

# Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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FINAL.

## Landmark Pennsylvania anti-blight law began here

**Decades later, housing groups wage battle with city over handling of properties**

By Michael Korsh  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

riorating homes on neighborhoods across the city.

As the former president of the Perry Hilltop Citizens Council, Mr. Walko had heard complaints from people about residents abandoning their homes, but the meeting with then-judge Irene McLaughlin Clark would impact his public life for years to follow.

"I looked upon it as solving that kind of problem," Mr. Walko recalled.

SEE LAW, PAGE A-9



Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Former Judge Donald Walko Jr., who as a state legislator was instrumental in passing the conservatorship law.

*Area groups unite in support of earthquake victims*

## 'There's someone in need'

By Michael Korsh  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Wiam Younes has connected with dozens of Syrian families across Western Pennsylvania in her role as executive director of a nonprofit that helps refugees acclimate to life in the U.S.

With war disrupting life for so many in Syria, many of the families who have come to the Pittsburgh area also have relatives who found refuge in Turkiye in their search for peace and safety, said the executive director of An-sar of Pittsburgh, based in Carnegie.

But two weeks ago, what was once a refuge became the site of unspeakable devastation.

With tens of thousands of lives lost in a series of earthquakes earlier this month, 20 local organizations — spearheaded by Pittsburgh's Turkish Cultural Center — led an interfaith vigil in Bethel Park on Sunday evening to grieve and seek healing.

The gathering brought together representatives of many different religious organizations with the goal, organizers said, of emphasizing unity. About 100 people attended the event to focus attention and prayer on the

SEE VIGIL, PAGE A-2



John Colombo/For the Post-Gazette

Inci Gutakar, 49, right, prays with her sons Mustafa, 15, and Murat, 9, all of Beechview. They came to the vigil Sunday at Christ Church in Bethel Park to pray for family in Turkey and mourn lives lost.

**Biden makes surprise visit to Ukraine**

The Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — President Joe Biden made an unannounced visit to Ukraine on Monday to meet with President Volodymyr Zelensky, a gesture of solidarity that comes days before the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of the country.

Speaking alongside Mr. Zelenskyy at Mariinsky Palace, Mr. Biden recalled the fears nearly a year ago that Russia's invasion forces might quickly take the Ukrainian capital. "One year later, Kyiv stands," Mr. Biden said, jamming his finger for emphasis on his podium decorated with the U.S. and Ukrainian flags. "And Ukraine stands. Democracy stands. The Americans stand with you, and the world stands with you."

The Ukraine visit comes at a crucial moment in the war as Mr. Biden looks to keep allies unified in their support for Ukraine as the war is expected to intensify with both sides preparing for spring offensives. Mr. Zelenskyy is pressing allies to speed up delivery of pledged weapon systems and is calling on the West to deliver fighter jets to Ukraine — something that Mr. Biden to date has declined to do.

In Kyiv, Mr. Biden announced an additional half-billion dollars in U.S. assistance — on top of the more than \$50 billion already provided — including shells for howitzers, anti-tank missiles, air surveillance radars and other aid but no new advanced weaponry.

Mr. Zelenskyy said he and Mr. Biden spoke about "long range weapons and the weapons that may still be supplied to Ukraine even though it wasn't supplied before." But he did not detail any new commitments.

Mr. Biden also got a short first-hand taste of the terror that

SEE UKRAINE, PAGE A-6

Malls, old stores and the state's mini-casinos seem to go together

## A WINNING COMBO

By Mark Belko  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

In Pennsylvania these days, some old department stores don't fade away. They just trade their sports wear for slot machines.

At Westmoreland Mall, for instance, a former Bon-Ton store is now home to Live! Casino Pittsburgh, an 80,000-square-foot gambling venue featuring 750 slot machines and 40 table games that opened in late 2020.

But it's not the only old department store to wager on gambling as a form of reincarnation. In fact, four of the five Category 4 mini-casinos licensed in Pennsylvania operate out of former big box stores.

The latest is the new \$35 million Centre County casino to be managed by Bally's. It will be located in a



Live! Casino is attached to Westmoreland Mall in Hempfield Township, in a former Macy's location.

94,000-square-foot former Macy's store in the Nittany Mall in College Township. The state gaming control board awarded the license for the venue last month.

SEE CASINOS, PAGE A-2

**Fond remembrances offered after Carter enters hospice**

By Jeff Martin  
and Maysoon Khan  
Associated Press

ATLANTA — Dozens of well-wishers made the pilgrimage Sunday to The Carter Center in Atlanta, as prayers and memories of former President Jimmy Carter's legacy were offered up at his small Baptist church in Plains, Ga., a day after he entered hospice care.

