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Maryland Independent

Vol. 147, No. 26
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Man struck, killed on 301

Police say driver may have been impaired

By **ANDREW RICHARDSON**
arichardson@somdnews.com

Police say a pedestrian was struck and killed by a suspected impaired driver Tuesday night in White Plains.

Christopher Thomas Flade, 35, of White Plains had been walking on the right shoulder of southbound U.S. 301 near Billingsley Road when William Vance Straight, 35, of Lexington Park reportedly struck him with

a Nissan Frontier pick-up truck after careening into a guardrail.

Around 7:23 p.m. on Tuesday, Maryland State Police troopers responded to the scene and found that Straight had continued traveling south on U.S. 301 after striking Flade, and had pulled over into the driveway for the Charles County Mobile Intensive Care Unit, a news release states. Flade was pronounced dead on the scene by paramedics and was transported to

See **FATAL**
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Planners talk airport and WCD

Looking for compromise on use restrictions

By **MICHAEL SYKES II**
msykes@somdnews.com

On Monday, the Charles County Planning Commission worked a bit on the Watershed Conservation District zoning regulations passed down by the county commissioners.

During the meeting, discussion about the

area the district covers became a topic for the commissioners.

There were 27 regulations that were changed by the Charles County Board of Commissioners from the original planning commission comprehensive plan that was passed last year. One of the key regulations, Planning Commissioner Wayne

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STAFF PHOTOS BY TIFFANY WATSON

On March 29, many Charles County residents and community partners attended the ALICE community conversation at Waldorf West Library to address the issues facing those who have been ALICE, are ALICE and could become ALICE.

Library hosts ALICE community conversation

Organizations, residents discuss ways to help those who are impoverished

By **TIFFANY WATSON**
twatson@somdnews.com

On March 29, the Charles County Public Library in collaboration with the United Way of Charles County hosted the first community conversation at the Waldorf West Branch Library titled, “Come Meet ALICE” in order to discuss the 25 percent of Charles County residents who are living at or below a basic needs budget.

The open forum brought together a diverse panel of leaders who evaluated solutions and created innovative approaches to give ALICE a voice, and create changes that improve life in

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Mike Bellis, director of the United Way of Charles County, discussed the results of the ALICE report at the Waldorf West Library on March 29.

Region works to implement body cams



STAFF PHOTO BY TAMARA WARD

Sheriff Mike Evans (R), a 20-year veteran of the Calvert County Sheriff's Office, displays, mid-torso, one of six Viewu police body-worn cameras the department purchased in 2015 with the assistance of a LGIT grant. The department is going to purchase another 12 cameras because it has additional grant funding. Evans hopes to deploy all the units by year's end.

Police, advocacy groups see value

By **TAMARA WARD**
tward@somdnews.com

The use of police body cameras has increased in recent years. Southern Maryland counties have slowly dipped their toes into the technology pool with hopes that relationships between law enforcement and communities might improve. Advocacy and civil rights groups believe the video recording devices are a necessity for restoring citizens' trust.

“I think body cameras are potentially a very important transparency and accountability tool,” said David Rocah, senior staff attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union of Maryland. “Police officers have a vast degree of power and authority over the citizens they encounter. When things go wrong in those encounters, if there is not an independent record that is not subject to bias,

See **CAMERAS**
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Parents angered Thomas Stone not fielding baseball team

School may have JV team if it can get enough players

By **JAMIE ANFENSON-COMEAU**
janfenson-comeau@somdnews.com

The news that Thomas Stone High School would not be able to field a varsity baseball team this season came out of left field for some parents.

“To me, it came out of nowhere. It's like a sucker punch,” said Michael Fenwick Sr., whose son has played baseball at Stone for the previous three years. “He's disappointed, I'm disappointed ... because a baseball scholarship would help him a whole awful lot, college money-wise.”

Earlier this month, it was announced that Stone, a school with three state championships, three runner-up finishes, six appearances in the state semifinals and 15 Southern Maryland Athletic Conference championships, did not have

enough players to field a varsity baseball team.

“They were having workouts, and then they were told they don't have enough players,” Fenwick said.

The school might be able to field a junior varsity baseball team. This week, workouts were held, and eight players attended. Eleven would be the minimum needed for a JV team, said coach James Landis.

