

Distillery From Front

growth across the company’s portfolio of spirits brands.

The Garrard County Distilling facility, which opened in 2024, sits on approximately 210 acres and includes two column stills and two 20,000-square-foot barrel warehouses. Sazerac will utilize the facility’s existing infrastructure and capabilities to support the company’s broader production needs. The company expects to hire additional team members initially and will grow over time as operations at the facility develop.

“Kentucky has been an important part of Sazerac’s story for many years, and we’re proud to continue investing and growing here,” said Jake Wenz, President and CEO of Sazerac.

Interim Chief From Front

ence of alcohol, first offense, a Class B misdemeanor, and first-degree criminal mischief, a Class D felony.

His next court proceeding was scheduled for Wednesday, Aug. 26. A review hearing and a refusal hearing were scheduled for that date.

The case originated with a crash at approximately 9 p.m. July 17 near the intersection of North U.S. 27 and Cooperative Way in Somerset. According to the Somerset Police Department citation, Hughes had been operating a Mercedes GLC that left the roadway and struck a state highway right-of-way fence. The crash involved a vehicle fire, and Hughes was found in a nearby yard after getting out of the vehicle.

A person who called 911 reportedly told dispatchers that they had helped Hughes escape from the burning vehicle and believed he was under the influence of alcohol. The caller reported detecting a strong odor of an alcoholic beverage.

The responding officer wrote in the citation that Hughes had

“Today, nearly 3,000 team members are part of Sazerac’s Kentucky operations, and we’re grateful for the opportunity to continue growing that team. Even with all the investments we have made to expand, we need more supply to keep up with demand, and the addition of the Lancaster facility gives us valuable distilling capabilities to support that growth. We’re excited to become part of the Garrard County community.”

Sazerac continues to make significant long-term investments in its Kentucky distilleries, strengthening production capabilities, modernizing facilities, and supporting the future of bourbon production in the Commonwealth.

In the past five years, the company has invested approximately \$50 million at Barton 1792 Distillery, including a

an odor of alcohol on his breath, bloodshot and glossy eyes and slurred speech. Hughes reportedly told police that he had consumed “a few drinks” earlier in the day.

Those statements are allegations contained in the police citation and have not been established as fact in court. Hughes has entered a not-guilty plea and is presumed innocent unless proven guilty.

Hughes suffered extensive injuries to his arm and head in the crash. He was transported to Lake Cumberland Regional Hospital before being transferred to UK Medical Center in Lexington. Police cited Hughes rather than taking him into custody because doing so would have delayed medical treatment, according to the citation.

The citation states that Hughes initially declined to provide a blood sample after asking to speak with an attorney. Police later obtained a search warrant, and Hughes then submitted to the blood draw without incident.

Results of that blood testing remain pending at the state crime laboratory, according to Gaffney.

“The City does not have control over the crime lab’s pro-

cessing of the blood evidence, nor should we attempt to make a determination that belongs in our justice system,” Gaffney said.

The mayor said the time required for the evidence to be processed was a factor in the timing of Friday’s administrative action. Rather than immediately changing the department’s leadership after the July crash, Gaffney said the city allowed time for the legal process to proceed while officials continued monitoring the case.

Because it remains uncertain how much longer the criminal proceedings and evidence processing will take, Gaffney said the city determined that it needed to address the department’s leadership separately from the question of Hughes’ criminal responsibility.

“This decision was not based on personal feelings, friendships, relationships, politics, or a determination of guilt or innocence,” Gaffney said.

Gaffney said he continues to support the principle that Hughes is entitled to due process and an opportunity to contest the allegations against him.

“I believe strongly in the principle that a person is innocent

called meeting at the Garrard Education Center on August 3 at 6 p.m. to propose the 61.1-cent general fund levy on real and personal property.

Changes in state legislative requirements meant the board could not complete the process with a single action. Following the August 3 meeting, the proposed rate was required to be advertised in local newspapers for two consecutive weeks before the board could take final action at its August 20 regular meeting.

Superintendent Kalem Grasham read the required tax notice into the record during the meeting. The notice was published pursuant to KRS 160.470 and stated that the proposed rate was not subject to recall under KRS 132.017.

The tax rate adopted by the

board also includes tax exonerations. Board Chairman Dr. Jerry Browning placed the decision in the context of his more than two decades on the board, noting that reductions in the district’s tax rate have historically been relatively uncommon. Browning said that during his 22 years of service, the rate has been lowered only a small number of times and has declined from a previous high of approximately 72 cents.

