



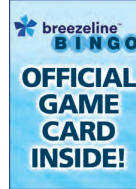
Local

The IRS would like to warn everyone about scams

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OBITUARIES

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Gabriele, Orlando
Barberic Jr., John
Modzik, George
Dunn, James
Lincolin, Myra J.
Starkey, Ernest
Childe, Charles
Bowser, Michael
Kochel, Rudy
Summers, David
Bar, Kenneth
Getz, Gisela
Hall, Judith

PUBLIC INTEREST

DOH District 4 boss: Relationship must change

BY BEN CONLEY

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The relationship between local elected officials and the West Virginia Division of Highways has followed a recognizable pattern over the last decade-plus.

It proceeds as such: Local frustrations mount over time — be they over specific issues, a general lack of maintenance, or both.

Complaints become more pointed, public and frequent.

The two sides come together to air things out, and depart proclaiming a renewed commitment to communication and collaboration.

No more, says DOH District 4 Manager Earl Gaskins. Gaskins, who took over Dis-

trict 4 earlier this year, recently sat down with Morgantown leadership.

"We could sit here and talk about staffing and money and all the problems of the world. Guys, most of the failures we have to own. Most of the failure is the way we've managed and the way we've operated, quite honestly, in drawing these lines. My whole goal is to change the perception of what everybody thinks about the department of highways; change the perception of what we're willing to do," Gaskins said. "I will not violate my policy. I will not violate state law. I will not violate anything for anybody, but we can make this work together. If we miss this opportunity, there will be nobody else to blame."

The lines referenced by Gaskins are the territorial barriers the city has typically run up against when looking to address various issues on or along the numerous state routes running through its territory.

Gaskins said he had "blanket permits" in place with the cities of Bridgeport and Clarksburg while at his previous post. "All that takes is a permit. You fill out a permit, and you can do whatever you want on our roads. It's that simple," he said, noting some activities may require a permit and a written agreement.

These comments represented a sea change in both the tone and substance of feedback provided to the city in the past. "We've been working on this

for years and years and years, and we keep hoping that someone would say the things that you're saying," Deputy Mayor Jenny Selin said.

Part of mending the relationship, Gaskins continued, is defining expectations.

For example, local leadership is often frustrated by a lack of mowing and sweeping at the major entrances to the greater Morgantown area — particularly during high-visibility occasions like WVU graduation and sporting events.

"A lot of times what I see in municipalities, your standards are different than what the department of highways is ... I don't mow for aesthetics. I mow for the fundamentals of safety," he said. "We're not mowing

SEE CHANGE, A2

HEALTH

Fresh feels better

Study: Time spent near real Christmas trees can ease stress, anxiety

BY DAVID BEARD

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This holiday season of peace and joy can actually be quite the opposite for many people. A 2021 study by the American Psychiatric Association said 41% of people included in the research reported experiencing holiday season stress and anxiety.

One solution might be to talk a walk through a Christmas tree lot, according to four WVU Davis College Division of Forestry & Natural Resources professors.

"You don't even have to buy one," said Chad Pier-skalla, who led the group's study. "You can just go to your local retailer and enjoy the smell for 15-20 minutes, and that alone can have a lot of positive benefits."

The professors looked at how tree shopping could offer restorative effects for mental fatigue, and compared walking through a lot with real trees with walking through a display of artificial ones.

They prepared two videos offering first-person point-of-view walk-throughs of displays of real

SEE FRESH, A-2



Craig and Tracy Anderson, of Morgantown, cut down their Christmas tree at King's Trees in Bruceton Mills this week, while their Doberman, Luna, keeps close. At right, Luna leads the way as the Andersons make the way back to the car with their tree.



PHOTOS by

Ron Rittenhouse/The Dominion Post



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NEWS IN BRIEF

Associated Press

Insurgers reach gates of Syria's capital

BEIRUT — A Syrian opposition war monitor and a pro-government media outlet say government forces have withdrawn from much of the central city of Homs. The pro-government Sham FM reported that government forces took positions outside Syria's third-largest city, without elaborating. Rami Abdulrahman who heads the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said Syrian troops and members of different security agencies have withdrawn from the city, adding that rebels have entered parts of it. Losing Homs is a potentially crippling blow for Syria's embattled leader,

Bashar Assad.