Among those paying homage was his niece, who noted the 39th president's years of service in an emotional address at Maranatha

Baptist Church, where Mr. Carter taught Sunday school for decades.

"I just want to read one of Uncle Jimmy's quotes," Kim Fuller said during the Sunday school morning service, adding: "Oh, this is going to be really hard."

She referenced this quote from Mr. Carter: "I have one life and one chance to make it count for something. I'm free to choose that something ... My faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I can, whenever I can, for as long as I can."

SEE CARTER, PAGE A-4

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**Weather**  
Cloudy, midday showers.  
Daytime high, 50;  
tonight's low, 40.

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## Local

# Scores gather at interfaith vigil for earthquake victims

**VICIL, FROM A-1**

disaster, its victims and its survivors.

At 4:17 a.m. on Feb. 6, a powerful earthquake struck southeastern Turkiye and northern Syria, registering a magnitude of 7.8 on the Richter scale. Nine hours later, an aftershock about 60 miles from the epicenter (the city of Kahramanmaraş) reached a magnitude of 7.5.

Such an aftershock is extremely rare: Only about 1 in 20 earthquakes create aftershocks at the same or larger scale as the initial event, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

In the ensuing weeks, more than 43,000 people have died and 80,000 have been injured, making the earthquake the deadliest natural disaster in the country's modern history. In addition to its human toll, the seismic event has caused an estimated \$84.1 billion in damages.

"Across the affected areas in both countries, entire apartment buildings and schools have been leveled. For Syrians, the damage took place in areas that were already devastated by years of war," Gurkan Colak, a member of the dialogue committee at the Turkish Cultural Center, said at the Sunday evening event.

The vigil, which took place at Christ Church in Bethel Park, included insights from Ms. Younes and Mr. Colak on the earthquake's impact on the region. For example, Ms.

Younes spoke about a family of eight in Syria — where little aid has arrived so far — who are building a shelter brick by brick in order to remain in their homeland.

Rich Fitzgerald also delivered remarks, in which he praised U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's commitment of \$100 million in additional humanitarian aid earlier in the day.

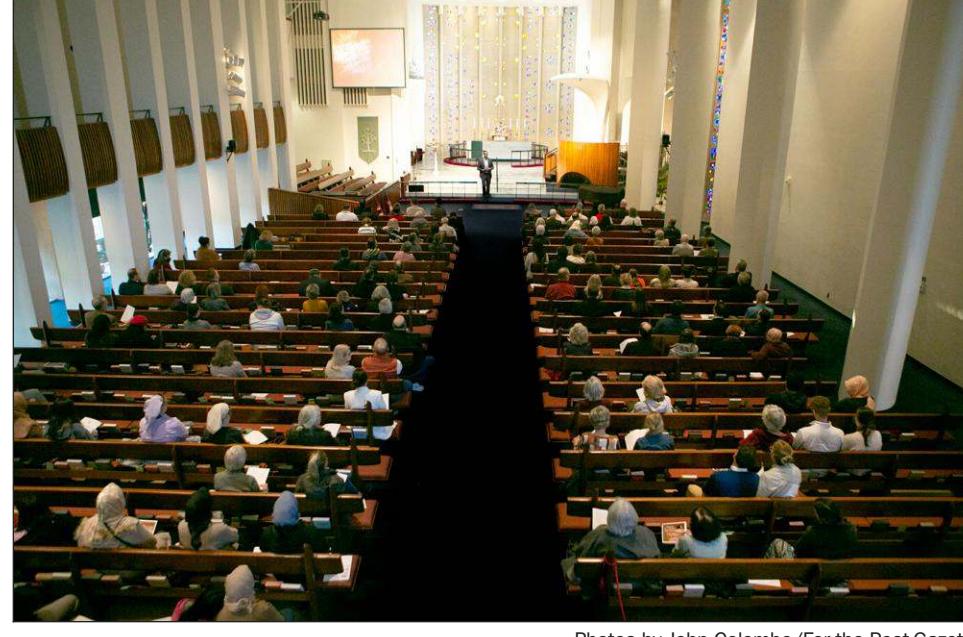
"One thing about the community of southwestern Pennsylvania that we've always been known for is people reaching out to help our members," Mr. Fitzgerald said. "Every time there's someone in need — whether it's our friends in Ukraine, our friends at the Tree of Life, or so many other things over the years — people reach out."

The United Nations website notes the Republic of Turkiye changed its official name from the Republic of Turkey in 2022.