“We're going to continue to hold workouts and practices for at least another week and see if more come out,” Landis said.

The news may have come too late, however, said parent Stacy Pritchett. Pritchett, the mother of a sophomore, said many student athletes have already made commitments to other sports.

“If it hadn't happened so late, they would have had enough

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CAMERAS

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police have a built-in credibility bias in disputes over what has happened.”

Also known as body-worn cameras, or BWCs, the mobile video and audio recording devices affixed to police uniforms allow officers to capture their interactions with the public while on patrol. Body cameras have been in use in Europe dating back to the mid-2000s.

The 2014 deaths of unarmed black men Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., and Eric Garner in New York City at the hands of police, caught on citizens’ mobile devices, catapulted the demand for BWCs in the U.S. as a means of deterring police brutality. The incidents ultimately spurred federal and state laws.

Maryland is one of a dozen or so states with laws specific to governing the implementation and use of BWCs. In 2015, Gov. Larry Hogan (R) approved an emergency bill establishing the Maryland Police Training Commission, with the purpose of developing guidance on the implementation and use of the cameras by law enforcement. Subsequently, the commission submitted a report to the Maryland General Assembly setting minimum standards for issuance and use.

Despite an ongoing debate about the effectiveness of body cameras and whether they improve police accountability and offer transparency, Southern Maryland law enforcement agencies seem to embrace them and see the mutual benefit to the officers and the residents they serve.

Leading the pack in the region is the St. Mary’s sheriff’s office. In April 2016, the agency launched a body-worn cameras pilot program, outfitting 13 personnel in both the patrol division and the community policing unit for Lexington Park.

“[We] started talking about it in 2015 because we had the in-car video program for years. So, this was just the next step in the evolution,” Capt. Edward Willenborg, who has been with the sheriff’s office for 26½ years, said of the Panasonic dash cams and BWCs. The agency looks to expand with 50 new units before year’s end.

“We have been exploring [BWCs] since the rules came out that we should have them,” said Sheriff Mike Evans (R) of the Calvert County Sheriff’s Office, which purchased six camera units in 2015, but are currently not in use. “We want to get them out because I

believe in body cameras.”

The neighboring Charles County Sheriff’s Office is actively reviewing factors for consideration of body cameras, to include cost, storage, maintenance and user compatibility, said Maj. Chris Becker, assistant sheriff of operations. To date, Charles does not have any body cameras in use.

Nestled within Charles is the town of La Plata, with 8,700-plus residents. Serving as the county seat, La Plata is a little ahead of the county sheriff’s office in its effort to deploy BWCs. Its chief of police, Carl Schinner, said he believes being a smaller department has helped in implementation.

“I expect late summer, early fall to have everyone equipped and out on the street with [body cameras],” said Schinner, who has plans underway to acquire 13 to outfit his patrol officers.

Regardless of where they are in the process, the local law officials all agree on the benefits of the fairly new technology.

La Plata has long seen the value of video in its day-to-day operations and has been using an in-car camera system for years. La Plata transitioned from the Watchguard in-car camera system to a Panasonic Arbitrator system, which takes the effort of transmitting video out of the hands of the officers.

“It’s touchless, there’s no video discs. When they [drive] by the station it automatically downloads via a secure server,” explained Schinner.

Calvert currently has 43 in-car camera systems. “They have been a blessing. They’ve exonerated deputies on more complaints than not,” said Evans, who anticipates the same with the body-worn devices.

“The experience that I have had with our in-car camera system is that more times than not, our officers are doing what they are supposed to do,” Becker said, and added that whenever there is a public concern, the Charles County sheriff’s office reviews those videos.

Nationally, reported benefits in implementing BWCs include the ability to resolve complaints about police more quickly, improved behavior by officers and citizens, reduction in police complaints and more.

“Our pilot has provided video evidence that has assisted in the prosecution of criminal cases, assists supervisors in obtaining a complete picture of the events during use-of-force reviews, and video has assisted the Office of Professional Responsibilities during the investigation

of personnel complaints,” said Willenborg of St. Mary’s County’s foray into BWCs.

The captain referenced body cam footage from a St. Mary’s deputy last July that was recently introduced as evidence in a court case in which a defendant was accused of pointing a loaded handgun at the officer. The case ended in a conviction.