Trump is welcomed by Macron to Paris

PARIS — French President Emmanuel Macron has welcomed Donald Trump to Paris with a full dose of presidential pomp. And they held a hastily arranged meeting with Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy on a day that's mixing pageantry with attention to pressing global problems. The president-elect's visit to France is part of a global celebration of the reopening of Notre Dame Cathedral five years after a devastating fire. Macron and other European leaders are trying to win Trump's favor and persuade him to maintain support for Ukraine in its

defense against Russia's invasion.

CEO's shooting opens a door for many to vent

The fatal shooting of UnitedHealthcare's CEO has opened the door for many people to vent their frustrations and anger over the insurance industry. The feelings of exasperation, anger, resentment, and helplessness toward insurers aren't new. But the shooting and the headlines around it have unleashed a new wave of patients sharing such sentiments and personal stories of interactions with insurance companies. Conversations at dinner tables, office water coolers, social gatherings and on social media have pivoted to the topic.

An explosion destroys an apartment block

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — An explosion and fire has rocked a neighborhood in the Dutch city of The Hague, killing three people and injuring other people and destroying several apartments. The cause of the disaster is unclear. Emergency authorities said four people were rescued from the rubble and taken to the hospital. The mayor said rescuers were no longer looking for survivors but for eventual bodies, but could not specify how many people might still be unaccounted for. Residents of the northeastern neighborhood of Mariahoeve in The Hague heard a huge bang and screams before dawn.

South Korea's president avoids impeachment

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea's embattled President Yoon Suk Yeol has avoided an opposition-led attempt to impeach him over his short-lived imposition of martial law. Most of Yoon's ruling party lawmakers boycotted a parliamentary vote Saturday to deny a two-thirds majority needed to suspend his presidential powers. The scrapping of the motion is expected to intensify protests calling for Yoon's ouster and deep political chaos in South Korea. A survey suggests a majority of South Koreans support the president's impeachment. Yoon's martial law declaration drew criticism from his own ruling conservative People Power Party. But the party also

apparently fears losing the presidency to liberals.

DNC chair candidates discuss Joe Biden

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Four Democrats are running for Democratic National Committee chair, looking to take on the task of reinvigorating a party demoralized by a second loss to President-elect Donald Trump. Others may still get into the race as Democrats reckon with what went wrong in the 2024 election, which saw Trump gain with nearly every demographic group in a decisive repudiation of the incumbent party. The 448 DNC members will elect a successor for outgoing Chair Harrison on Feb. 1.

FRESH

FROM PAGE A-1

trees and artificial trees and provided a simulated shopping experience in different store environments — walking through the various types of displays, smelling and feeling the trees, Pierskalla said.

The study involved 1,208 people across the country who answered 45 questions and viewed the two videos. The subjects, using established study methods, evaluated the videos moment to moment, indicating how the experience would help them recover from mental fatigue.

The study looked at the role of fascination: one of five major qualities of an environment that contributes to recovery from mental fatigue, and is considered the most important of the five, Pierskalla said.

Both experiences produced fascination, he said. But touring the artificial tree display stimulated what he called "hard" fascination — along the lines of what you might experience playing a video game or watching a sports event. It's noisy and loud and burdens the mind more than it helps it recover. Hard fascination can lead to mental fatigue, which in turn can lead to distractibility, impulsivity, irritability.

The real trees stimulated "soft" fascination — similar to wind blowing through leaves, ripples of water, clouds and sunsets, he said. It doesn't burden the mind with internal noise and clutter.

They learned that the real tree experience contributed more than twice as much to recovery. "That was an unexpected and interesting finding."

Touring the real trees offered a type of "forest bathing" experience — an immersion in nature. "It's hard to get out of this time of year, maybe more so than in the summer," he said. "It's nice to be able to go to a shopping environment, a retail lot, a big box store, even a Christmas tree farm, and have this accessible nature right there, as a way to forest bathe while shopping."

