

Week in Review

5/30/2023

ARTS, SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Gov. Mike DeWine was among those offering his condolences to the family of Jim Brown following the passing of the Hall of Fame running back and civil rights advocate. Brown died at the age of 87 on Thursday, May 18.

Coaches from across the state are being recognized by the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) for their sportsmanship, ethics and integrity. Throughout the 2022-2023 school year, the coaches' associations of the sports sanctioned by OHSAA selected one of their own for an OHSAA Sportsmanship, Ethics and Integrity Award. Individuals selected reflect the values of sportsmanship, ethics and integrity through their professional responsibilities and are role models for student-athletes and others, according to OHSAA.

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) on Wednesday announced its spring round of grant funding, which includes nearly \$2.3 million for 32 Ohio arts organizations. As part of the NEA's state and regional partnership grant program, which awards federal funding to state and territorial arts agencies based on population and the merit of the agency's work, the Ohio Arts Council (OAC) received \$1,325,500 for Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2023. In Ohio, all federal dollars received by OAC are reinvested into the state's arts and culture sector to help individuals and organizations pursue artistic endeavors, according to a news release from OAC.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Anti-Robocall Multi-State Litigation Task Force led by Ohio and a handful of other states said Tuesday they are suing the voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) service provider Avid Telecom of Arizona in the U.S. District Court for Arizona for violating federal laws. Attorney General Dave Yost says the company, founded as Michael D. Lansky, LLC in 2000 and doing business as Avid, has been "bombarding millions of Americans with billions of illegal robocalls" for a long time in conjunction with downstream telemarketers. The lawsuit claims Avid Telcom, Lansky and his vice president, Stacy Reeves, violated the federal Telephone Consumer Protection Act and federal Telemarketing Sales Rule. Plaintiffs include Indiana, North Carolina and Ohio, which lead the task force, along with 45 other states and the District of Columbia.

AUDITOR OF STATE

More than 1,000 local schools and educational entities got a survey from Auditor Keith Faber recently on the use of funding in support of litigation challenging the constitutionality of Ohio's EdChoice scholarship program. Senate leadership had asked Faber's office to conduct the survey. The Vouchers Hurt Ohio Coalition, which is leading the litigation, urged schools to ignore the request, saying it's an attempt to interfere with the case. In a mid-May letter from Senate Chief Counsel Matthew Oyster, the Senate asked Faber's office to compile a report on "Ohio school district and education service center funding or financial support of the litigation over the past two fiscal years." According to Faber's office, the survey went out Monday, May 22, with a

request to respond by Friday, June 2. The office said a survey is the simplest way to get information, but added that it intends to file formal requests for information from schools that don't reply.

BALLOT ISSUES

Gov. Mike DeWine told reporters Wednesday he plans to vote yes on State Issue 1 in August, saying that arguments made by the business community show the concern that "outside forces" can spend a large sum of money to influence Ohio's Constitution. "The better process is frankly through the legislative process," he continued. "This just creates a higher burden in regard to changing the constitution. If you look at the burden that exists to change the U.S. Constitution, for example, you'll find ... it is a process that certainly calls for a few hoops to go through." The Ohio Chamber of Commerce, National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB), Ohio Restaurant Association, and Ohio Hotel & Lodging Association voiced their support for the measure earlier in May.

The executive committee of the Ohio Democratic Party (ODP) unanimously voted to endorse the "No in August" campaign to oppose Issue 1 -- a constitutional amendment that would raise the threshold for passing future constitutional amendments -- as well as detailed other plans for stopping the ballot initiative during an emergency meeting Thursday evening.

Protect Our Constitution Tuesday was announced as the coalition that will back Issue 1 on the Tuesday, Aug. 8 special election ballot. Senate President Matt Huffman (R-Lima) and House Majority Whip Jim Hoops (R-Napoleon) are the co-chairs. The group said it will have a presence in all 88 counties in the coming weeks and will be releasing endorsements, volunteer opportunities and other materials on its campaign website at www.voteyesohio.com and social media pages. It will spread the message that voting for the proposal, which would raise the threshold for passage of future constitutional amendments to 60 percent, will "make it harder for out-of-state special interests to buy their way into our state's founding document."

