

READING EAGLE

WEDNESDAY August 27, 2008 | Reading, Pennsylvania | 50 cents | LOCAL NEWS DELIVERED ALL DAY AT readingeagle.com

Official defends Firetree rejection

No decision is made by the Hamburg Zoning Hearing Board because the panel did not properly notify the public of the meeting.

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By Michelle Park
Reading Eagle

Hamburg's zoning officer Tuesday defended his decision to deny a permit for a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center at Second and Pine streets.

John J. Leonforte spent an hour testifying before a standing-room-only crowd at a hearing on his refusal to issue the zoning permit for the facility proposed by Firetree Ltd., a Williamsport nonprofit.

The zoning hearing board proceeding ended after two hours without a decision because the borough failed to properly post notice of the hearing.

A date for the decision will be scheduled and advertised later, board Solicitor Charles F. Fitzpatrick said.

Leonforte testified his refusal to issue the zoning permit was largely due to his uncertainty over whether the facility would provide detoxification services.

If it would, Leonforte said, the center would fall under the definition of a hospital and would not be permitted at Second and Pine streets because the property is in a floodplain.

Firetree affiliate Alcat Re-entry Centers Inc. purchased the former Wright's Knitting Mill site in mid-March for \$1.5 million.

In June, Firetree submitted plans for an 84-bed facility for people with addictions and for former prison inmates re-entering society.

Residents have vehemently opposed locating the facility in Hamburg's redevelopment area.

Many say it does not belong next to new senior citizen apartments in a residential

Firetree continues on A2



Reading Eagle

INSIDETODAY

SAT results still low

Scores for the most recent high school graduating class remain at the lowest level in nearly a decade. **Nation, A9**

Identity thieves target youngsters

When criminals open accounts using children's Social Security numbers, the damage may not become apparent for years. **Consumer, C10**

TODAY

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Details, A10

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Passion and a flag

When to fly 11 donated POW-MIA banners on county flagpoles sparks heated words between a county commissioner and a veteran.



Reading Eagle: Lauren A. Little

Robert Howell of Mohnton at the Veterans of Foreign Wars post in Mohnton.

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By Mary E. Young
Reading Eagle

A discussion on when to display 11 donated POW-MIA flags on county-owned properties heated up Tuesday when Berks County Commissioner Kevin S. Barnhardt disagreed with a veterans group's requests to fly the flag every day.

Instead, he said, the county should follow congressional protocol of flying the flags only on patriotic holidays.

Barnhardt said he respects the people who have defended the country, but he fears other groups, such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving and Years of Tears, would want equal treatment for their banners.

But several veterans argued that the flags honoring prisoners of war and soldiers missing in action should be flown daily.

Robert Howe of Mohnton, commander of Disabled American Veterans, Chapter 10, and the Combined Veterans Council, said he didn't care about

other groups.

"If it wouldn't be for us, you wouldn't be sitting there talking where you do," he told Barnhardt.

Bernie Bingham of Earl Township, executive director of Forget-Me-Nots Inc., a POW-MIA organization, said drunken drivers and murder victims have family members to speak for them.

"We are the voices of the ones who can't speak," he said. "I don't see how you can compare it with Mothers Against Drunk Driving. They know where their sons are buried. We don't know where the 96 still missing (from Pennsylvania) are."

"Flying that flag is going to let people know that we still have people missing. That flag should be flying under every American flag in the United States because we defended that flag."

Barnhardt said he was not equating veterans organizations with the others, but recognizing that the county has only so many flagpoles.

"There are 89 murderers still on the loose," he said, referring to Years of Tears,

an organization of family and friends of victims of unsolved murders and suspicious deaths. "Are you going to tell them no?"

Absolutely, Commissioner Christian Y. Leinbach replied.

"That flag is a guarantee that if something happens to my son who serves in the United States Air Force, there are people who will do everything to bring him back home," he said.

Leinbach said he would draft a policy for a vote Thursday that would require the flag be flown daily on county-owned flagpoles.

Commission Chairman Mark C. Scott said he respected all the opinions expressed, but did not indicate how he would vote.

Sovereign Bank donated the flags at a cost of \$1,013.

In other business, the commissioners approved a debt refinancing deal that allows the county to reduce its bond payments by \$54 million to about \$376 million through 2029.