You don't need to spend a lot of time, he said. Stroll through the tree lot for 15-20 minutes. Walk slowly and appreciate the experience. You don't have to drive far to find a farm. A retail tree lot offers an easily accessible urban forest.

"The smell is one of the peak restorative moments that we identified in our study," he said. Artificial trees don't offer the same multi-sensory experience.

The benefits can continue if you take a tree home, but it's not neces-

sary, he said. The brief walk alone can help.

A couple questions The Dominion Post posed are topics of possible future study, he said. One is how visiting a tree farm would compare to a tree lot where they're already cut and sitting in a retail environment.

They don't at this point want to discourage or discount the tree lot experience, he said. "We can find nature in very accessible places, including your local retail store."

Another question is what kinds of benefits having a real tree versus a fake tree in your home might offer. He noted that research has shown that artificial plants offer less of the positive fascination benefits compared to real plants.

Pierskalla noted that the Real Christmas Tree Board sponsored the study, but that played no role in the data collection and WVU didn't know the outcomes in advance. The professors wanted to see if tree shopping could help people at the time they may need it most.

Dave McGill, forest resources specialist and professor with WVU Extension, was another member of the study team.

For those looking to buy a real tree, he said, "think about supporting West Virginia growers. Purchasing a locally grown

Christmas tree helps sustain West Virginia's agricultural economy and maintains open farmland. Also, many tree farms replant saplings annually, ensuring a sustainable and renewable tradition that contributes to cleaner air and wildlife habitat conservation."

Look for trees with vibrant, green needles that don't easily fall off when gently pulled or shaken, he said. "Before bringing the tree inside, be sure to cut about one to two inches off the trunk's base to improve water absorption and ensure your tree stays hydrated."

"After the holiday season," he said, "many communities in West Virginia offer tree recycling programs. Recycled trees can be turned into mulch for parks or wildlife habitats. Also, placing your tree in your yard can provide shelter for birds or wildlife until spring."

The West Virginia Department of Agriculture lists 29 tree farms across the state, including these three in the region:

- King's Trees, 5372 Old Route 73, Bruceton Mills, WV 26625, 304-290-1329
- Miller's Christmas Trees, 8859 Craneyville Road, Terra Alta, WV 26764, 304-789-2183
- Mulkeen Landscaping and Christmas Tree Farm, 740 Sleepy Hollow Road, Independence, WV 26374, 304-292-0059

CHANGE

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to landscape. You guys mow for aesthetics."

He said that there are activities, like patching or winter road treatment, the DOH could reimburse the city for once the proper paperwork is in place. That would not be the case, however, for something like extra mowing as it is a local standard beyond the fundamental responsibility of the DOH.

Senator Mike Oliverio, who invited Gaskins and his team to the meeting, said he would like to see an initial focus on what he's dubbed a "high maintenance corridor" running from (I-79) Exit 155 at Star City to (I-68) Exit 7 at Pierpont.

"So rather than cutting the grass twice a year, we cut the grass in that corridor twice a month. Rather than a pothole forming and being repaired before Memorial Day... that pothole is repaired within X number of days," Oliverio said. "If we could develop a high maintenance corri-

dor and maintain it, it'll be good in the spring. It'll be good in fall. It'll be good anytime."

So, what can be done to make this happen?

"If it's all up to the department of highways, nothing. We can keep talking about it until the cows come home," Gaskins said. "If we join together and join forces, it's very feasible. It's something we can accomplish, but we've got to join our forces and work together."

To that end, Gaskins introduced Maintenance Engineer Joe Pennell, who will serve as a direct liaison between District 4 and Monongalia County.

"I know you've heard this 1,000 times, but as long as I'm in office in District 4, and as long as I have my team, this offer is going to be there. We're going to get this line of communication taken care of. We've got to get working together," Gaskins said. "We need to get reasonable expectations in place and move on like it's 2025 and not 1940."

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