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A PRIME PERCH

Kelly Humphrey / Brainerd Dispatch

Birds perch on the branches of a tree on Saturday at Breezy Point Resort.

Motley man charged for murdering girlfriend

MOTLEY — A 60-year-old man was charged for the murder of his 66-year-old girlfriend Sunday, March 6, at their Motley home.

Harold Wassather was charged by the Morrison County Attorney's Office with second-degree murder, Morrison County Sheriff Shawn Larsen reported in a news release Tuesday.

About 9:40 a.m. Sunday, the sheriff's office received a 911 call from a person stating he received a phone call from his friend, later identified as Wassather, who indicated he killed his girlfriend.



Wassather

and the Motley Police Department responded to a house on the 600 block of Highway 10 South in the city of Motley. At the home, law enforcement authorities found Wassather and detained him while authorities conducted a search. Law enforcement authorities discovered a dead woman, identified as Christine Nygard, inside the house. Authorities took Wassather into custody.

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3 dogs to be euthanized after second incident

By Theresa Bourke
Brainerd Dispatch

BRAINERD — Three dogs in Brainerd will be euthanized after a second incident following a dangerous dog designation last fall.

Three pitbull/Labrador mixes belonging to Nathan Scott and Angela Blakemore were declared dangerous in October after killing a smaller dog while off their leashes in northeast Brainerd. The City Council upheld the dangerous dog designation, requiring the owners to remove the dogs

from city limits within seven days and provide proof of such.

On Feb. 24, however, police officers were called to a residence on Second Avenue Northeast to break up a fight between two of the dogs in which Blakemore intervened. Under city statute, if an animal previously deemed dangerous violates a provision set forth during the designation process, it is to be seized by animal control and euthanized in a humane manner.

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Morrison County GOP faces scrutiny amid caucus fracas

Critics raise questions of fraud in delegate selection

By Chelsey Perkins
Brainerd Dispatch

BRAINERD — Accusations of improper handling of delegate selection at the Morrison County Republican caucuses — amid the bungled release of data by state party officials — continue to reverberate well into the local GOP convention season.

Despite calls on the Republican Party of Minnesota from some GOP gubernatorial candidates to halt conventions until completion of a review of caucus documentation by an independent third party, a number of local gatherings have already occurred while leaders of others have yet to set dates.

Dr. Neil Shah, a physician seeking the Republican endorsement for governor, said he views the ongoing issues as not only limiting the ability of statewide candidates to campaign but also discouraging participation in the political process among people who may be engaging for the first time.

"We should make it easy to get involved with this process on either side of the aisle. We should



Tim Pugmire / MPR News

Neil Shah, third from left, participates in a gubernatorial candidates' forum in December 2021 in Wayzata along with Republicans Michelle Benson, left, Paul Gazelka, Mike Murphy and Scott Jensen.

make it — we should reward people for getting involved, so it's not the same people year after year," Shah said during a phone interview Thursday, March 3.

"... If we're telling them like, look, we're gonna throw

up roadblocks, we're gonna lose your name, we're gonna have difficulty getting in contact with you — it just, even if it's all honest errors, it just reflects so

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Biden bans Russia oil imports to US

Gasoline prices will rise further, president warns

By Tracy Wilkinson and Eli Stokols
Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden announced on Tuesday that the U.S. will ban the importing of Russian oil, liquefied natural gas and coal, broadening the economic sanctions leveled against Moscow over its war in Ukraine.

The targeting of Russia's most lucrative

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Win McNamee / Getty Images / TNS

President Joe Biden speaks in the Roosevelt Room of the White House on March 8. Biden announced a full ban on imports of Russian oil and energy products as an additional step in holding Russia accountable for its invasion of Ukraine.

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Owners have the option to request a hearing in front of the City Council, in which the council will determine if the animal has violated any provisions.

Animal Control Officer Mike O'Brien gave a brief account of the incident during the council's meeting Monday, March 7. Police officers were already on scene and separated the dogs when he arrived, he said. One dog was in a squad car, while another was in the backyard. He later found the third dog inside the house. O'Brien said he immediately recognized the dogs as Ava, Wendy and Brownie, the three that had

previously killed the smaller dog. He then seized the dogs.

