead of them.

“He was a volunteer and he’s not able to go back to work,” she said adding that another firefighter had broken her leg, and a third was healing from internal injuries.

“We are a 100% volunteer organization. We get zero dollars from the government or county. Every penny we bring in is off of the effort of our volunteers ... and community,” Johnson said.

While generally any donations that come into the organization are put into a general fund, she said since Feb. 16, they have organized a few restricted funds to direct donations to those specifically injured in the incident. After March 30, donations will begin being added back into the general fund, Johnson said.

ResQ BBQ and the Real Husbands of Loudoun County Foundation are hosting a fundraiser for Diamond this Saturday at the Leesburg restaurant from 12 to 6 p.m. Tickets are \$40 and include two drinks and a BBQ Buffet. To purchase tickets or donate directly to the LFRF go to lfrf.org. ■

Feds Earmark \$4.1M for Loudoun’s Crisis Center

BY NORMAN K. STYER
nstyer@loudounnow.org

Sen. Mark Warner and U.S. Rep. Jennifer Wexton met Monday with those on the front lines of mental health treatment to tout plans for construction of a Crisis Receiving and Stabilization Center near Leesburg.

The meeting came two days after the Senate approved a budget to keep the federal government open. The spending plan includes a \$4.1 million earmark to help build the \$16.3 million treatment center.

The project is viewed as a game-changer for early treatment of those facing mental health emergencies. The facility will be built at the county’s government service

center on Meadowview Court and provide urgent psychiatric care, 16 “recliners” providing up to 23 hours of treatment, and 10 short-term stay inpatient beds for stays up to 14 days. Patients could be walk-ins or brought in by ambulances or law enforcement.

Dr. Ramia Gupta, medical director for the county’s Department of Mental Health, Substance Abuse & Developmental Services, said the center would be better equipped to handle the needs of those in crisis than hospital emergency rooms.

“This enables us to start treatment in a timely manner, because as we know, timely intervention is a critical factor in stabilizing any patient,” she said. “This mitigates stress and focuses on the patient safety as

well as the safety of others around them. The center will include a multidisciplinary team, so we will have nurse practitioners, nurses, psychiatrists, clinicians, and peer specialists.”

In a roundtable discussion at Inova Loudoun Hospital, medical and mental health providers said the crisis center was a critical community need but would address only part of the challenge they face in providing treatment. Other concerns included training more providers, improving insurance coverage for mental health services, expanding tele-health services, removing stigmas that discourage

CRISIS CENTER *continues on page 36*

Board reconsiders

continued from page 1

Belmont Ridge Road and Goose Creek just west of the Belmont Country Club neighborhood, was originally envisioned to have 4.8 million square feet of data center space. The size was then reduced to 2.9 million square feet prior to the board's March 13 public hearing. The by-right allowance is 1.3 million square feet.

The proffers include buffering the project from Goose Creek and dedicating that area as a park to the county, a walking trail along the creek and building a public access walkway and roadway to the park. The company will also install a measure to filter water flowing into the creek which will result in cleaner water, according to Turner.

Turner said the by-right data center would be built regardless of whether the board voted to support it. However, if supervisors approve the proposed package of land use applications, they could get significant environmental protections.

"It is worth a reconsideration to look at this application with the much-reduced footprint with the environmental package," he said during the meeting.

Vice Chair Juli E. Briskman (D-Algonkian) said she did not understand why the applicant would agree to add the proffers when it could move ahead with the smaller data center campus.

Turner said going through the by-right permitting process would take another six months, but if the board approved it, construction could be started immediately.

"I think that it's not a good look for us to deny something and then come back and reconsider and approve it," Briskman said.

Supervisor Caleb A. Kershner

(R-Catoctin) said, who opposed the previous denial motion, supported reconsideration.

"I think Supervisor Turner has seen what this is, and I appreciate him bringing this back and hopefully we can get a lot of these things that they've asked for obviously the will of the board is that it will not be larger than the by right," he said.

The motion to reconsider passed 4-3-2 with County Chair Phyllis J. Randall (D-At Large), Briskman and Laura A. TeKrony (D-Little River) opposed and Koran T. Saines (D-Sterling) and Matthew F. Letourneau (R-Dulles) absent. Saines and Letourneau opposed the original denial motion.

Turner told *Loudoun Now* that after the vote he learned that if Loudoun GC LLC resubmitted the plans for a by-right project, it would be subject to the county's new zoning ordinance, adopted in December. If the board approves the amended application, it would be grandfathered into the previous zoning ordinance regulations.