Grasham said the district has been able to reduce its tax rate multiple times since 2015. He attributed the district’s ability to lower the rate while continuing to generate additional revenue in part to growth in Garrard County’s property base, including a strong real estate market and construction of new homes.

elementary schools rank 11th in Kentucky. He also cited facilities, athletics, extracurricular activities and other student opportunities.

The district’s written enrollment standards expand on those areas, highlighting Advanced Placement and dual-credit courses, career pathways, Career and Technical Education programs, industry certifications, fine arts, leadership organizations, academic teams, clubs and service-learning opportunities.

The plan also emphasizes support services such as school counselors, Family Resource and Youth Services Centers, school-based health services and academic intervention programs.

Still, Bolin told the board that programs and facilities alone are not what ultimately distinguish Garrard County.

He recalled being asked during a recent podcast interview what makes the district different from other school systems. His answer, he said, was “our people.”

That idea runs throughout the proposed enrollment standards. The district’s draft declares that every employee should be considered an “enrollment ambassador” because families’ perceptions of the school system can be shaped by interactions throughout the organization; whether with a teacher, administrator, bus driver, coach, food service employee, office worker or maintenance employee.

Under the proposed customer-service standards, employees would be expected to make families feel welcomed and respected, respond promptly and professionally to questions, listen to concerns before responding and focus on solutions that sup-

struction of new warehouses in Laurel and Taylor Counties.

“We’re pleased to welcome Sazerac to Garrard County and look forward to what this investment will mean for our community,” said Garrard County Judge Executive Chris Elleman.

“Sazerac’s decision to invest here brings new jobs and economic opportunity to our county while positioning this Distillery for continued growth. We’re proud to have Sazerac become part of the Garrard County community and look forward to working together for years to come.”

Kentucky House Speaker Pro Tempore David Meade adds, “Sazerac’s investment in Garrard County is another strong example of the continued confidence companies are placing in Kentucky and our signature bourbon industry. This

until proven guilty,” Gaffney said. “Ryan has the right to have the facts heard and to allow the judicial process to determine the outcome of this matter.”

At the same time, Gaffney said his responsibilities as mayor require him to consider the operation of the police department and public confidence in its leadership while the case remains unresolved.

“These two principles can exist together: we can respect an individual’s right to due process while also making a leadership decision that we believe is in the best interest of the City while the legal process continues,” he said.

Hughes had previously been placed on paid administrative leave following the crash while the city conducted an internal investigation. Gaffney said at the time that city officials were gathering information to develop a fuller understanding of the incident. Lancaster Police Lt. Steve Taylor had been overseeing the department during Hughes’ leave.

Friday’s announcement formally places Shearer in the interim chief’s position as the criminal case continues.

The criminal mischief charge

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port students and families.

The district would encourage prospective families to tour schools and attend extracurricular activities, while employees would personally follow up with people who inquire about enrollment. The plan also proposes recognizing employees who demonstrate exceptional customer service.

The district also plans a larger public-relations effort to make families more aware of what its schools offer. The proposal calls for a unified enrollment campaign, a district enrollment slogan, increased social media promotion and features on successful Garrard County graduates.

Students, parents, employees and alumni would be encouraged to act as ambassadors by sharing their experiences, while district successes would be promoted through civic organizations, churches, businesses and community meetings.

Community partnerships are another component of the plan. The district wants to strengthen relationships with businesses, churches, civic organizations and community leaders and continue partnerships supporting character development, leadership and service.

The plan additionally addresses multilingual families, calling for translated materials and interpreter services when needed and continued assistance for Ukrainian families through a designated district staff member.

District leaders propose measuring the enrollment initiative through monthly enrollment reports, retention rates, the number of homeschool students who return to the district, transfer enrollment, exit-interview

acquisition brings new opportunity to an impressive facility that already represents a significant investment in our region. Seeing Sazerac put this facility back to work is a positive development for Garrard County and another opportunity to strengthen one of our Commonwealth’s signature industries.”

For more information on Sazerac’s distilleries, please visit www.sazerac.com/our-distilleries.

About Sazerac

With over 400 years of history, Sazerac is one of the world’s largest distilled spirits companies. Now in the fourth generation of the current family ownership, Sazerac strives each day to bring the finest spirits to consumers and communities around the world.

