

Fire damages Lost River Cave building

JUSTIN STORY
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A fire at Lost River Cave’s maintenance headquarters Tuesday damaged the building but left no one injured. The Bowling Green Fire Department was able to contain the fire, which appeared to originate in the garage area of the building. Lost River Cave CEO Justin Jennings said that various tools, lawn care equipment and boat supplies were lost in the fire, and the building itself sustained “quite a bit” of smoke damage, but praised the work of the BGFD to put out the blaze before it could spread. Jennings said a pair of maintenance workers first spotted the fire and then contacted BGFD.

“We’re working with fire inspectors and the insurance company to see what the best path forward is,” Jennings said. The building on the grounds of the park has been used as the maintenance headquarters for the past few years, before which it served as the site of administrative offices, Jennings said. Tuesday’s fire was the second event this year to damage the building – Jennings said an 80-foot hackberry tree fell on the opposite end of the house from the site of the fire in May, crushing it. Park officials were in the process of selecting a contractor to repair the tree damage, and now have to contend with the aftermath of the fire. The setbacks come in the midst of what Jennings said has been a difficult

year for the park, with significant local flooding ushering in a 111-day period in which the park was unable to give boat tours, the park’s main source of revenue. “It’s been a rough year financially and we’ve had a lot of setbacks, with flooding, fire and tree damage, but we’re still here and dedicated to the mission,” Jennings said. “We’re here for the community to have access to nature.” A post on the park’s Facebook page announcing the fire thanked the BGFD for its swift response and included a link to donate to Friends of the Lost River Inc., the non-profit organization that manages Lost River Cave. Jennings encouraged people to support Lost River Cave’s efforts through donations or becoming a member.



PHOTO SUBMITTED BY LOST RIVER CAVE
Members of the Bowling Green Fire Department work to put out a fire Tuesday afternoon at Lost River Cave’s maintenance headquarters.



GRACE MCDOWELL / Daily News
Margie Dawsey reads a letter signed by members of the Amish community in Park City voicing their opposition to the controversial Wood Duck Solar, LLC, solar energy project.

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Geenex expects the 100-megawatt project to generate electricity that’d serve about 15,000 homes’ electric needs annually. It aims to create sustainable energy while boosting the economy by numerous millions of dollars across Barren County and the state, according to Geenex. Concerns among project opponents – among them, Mammoth Cave advocates, area property owners, farmers and Amish community members – included property value reductions, a removal of farmland, potential project toxins, a threat to local wildlife that feeds families, ramifications if storms destroy the panels, project decommissioning details, glare issues, road problems and an alleged lack of transparency. Paula Pedigo, who’s staunchly opposed the project, brought a stack of 52 letters asking the county judge to publicly oppose the project. She told the Daily News that community members have lacked the opportunity to ask questions or submit input before the project was approved by Planning and Zoning. “That’s part of why you’re seeing such a tremendous outpouring in response to the project,” she told the Daily News. “Folks are outraged.” Michelle Snyder expressed concern that the panels would catch on fire, pointing to fires at a solar project in Eagle Point, Oregon. A solar farm there had two grass fires in two months last year, both caused by overheated electronic panels, the area’s Fire District 3 reportedly stated in a release. Should panels in the proposed Wood Duck project catch fire, Snyder said, it would cause dripping directly into the Mammoth Cave watershed and poison it. She refer-

enced an April 15 letter from Mammoth Cave National Park Superintendent Barclay Trimble to the Kentucky Public Service Commission outlining park concerns. Park representatives previously told the Daily News that because the panels are proposed for the park’s drainage basin, leaked chemicals may pollute groundwater and harm 160 species of animals relying on the cave system. Margie Dawsey, reading from a statement signed by members of the Old Order Amish congregation of Park City, said the panels would completely surround their home, and they worry about chemicals. “We are concerned with the health of our children and of ourselves . . .,” she said. She added that if chain-link fences surround their farm, it would prevent family members from sustaining themselves during deer season in November – “taking good, healthy God-given food out of the mouths of our children.” She also described the blessings of living in their natural environment, stating that the project would mean “a way of life will be forever gone.” Tiffany Thompson, who owns a swathe of land adjacent to the property, spoke in opposition, particularly concerning what she and others have described as a scattered-site project model. This, she said, “affects a vastly greater number of adjacent farmers and landowners than other projects, as well as the community impacts. I would implore the PSC to consider this in their decision-making on this particular solar energy project, and deny this company the access they want that will destroy our valuable farmland for generation after generation to come, if this land is ever able to be farmed again.” Project supporters highlighted the jobs the project would create and the energy and taxes it would bring to the region.

Lonnie Calvert, from Louisville, said he spoke on behalf of Laborers International Union of North America Local 1392 out of Owensboro as he expressed support for the project. Most of all, he spotlighted jobs: Temporary work is the nature of construction, he said, as people constantly work on one job site and then move to the next. “These folks will take these skills that they learn on this project, and they’re transferable skills where they can stay in this community and work on other union projects out of this local union’s jurisdiction and turn around and have a permanent career path, not just a temporary job,” he said. Darrell Burks, born and raised in Barren County, said he saw the county decades ago undergo a period without prosperity, and has since seen it prosper and grow. When a business considers coming to a county, it considers what utility resources are afforded, he said, adding that if a county cannot provide those resources, a business “will walk out of the first meeting.” He expressed concern that the community shouldn’t depend solely on limited supplies of gas and coal. “We’ve got to use alternative sources,” he said. “We’ve got the one best source that God has ever created, and that’s our universe. We have the sun. Doesn’t cost you or I one penny. By being able to harvest the sun, we can convert that energy into a usable source that I daresay every one of us in this meeting uses.” *Oral public comments for the Oct. 2 formal hearing can be offered prior to the start of the hearing, with instructions to be available on the PSC website. Public comments can also be made in writing, with the case number 2024-00337 in the email subject line and sent to psc.comment@ky.gov with a person’s full name and address of residence in the body of the email.*