"[The new zoning ordinance] has much stricter noise mitigation rules, setbacks and that sort of thing. If we vote yes, we get the environmental package but it's yes under the revised '93 ordinance which has looser noise rules and looser setback requirements," he said.

Turner said he was working with the developer to see if it would commit to compliance with the stricter noise standards as well.

"I said, 'this could be a showstopper. I cannot allow you to build a data center that is noisier than the current ordinance applies. I think it's an easy fix,'" Turner said.

He said he was hopeful that the company would agree to that stipulation.

"If they do that, now, I'm getting a better data center with the environmental stuff attached to it and that's a slam dunk,"

he said.

He and his staff are working to see which set of standards would result in the best option for residents, since the data center will likely be built either way.

"My overarching obligation is the welfare of my constituents. Period. Everything else takes a back seat to that," he said.

Loudoun Now reached out to Loudoun GC for comment but has not received a response.

The item will come before the board for another public hearing at its April 10 meeting.

Glass' motion to reconsider the Tillet's View project in Ashburn that originally envisioned 397 homes by rezoning 50 acres adjacent to Waxpool Elementary School passed 5-2-2 with TeKrony and Kristen C. Umstattd (D-Leesburg) opposed and Saines and Letourneau absent.

The Pulte Home Company was seeking to rezone 50 acres adjacent to Waxpool Elementary School to permit the construction of 103 single family detached homes, 184 townhouses and 110 multifamily stacked units and told Glass they would reduce the housing footprint by 40 units.

She also said she may propose an amendment to the Countywide Transportation Plan to close Waxpool Road/Belmont Ridge Road intersection.

"When I was listening to the community, they had concerns on a couple of streets that had become drive throughs to get to certain areas and they were concerned about the speed of the neighborhoods and so that's what I was looking to do to see if there was a possibility to close off Waxpool to deter people from doing that," she said.

The item will come before the board for another public hearing at its May 15 meeting. ■

Firefighter heads home

continued from page 3

what he wants to do," she said.

The journey to recovery will be long, but Diamond said his doctors are reassuring him he will be able to meet his goals.

"It was just a lot of unknowns but once we got to the Step Down everything moved so rapidly," he said.

Diamond also spoke fondly of Trevor Brown, who was killed from the explosion and said they were just beginning to bond

and their families had even had dinner together at the fire station just a few weeks before the incident.

"I'm very sad about everything that happened with Trevor," he said.

During the day, Diamond works as a Loudoun County Public Schools teacher and said he has received cards and notes from his students during his hospital stay.

"I'm here. I made it and I'm looking forward to seeing them soon," he said.

Diamond began volunteering for the fire company in 2021 after he stopped coaching track and field to spend more time with his family, but decided he still wanted to give back to his community.

Short said the welcoming back process and procession home is meaningful for everyone at the station.

"This is a big milestone in his physical healing and in everyone's emotional healing," he said.

He said the journey to wellness for the whole department is still a process but a day like today encourages everyone.

"He's a really strong guy, really strong character and really strong physically which I think both contributed significantly to the rapidness of his physical recovery," Short said. ■

Obituaries

DAVID WALLER CHAMBERLIN

David Waller Chamberlin, age 79, passed away, his wife of 56 years by his side, on Saturday, March 23, 2024, at Kendal in Lexington, VA, after a struggle with Alzheimer's. A native of Waterford, VA, he was the beloved husband of Carolee, dear father of Justin, Rebecca, and Marion; father-in-law to Wendy, Keith, and Sephora; and grandfather to Claire and Cal. He is also survived by his brothers Robert and John. He was predeceased by his father Wellman and his mother Anne Carter.

David graduated from Loudoun Valley High School in Purcellville, VA, and received a BA in Political Science from Earlham College in Richmond, IN. He and his wife served as Peace Corps Volunteers in Brazil from 1968-1970, and he was the Administrative Officer for Peace Corps/Afghanistan from 1972-1975. After the family's return to the US, he worked with the federal government's volunteer agency, ACTION, then spent his remaining career with the Environmental Protection Agency.

As a Quaker and a member of Goose Creek Meeting, his life reflected his strong belief in working toward peaceful solutions to conflict. David was an avid outdoorsman, and he enjoyed hiking, and traveling with his wife. He was also creative, expressed via tenderly caring for his vineyard, native rewilding both his own garden and areas in the towns he lived, and working with wood to make beautiful custom furniture for family members.

A memorial will be held later. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to Boxerwood Nature Center 963 Ross Rd Lexington, VA 24450, or Doctors Without Borders 40 Rector St. 16th Floor New York, NY 10006.