City Attorney Joe Langel told council members the issue before them Monday was very narrow — were the dogs within city limits and therefore in violation of their provisions. The answer, the council agreed, was yes.

Council members then agreed to follow city code, which means the three dogs will be euthanized.

"These owners knew that by bringing the dogs back in city limits they were putting the dogs in danger," council member Mike O'Day said, noting he wanted to give the dogs a chance last fall. "This is not the dogs' fault, and the reason that they are dangerous dogs is probably not their fault either. It doesn't

feel good, but this was their choice."

The owners were not present during the hearing at the beginning of Monday's meeting but came later on and were allowed to address the council.

Blakemore and Scott both said the dogs are not dangerous in their nature and asked the council to at least consider having a behavioral specialist examine them to determine whether they are dangerous before euthanizing them. Council President Kelly Bevans, however, noted the council had already voted on the measure and was only allowing the owners to speak after the fact as a courtesy.

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custody and the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension responded to assist with the death investigation.

Nygard and Wassather were in a relationship and lived together at the residence, the sheriff's office reported.

Nygard's body was transported to the Midwest Medical Examiner's Office for an autopsy. The autopsy determined her cause of death as blunt head and chest trauma and the manner of death was ruled a homicide.

Larsen said because the investigation is ongoing, he would make no further comments. He added authorities believe this was an isolated

incident and there is no known threat to the public.

"Our thoughts and prayers go out to the victim's family for this senseless act of violence and to the First Responders that investigated and processed the scene," Larsen stated in the release. "The victim tragically lost her life to domestic violence, which could have been prevented."

According to the Minnesota Department of Corrections, since 2017 Wassather has been under supervised release on a 2010 conviction for felony first-degree criminal sexual assault in Bloomington.

A search of Minnesota court records also showed Wassather has a history of driving offenses in the Twin Cities area including fleeing a police officer, DWI, driving after license cancellation and speeding.

SCRUTINY

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poorly on the Minnesota GOP. And I think that we have to hold ourselves to a higher standard."

How the process works and where it may have gone awry

Precinct caucuses are the first step for those engaged in party politics toward the eventual endorsements of candidates for various offices. They serve as the grassroots level of involvement for those seeking to become delegates to county and state conventions and provide residents the opportunity to give input on party platforms. Those voted as delegates at the caucuses are invited to attend the county convention, where some will move on to the state convention as delegates.

Volunteers on the local level organize and lead these gatherings, which are usually attended by a small percentage of people who align with either political party. In Minnesota, caucuses for the DFL and Republican parties took place Feb. 1.

State Party Chairman David Hann acknowledged errors in caucus data in a statement last month after former GOP operative Michael Brodkorb noted a major discrepancy in the number of reported caucus attendees (35,196) and the number of people who voted in the straw poll for governor (17,801).

Hann said the errors came from the mistaken inclusion of attendees of previous caucuses in the data by those leading the basic political organization units, or BPOUs — the lowest level of party political organization. Delegate and attendee information from those found to be erroneous were in the process of being corrected, Hann said Feb. 15.

"Those submissions, made by local volunteers, were not intentional, malicious, or related to any campaign. They were also limited to a specific geographic area," according to the statement.

Hann also specifically mentioned Morrison County and said a data entry was corrected and re-sent to campaigns. Requests for comment on the issue from the state party were not returned.

Critics raise questions about Morrison County

Among swirling accusations of potential fraud perpetrated by Morrison County GOP Chairwoman Mandy Heffron, a paid staffer for state Sen. Paul Gazelka's gubernatorial campaign, the 8th Congressional District Republican Party announced six days after the state party statement it would take over all further business related to the Morrison County convention. It would also "review the delegate election documents and the Morrison County caucus process," a news release stated.

"The fact that the Morrison County BPOU chair is working for the campaign of a state-

wide candidate has raised questions among some of the statewide campaigns about the ability of Morrison County to restore confidence in the integrity of the process. However, our Party constitution and bylaws do not prohibit a local BPOU chair from working for a campaign," stated Ted Lovdahl, 8th District GOP chair, on Feb. 21.

Neither Lovdahl nor Justin Krych, the executive board member who took over as Morrison County convention arrangements chair, returned repeated requests for interviews. Fletcher Karper, Shah's campaign manager, said Tuesday the Morrison County convention was rescheduled to take place 10 a.m. Saturday at Little Falls Community High School.

