



## Baseball

WVU has a chance at Big 12 title

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## OBITUARIES

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## PUBLIC HEALTH

## Judge: Keep NIOSH open

Congressman says 111 jobs restored

BY JOSEPH HAUGER

Managing Editor

MORGANTOWN — A federal judge issued an injunction Tuesday to bring a halt to the reduction-in-force notices issued to NIOSH employees in Morgantown.

Meanwhile, one of West Virginia's congressional representatives received direct answers on NIOSH from U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

Ruling on a request from a southern West Virginia coal miner to restore the respiratory health division of the National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health, U.S. District Judge Irene Berger said plaintiff Harry Wiley of Kanawha County and other coal miners have a right to the congressionally mandated protections and services that had been promised to them with "no pause, stoppage or gap."

Berger, who presides in the District Court for the Southern District of West Virginia, ordered that the RIF notices issued to NIOSH employees be rescinded and that Kennedy prove compliance with her ruling within 20 days.

Mountain State Justice filed the lawsuit on behalf of Wiley, challenging the closure of NIOSH's occupational health programs as illegal and hazardous to the lives of West Virginia miners.

"America's coal miners won an injunction [Tuesday] reversing the federal

SEE NIOSH, A-2

## PRESTON COUNTY

## County clerk leaving office at end of June

BY JENIFFER GRAHAM

DPNews@DominionPost.com

KINGWOOD — Preston County Clerk Linda Huggins presented county commissioners with her letter of resignation during their Wednesday meeting.

"Please consider this letter as my formal notification that I will be retiring from my position as the County Clerk of Preston County effective June 30, 2025," she wrote.

In her letter, Huggins said she "always believed in going above and beyond when conducting the duties of her office. She said the practice in her office has always been that both she and her staff treat the public like they would want to be treated.

"I'm proud of the accomplishments my office has achieved over the years. Several factors have led me to make this decision. Most importantly, time with my family. ... My job as County Clerk is a very rewarding one. You help a lot of people, but you know when it's time to retire, and it's my time."

Huggins was first elected county clerk in 2010 and served three terms in that position, and has served a total of 30 years in various positions in the clerk's office. She started in 1993 as a part-time employee in a bookkeeping/accounts payable position under County Clerk Nancy Reckart.

Huggins said she is also looking

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File photo

Preston County Clerk Linda Huggins has tendered her resignation effective June 30.

## Michael T. Benson to lead WVU by opening doors for students



Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

Michael Benson, the 27th president of West Virginia University, discusses his new role at the school Wednesday in Morgantown.

BY SPENCER RIPCHIK

SRipchik@DominionPost.com

New West Virginia University President Michael T. Benson took a tour of an architecturally impressive Reynolds Hall on Wednesday afternoon.

Benson walked down the halls guided by Josh Hall, the Dean of the John Chambers College of Business and Economics. Benson, with his hands behind his back, started the tour by taking in the nearly new building but quickly transitioned to question mode.

Benson grazed his hand over the natural looking table in the faculty commons room.

"Where is this table from?" he asked.

Benson was curious.

Hall replied, and Benson continued to listen. Then, Benson approached one of the research centers where he wanted to take a peek, but first, he made sure to grab the door to allow the tour group of five to seven to enter the room. Benson did this numerous times throughout the tour, and the only time he didn't, someone beat him to it.

Benson's personable nature was apparent. He made sure to introduce himself to everyone and ask where they were from before conversing with them.

"I really do like people," Benson said. "I like talking to them. I like finding out about them,

and I love being around students. I mean, there's nothing more energizing than stepping foot on a campus and meeting students... My parents taught me that every single person is important. You're no better than anybody else, and I may be the president and have a nice office at Stewart Hall, but every person on campus has a job, a responsibility and a value."

Benson wants to lead West Virginia University with the same attitude. Whether that comes to increasing funding or tackling what he thinks is his biggest task, increasing enrollment.

Three weeks ago, one evening, Benson called in all the

West Virginia deans. They went through a list of names of students who had applied and been accepted but had not made a deposit. On the table, other than the list of names, were phones. Benson and the deans used the phones to personally call each student who didn't make a deposit.

