



BASKETBALL

FINAL FOUR: Western women face North Georgia Wednesday night

Vikings make program's third Final Four appearance.

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CASCADIA DAILY NEWS

Bellingham, Washington

Wednesday, March 23, 2022

Volume I Issue IV

RESUMPTION OF 72-HOUR PARKING RULE HITS HOME TO HOMELESS

No easy fixes to city's car theft problem

By RALPH SCHWARTZ
Staff Reporter

The security camera footage isn't especially dramatic, except maybe for the owner of the white Ford F-350 pickup visible on the left side of the frame.

The camera recorded what was described on the social media site NextDoor as a crime in progress: Just after 9 a.m. on Jan. 20 in downtown Bellingham, someone wearing a hoodie and a backpack approaches the driver's door. Less than 30 seconds later, they are in the truck. Less than 20 seconds after that, a plume of white smoke bursts out of the tailpipe. Seconds later, the truck is gone.

January 2022 is a recent high-water mark for stolen cars in Bellingham. Police report 74 auto thefts that month on a crime statistics webpage, the most in any month in at least the past four years. In 2019, Bellingham averaged 13 car thefts per month. So far this year, Bellingham police have recorded on average 68 vehicle thefts per month.

Stolen vehicles have been a growing problem over the past year across Whatcom and Skagit counties, too. Most of the U.S. has seen a spike in vehicle thefts since the pandemic started.

See > THEFT, A7



Ed Hunt stands outside his RV on Cornwall Avenue on March 16. Hunt has lived along the road for more than a year. (Hailey Hoffman/Cascadia Daily News)

By KAI UYEHARA
Staff Reporter

Ed Hunt's inoperable recreational vehicle is parked alongside Cornwall Avenue

near the Bellingham Shipping Terminal. A few of his belongings sit outside the rig, such as his cooking grill and a collection of his friend's possessions beside

the door. Hunt, who is living in the RV after losing his farm, said he has parked in the same spot for about two months because his de fac-

to home doesn't run. As he spoke with Cascadia Daily News outside his banged-up rig, Hunt unboxed a part needed to fix the vehicle.

Hunt's vehicle is one of

several parked on Cornwall, and one of many parked around Bellingham serving as living quarters.

See > HOME, A8

Community weighs in on Bellingham police chief semifinalists

By RALPH SCHWARTZ
Staff Reporter

Candidates for Bellingham police chief aren't just trying to impress their potential future boss, Mayor Seth Fleetwood. City Hall gave the entire community an opportunity to pass judgment on the three semifinalists during an online forum March 17.

Survey respondents scrutinized the candidates closely, assessing what they wore, whether they made eye contact over Zoom, and most importantly, whether they have what it takes to be the city's police chief in a particularly challenging time for law enforcement.

Former Bellingham Chief David Doll retired less than a year after police killings of unarmed Black people

sparked nationwide protests calling for major police reforms. On top of that, over the past year, Bellingham's property crime rate has risen dramatically.

Community members have been clear about what they want from the next police chief: accountability, trustworthiness, a strong sense of racial equity and the know-how to address rising crime.

People who watched the March 17 forum won't have the final say on who Bellingham's next police chief will be, but 59 survey responses indicated that one candidate rose to the top in their view: Everett Deputy Chief John DeRousse. More than two-thirds of the respondents said he was "strong" in the areas of public safety, trust-building, racial equity

and accountability.

The other two candidates, Lt. Rebecca Mertzig of the Snohomish County Sheriff's Office and Commander Dennis Flynn of Commerce City, Colorado were generally perceived as "adequate" in these areas.

"I thought Mr. DeRousse was the most impressive of the three candidates," one favorable public review of the Everett officer said. "He is able to acknowledge the reality of racism, underlying causes of homelessness and appears to have the capacity to find creative solutions."

DeRousse scored points for preparation. "He also did his homework to learn about local service providers," one respondent said, as DeRousse demonstrated by mentioning Belling-

ham and Whatcom County's GRACE program, or Ground-level Response And Coordinated Engagement, and expressing his desire to partner with Northwest Youth Services.

Some who responded to the survey appreciated Flynn's big-city experience with the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department before moving to Colorado. Flynn said he was initially nervous when the Las Vegas department established a citizen review board in the 1990s, but now says he sees the value of public oversight of police agencies. Flynn said he would look into establishing a similar review board in Bellingham and invite Black Lives Matter and other groups to participate.