Issue 1 opposition group One Person One Vote filed a second lawsuit Tuesday over the proposed constitutional amendment, challenging the Ohio Ballot Board over ballot language approved last week. The group, along with Ohio voters Jeniece Brock, Brent Edwards and Christopher Tavenor, argue in the lawsuit that the ballot language and title adopted by the board violate legal standards established by the Ohio Revised Code and the Ohio Constitution as well as Ohio Supreme Court precedent. The lawsuit seeks an order that the Ballot Board reconvene and adopt language that properly describes the amendment, or in the alternative, adopt the full text of SJR2 (McColley-Gavarone) as the ballot language, and that Secretary of State Frank LaRose adopt a ballot title that properly and lawfully describes the amendment. The lawsuit argues that, "apparently not confident that the amendment's submission at an illegal, low-turnout special election will be enough to get it over the line," LaRose and the Ballot Board "adopted ballot language and a ballot title calculated to mislead voters about what the amendment does."

Election statutes cannot override powers conferred to lawmakers in the Ohio Constitution, the attorney general's office argued this week in defense of plans for an Aug. 8 special election on raising the threshold for future constitutional amendments to pass. After trying and failing to

pass a bill authorizing a summer special election for voters to consider the new amendment process outlined in SJR2 (Gavarone-McColley), lawmakers decided that specifying the election date in SJR2 itself would suffice. The campaign group One Person One Vote, formed to oppose passage of the issue, quickly filed a lawsuit in the Ohio Supreme Court, arguing that recent changes to election law forbid special elections except to consider funding issues for local jurisdictions in fiscal distress. Lawmakers mostly did away with special elections in 134-HB458 (Hall), which also instituted a photo ID requirement among other election law changes.

FY24-25 BUDGET

Ohioans with vision and hearing difficulties, often testifying through interpreters, urged the Senate to boost the small funding pool for support services to help them navigate life and employment during a lengthy budget hearing on health- and Medicaid-related topics Thursday on HB33 (Edwards).

CHILDREN/FAMILIES

The DeWine administration announced Wednesday a new portal to streamline certification in the foster care and adoption process while maintaining thorough screening standards. It is the latest step in a series of changes to improve foster care, including two "bill of rights" documents for foster children and families as well as the creation of the Youth and Family Ombudsman Office. Gov. Mike DeWine noted these actions reflect the work of the Children's Services Transformation Advisory Council, which released 37 recommendations in a 2020 report. DeWine said 22 of those have already been fully implemented and the rest are being worked on further. He also detailed past increases in public children's services funding and said his FY24-25 budget proposal increased funding for children's protective services by \$60 million. There is also increased support for the Wendy's Wonderful Kids program. DeWine further described the new adoption grant program, which ensures adopting parents do not have to wait for a tax credit.

CORONAVIRUS/MONKEYPOX

FEMA and the Ohio Emergency Management Agency (Ohio EMA) announced Tuesday that \$71,181,677 in federal funding has been made available to the Ohio Department of Health (ODH) for costs related to the state's response to the COVID-19 pandemic under the federal disaster declaration of March 31, 2020. This funding will reimburse ODH for costs that include community-based diagnostic testing, a COVID-19 call center, dissemination of information and delivery of personal protective equipment and testing supplies.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

The DeWine administration announced \$3 million Thursday for local drug task forces led by awards to the Cleveland Division of Police, Mansfield Police Department and Licking County Sheriff's Office. Grants from the 2023 Ohio Drug Law Enforcement Fund (ODLEF) will fund task forces supported by 44 local law enforcement agencies in 42 counties. They focus on drug trafficking, pharmaceutical diversion and other organized criminal activity related to the drug

trade. Administered by the Office of Criminal Justice Services (OCJS), the program also helps local agencies improve Ohioans' safety through multi-jurisdictional partnerships.

ECONOMY

The Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) said Friday that the state unemployment rate decreased to 3.7 percent in April, down from 3.8 percent in March. This marks the lowest rate since 1976, when unemployment data was first reported. The state added 18,100 jobs over the month. ODJFS said the number of workers unemployed in Ohio in April was 211,000, down from 218,000 in March. The number of unemployed has decreased by 12,000 in the past 12 months from 223,000. The April unemployment rate for Ohio decreased 0.2 percent from 3.9 percent in April 2022. The U.S. unemployment rate for April 2023 was 3.4 percent, down from 3.5 percent in March 2023, and down from 3.6 percent in April 2022.