What do those accusing Heffron of fraud say she did? People in attendance at the caucuses in Morrison County told the Shah campaign as well as the group Action4Liberty they or a spouse were elected as delegates on caucus night, but are no longer listed as such. They said others — such as Wendy Kresha, the wife of state Republican Rep. Ron Kresha — were elected as alternates, but were later switched to delegate status. And the names of those who weren't elected as delegates at all that night also appeared on the list, according to multiple accounts.

Attempts by the Dispatch to contact a number of these individuals through social media and the Shah campaign were unsuccessful, and one who did respond to an emailed interview request — Little Falls Ward 3 Precinct Chair Dan Schilling — refused to participate.

Nathan Wesenberg, a Little Falls man running as a conservative candidate for state senate, told Action4Liberty he turned out many activists to caucuses but his requests for the delegate lists from Morrison County have not been fulfilled. A Feb. 16 post on the Nathan Wesenberg for Senate page on Facebook showed photographs of manila folders allegedly containing evidence of caucus fraud held up outside the Little Falls Police Department and the Morrison County Government Center.

"We can not have free and fair elections, if illegal activities are taking place at the local or any level of voting," the post stated. "I have turned over some of the information I have on the fraud that took place during the caucusing process. We will get this corrected. We will keep fighting for what is right."

When contacted by the Dispatch, Wesenberg asked for questions to be sent by email but did not respond to those emails.

Shah — who described himself and fellow candidates Mike Murphy, Kendall Qualls and Scott Jensen as political outsiders — said unanswered questions surrounding the caucuses give the impression of a concerted effort to keep out conservative activists who pose a political threat to party insiders.

"If you look at the leadership of the Minnesota GOP, it's a mix, but there's quite a few party insiders," Shah said. "And so that's our biggest

concern is they're trying to stack the deck for a preferred candidate. And that's not why we have this process. We have this process so that everyone should have an equal chance to win or lose, based on their merits as a candidate. And we just want a fair and transparent process."

Honest mistakes or fraud?

A Feb. 16 statement posted to the Morrison County GOP's Facebook page sought to explain the discrepancies. Some of those left off the delegate lists failed to provide contact information on caucus night, according to the statement, and five people added to lists contacted Heffron before the caucus expressing the desire to be delegates.

"No one was intentionally disenfranchised," the statement read. "... The allegation from a statewide campaign that stated that there were discrepancies in the Morrison County Republican delegate list is because of a clerical error from the State Party."

The county party stated in almost every precinct, participants who wanted to be delegates were able to be delegates, and including those not present was based on a precedent set long before the current board.

"It is customary to let the leadership know so they can verify the person is in the correct precinct, is willing to be a delegate, and agrees to the principles of the Republican Party," according to the statement.

Heffron did not return repeated requests for comment on what occurred at the caucuses and in the days after. Kresha and Gazelka, who represent Morrison County in their respective legislative bodies, both came to Heffron's defense.

Gazelka sent a campaign email March 1 calling for party unity and defending fellow GOP legislators and caucus volunteers from political attacks. He cited the recent difficult major transition at the state party as the reason for mistakes in the timely recording of delegates but said these mistakes weren't fraudulent.

"The narrative that virtually every Republican legislator is part of the swamp is disgusting to me. These are the men and women that answered the call to save our state. They are the ones that are on the front lines battling for all of the things that conservatives hold dear," the news release stated.

"... When the state leans left, it is very difficult to hold the line, and yet republican legislators did just that. So when bloggers and new, inexperienced candidates speak ill will of all of these people that have been engaged in this fight for a while, we all need to speak up and say it's time for that rhetoric to stop."

Gazelka specifically defended Heffron as a longtime Republican volunteer and a young Christian woman who is always trying to do the right thing. And while the email began with a call for unity, it ended with Gazelka's own accusations against the Shah campaign for alleged improper behavior.

"I'm particularly angered that one of the campaigns would constantly declare that the volunteers were doing something wrong when it appears that their campaign

is the one that was writing in names down to be delegates, without permission, who were not at the caucuses," the release stated. "... I am offended that the Shah campaign would go after volunteers like her. You can spew lies about me, but when you mess with the volunteers it is very, very inappropriate."

Gazelka did not return multiple requests for an interview on the issue.