"I spoke to one mother who asked who I was and why I was calling her daughter," Benson said. "I said, 'Well, I'm Mike Benson. I'm the new president at West Virginia.'"

In fitting with his personality, Benson wants to create a welcoming community no matter the religion, race or gender of

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NATION

Lawmakers question Kennedy on staffing cuts

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democrats and Republicans alike raised concerns on Wednesday about deep staffing cuts, funding freezes and far-reaching policy changes overseen by U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

A bipartisan group of lawmakers questioned Kennedy’s approach to the job, some saying that he has jeopardized vaccine uptake, cancer research and dental health in just a few short months.

In combative and at times highly personal rejoinders, Kennedy defended the Trump administration’s dramatic effort to reshape the sprawling, \$1.7 trillion-a-year agency, saying it would deliver a more efficient department focused on promoting healthier lifestyles among Americans.

“There’s so much chaos and disorganization in this department,” Kennedy said on Wednesday during the Senate hearing. “What we’re saying is let’s organize in a way that we can quickly adopt and deploy all these opportuni-

ties we have to really deliver high-quality health care to the American people.”

During tense exchanges, lawmakers — in back to back House and Senate hearings — sometimes questioned whether Kennedy was aware of his actions and the structure of his own department after he struggled to provide more details about staffing cuts.

“I have noted you’ve been unable, in most instances, to answer any specific questions related to your agency,” said Sen. Angela Alsobrooks, a Maryland Democrat.

The secretary, in turn, pushed back — saying he had not had time to answer specific questions.

Kennedy testified to explain his downsizing of the department — from 82,000 to 62,000 staffers — and argue on behalf of the White House’s requested budget, which includes a \$500 million boost for Kennedy’s “Make America Healthy Again” initiative to promote nutrition and healthier lifestyles while making deep cuts to infectious disease prevention, medical research and maternal health programs.

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Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

New WVU President Michael Benson, left, and Dean Josh Hall talk about the unique experience of Reynolds Hall on Wednesday afternoon in Morgantown

DOORS

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a student, too, despite the current political climate making it harder for universities.

“There’s no law against empathy,” Benson said. “There’s nothing that says you can’t treat another person with respect. Whether it’s your religious faith that teaches you that, or just the decency of being a human being. Regardless of what people say or what’s out there in my administration, we’re going to create an environment where every single person who steps foot on campus feels welcome. They feel like they can be successful. They have a home here, and they have people who will support them.”

After taking in the view of the Monongahela River from the balcony, the tour worked its way down the stairs, where Benson passed by the floor names. The floors in Reynolds Hall are interesting. Each is named after an international city. Before the tour started, Benson learned that those are the places West Virginia students

study abroad.

Benson realized how important getting to those places is for students who are looking for jobs after college. He said no parent wants to finish the last tuition payment while their child is still under their roof.

Benson studied abroad, too, so he wants to keep expanding the West Virginia brand outside the state borders and create more opportunities for students to get jobs after college, because that is the ultimate goal.

“The experiences to send students into those parts of the world and just see different cultures and to see how people learn, I think is really valuable,” Benson said. “I talked to the dean a little bit about that, but I would love to expand those chances to every student who wants it.”

After going down the stairs, Benson was stopped and told about the business college’s support fund program. If a student doesn’t have money for a suit, the college established a career closet to help out. Or, if they can’t afford to pay for rent at a

new internship location while maintaining a lease in Morgantown, the support fund program will help out, to the tune of \$133,500 this past school year. Benson loved that idea and wants to expand those programs to other colleges at the university.

Benson sometimes veered off or asked to see other rooms, like the cantilevered classroom. It’s clear Benson wants to start his own path.

President Gordon Gee had his signature bow-tie-shaped sugar cookie. Benson said bow ties are “Gordon’s thing.” Benson, if he were to get one, wants his cookie to be in the shape of the Mountaineer because he thinks that’s one of the coolest aspects of the university.

Benson has learned under his good friend Gee for a couple of months, but didn’t want to compare himself. Gordon’s not the only president West Virginia’s had, and recognized how 26 came before him, and all led differently, and Benson wants to do the same.