Contact reporter **Mary Young** at 610-478-6292 or myoung@readingeagle.com

URGING SUPPORT FOR OBAMA



The Associated Press

Hillary Rodham Clinton on stage Tuesday night as she prepares to address the Democratic National Convention in Denver. She urged fellow Democrats to work for Barack Obama's election as president, telling them "We are on the same team and none of us can sit on the sidelines." **Story, A3.**

2 charged in beating death freed on bail

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Two teens charged in the killing of an illegal Mexican immigrant in Shenandoah were released on \$50,000 bail each Tuesday after a hearing in Schuylkill County Court.

Brandon Piekarsky, 16, and Colin Walsh, 17, of Shenandoah, both of whom had been in prison since their arrests July 25, were freed by Senior Judge William E. Baldwin.

They are charged with criminal homicide along with ethnic intimidation in the July 12 beating of Luis E. Ramirez, 24.

Full coverage on B1.

Poverty level in Reading worst in state

Almost 35 percent of the city's population lives on an annual income of less than \$21,203 for a family of four, U.S. Census Bureau figures show.

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By Darrin Youker
Reading Eagle

Reading has the highest percentage of residents living below the poverty level of any large city in Pennsylvania, according to figures released Tuesday by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Almost 35 percent of the city's population lives below the poverty level, which was an annual household income of \$21,203 for a family of four in 2007, according to the bureau's American Community Survey.

The survey put Reading's median annual household at \$25,536, far below the levels for Pennsylvania and the U.S. The state and national figures were \$48,576 and \$50,740, respectively. Median refers to the midpoint. In this case, half of all household incomes are below it, half above.

And Reading's poverty rate, 34.5 percent, is nearly 50 percent higher than that of second place Erie, 24.6 percent.

The survey looked at 2007 income, earnings and poverty data for cities with populations greater than 65,000. In Pennsylvania, they were Allentown, Bethlehem, Erie, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Reading and Scranton. Reading's estimated population is 81,000.

Tuesday's numbers came as little surprise to community leaders and those who see the faces of the city's poor every day.

"People are having a hard time making ends meet," said Capt. Laurence A. Whittenberg of the Salvation Army Reading Corps.

The combination of a poor economy and the rising costs of basic necessities is forcing more people to seek help paying heating bills and buying food, he said.

There's been about a 10 percent increase in the number of people attending the Salvation Army's food bank distribution, said Jay Meitrott, the agency's director of social services. Many are people who have

Comparing Reading's poverty to the state and nation

34.5%

Reading's population in poverty, highest among the state's largest cities

11.6%

Pennsylvania's population in poverty

\$25,536

Reading's median household income, lowest among the state's largest cities

\$48,576

Pennsylvania's median household income, 26th in the nation, below a national average of \$50,740

Source: Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg, Institute of State and Regional Affairs

never sought help previously. "You can tell the new people," she said. "There is embarrassment of having to now rely on other people."

Mayor Tom McMahon said he expected Reading to rank poorly. The city needs to combat poverty by providing a good education to children and having jobs available, he said.

"I wish I had the total answer to this," McMahon said. "We've got to be more competitive and attract more jobs."

The superintendent of the city's school system, Dr. Thomas R. Chapman Jr., said the poverty ranking came as little surprise since almost every child in the district receives free and or reduced-cost meals.

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More inside

The U.S. poverty rate remains steady, the Census Bureau reports. **A2**

Man beaten by mob in city dies of injuries

©2008 Reading Eagle Company
By Jason A. Kahl
Reading Eagle

A 28-year-old Reading man who was beaten unconscious by a mob in the Glenside Homes last weekend died Tuesday afternoon in Reading Hospital, officials said.

Neil Thompson was found unconscious on the sidewalk in front of his residence in the 500 block of Avenue A by Reading police, who were responding to reports of a fight in the block Saturday about 3:15 a.m., investigators said.



Neil Thompson

According to police: Thompson was beaten by as many as eight people who entered the residence after he assaulted his girlfriend. The two live there with the woman's children.

After Thompson was unconscious, he was dragged from

the apartment to the sidewalk, where the beating continued.

Police believe the attack on Thompson was revenge for the assault on his girlfriend, whose name and age were unavailable.

No weapons were used against Thompson.

Earlier in the night, Thompson and his girlfriend had been drinking alcohol and had been at a bar. After returning home, the two argued about a cell phone and Thompson assaulted the woman.

"It appears that he assaulted his girlfriend and a mob of people, in revenge for that, viciously and brutally attacked him," said Sgt. Eric T. Hartman of the Reading police criminal investigations division.

Thompson was taken to Reading Hospital after the attack and never regained consciousness, officials said.

He was pronounced dead Tuesday shortly after 1 p.m., according to the Berks County coroner's office.

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