During the Sunday's event in Bethel Park, religious leaders within the community offered prayers, interspersed with musical selections that included a piece performed on the ney, a traditional Turkish flute.

While the prayers centered around three themes — lament, healing and "the way ahead" — their origins stemmed from a wide variety of traditions, including Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism, along with multiple Christian denominations.

This interfaith approach



Photos by John Colombo/For the Post-Gazette  
The crowd gathers at the interfaith vigil to mourn lives lost in the Feb. 6 earthquake in Turkey and Syria on Sunday at Christ Church in Bethel Park.



Tokya Trice, of Beechview, tears up for friends who live Turkey.



Fatima Gurakar of the Turkish Cultural Center speaks.

was meant to bring unity and build upon a foundation of mutual trust and care, according to the Rev. Liddy Barlow, executive minister of Christian Associates of Southwestern Pennsylvania, who helped organize the event.

"In these prayers, it's a typical practice to not to pray to the lowest common denominator. We want people to speak authentically from their own traditions," Rev. Barlow said.

Donations from the event were directed to Embrace Relief, a humanitarian organization with connections to the local Turkish Cultural Center, as well as the Syrian American Medical Society. Embrace Relief has already raised more than \$1 million to provide urgent relief to the affected areas.

event helped localize a catastrophe that occurred thousands of miles from Pittsburgh — underscoring the message in the event's closing song: "We Are All the Leaves of One Tree."

"I think it's one thing to read a headline, and it's another to know people who are from these places. And here in Pittsburgh, we have neighbors from around the world," she said.

"Our friends from Turkiye have supported communities in their own times of struggle ... and so it feels right to stand with our Turkish and Syrian friends at a moment like this."

## Mini-casinos find a home in vacant malls, stores

**CASINOS, FROM A-1**

In addition, Hollywood Casino in York County operates out of an old Sears department store in the Galleria Mall. And the Parx Casino in Shippensburg found a home in a former Lowe's home improvement store in Shippensburg.

So what's drawing mini-casinos to old big box stores like shoppers to a Presidents' Day sale?

It's a matter of cash and convenience, according to one gambling industry expert.

Joseph Weinert, executive vice president of Horsham, Pa.-based Spectrum Gaming Group, said malls offer several advantages — a built-in customer base, parking and, in the case of vacant department stores, a building just about the right size for the smaller mini-casinos.

"These are convenience casinos designed to attract a very localized market and an existing mall has a ready-made customer base," he said.

Not only are casino owners able to avoid massive capital expenditures by locating in malls, the shopping venues themselves can profit from

having a gambling facility among their tenant mix.

"The malls across America in general are having a tougher time. Casinos can bring foot traffic and help restore some of the volume to retail shops, restaurants, and other establishments within the mall," Mr. Weinert said.

Likewise, the casinos can prosper from the arrangement.

"If someone is making a clothing purchase, they may decide to spend five minutes to an hour playing slots," he noted.

The arrangement has worked well for Live! Casino Pittsburgh in Hempfield Township, Westmoreland County, general manager Sean Sullivan said.

"It's that age-old symbiotic relationship where we're providing traffic for the mall and the mall is providing traffic for us," he said. "What's good for them is good for us."

Live! Casino Pittsburgh operates on two levels. The first is the gambling floor open to those 21 years old or older, while the second consists of restaurants and a new events center that is available to anyone.

Shoppers or visitors can access the casino from inside the mall or its main entrance from outside. The casino itself benefits from the surface parking surrounding it as well as a three-story garage that it shares with Macy's.

At first, Mr. Sullivan said he was a little worried about the idea of a casino being located in a former Bon-Ton. But he has since wholeheartedly embraced the concept.

"This is a hot traffic area. There's a ton of people already coming to the mall. There are good hotels nearby. There are good restaurants," he said. "It all comes together. It's the center of Westmoreland, to be honest with you."

And it's not only the mall itself that draws traffic but stores like Dick's Sporting Goods that are located next to it, he pointed out.

As Mr. Sullivan explained it, some of the slowest times for casinos are between Thanksgiving and Christmas. But being located in a mall has proven to be a gift in that regard.

"Typically casinos have a hard time competing with Santa Claus," he said. "A mall

gives you a more seasonal advantage where you don't have the slow period you usually see between Thanksgiving and Christmas."

These days, Mr. Sullivan has no qualms about operating a casino in the mall. As a matter of fact, asked to identify the drawbacks of being located there, he couldn't come up with even one.

"I can't think of one real negative," he said.

Mr. Sullivan added that mall traffic was up 5% last year over 2021 and up 15% over 2019.