“There’s only one Gordon Gee,” Benson said. “I can’t try to be him, just

like he won’t try to be anybody else. I’m going to try and chart my own path, kind of always reflecting on the work that all my predecessors did.”

Benson won’t start as the president of West Virginia until July. The next couple of months, Benson will be finishing up his duties at Coastal Carolina while still meeting with West Virginia over Zoom. Most of Benson’s family will be in Morgantown when he moves. His daughter will finish up high school in South Carolina after next year, and then she and his wife will join them in Morgantown.

Benson’s still in the early stages of his vision for the university, but he knows for sure he will make West Virginia welcoming. He’ll be the first to hold the door open for students to start their careers.

“We’re in the beginning,” Benson said. “We are kind of in the beginning processes of a strategic plan that I think is gonna be really exciting, that’s gonna chart a very, very bold path forward for us.”

NIOSH

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government’s closure of NIOSH’s miners’ health programs, including the Part 90 low-dust transfer & miners’ health screening programs,” Sam Petsonk, the lawyer who has spearheaded the lawsuit, said in a statement.

“These programs are more urgent than ever as Appalachian coal miners cut through massive amounts of highly-toxic sandstone to reach the thin coal seams that remain in our heavily-depleted coal basin.

“This opinion gives life to America’s foundational principles of judicial review, empowering ordinary citizens like these coal miners to defend their rights against illegal actions by our government. I’m glad to

see the administration already taking some initial steps in the direction of complying with the order. America’s coal miners deserve nothing less, and in fact, they deserve a heck of a lot more.”

Congressional questions

On Wednesday morning, Kennedy appeared before Congress to answer questions on several topics — including NIOSH.

Rep. Riley Moore, R-W. Va., asked the HHS secretary whether 111 NIOSH employees in Morgantown had been reinstated.

“Yeah, I reinstated 328 employees at NIOSH,” Kennedy replied. “About a little over a third of them were in Morgantown, and then about a third in Cincinnati and then the World Trade

Center group I also reinstated.”

Moore turned his questions toward programs for coal miners’ health.

“The black lung screening program and the coal workers’ health surveillance program are particularly important to West Virginia. My understanding is that the coal workers health surveillance program at NIOSH will be fully reinstated. Is that correct?” Moore asked.

“Yes, the program ... will continue to function with continuity,” Kennedy responded.

A similar exchange confirmed the respirator testing programs will remain fully operational.

“This is a great win for West Virginia, and I can’t thank the secretary enough for working closely with my office to make this happen. The work

NIOSH does is critically important for our coal miners and their safety,” Moore said during the hearing.

However, the chair of the West Virginia Democratic Party contends that the Mountain State’s congressional delegation shouldn’t be taking credit for the restoration of NIOSH jobs, which is the result of Berger’s court order.

““This is not leadership by the Republican delegation or the Trump administration,” state Democratic leader Mike Pushkin said. “This is accountability, imposed by the courts. And it only happened because people like Sam Petsonk and brave coal miners stood up and fought back. They won — and all of West Virginia wins because of it.”

JUNE

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forward to being more active in her clubs.

“I’m an officer in the Lions Club, and the DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution.) I’m also a member of the ladies auxiliary of the Eagles. I want to be more involved

with all of them,” she said.

Commissioner Hunter Thomas said it has been a pleasure working with Huggins. Commissioner Samantha Stone echoed his words and said the county is losing a lot of service and experience with Huggins’ resignation.

Commission President Don Smith said an interim county clerk has to be appointed within 30 days of Huggins’ retirement. He said a discussion on how to proceed will be added to next week’s commission agenda.

“The last commission took applications,” he said.

In other business:

— Stone said due to the amount of funding being requested for EMS, she did not feel confident in making a motion about it. Instead, Stone requested the item be tabled until next week’s meeting.

— A fire department request for \$14,896 for gear and training was also tabled until the next meeting.

— Commissioners approved the Board of Health request to appoint Charise O’Shell to a five-year term as a board member effective July 1 until June 30, 2030.

The next meeting of the Preston County Commission will be held at 9:30 a.m. May 21.

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