"I believe Dennis would

be tough on crime while holding officers accountable," one comment said. Several survey responses expressed concern about Flynn's stated intention to retire in eight years.

Mertzig, who lives in Whatcom County, had the inside track for some respondents as the only female candidate. Some considered her 18 years of law enforcement experience, compared to DeRousse's 27 or Flynn's 33 years, to be a drawback — but not everyone.

"Local candidate, young and female," a survey respondent said. "No-brainer."

In her discussion of racial bias, Mertzig said she has experienced "microaggressions" as a woman in law enforcement.

"I'm a female in a very male-dominated progression," Metzger said. "That's why these issues are very important to me."

Her statement resonated with some survey respondents.

"Mertzig's ... mention of examining her own perspective felt more sincere and more likely for PD improvement," a commenter said. "She is familiar w/ Bham and can build on that. Hire local."

In an email on Monday, Fleetwood's office said the mayor expects to hold additional interviews with police chief finalists in early April. After extensive background checks on the finalists, Fleetwood anticipates making an offer to the city's preferred candidate in May.

INDEX

NEWS
News roundup.....A2
Civic Agenda.....A3
Opinions/Letters.....A4
SPORTS
Calendar.....B2
College.....B4
LIVING
Best Bets.....C1
Events calendar.....C2
Just for Fun.....C6



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LOCAL

Whatcom County resident receives suspicious email from Russian friend

By **RENA KINGERY**
Staff Reporter

A Whatcom County resident received a suspicious message last week from a close friend residing in Russia in support of the war in Ukraine.

Kenneth Gass, 75, a retired Bellingham pediatrician, said he sent a short email to his friend, Michael Lazarev, who lives in Russia. In the message, Gass wished the family well and made no reference to the war in Ukraine. He received a bewildering email from his friend's mail.ru account in reply:

"Thank you for worrying about us. We are waiting for the end of the military operation in Ukraine to stop the spread of fascism. This is a forced operation. Russia had no other choice. Everything that the American media shows about Russia is an absolute lie. That's the kind of time we live in today. Russia will cope with all the difficulties of the economy. The main thing is to return peace to Ukraine!"

Gass knew the message couldn't have come from his friend, who is usually warm and affectionate, he said.

"It was very formal and just went straight to the party line," Gass said. "Putin could have written that. I said, 'this just doesn't seem like Michael.'"

Gass believes his initial message, sent from his Gmail account, might have been intercepted by the Russian secret service. He doesn't think his friend ever received the email.

Propagandized messages wouldn't be uncharacteristic for the Kremlin, which has used social media and online outlets to spread disinformation about the war in Ukraine to people in Russia, Ukraine and throughout the West.

Russian groups use propaganda to divide Western forces and garner internal support for what President Vladimir Putin calls a "special military operation" in Ukraine. An Associated Press article reported that anti-Ukrainian posts



Kenneth Gass received a propagandized message, allegedly from his longtime Russian friend. (Hailey Hoffman/Cascadia Daily News)

from suspicious accounts on Twitter and Facebook jumped 11,000% on Feb. 14 — 10 days before the invasion began.

"When you see an 11,000 percent increase, you know something is going on," Dan Brahmey, CEO of Cyabra, an Israeli tech company that analyzes data for misinformation, told the AP. "No one can know who is doing this behind the scenes. We can only guess."

Gass and Lazarev have been close friends for three decades and worked closely with one another to develop an international health program for asthmatic youth, Gass said. They are still in touch, he said, but Gass hesitates to reach out again after the recent exchange. He fears that the Russian state might be monitoring Lazarev's communications and that further contact could endanger Lazarev

and his family.

"I'm really stuck," Gass said. "There's no way that I can reach out to Misha (Michael) at this point for his family's safety's sake."

Whatcom and Skagit counties are home to more than 6,000 people of Russian or Ukrainian descent, according to 2020 data from the American Community Survey. Nakhodka, a Pacific port city in Russia, is one of Bellingham's sister

cities, further connecting Whatcom County to the country.

Because of these close ties, Gass said, he believes other people in the community might be experiencing similar messaging and wants to bring awareness to the issue. Gass said all he can do now is hope for his friend's safety.

"I was just heartbroken at first, and now I'm just worried," Gass said.

HOME > FROM A1



Many RVs park along Cornwall Avenue near the waterfront. They are subject to Bellingham's 72-hour parking rule just as all vehicles are. (Hailey Hoffman/Cascadia Daily News)

But Hunt and others living in cars and motorhomes during the COVID-19 pandemic face mounting pressure to move as city officials and some residents worry their presence poses a safety and environmental risk.