EDUCATION

The Ohio Facilities Construction Commission (OFCC) warned schools against potential scams involving school safety grants. The commission said it recently learned that one of the grantees was contacted by a potential scammer. That school received an email in which the sender identified themselves as an officer of school safety grants and that the school needed to send them its financial information in order to receive grant funds. That email did not originate from OFCC or the Ohio Office of Budget and Management (OBM).

ELECTIONS 2023

In a letter sent to members of the General Assembly this week, Secretary of State Frank LaRose encouraged lawmakers to serve as poll workers in the Tuesday, Aug. 8 special election, calling it "a unique opportunity for the members of the General Assembly to experience our voting process from a different perspective." He said counties have been dealing with a high rate of turnover among poll workers in recent years, increasing the need for recruitment and training of a new army of poll workers.

ELECTIONS 2024

The following endorsement was made over the week:

- U.S. Sen. J.D. Vance (R-OH) endorsed Bernie Moreno for the Republican nomination for U.S. Senate in 2024.

EMPLOYMENT/UNEMPLOYMENT

Gov. Mike DeWine and Lt. Gov. Jon Husted Monday announced new features to OhioMeansJobs.com designed to offer a faster and more streamlined approach for connecting jobs seekers and employers in the state. The new features are meant to improve the customer experience on the site. The following are among the changes:

- **User Focused Dashboards** - All three user types -- job seeker, employer, and student -- will have centralized dashboards to give up-to-date reports on their status. These dashboards will include tasks like uploading resumes, applying for jobs, creating career plans as well as summaries showing scholarships saved or submitted job applications. It will also show available tools and resources tailored to the user's specific needs.

- **Tasks and Alerts** - This feature "builds a foundation for a return engagement and customized messaging." This includes applying for jobs and uploading resumes. This integration is meant to highlight the tasks needed to be completed, while efficiently searching for jobs.

- **Single Sign On using OH|ID** - With the integration of OH|ID, OhioMeansJobs users will now have access to a wider range of resources, connecting them instantly with multiple state agencies. Staffing agencies and third-party recruiters now can use one account to toggle among multiple employers. Previously they had to manage multiple accounts; the system will automatically save people's information as they are setting up their accounts.

- **User Tutorial** - When a new user logs in, there is a guided walk-through of website capabilities and all the available tools.

ENERGY/UTILITIES

The Ohio Power Siting Board (OPSB) authorized Blossom Solar LLC to construct a 144 megawatt (MW) solar-powered electric generating facility in Washington Township in Morrow County. The Blossom Solar project will consist of large arrays of photovoltaic modules, commonly referred to as solar panels, ground-mounted on a tracking rack system, as well as associated facilities including access roads, underground and overhead electric collection lines, weather stations, inverters and transformers, and a collection substation. The project will occupy approximately 1,073 acres composed of private land secured by Blossom Solar through agreements with landowners. The OPSB required 41 conditions that the developer must adhere to in order to minimize and mitigate potential impacts during construction and operation of the facility.

FirstEnergy is the big winner of Ohio's four electric distribution utilities (EDU) if the prospect of \$250 million to \$1 billion in Infrastructure and Investment Jobs Act (IIJA) funding is any measure. The utility beat out American Electric Power (AEP) of Ohio and Duke Energy Ohio to secure most-favored status from the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Grid Innovation Program (GIP), which is matching private investments in utility-scale battery storage to support the buildout of a renewable energy grid. DOE gave FirstEnergy the green light to proceed with a full application in March but said AEP and Duke's chances of award were "unlikely," though they may still apply. The Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) is partnering with FirstEnergy and released a heavily redacted, joint application this week.

FEDERAL

U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH) joined Franklin County Sheriff Dallas Baldwin at an event in Columbus Thursday to promote his Fentanyl Eradication and Narcotics Deterrence (FEND) Off

Fentanyl Act, calling it an "all of the above approach" to address the drug crisis in Ohio and across the country. Brown said people everywhere from rural America, urban America, and suburban America are worried about the impact fentanyl has had on communities. He noted that fentanyl in Franklin County accounted for more than 85 percent of overdose deaths. The bill seeks to impose new sanctions that Brown said targets the illicit supply chain from the chemical suppliers in China to the cartels that traffic the drugs and launder money in Mexico.