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totaling over \$1.56 million. Souza said the reason Cave Mill has seen the most properties purchased by the city is because “it has the biggest impact for the biggest amount of citizens.” He said the mitigation projects also fit it with the state’s multi-million dollar plan to widen Cave Mill Road. “It’s going to go up in elevation, so we get the road out of the flooded area,” Souza said. “Now we’ve got more room to store (water) so everybody that drives that road, city residents, county residents, tourists, everybody benefits from not having that thing flooded.” The city has closed on three of the now five properties. Souza said current residents will not start moving out of the first home until mid-August, while residents will stay in two other homes until October. He said once residents are gone, utilities will be turned off at the homes and Scott & Ritter, the demolition contractor for the city, will come in and “do what they need to do.” Before any demolition happens though, Souza said personnel with the Bowling Green Fire Department will be able to come to the houses to train. “If they want to come cut (a) hole through the roof or practice, since we’re tearing these houses down, fire gets to train on them first,” he said. Souza said above all, the purchases are voluntary. “We are not doing eminent domain or condemnation,” he said. “This is a voluntary process. One of the houses that we also approached said no, and that’s totally fine.” Commissioners also heard an update on the city’s stormwater utility and fee-in-lieu-of-construction (FILOC) project, which promises to provide long-term funding for future upgrades needed to the city’s stormwater system. Officials have been looking into a stormwater utility since January, when the idea was first floated during the city’s strategic planning meeting. Courtney Howell, the city’s environmental compliance coordinator, told commissioners that the plan is to implement a \$4 charge on monthly water bills for single family residential units and duplexes, with a \$2 per month charge on multi-family units and those living in mobile homes. For businesses in the city, charges would be based on equivalent residential units (ERUs). Nick Lawhon, the city’s geologist, stated in the meeting that an ordinance implementing the utility and the FILOC could be on the city’s agenda in “the next two or three months.” If approved on time, the utility could start the rollout by Jan. 1, 2026. Commissioners will meet again Aug. 5.

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inform visitors about the night sky and its importance to plants, animals and humans. After the program, the group will move to the bus loop of the visitor center where several telescopes will be set up for night sky viewing. Volunteers from Western Kentucky University’s Hilltopper Astronomy Club and park rangers will be available to answer questions and help identify objects in the night sky. “This is especially helpful for people who enjoy looking at the night sky but don’t know exactly what they are looking at,” Schroer said. Local astronomers are also welcome to bring their own telescopes and set them up in the bus loop. The event is free and there are no reservations required, “so come sit, relax and enjoy watching the night sky.” All activities are weather dependent and may be canceled in the event of hazardous weather. For more information about stargazing opportunities at Mammoth Cave, visit www.nps.gov/macaplanyourvisit/stargazing.htm. For more information about the Star Party, contact the park at (270) 758-2180 or email the park by using the form on the website.

Feds charge 3 current, former La. police chiefs in alleged visa scheme

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — Federal authorities have charged three current or former Louisiana police chiefs with taking bribes in exchange for filing false police reports that would allow noncitizens to seek a visa that lets certain crime victims stay in the U.S. The false police reports would indicate that the immigrant was a victim of a crime that would qualify them to apply for a so-called U visa, U.S. Attorney Alexander C. Van Hook said Wednesday at a news conference in Lafayette. He said the police officials were paid \$5,000 for each name they provided falsified reports for, and that there were hundreds of names. There had been “an unusual concentration of armed robber-

ies of people who were not from Louisiana,” Van Hook said, noting that two other people were also charged in the alleged scheme. “In fact, the armed robberies never took place,” he said. Earlier this month, a federal grand jury in Shreveport returned a 62 count indictment charging the five defendants with crimes including conspiracy to commit visa fraud, visa fraud, bribery, mail fraud and money laundering, Van Hook said. Those charged are Oakdale Police Chief Chad Doyle, Forest Hill Police Chief Glynn Dixon, former Glenmora Police Chief Tebo Onishea, Michael “Freck” Slaney, a marshal in Oakdale, and Chandrakant “Lala” Patel,

an Oakdale businessman. If convicted, the defendants could face years or even decades of jail time. Court and jail records don’t list attorneys for any of them. According to investigators, people seeking special visas would reach out to Patel, who would contact the lawmen and offer them a payment in exchange for falsified police reports that named the migrants as victims of armed robberies that never occurred. The scheme went on for nearly a decade, Van Hook said. Asked what might happen to the people who allegedly paid bribes, including whether they might be charged or their immigration status might be changed, Van Hook said he couldn’t say

yet but that the investigation is ongoing. Getting a U visa can give some crime victims and their families a pathway to U.S. citizenship. About 10,000 people got them in the 12-month period that ended Sept. 30, 2022, which was the most recent period for which the Homeland Security Department has published data. These special visas, which were created by Congress in 2000, are specifically for victims of certain crimes “who have suffered mental or physical abuse” and are “helpful to law enforcement or government officials in the investigation or prosecution of criminal activity,” based on a description of the program by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.