While there are some definite pluses, Willenborg thinks it’s too early to determine the overall effectiveness of the program because there are only 13 cameras and, just one year in, there is no data to compare.

Barriers to body cams

Before any law enforcement agency can launch a BWC program, it needs to consider costs associated with the device and storage of the video evidence, and policies to govern use.

Body units can cost from the high \$100s up to more than \$2,000. In addition to the cost of the units, there are additional costs associated with hardware, software, licenses and operational costs associated with support staff to train, review, redact, upload and store footage.

At the suggestion of former President Barack Obama, Congress appropriated in excess of \$20 million to the U.S. Department of Justice for a BWC partnership program to offset the cost. There are also grant opportunities at the federal and state levels to minimize impact.

St. Mary’s acquired \$17,000 from an Edward Byrne Memorial Assistance Grant toward the purchase of its 13 cameras. Schinner said La Plata’s council gave the department \$13,000 to supplement a \$5,000 Local Government Insurance Trust Grant to purchase the technology.

Lt. Craig Bowen, a 31-year veteran of the Calvert sheriff’s office, said the agency was awarded in 2015 a \$2,500 matching LGIT grant; the county matched the amount. Bowen estimates the six Viewu cameras the office purchased were roughly \$900 each. It plans to purchase more by the end of the year. Calvert also has a grant to purchase an additional 12 units.

Charles County is still working on funding to reach its deployment goal of outfitting roughly 150 personnel, 20 percent of the patrol division and community policing force, with body cameras. Later, it may add school resource officers to the effort.

St. Mary’s relied on multiple sources to develop its

policy before deploying the BWC pilot, to include reaching out to other departments using body cameras.

“The state came out with a model policy that was in line with the law that covers body-worn cameras,” said Willenborg, referring to the Maryland Police Training Commission guidance. “We made sure the categories in that policy were in ours.”

The commission report mandated officers begin recording with the BWCs at the beginning of an investigation or enforcement activity. It also mandates the footage be released as required by the Maryland Public Information Act and sets forth storage and retention parameters.

Willenborg said it was good guidance and the draft policy was sent to the agency’s attorney and state’s attorney’s office for review prior to implementation.

The nine-page document details the St. Mary’s BWC policy, though a chapter on redaction appears to be missing, which could be a consequence of the county being an early adopter of the technology. MPTC’s policy did not include a section on redaction, which is the blurring of faces, muting of audio and trimming.

Willenborg said the agency has not had to redact video, but is actively working on an update to its policy. St. Mary’s plans to purchase the Taser’s Axom Body 2, which will offer a much longer recording time and has built-in redaction capabilities.

Calvert does not share its southern neighbor’s enthusiasm for the MPTC guidelines and partially attributes its delay in implementing the six body cameras to the development of policy. The sheriff said they are trying to take the policies of all the other local police agencies, as well as get funding and support from the county commissioners.

“Unfortunately, there is not a lot of clear-cut information coming from the state on what you can do and what you can’t do,” Bowen said. “We’d rather take a little extra time to make sure we get it right.” “Purchasing the camera is the easy part,” added Capt. Dave Payne, a 20-year veteran of the Calvert sheriff’s office. “It’s all the back end, and policy and redaction of those things that come with it. That’s the part that holds things up.”

Growing in concern and debate is the issue of privacy and releasing videos to the public. Becker brought up the dilemma an officer may face when encountering two homeowners; one may say to turn off the camera in



STAFF PHOTO TAMARA WARD

Sgt. Robert Bagley of the La Plata Police Department drives past the police station. The video and data from his in-car camera system automatically uploads to the department servers. La Plata will be rolling out a police body worn camera system to integrate with the dash cams in the coming months.

the privacy of their home and the other may want it to stay on.

“That’s a deliberation now because you are in somebody’s home. They have the right to privacy within their home,” Becker said. “Ultimately those are questions that will be answered within the courts.”

Rocah said the direction in which a camera points matters, and there needs to be clear understanding by citizens, who he said can decline to interact with an officer with the camera on if not being detained or arrested by the officer, on why an officer may choose to turn off their camera, as long as the officer documents the reason while the camera is still on.

