

Voter fraud suspected with one ballot

Deceased person's signature forged

BY DON GRONNING
OF THE MINER

NEWPORT – Pend Oreille County voting officials suspect one ballot in the General Election was successfully forged and counted. After ballots were counted, officials received a database from the Secretary of State indicating one of the names on a ballot that was cast was a deceased person.

The case has been turned over to the Pend Oreille County Sheriff's Office to investigate and will be referred to the county prosecutor and the Secretary of State. Since it was a federal election, the case also goes to the FBI.

"While our safeguards work the overwhelming majority of the time, people do sometimes successfully break the law, which is why we have significant criminal

penalties for committing voter fraud on the back end," Pend Oreille County Auditor Marianne Nichols said. "Potential voter fraud has very serious consequences, as it absolutely should."

Nichols said there are a number of ways to check for voter fraud.

"We have a number of safeguards in place to ensure this doesn't happen, including regular data uploads from the Department of Health and Social Security Administration, checking local obituaries, and the fact that we verify every voter's signature to ensure they are the one who voted their ballot," she said.

Nichols said the single vote represents just .0116% of ballots cast in this election.

"At the end of the day this represents an infinitesimal portion of the legitimately cast ballots (one out of 8,622) and, while concerning, one thing everyone should

take away is that the system is working as it's supposed to," she said. "Our safeguards ensure these cases are extremely rare, the one that did happen was caught, and they will be referred to the criminal justice system."

Nichols can only remember two other cases of voter fraud in her time as an auditor. One was a woman who voted for her daughter and signed her daughter's name. Even though the daughter gave permission, it was still illegal, Nichols said. The other case was when a person vindictively voted a relative's ballot. Both cases were caught and she said she didn't think they were prosecuted.

The Pend Oreille County Elections Canvassing Board met Tuesday morning, Nov. 24, to certify the election. People could watch the canvassing via Zoom.

Elections supervisor Liz Krizenesky

showed the canvassing board the eight signatures that weren't counted because the signatures didn't match the ones on file. Elections officials questioned about 200 signatures and were able to reach all but eight voters to confirm the ballots. Self-addressed stamped envelopes were sent to the voters and phone calls made when there was a phone number on record.

Five ballots were received too late to count and one came in with a primary election ballot.

Elections officials hand-counted the Secretary of State race. The race was randomly drawn to check the machine count. It matched.

There was an 83.47% voter turnout for the election. It was the first big election since same day voter registration was started and officials said it went well.

PLEA:

FROM PAGE 7A

Prosecutor Dolly Hunt asked that bail set in District Court by Judge Robin McCroskey be maintained for each defendant and that each man have a physical address before they were released if they were to make bail. McCroskey set bail at \$750,000 for Raddatz-Freeman, Merritt and Belding and \$1 million for Hillestad.

Dana Kelley, a public defender, appeared in court in person representing Raddatz-Freeman. Kelley said he would need an investigator for the case.

Only public defender Carson Van Valkenburg, who represents Hillestad,

contested the bail.

Van Valkenburg argued in court Friday that Hillestad's bail should be lowered to \$450,000 and that he should be released to house arrest to stay with his mother in Blanchard. Van Valkenburg said that Hillestad's bail should not be more than the others who are charged for the killing and that it needed to be reasonable.

He said Hillestad's only criminal record was for misdemeanor convictions in 2012 when he was 18. Van Valkenburg said that Hillestad's co-defendants had criminal records that were the same or worse, yet their bail was set \$250,000 lower than Hillestad's. Hillestad has always come to court.

Van Valkenburg said that if he wanted to flee in this case, he had time to do so already. He said he had affidavits from Hillestad's father and mother supporting Hillestad. Van Valkenburg said there was a presumption of innocence. He said that Hillestad voluntarily came to the police station for an interview.

Hunt said that the state had great concern that Hillestad wouldn't reappear. She said there were a number of witnesses that were not in police custody who she feared Hillestad would intimidate. She said Hillestad did have a criminal record for criminal trespass, theft and possession of stolen property.

Radzinski asked why Hillestad's bail was set higher than the co-defendants. Hunt said

she had asked for \$1 million for each man, but that McCroskey set it at \$750,000 for the other three. She said her bail request was consistent for all four defendants.

Radzinski agreed with Hunt and kept Hillestad's bail at \$1 million, which he said was the least restrictive amount. Radzinski said Hillestad's three gross misdemeanors were considerably different than the Class A felonies he faces now. He said Hillestad, by his own admission, had already threatened a witness. He said that Hillestad had already demonstrated a willingness to interfere with justice. Hillestad did not leave his cell Monday, Nov. 9 for his first scheduled court appearance for these charges.

Radzinski left bail at

\$750,000 for Raddatz-Freeman, Merritt and Belding and \$1 million for Hillestad. He also ordered a hearing before each defendant was released in the event they could make bail.

Trial was tentatively set for Feb. 2.

Fox was first reported as a missing person Sept. 16. His family pressured local law enforcement to investigate and held several vigils and contacted the Spokane news media to draw attention to his disappearance, which they thought was suspicious.

The Newport Police Department, the Pend Oreille County Sheriff's Office and other agencies investigated, eventually finding Fox's body and making the arrests.