GENERAL ASSEMBLY/STATEHOUSE

House Speaker Jason Stephens (R-Kitts Hill) made a number of changes to committees, including giving assignments to newly seated Reps. Brian Lorenz (R-Powell) and Justin Pizzulli (R-Franklin Furnace) and changing up vice chairs. Among those changes was removing his rival for speaker, Rep. Derek Merrin (R-Maumee), as vice chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, which Merrin had chaired last General Assembly. Pizzulli was named vice chair on the House Financial Institutions Committee, replacing Rep. Jena Powell (R-Arcanum) in that slot. Rep. Ron Ferguson (R-Wintersville) was also replaced on the committee by Lorenz, while Rep. Jeff LaRe (R-Canal Winchester) was named chair, succeeding Rep. Kris Jordan (R-Ostrander) who died earlier this year. Merrin, on Twitter, reacted to the news by saying at least Stephens "did it while my mother is still in good health," referencing his battle for the speakership with Stephens as Merrin's father was ailing.

Justice-involved individuals who can show they have successfully re-entered society would have a better chance to find stable housing under legislation passed by the House on Wednesday. Under HB50 (Humphrey-Seitz), individuals who are subject to collateral sanctions for housing would be able to file a petition with a court to obtain a certificate of qualification for housing (CQH). If a landlord chooses to accept a CQH, they would receive liability protections for providing housing to the rehabilitated individual. The bill passed by a vote of 81-8, with Reps. Jena Powell (R-Arcanum), Darrell Kick (R-Loudonville), Beth Lear (R-Galena), Roy Klopfenstein (R-Haviland), Jennifer Gross (R-West Chester), Brian Lorenz (R-Powell), Riordan McClain (R-Nevada) and Scott Wiggam (R-Wooster) voting against it.

In other floor action, the House voted 89-0 to pass HB57 (Hall-Demetriou), which indexes the homestead exemption amounts to inflation. The homestead exemption applies to homeowners who are elderly, disabled, a disabled veteran or the surviving spouse of a public service officer killed in the line of duty. Rep. Dan Troy (D-Willowick) said while the bill is a step in the right direction and he supports it, it's an "extremely small" improvement.

The House also passed the following bills:

- **HB27** (Mathews-J. Thomas), which requires state institutions of higher education to provide financial cost and aid disclosure forms. The bill passed 87-1.
- **HB105** (J. Thomas), which limits the penalty that may be imposed on a taxpayer for failing to file municipal income tax returns on time. The bill passed 87-0.

- **HB61** (Troy-Callender), which designates Nov. 19 as "James A. Garfield Day." The bill passed 88-0.

- **HB66** (Hall-Stoltzfus), which allows a wholesaler to obtain a refund of excise taxes on cigarettes, other tobacco products and nicotine vapor products remitted on bad debts arising from the sale of those products. The bill passed 84-2.

- **HCR5** (J. Miller-Holmes), which supports the work of the Ohio Commission for the United States Semiquincentennial. The resolution was adopted by a vote of 89-0.

- **HB28** (Humphrey), which designates March as "Triple Negative Breast Cancer Awareness Month." The bill passed 87-1.

Though the House Government Oversight Committee delayed action on a substitute version of HB51 (Loychik-Schmidt), the Second Amendment Preservation Act, the sponsor of the similar Missouri legislation now making its way through federal court told Ohio lawmakers Tuesday that it is imperative to act sooner than later, noting a new U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) rule that will go into effect in just over a week that will limit pistol braces. Jered Taylor, who recently termed out of the Missouri House of Representatives and sponsored that state's version of the bill, returned to speak to the committee on behalf of Ohio Gun Owners after testifying on the bill in early March.

Legislation that proposes to make significant changes to the state's eminent domain laws would prevent economic development and harm quality of life in Ohio, opponents of HB64 (Kick-Creech) told the House Civil Justice Committee on Tuesday. Alexandra Denney, vice president of government relations and communications for the Ohio Business Roundtable, said HB64 will "stifle" Ohio's economic momentum and "deter future investment" in the state.