“Officers that violate those rules should face discipline. If not, it becomes just a surveillance tool,” explained Rocah.

During the St. Mary’s pilot, review of video has revealed conduct unbecoming of an officer.

“We’ve seen it and addressed it,” said Willenborg. “[Correction] could be anything from reprimand to suspension days or retraining, depending on the circumstance.”

Willenborg said it is important to have transparency in law enforcement and a well-managed video program can contribute to improving community trust.

Advocates on board

Both the Charles County Sheriff’s Office and La Plata Police have the backing of the local county NAACP chapter in their upcoming BWC endeavors.

“We are very supportive of the use of body cameras,” said Janice Wilson, president of Charles County NAACP chapter, who reported having had several conversations with Charles Sheriff Troy Berry (D) and La Plata’s Schinner on the devices. She admits the process to secure the cameras has been a little slow and suspects funding is part of the problem, but definitely sees the benefits for everyone, not just African Americans.

“I think that it is a safety issue, [that] it will protect private citizens and the police,” said Wilson. “The

climate is tense in regards to law enforcement and alleged police brutality.” Wilson hopes that before deployment each department will host a town hall, giving the community an opportunity “to help shape policy.”

Chesapeake Beach Councilman Stewart Cumbo, who helped Calvert obtain the LGIT grant as a LGIT member, is also member of the NAACP chapter in Calvert, which supports the use of body cameras. He said he and the chapter are disappointed with the delayed implementation.

“Calvert County has been fooling around with this body camera thing for over two years now,” said Cumbo, adding the department told him it is waiting for the state and legislature to come out with various mandates. “I think that is stonewalling the program, because we see major cities are using police body cameras ... in Maryland for over two years.”

Cumbo said there is no reason not to implement the program using existing policy from other departments, and even recommended piloting a small program using the patrol officers who cover the municipalities of North Beach and Chesapeake Beach.

A retired law enforcement officer with 27 years of experience, Cumbo hopes the county can get past the policy hurdle to implement the technology that he believes saves counties millions of dollars resulting from lawsuits.

In St. Mary’s, newly appointed NAACP President Janice Walthour said there have been no issues with body cameras in the county brought to the chapter over the last year. She agrees the use of the cameras should be expanded and believes both citizens and officers behave better when they know they are being recorded. However, she does not feel the BWCs are the final solution for police-community relations.

“A camera cannot take the place of good policing practices or any reform that is needed in that area,” Walthour said.

Twitter: @CalRecTAMARA

FATAL

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the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Baltimore for autopsy.

Police said Straight displayed signs of impairment and was taken into custody after field sobriety tests. The Charles County State’s Attorney’s Office was briefed on the preliminary investigation.

tion. No charges have been filed at this time.

The investigation is being continued by Cpl. J. Zimmerman, a collision reconstruction specialist assigned to the Maryland State Police CRASH team. Anyone who may have witnessed or who has information regarding this collision is asked to contact him at 301-392-1231 and reference case number 17-MSP-012999. Twitter: @Andrew_IndyNews

ALICE

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Charles County.

“As the United Way’s recent ALICE report highlighted, 25 percent of Charles County households are struggling to make ends meet,” said Janet Salazar of Charles County Public Library. “We believe there is work ahead to make Charles County a better place to live and work. Opening up the dialogue at our Community Conversations: Come Meet ALICE event is a step to a stronger community.”

The United Way recently used a series of standardized measurements called the ALICE (Asset Limited Income Constrained Employed) report to provide an in-depth look at county-

wide poverty and presented its data during a webinar on Jan. 9. According to the report’s Economic Viability Dashboard, which evaluates community conditions for ALICE in three core areas on a scale of 1 (worse) to 100 (better), Charles County received a 31 (poor) in housing affordability, 56 (good) in job opportunities, and 61 (good) in community resources.

“ALICE individuals often need help to navigate financial struggles such as rent, health care, utility assistance and food,” said Mike Bellis, director of the United Way of Charles County. “Every one of us was ALICE, is ALICE or knows ALICE. This conversation is the start of a call to action for all of us because ALICE is one car repair or dental emergency away from

homelessness.”