*Lives are like rivers:
Eventually they go where they
must, not where we want them to.*

LoudounNow

**TO PLACE AN OBITUARY,
CONTACT SUSAN STYER
AT 703-770-9723 OR EMAIL
SSTYER@LOUDOUNNOW.COM**

Former Propane Company Worker Faces Manslaughter Charge in Fatal Home Explosion

BY HANNA PAMPALONI

hpampaloni@loudounnow.org

A former Southern States employee has been criminally charged in the February home explosion that killed a volunteer firefighter and injured 13 more people.

A Loudoun grand jury on Monday handed up five indictments against Roger Bentley, 67, on charges of involuntary manslaughter and four other misdemeanors relating to the unlawful transfer, release, maintenance and control of liquid petroleum gas.

According to court documents, Bentley handled propane without proper certification. He faces up to 10 years in prison on the involuntary manslaughter charges. In the days following the explosion, the Fire Marshal's Office temporarily halted all Loudoun County gas deliveries by his then-employer Southern States Cooperative, Inc. – Leesburg – Fairfax Petroleum Service.

The grand jury found that Bentley, either by engaging in an unlawful act or improper performance of a lawful act, unintentionally caused the death of firefighter Trevor Brown. No further details of Bentley's alleged role in the incident have been made public or included in the court



An overhead view shows the damage after a home exploded in Sterling Feb. 16, after an unknown ignition source sparked leaking propane.

record as of Tuesday.

On Feb. 16 at 7:38 p.m. dispatchers received a call about a gas odor outside of a residence in the 300 block of Silver Ridge Drive in Sterling. Firefighters located a 500-gallon underground propane tank

with a leak on the side of the home and requested additional units from Sterling, South Riding, and the Hazardous Materials Response Team as well as multiple command officers.

A short time later, units on the scene

reported a "catastrophic explosion" with multiple maydays from firefighters inside the home. Additional units were then brought in from Fairfax and the Metropolitan Washington Airport Authority, according to a release.

Crews worked to locate and rescue the trapped firefighters from the home. Ten firefighters were transported to area hospitals along with two civilians. Brown died at the scene.

The criminal charges come after an investigation by the Loudoun County Fire and Rescue Marshal's Office determined that the explosion was the result of a leak involving a 500-gallon underground propane tank. Uncontained propane migrated into and around the structure and was ignited by an unknown ignition source.

Following the explosion, the Fire Marshal's Office imposed restrictions on all branches of Southern States that deliver and transfer propane in the county.

"The LCFR-FMO is working directly with representatives from Southern States Cooperative, Inc. – Leesburg – Fairfax Petroleum Service ('Southern States') to review and update the company's fire code related information," according to a March 12 statement.

The restrictions were lifted three weeks later on April 1. ■

'Innovative' Data Center Campus Prepares for County Review

BY HANNA PAMPALONI

hpampaloni@loudounnow.org

A rezoning application for a first-of-its-kind data center campus is in the beginning legislative review process by county government and envisions a 362-acre complex in the Brambleton area.

The application requests a rezoning from Transitional Residential – 10 to Industrial Park. The property, located on the east side of Evergreen Mills Road north of Ryan Road, falls primarily within a part of the county designated for large lot neighborhoods, while the western portion is envisioned for rural agricultural uses.

Active Infrastructure, a New York-based data center company, submitted the application. Representative Hawwi Edao said in a pre-application letter that, while the campus is large, the company plans to implement several methods outlined in a recent white paper authored by Supervi-

sor Michael R. Turner (D-Ashburn).

"This project, the first of its kind in Loudoun County and is pursuing best-in-class data center and energy innovations directly addressing priorities outlined in this aspirational document along with other sustainability features," according to the letter.

Those include onsite carbon-net-zero power generation through microgrids, potential on-site excess power generations sources for the county, maximizing power usage efficiency, and maximizing water usage efficiency.

Edao said the company plans to use natural gas-powered hydrogen fuel cells, a battery storage system, and air-cooled chillers.

"This innovative project will be discreetly situated within the landscape, preserving a minimum 200-foot buffer of mature trees along all adjacent roadways and properties, with a majority of the buf-



Active Infrastructure

A rendering shows a proposed 362-acre data center campus along Evergreen Mills Road near Brambleton.

fers being between 400 and 1,000 feet to adjacent properties, ensuring it remains completely concealed from public view," she wrote.

Edao said the company acknowledges that

the Transition Large Lot Neighborhood Place Type is not the "typical location" for

DATA CENTER CAMPUS
continues on page 39