Members of the House Transportation Committee Tuesday unanimously approved legislation to name a portion of State Route 36 after the late Rep. Kris Jordan (R-Ostrander), who died unexpectedly at the age of 46 early this year after a diabetic reaction at his home. In addition to lawmakers, Jordan's former wife, Melissa, and their three children appeared in support of the bill, with the children telling the committee it would be an "honor" to have a site named after their father. HB165 (Lear-Ferguson) would name the portion of State Route 36 that runs in front of the Jordan homesite as the "Representative Kris Jordan Memorial Highway."

A proposed budget amendment asks lawmakers to fund a pilot program that would allow those suffering from addiction to take methadone at home under review of a health provider. Michael Giles of Sonara Health gave a presentation Wednesday to the Senate Community Revitalization Committee on the proposal, which uses a web-based application created by the company for a medication-assisted treatment program using methadone, which he said can be an effective treatment for addiction, especially fentanyl. Giles said less than 10 percent of those suffering from opioid use disorder seek treatment with methadone, with access being a primary barrier. It is only available at federal-certified "opioid treatment programs" and onsite daily dosing is required for the first 90 days of treatment. Most urban patients live 20 minutes or further away from a clinic and 71 percent of rural counties don't have a clinic that offers methadone.

Rep. Monica Blasdel (R-Columbiana), whose husband Chuck Blasdel had previously served as Speaker Pro Tem of the Ohio House, has spent much of her time since Feb. 3 responding to the train derailment in East Palestine, which is in her district. One of those steps was to introduce HR33 with Rep. Lauren McNally (D-Youngstown) which urges passage of federal legislation requiring rail lines to alert local and state government officials when hazardous materials are traveling through their jurisdictions.

In other action, the House Civil Justice Committee reported out SB21 (McColley-Reynolds) which would allow appeals of legislative action to be filed in counties other than Franklin; the House Commerce and Labor Committee reported out HB106 (Jarrells-Lipps), the 'Pay Stub Protection Act' and HB86 (LaRe) which deals with liquor control laws; the House Government Oversight Committee reported out HB114 (Humphrey-Seitz) which allows using campaign funds for certain child care costs; the House Transportation Committee reported out highway naming bills HB131 (King), HB132 (King) and HB133 (King); and the House Ways and Means Committee reported out SB43 (Brenner) which addresses the homestead exemption.

GOVERNOR

Gov. Mike DeWine's office said Friday he's appointed Robert J. Patton of Willowick to the 11th District Court of Appeals to succeed Judge Cynthia Westcott Rice, who was elected to the Trumbull County Court of Common Pleas. Patton will have to run for election in November 2024 to retain the seat for the rest of the term, ending in February 2027. Patton is senior litigation counsel for the U.S. Attorney's Office of the Northern District of Ohio, and previously was assistant prosecutor in Lake County. He has served on Willowick City Council since 2005 and as council president the past 10 years. He has bachelor's, master's and law degrees from Cleveland State University.

Gov. Mike DeWine announced the appointment of Elizabeth A. Ellis to the Montgomery County Court of Common Pleas, General Division. Ellis, of Dayton, will assume office on Tuesday, June 20, 2023, and will be taking the seat formerly held by Judge Mary Kate Huffman, who was elected to the Second District Court of Appeals. Ellis will have to run for election in November 2024 to retain the seat for the term expiring July 1, 2027. Ellis currently is an assistant prosecuting attorney for the Montgomery County Prosecutor's Office. She previously served as the civil division chief for the Greene County Prosecuting Attorney's Office. She also previously served as the chief appellate counsel and chief of the juvenile division for the Greene County Prosecuting Attorney's Office.

GUNS

Rep. Al Cutrona (R-Canfield) announced he is introducing legislation that would eliminate the state sales tax on guns and ammunition. Additionally, the bill would provide gun and ammunition manufacturers a tax credit that would offset the federal excise tax imposed on these manufacturers.

HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Noting the toll that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the nursing workforce as well as an ongoing issue with understaffing, the Ohio Nurses Association (ONA) held a press conference Tuesday to introduce its "CODE RED" initiative to highlight workforce challenges and to call on health executives and lawmakers to work with ONA to address the issue. Robert Weitzel, president of ONA, said the CODE RED initiative highlights five strategic areas of concern for ONA: safe staffing levels, working conditions, workforce pipeline, corporate trends, and trust and agency for nurses. He said they will be "laser focused" on promoting safe staffing.