Sheriff Troy Berry (D) with the Charles County Sheriff’s Office said the ALICE study helps shed light on segments of the population that have been suffering in silence.

“I really believe that we have to find a way to have a safety net in place for ALICE individuals so we can give those individuals a hand up because they are not looking for a handout. If there are resources that will help us mitigate those particular financial issues for those individuals then we must do our due diligence as leaders to bring those resources in and help them. We have to break the cycle of poverty. I believe when people are empowered with information, and when they know better, they will do better,” Berry said.

Sandy Washington,

president of LifeStyles Inc., an organization dedicated to helping those in need, said, “We create a system where people are about to fall and are reaching out for help but none of our programs will help because they have to have fallen in order for us to help them and that is wrong. ALICE is the validation about why we are dealing with these issues in the community.”

Bill Buffington, from the College of Southern Maryland Veteran Resource Center and Lounge on the La Plata Campus, said the veterans are living much worse than the numbers portrayed in the ALICE report, but in looking toward the future, partnerships are the key to overcome ALICE. He said he was

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ALICE

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surprised that Nanjemoy and Pomonkey are not included in the report (Bellis noted both areas are not a part of the Census count) because the poverty level in those areas of the county are really bad.

Mary Hannah, a native to Nanjemoy, said she lived as ALICE and grew up as ALICE on the western side of Charles County.

"I now work in the health-care field and I see ALICE everyday and how they can't focus on their health. It's not about their medication or learning about their health condition, it's about what are they going to do for their next meal and where they are going to live. If that is your focus then you can't focus on prevention or what they can do to live a long healthy life," Hannah said.

Bonnie Morris, chairwoman of the Charles County Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, said the income levels need to be changed in order to better help ALICE workers within the county.

Dr. Dianne Abney, with the Charles County Department of Health, said her initial reaction to the \$74,688 household survival budget, an annual total for a family of four with one infant and one preschooler, was one of shock.

"I was totally astounded that you have to make close to \$75,000 to not essentially be in poverty in our community," Abney said. "Everyone doesn't go to college but there are other jobs that can get you above ALICE — master plumber, electrician and mason ... we need to let people know that it's OK to take a different path."

Waldorf resident Janet Sargent agreed.

"My two grandsons went to North Point High School and they both work as electricians now," Sargent said. "They started out way above minimum wage and they will probably go to college at some point but they are receiving training to become certified electricians. They don't want to sit behind desks so I think we do put too much emphasis on going to college and it's not necessary."

Bellis said that for permanent, longterm community change the county needs substantial changes in legislation on a county, state and federal level.

"In regards to housing affordability, I was shocked by that 31 percent being the lowest in the state," said David Jenkins with the Southern Maryland Association of Realtors. "In terms of legislation and policies, we need to look at how we can create forms of housing that are affordable for residents. There are more and more folks living together in neighborhoods that cross generations. We need to look at zoning laws and policy that would encourage that and not be so restrictive about certain housing in neighborhoods."

Sandy McGraw, a Waldorf resident, said inclusionary zoning is the key to having affordable housing within the county.

"We need affordable rentals, not all of this affordable housing that people own, but we have an entire strata of the population that needs to have a rental property to take advantage of. They don't have the income and the inclination to own a property. We're building lots of

swanky new apartments but they are not affordable so we need to educate the citizenry and give the elected officials political cover. Until we make our citizens aware of what the future holds for our county then we are not going to have much success," McGraw said.

Regina Larrabee, a Welcome resident, said the one thing that affects ALICE is transportation in the county.

"It's great that there is an educational center out in Hughesville, but if you

don't have a car then you can't go there to get an education. Not having a car to get to a job means you can't get the better job. You need the transportation in order to do better," Larrabee said.

The CCPL has not yet announced when the next community conversation will take place. Bellis said as these conversations continue he hopes the ALICE report is a tidal wave of change that hits members of the community, for the better.

Twitter: @TiffindyNews



STAFF PHOTO BY TIFFANY WATSON

On March 29, Sandy Washington, president of Lifestyles Inc., Bonnie Morris, chairwoman of the Charles County Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, Dr. Dianne Abney of the Charles County Department of Health, David Jenkins with the Southern Maryland Association of Realtors and other community partners, attended the ALICE community conversation at Waldorf West Library.

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