After a moratorium on the 72-hour parking rule was lifted on Nov. 30, police have been enforcing the law.

Hunt said he was able to park in one spot for 16 months during the moratorium because of the moratorium.

Since the rule was lifted, the Bellingham Police Department has towed many vehicles violating the parking law — a few were uninhabited, Bellingham Police Lt. Claudia Murphy said.

A friend of Hunt's had her vehicle towed the day before he spoke with Cascadia Daily News.

When a vehicle has been on the street for more than three days, it is towed and can be reclaimed by the owner later. But, it isn't usually that simple when it comes to occupied motor-

homes, Murphy said.

When officers resumed enforcing the 72-hour rule in November, they realized that some vehicles were immobile or not roadworthy, Murphy said.

Many of the vehicles are considered automobile "hulks;" a legal term meaning they are inoperable. If the vehicle is considered a hulk after inspection, the owners are given 15 days to fix the issues or move it.

Because his vehicle is immobile, Hunt worries that his RV could be towed any day. He has a tent to live in if that ever happens.

"Weekdays, I gotta be here between 8 o'clock in the morning and 5 o'clock at night because that's when they'll come," he said.

Most of the occupied vehicles likely won't be fixed or moved, Murphy said. And many occupants of the RVs aren't the owners, or they don't have proof of ownership, so they wouldn't be able to reclaim their vehicle from a scrapyard.

Hulk vehicles not fixed or moved are towed to a scrap-

yard and destroyed. This costs \$1,500 to \$2,500 per vehicle and expenses are paid with Bellingham's solid waste fund, Murphy said.

People live in vehicles on the streets for many reasons, she added. Some move into a vehicle after losing their home; some take over abandoned vehicles, some are there by choice, and she said some really just want to be left alone.

John Patterson lives in an RV near Hunt. He traded his truck for the RV and he's been living in it for about a year. He said it is difficult to move every three days, especially since his alternator is missing.

"That 72 hours is lame; it's not like we're sitting in a neighborhood or anything," Patterson said. "We're just in a business park."

Murphy said police tow as a last resort. But when it happens, officers work with the occupants to collect their belongings before the vehicle is destroyed.

For Murphy, enforcing the parking rule is a ne-

cessity, because letting the occupied vehicles stay is an issue of law, safety and humanity, she said.

"Sometimes, I have to get people out of their own places that are so inhospitable for them to be in, that realistically, taking their vehicle is a more humane option than leaving them in that vehicle," Murphy said. Some have garbage, human waste and rat infestations, she added.

Moving the RVs stops waste from building up indefinitely. The difference in garbage pileup between RVs that move regularly versus those that don't is staggering, Murphy said. She added that some parked RVs cause ecological damage by depositing garbage, feces and their blackwater tanks that collect waste from the toilet into streets and waterways. Some people just let garbage pile up.

"There's no amount of garbage bags that we can give them that's going to make them clean up because they hoard junk," she said.

Hunt puts his garbage into heavy-duty trash bags brought to him by Public Works and leaves them next to the sidewalk for pickup, which is done regularly, he said.

The Bellingham police and the Opportunity Council, a private, nonprofit agency serving the homeless and low-income people, will soon begin handing out purple trash bags in hopes that vehicle occupants will dispose of their garbage easily for Public Works to collect.

"I wish everyone that I talked to would just take us up on the services that we have to offer here in Bellingham or take the Opportunity Council or GRACE (Ground-Level Response And Coordinated Engagement) or HOT (Homeless Outreach Team) up on their services and they just don't," Murphy said.

Police offer occupants a chance to meet with representatives of HOT to discuss resources available to them.

Patterson would rather

live in his tent than stay at the Lighthouse Mission's Base Camp because he said he dislikes the people who live there.

He and Hunt both wish they could just park in an empty space indefinitely, rather than constantly move or worry about losing their RVs.

"If they'd give us some place where we could go, that'd be all right," Patterson said. "There's gotta be a parking lot somewhere they're not using."

In a meeting with the City Council on March 14, Murphy said opening private property to park RVs is not realistic, as a property owner would have to enforce the parking code instead of police.

"We are treating a symptom here and the only thing that I'm doing is making sure that I don't have rigs that are creating an unsanitary, unsafe environment for the community, for whatever neighborhood they're in," Murphy said.