"Is this a problem in search of a solution or a solution in search of a problem?" More than 200 listed opponents and a full House committee were prepared Wednesday to answer that question, posed by President and CEO Nick Lashutka of the Ohio Children's Hospital Association in response to a bill that would ban puberty-blocking drugs, cross-sex hormones and transgender surgery for minors, HB68's (Click) Saving Adolescents from Experimentation (SAFE) Act. Lashutka and fellow opposing parties including several medical and behavioral health associations clearly landed on the latter side of the question. Five Republican members of the House Public Health Policy Committee, including Vice Chair Brian Stewart (R-Ashville) though not including Chairman Scott Lipps (R-Franklin), landed on the other -- if co-sponsorship of the bill is any judge. Three members of the committee have not signed onto Rep. Gary Click's (R-Vickery) HB68, while 34 other Republicans and zero Democrats have.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Central State University President Jack Thomas has announced his plans to step down at the end of his contract which expires at the end of June. Thomas became Central State's ninth president in July 2020. Thomas said he plans to take an educational sabbatical and then serve as tenured professor at Central State. He highlighted achievements during his tenure such as growing corporate partnerships from 18 in 2020 to over 60 currently; implementing a \$75 million expansion of the campus which includes seven new buildings through public-private partnerships; and creating a new strategic plan entitled "Reach Higher, Go Farther, Thrive!"

HOUSING/HOMELESSNESS

The DeWine administration announced Friday that it will fund the following programs from a \$150 million pot set aside for lead safety efforts in last year's American Rescue Plan Act spending omnibus, 134-HB45 (Roemer-West):

- About \$100 million for prevention and mitigation activities, including lead-safe building certification; screening and testing for lead poisoning; education and outreach; and early intervention for children and families affected by lead.
- \$22.5 million for workforce development in lead safety.
- \$20 million in support for the Ohio Department of Health (ODH).

- \$4 million for contractor recruitment and technical assistance.
- \$3.5 million in administrative assistance.

Information on how to apply for the funding is not yet available but will be posted at <https://development.ohio.gov/LeadSafeOhio>.

HUMAN SERVICES

Gender-affirming care services are now available at Planned Parenthood's Toledo health center, the reproductive health care organization announced Monday. Planned Parenthood of Greater Ohio's (PPGOH) goal is to provide gender-affirming care in all of its health centers across the state. First launched in 2021 to support transgender, non-binary and gender non-conforming Ohioans, gender-affirming care is currently available at PPGOH's Akron, Athens, Franklinton, Kent, Mansfield and Old Brooklyn health centers. PPGOH's gender-affirming care program services include hormone therapy, birth control, cancer screenings, care coordination, HIV prevention, testing, counseling, patient navigation, primary care, and sexually-transmitted infection (STI) testing and treatment.

INTEL

The mayors of New Albany, Gahanna and Johnstown discussed what they are doing to prepare for Intel's semiconductor production at a recent Columbus Metropolitan Club (CMC) forum, including how they expect to meet housing, infrastructure and education needs resulting from the influx of new residents. New Albany Mayor Sloan Spalding and Johnstown Mayor Donald Barnard both pointed out when their cities attained that status by reaching over 5,000 residents. Johnstown did so around 18 months ago, while New Albany did in 2010 and has almost tripled in residents since then. Gahanna Mayor Laurie Jadwin also said her city has seen "significant growth" in the past two years and that growth is not slowing down, in large part because of the development north of the city. Regarding how their constituents have responded to Intel, they each described a mix of excitement and concerns about the coming changes and how quickly they will occur. Spalding said it is important they be as transparent as possible, including updates on road work and the Intel site construction itself. Jadwin added that they are working to celebrate the past, honor the present and plan for the future in Gahanna.

