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FINAL

ANOTHER TOOL TO FIX DOWNTOWN?

Proposed loan fund program seen by some as key to hopes for revitalization of city's center

By Mark Belko
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Another proposal is being advanced to help developers or Downtown property owners convert failing office buildings to residential — a \$55 million loan fund

to counter high interest rates and construction costs.

A group of stakeholders, including the owner of Gulf Tower, is calling for the creation of the Downtown Emergency Impact Fund, which would offer below-market-rate loans to help fill gaps

in construction financing.

The proposal is separate from the 10-year Downtown tax abatement program approved by City Council last week to also assist in building conversions.

While the abatements would help to cover costs after buildings have been converted, the Downtown Emergency Impact Fund would aid in filling gaps in construction costs, particularly during a time when banks are being

more cautious in lending money.

The various initiatives come at a time when the Golden Triangle is reeling over high office vacancies caused in large part by the COVID-19 pandemic and hybrid work policies and property assessment reductions involving some of its biggest office towers totaling nearly half a billion dollars.

Among those pushing for the

SEE **PROGRAM**, PAGE A-2

City admits to policy violation

Says PayPal payment didn't breach ethics law

By Hallie Lauer
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh's payments to a former employee through the person's PayPal account using a city credit card violated city policy but not the state ethics law, Maria Montano, director of communications, said during a news conference Tuesday afternoon.

City Controller Rachael Heisler raised concerns in a letter sent to City Council members the day the former employee, Mario Ashkar, 36, of Perry South, was arrested on multiple charges of ethnic intimidation, criminal mischief, theft by unlawful taking and disorderly conduct regarding an alleged antisemitic incident in April in the Mexican War Streets.

Ms. Heisler raised alarms that Ashkar, who during interviews with other media indicated they prefer they/them pronouns, has been receiving payment since June 2023 in the form of PayPal transactions. Ashkar was hired in June 2022 and left employment with the city near the end of November 2022.

"This would seem to be in

SEE **PAY**, PAGE A-2

PACK MENTALITY



Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette

Stacy Splitstone and her daughter Zoe Splitstone, 10, of Gibsonia, pack a food kit box Tuesday during United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania's food drive event in the Great Hall at Acrisure Stadium on the North Shore. Close to 300 volunteers spent the afternoon packing 1,750 food boxes for families in need. The food boxes will be delivered to area agencies for distribution. Story, A-12.

Pa. lawmakers told of health care deserts

By Ford Turner
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A mental health patient in an Eastern Pennsylvania emergency room recently wrapped a towel around the neck of a staffer and dragged the employee across the floor as ill patients watched, before he could be stopped.

The disturbing scenario was recounted by Tammy Torres, a hospital president, on Tuesday when Democratic lawmakers held a hearing on "health care deserts" in areas where hospitals have closed or where dysfunction within the health care system has produced bad consequences.

Sen. Katie Muth, D-Montgomery, said 33 hospitals have closed in Pennsylvania in the past 20 years — including 15 closures in

the past five years — and Ms. Torres and Patrick Keenan of the Pennsylvania Health Access Network testified on aspects that need attention.

Ms. Torres, president of Lehigh Valley Hospital-Hazleton, said insurance reimbursements for mental health care are smaller and slower to arrive than those for physical care. That dynamic that has caused institutions that specialize in such care to close and force mental health patients who may be about to "escalate into crisis" to wait in traditional emergency rooms.

The recent scenario at her hospital, she said, resulted in an employee who "was left unconscious and had to go on disability."

SEE **CARE**, PAGE A-11



Ukrainian Presidential Press Office via AP

BLINKEN OFFERS SUPPORT Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, left, greets U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday prior to their meeting in Kyiv, Ukraine. Mr. Blinken arrived in Kyiv in an unannounced diplomatic mission to reassure Ukraine that it has American support as it struggles to defend against increasingly intense Russian attacks. Story, A-8.

Thousands accessing abortion pills

Women in states with bans get them by mail

By Laura Ungar and Geoff Mulvihill
Associated Press

Thousands of women in states with abortion bans and restrictions are receiving abortion pills in the mail from states that have laws protecting prescribers, a new report shows.

Tuesday's release of the #WeCount survey shows about 8,000 women a month in states that severely restrict abortion or place limits on having one through telehealth were getting the pills by mail by the end of 2023, the first time a number has been put on how often the medical system work-around is being used. The research was conducted for the Society of Family Planning, which supports abortion rights.

An additional 8,000 women in states without bans or major restrictions on telehealth abortion were receiving pills each month through virtual appointments, the study showed.

SEE **PILLS**, PAGE A-8



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Cloudy with showers.
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tonight's low, 56.
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