Over 550 of the world’s most extraordinary brands are part of

against Hughes stems from damage to the state highway right-of-way fence, which was estimated at approximately \$500. Under changes to KRS 512.020 that took effect July 15, a first-degree criminal mischief charge may be reduced to a Class B misdemeanor if complete restitution is made before trial or court-ordered community service is performed.

Court records from Hughes’ Aug. 10 appearance also show that his operator’s license was suspended while the case is pending. Conditions of his pretrial release prohibit him from driving and require that he have no violations of law.

Court notes indicate that the statutory time limit for conducting a preliminary hearing was waived. The waiver permits the case to remain pending beyond the normal period for conducting such a hearing; it does not constitute an admission of guilt or determine whether the felony allegation ultimately will proceed to a grand jury.

Gaffney acknowledged Friday that residents may disagree over the city’s handling of Hughes’ status and the decision to appoint an interim chief.

“I know difficult decisions

As property assessments and the amount of taxable property increase, a lower tax rate can still produce greater overall revenue. For the coming fiscal year, the district’s projections illustrate that effect: the rate on real property is declining by 1.4 cents per \$100 of assessed value from the previous year, while the personal property rate is declining by 2.9 cents, but total projected general fund revenue is increasing.

District officials also acknowledged the broader financial conditions facing taxpayers. Grasham and Browning said the board takes its responsibility for setting the annual tax rate seriously, particularly as residents continue to contend with economic pressures that include inflation and elevated interest rates.

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the Sazerac portfolio, including Buffalo Trace Bourbon, Eagle Rare, Weller, The Last Drop Distillers, Fireball Cinnamon Whisky, Southern Comfort, Wheatley Vodka, Myers’s Rum, White X Cognac, Sazerac de Forge Cognac, Paddy’s Irish Whiskey, and many more.

Sazerac is also the steward of many fine distilleries internationally, including Buffalo Trace Distillery in Kentucky, United States; Domaine Sazerac de Segonzac in Cognac, France; Paul John Distillery in Goa, India; and Hawk’s Rock Distillery in County Sligo, Ireland. Additional impressive locations can be found in New Orleans, Montréal, London, Cork and Sydney, to name a few.

To learn more visit www.sazerac.com.

are not always popular decisions,” Gaffney said. “As Mayor, however, my responsibility is to do what I believe is right for all of Lancaster, even when that means making a decision that may be difficult or unpopular.”

Gaffney also expressed support for Lancaster police officers and said the leadership change is intended to provide consistency for the department while allowing the criminal justice process to proceed independently.

“I have tremendous respect for the men and women who serve Lancaster, and I remain committed to supporting our officers and maintaining a Police Department that our community can trust,” he said.

The mayor asked residents to reserve judgment while Hughes’ case moves through the court system.

“I ask our community to allow the legal process to take its course, respect due process, and remember that the outcome of this matter has not yet been determined,” Gaffney said.

Hughes’ next scheduled court date was Aug. 26, after the press deadline for this week’s edition of the Central Record.

The final action received support from every member of the five-member board.

Dr. Connie Lamb made the motion to approve the adopted tax rate of 61.1 cents, including tax exonerations. Board member Kenneth Hurt seconded the motion.

Browning, Hurt, Lamb, Mary Davis and Ethan Smith each voted yes. There were no dissenting votes.

With the unanimous vote, Garrard County Schools will enter the 2026-2027 fiscal year with a lower general fund tax rate while projecting approximately \$8.27 million in property tax revenue, with the district pointing to growth in the local property base as a key factor allowing revenue to rise despite the rate reduction.

trends, family satisfaction feedback, community engagement and the reach of public-relations efforts.

The effort represents a shift toward treating enrollment and retention as responsibilities shared across the entire school system rather than matters handled primarily through the district office.

At the center of the proposal is a question the district says should guide decisions at every level: “Does this make our schools a place where families want to enroll their children and where students want to remain?”

With graduating classes continuing to outnumber the students coming behind them, district leaders are making the case that maintaining enrollment will require more than waiting for demographic trends to change. Their strategy calls for actively retaining current students, reconnecting with homeschool families, recruiting new families and making personal relationships a central part of the district’s appeal.

For Bolin, the goal is not simply to convince families to enroll. It is to ensure students receive a broader experience that gives them a reason to stay.

The district’s proposed approach ultimately rests on the idea that academic instruction is only one part of what families consider when choosing where their children will be educated. Garrard County’s challenge now is to turn its academic programs, activities, services and, above all, its relationships with families into enrollment growth while ensuring that every student who enters the district has what Bolin described as a great overall experience.