The casino, meanwhile, saw its total revenues jump nearly 10.3% to \$111.9 million last year, an indication that the arrangement seems to be bearing fruit. It currently employs 540 people.

In all, the Cordish Companies invested \$150 million in the venue, including the \$40 million bid to win the rights to it.

"Business has been robust, no doubt about it, the first two years. And that's despite COVID," Mr. Sullivan said. "We've been busy."

A mall spokeswoman could not be reached for comment.

According to Mr. Sul-



Pittsburgh Post-Gazette  
The Live! Casino, inside Westmoreland Mall in Hempfield Township, is one of four mini-casinos in Pennsylvania that are located in former department stores.

livan, the casino leases its space, making it a tenant just like Macy's and J.C. Penney. It also coordinates with the mall on any outdoor events it would like to hold, such as a rodeo last summer that drew big crowds.

Mr. Sullivan isn't the only one bullish about operating in a shopping complex. Penn National Gaming, the owner of the Hollywood Casino in York County, is another.

"We explored numerous other potential opportunities within York County for our Category 4 license, but the mall's convenient lo-

cation, existing infrastructure and ample parking, as well as the support of Springettsbury Township officials and the local business community, helped cement our decision to locate Hollywood Casino there," spokesman Jeff Morris said in a statement.

Penn National also owns the only mini-casino in the state not to be located in a big box store — Hollywood Casino in Morgantown, Pa. For that one, it decided to build from the ground up on a 36-acre vacant lot near the turnpike.

## Corrections & clarifications

If you have a correction and cannot reach the responsible reporter or editor, please call the office of Stan Wischnowski, executive editor, at 412-263-1890.

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## ALMANAC

### On this day, Feb. 20

**1792** President George Washington signed an act creating the United States Post Office Department.

**1862** William Wallace Lincoln, the 11-year-old son of President Abraham Lincoln and first lady Mary Todd Lincoln, died at the White House, apparently of typhoid fever.

**1905** The U.S. Supreme Court, in *Jacobson v. Massachusetts*, upheld, 7-2, compulsory vaccination laws intended to protect the public's health.

**1907** President Theodore Roosevelt signed an immigration act which excluded "idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded persons, epileptics, insane persons" from being admitted to the United States.

**1933** Congress proposed the 21st Amendment to the U.S. Constitution to repeal Prohibition.

**1938** Anthony Eden resigned as British foreign secretary following Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's decision to negotiate with Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.

**1965** America's Ranger 8 spacecraft crashed on the moon, as planned, after

sending back thousands of pictures of the lunar surface.

**1987** A bomb left by Unabomber Ted Kaczynski exploded behind a computer store in Salt Lake City, seriously injuring store owner Gary Wright.

**1998** Tara Lipinski of the U.S. won the ladies' figure skating gold medal at the Nagano Olympics; Michelle Kwan won the silver.

**2003** A fire sparked by pyrotechnics broke out during a concert by the group Great White at The Station nightclub in West Warwick, R.I., killing 100 people and injuring about 200 others.

**2005** Death claimed actor Sandra Dee at age 62; musical actor John Raitt at age 88; and counterculture writer Hunter S. Thompson at age 67.

**2020** A poll by the Associated Press and the NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found more Americans expressing some concern about catching the flu than about catching the coronavirus.

**Today's birthdays:** Racing Hall of Famer Roger Penske, 86. Singer-songwriter Buffy

Sainte-Marie, 82. Hockey Hall of Famer Phil Esposito, 81. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., 81. Movie director Mike Leigh, 80. Actor Brenda Blethyn, 77. Actor Sandy Duncan, 77. Actor Peter Strauss, 76. Rock musician Billy Zoom (X), 75. Actor John Voldstad, 72. Newspaper heiress Patricia Hearst, 69. Actor Anthony Head, 69. Actor James Wilby, 65. Rock musician Sebastian Steinberg, 64. Comedian Joel Hodgson, 63. Basketball Hall of Famer Charles Barkley, 60. Model Cindy Crawford, 57. Actor Andrew Shue, 56. Actor Lili Taylor, 56. Actor Andrea Savage, 50. Singer Brian Littrell, 48. Actor Lauren Ambrose, 45. Actor Jay Hernandez, 45. Country musician Coy Bowles, 44. Actor Michael Zegen, 44. Actor Majandra Delfino, 42. Actor Jocko Sims, 42. Singer-musician Chris Thile, 42. Actor-singer Jessie Mueller, 40. MLB All-Star pitcher Justin Verlander, 40. Comedian Trevor Noah, 39. Actor Jake Richardson, 38. Actor Daniella Pineda, 36. Actor Miles Teller, 36. Singer Rihanna, 35.

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