Kresha said he and his wife Wendy Kresha attended the GOP caucus in Little Falls, as they have for the last decade. He said while state party officials did release incomplete and inaccurate delegate lists after caucus night — which sparked confusion — everything at the local level was above board and ordinary caucus practice.

"What was happening was people were just putting family and friends' names down without actually verifying that they wanted to be delegates or not. You can't do that," Kresha said during a phone interview March 2. "And so when the chairs reached out to verify, there was no phone number, there was no contact information. So, therefore, they couldn't verify that they actually wanted to be a delegate."

"So yeah, it's a basic verification. You have to confirm that you want to be a delegate and the people's names that were removed, they couldn't be reached."

He described the events as a non-story and said those accusing local leadership of impropriety are using the state party's bungled lists to spin a false narrative. He said the only difference between this year's caucus and any others he's attended was a concerted effort by some campaigns to use dishonest tactics. "I've never seen this before. We've always gone through this process. But when I see groups like Action4Liberty and the Shah campaign, and others using these, frankly, political backhanded tactics, that's the difference here," Kresha said. "They're dragging good people's names down that did nothing wrong."

Kresha rejected the notion party leaders are repressing those outside the Republican establishment from participating.

"I've been doing this for over 10 years. I've been in parades. I've been at city council meetings. I've been 100% active," he said. "And suddenly these people are showing up saying they don't have a voice. Where have they been? You know, they've had the same opportunities that everybody else has had. It's just, they're claiming a story of victimhood that doesn't exist."

Action4Liberty encouraged caucus attendance

Action4Liberty, which published a post on its website characterizing the caucuses in Morrison County as corrupt, is an organization based in Minnesota. It describes itself as a grassroots effort seeking to stop the governor's shutdown powers and vaccine mandates. The group pushed caucus attendance as part of its strategy, hosting trainings to encourage people to become delegates and introduce resolutions available on Action4Liberty's website.

One of these training sessions, dubbed a "Patriot Meet-

up and Caucus Training," took place a week before caucuses at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post No. 1112 in Little Falls. A slideshow presentation prepared for the trainings is available on the group's website. The second slide, featuring a photoshopped image depicting Gov. Tim Walz as Chairman Mao Zedong of the Chinese Communist Party, sets out the objective for the gathering.

"Why are we here? Tyrant Timmy has used COVID as an excuse - to grab power," it states. "And our weak-kneed legislators didn't have the GUTS to STOP HIM."

In a YouTube video titled "Biggest Impact YOU Can Make in Politics - Attend MN Caucus on Feb 1," Action4Liberty President Jake Duesenberg tells viewers all politicians pay attention to what happens at the annual gatherings.

"Normally the cronies, lobbyists and politicians stack these caucuses, but we can displace them because there are more of us than there are of them," Duesenberg said. "We the people have the power, if we show up."

He told people to sign up as delegates at the caucuses, noting it would amplify the voices of those seeking to oust "Republicans in Name Only," or RINOs.

"This is your chance to decide who represents you in St. Paul before Election Day. Want to hold radical leftists or RINOs accountable? Here's where you have the power to do that," he said. "Usually, all you have to do is write your name down on a piece of paper saying you want to be a delegate and you're in."

'Access to good, clean data'

Shah said he named Heffron in his news release calling for an audit because she admitted to attorneys associated with his campaign she added names to the delegate lists after caucus night, meaning they were not elected by fellow Republicans, along with omitting other names.

But he acknowledged it's difficult to disentangle the state party's erroneous lists from alleged wrongdoing on Heffron's part, as well as to discern whether caucus attendees who favored more traditional GOP candidates also fell off delegate lists. The fix for that is greater transparency, he said.

"We do know this process has been an absolute mess. The Minnesota GOP has had little clarity and transparency on their willingness to address very reasonable concerns that are shared by our campaign and other campaigns, and they really have yet to adequately address them," Shah said. "And what we're asking for is, again, just some source data to look at and confirm, and they refuse flat out to provide that. So you know, what that's gonna unfortunately lead to is some people will speculate and we try to limit that."

"We just want — we have enough problems as a campaign just to try to actually make it through this process. We really don't have time for that. We just want to be able to compete and we want access to good, clean data so that we can try to make our case to involved Minnesotans."

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