Fox's family suspected the murder might be a

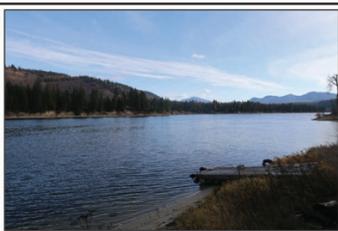
hate crime based on Fox's sexuality. The family said Fox was gay. Pend Oreille County Sheriff Glenn Blakeslee said while nothing has been ruled out, there has not been any evidence yet to indicate it was a hate crime.

According to a statement of probable cause, investigators think Fox was killed in the early morning hours of Sept. 15. He died by blunt force trauma to the head. According to the probable cause statement, Fox was found buried with his hands tied behind his back about 3-4 feet in the ground in an isolated area on the south side of the property at 22 Yergens Road, north of Newport, Oct. 4.

The four men were arrested separately Nov. 7 and are being held at Pend Oreille County Jail.

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Sheriff's office will not enforce mask mandate

BY SOPHIA ALDOUS
OF THE MINER

SANDPOINT – Bonner County Sheriff Daryl Wheeler said his office would not enforce the mask mandate passed by the Panhandle Regional Health District, according to a press release posted to the sheriff's office official Facebook page on Monday, Nov. 23.

When Bonner County Dispatch receives a complaint of a suspected violation of the mask mandate from a citizen, the complainant will be advised that the Sheriff's Office will not be investigating or enforcing the mask mandate, the press release said. Dispatch will close out the call and make a record of it. If the caller insists on speaking to a deputy, the deputy will call him or her back and state the same thing.

"The three police depart-

ments in the county – Ponderay PD, Priest River PD and Sandpoint PD (who also provides services in the city of Kootenai) – will have to make their own decisions regarding if and how they will enforce the mask mandate," Wheeler said. "Dispatch will forward the call to the police departments, and they are on their own to take it from there."

The Panhandle Health District Board voted 4-2 on the mask mandate at their general meeting Thursday, Nov. 19 (see adjoining story).

"Governor Little, instead of calling up the Idaho Legislature, empowered the unelected Panhandle Health District with a legislative function," Wheeler said. "Please read what the Panhandle Health District wrote, and decide for yourself how it could possibly be enforced."

Wheeler added that the

Bonner County Sheriff's Office is working at maximum capacity on, "real crime," and cannot enforce "unenforceable mask rules."

According to Wheeler, most law enforcement agencies around the country are either passively or actively refusing to follow these types of directives.

"Any arrests/citations that have been made/ issued in the past were related to high-profile targets, such as the Psalm Sing in Moscow, Idaho, and I believe they have nothing to do with public health," Wheeler said.

When contacted by The Miner, Priest River Police Chief Drew McLain said the police department would continue to educate the public about mask mandates as they are currently written. He cited Idaho Code 56-1003(7) as designating

the enforcement of isolation and quarantine due to sickness to the Director of Health and Welfare.

"PRPD will continue to remind people that if you feel sick, have had a positive COVID-19 test, or are at greater risk than the general population to stay home per CDC recommendations," McLain wrote in an email. "We want to avoid turning neighbor against neighbor in our great community. The best part of being in a small community like Priest River is knowing all of our neighbors."

McLain acknowledged that times have been tough for everyone and that the police department would continue to do its best to show empathy and sympathy. "Towards our neighbors during these trying times."

In terms of law enforcement becoming involved in the mask mandate, McLain said he wants to remind people that if a private property owner or a business requires the wearing of masks and a person refuses to comply or leave, that could result in a trespassing charge. "It is important to keep in mind that employees of our local businesses do not set policy and please be kind to them regardless of your stance on the issue, because they have been trying their best to stay safe along with their families during this pandemic," McLain said.

HOT BOX

Special deadline Tuesdays noon.

BOY SCOUTS

Local Troop 696 taking orders for fresh Christmas trees and wreaths. Mountain West Bank, Newport, parking lot. November 28-29, December 5-6. (208) 946-7385. (44p)

NOTICE FROM PEND OREILLE COUNTY HOTEL/ MOTEL TAX ADVISORY BOARD

Your organization/business may be eligible to apply for funding for tourism promotion as defined in RCW 67.28.808(6). Applications will be reviewed by the Tax Board with a recommended list submitted to the County Commissioners for consideration. Applications will be accepted until December 11, 2020 for the 2021 budget year and will be considered at the December 18 meeting. Application is available at www.pendoreilleco.org (Click "Your Government" Commissioners tab, then select 'Hotel/ Motel Tax Advisory Board' from the panel on the right), or mail to Post Office Box 5025, Newport, Washington 99156, or call (509) 447-4119. (44)

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OLDTOWN AMERICAN LEGION POST #155

VETS SUPPORTING VETS in the ID/WA area Meeting 2nd Saturday at 10:30 am Oldtown Rotary Park 509-671-1057

SOROPTIMIST OF NEWPORT

Meetings second and fourth Tuesday at noon PineRidge Community Church 1428 W. First Ave., Newport Contact Micki Weisbarth 509-671-2552 www.facebook.com/siofnewport/

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