LIQUOR/ALCOHOL

According to the Ohio Department of Agriculture, Hanover Winery won Overall Best of Show and Best of Ohio at the 2023 Ohio Wine Competition. The competition was held May 15-17 and coordinated by Kent State University Ashtabula. There was a record-breaking total of 432 entries this year with 327 receiving medals (34 double gold, 50 gold, 134 silver, and 109 bronze). The winners include the following:

Overall Best of Show and Best of Ohio

Hanover Winery, Marquette, Non-vintage (NV), American

Best of Class Red

Burnet Ridge, Three Kings Cabernet Sauvignon, 2021, American

Best of Ohio Red

Cask 307, Cabernet Sauvignon, 2021, Grand River Valley

Best of Class White

D&D Smith Winery, Riesling, 2021, American

Best of Ohio White

Dragonfly Vineyards & Wine Cellar, LaCrescent Curves, NV, Ohio

Best of Class and Best of Ohio Blush/Rose

M Cellars, Dry Rose, 2022, Grand River Valley

Best of Class and Best of Ohio Sparkling

Kosicek Vineyard, Carbonated Riesling, NV, Grand River Valley

Best of Class Fruit Wine

D&D Smith Winery, Whoopee! Wine (Elderberry), NV, American

Best of Class and Best of Ohio Ice Wine

Ferrante Winery, Vidal Blanc Ice Wine, 2022, Grand River Valley

LOBBYISTS

Law firm Shumaker announced that it has expanded its presence in Ohio, acquiring a team of experienced insurance recovery attorneys, which it said will provide a significant boost to its insurance recovery practice, an area of law that has been rapidly growing over the past few years. As part of the acquisition, Shumaker will open an Akron office, where the attorneys will focus on insurance recovery cases throughout the United States.

MARIJUANA/HEMP

A bipartisan marijuana legalization bill has been introduced in the House. Reps. Jamie Callender (R-Concord) and Casey Weinstein (D-Akron) announced Monday that their legislation, HB168, would legalize the use of cannabis by adults age 21 and older. The Ohio Adult Use Act would allow for the cultivation, purchase and possession of cannabis by Ohioans over the age of 21 and

allows for the expungement of conviction records for previous cultivation and possession offenses. The bill would implement a 10 percent sales tax on adult-use cannabis products. The tax revenue would be distributed in part to supporting K-12 education, communities that host dispensaries, combatting chemical dependence and illegal drug trafficking, and the state General Revenue Fund (GRF).

MENTAL HEALTH

The latest report on suicide deaths in Ohio shows an increase in 2021 after a two-year decline, according to the Ohio Department of Health (ODH). ODH's "Suicide Demographics and Trends 2021" showed that deaths increased in 2021 by 8 percent over 2020 to 1,766, though the number of deaths remained below the 10-year high of 1,836 deaths in 2018. The data, according to ODH, means that five Ohioans die by suicide every day, and one youth dies every 34 hours. Suicide was the second-leading cause of death among Ohioans ages 10-34 in 2021, the report showed, and the 12th leading cause of death overall.

NATURAL RESOURCES

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) Division of Wildlife has confirmed 11 additional white-tailed deer tested positive for Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) in Marion and Wyandot counties. Seven of the CWD-positive deer were bucks, and four were does. Testing was performed on deer harvested by hunters during the 2022-23 season, as well as on deer taken through targeted removal efforts in February and March. Postseason deer removal is meant to slow the spread of CWD by reducing deer numbers in areas where the disease has been detected.

PEOPLE

Richard Lewis, executive director of the Ohio School Boards Association for nearly two decades, announced his immediate retirement Monday, citing health reasons. Deputy Executive Director Kathy McFarland, who's been in that position five years, succeeded him, effective Tuesday, May 23. Lewis had nearly four decades of experience at OSBA, starting as a labor relations specialist in 1984 and working his way up through numerous other positions before becoming deputy executive director in 2002 and executive director in 2006.

Tom Sawyer, a former state legislator, U.S. congressman, State Board of Education member and Akron mayor, died Tuesday at the age of 77. His death followed a long illness. He is survived by his wife Joyce and their daughter Amanda. Sawyer, who began his political career as a member of the Ohio House in 1977, went on to become mayor of Akron from 1984 to 1986. He then was elected to the U.S. House, where he served from 1987 until 2003. He returned to the Ohio Statehouse as a state senator, serving from 2007 until 2016, after a short stint on the State Board of Education. According to the *Akron Beacon Journal*, services are planned for mid-July, with calling hours from 5 to 8 p.m. on Tuesday, July 11 and 10 to 11 a.m. on Wednesday, July 12 at the Billow's Funeral Home, 85 N. Miller Rd., Fairlawn. A celebration of life is set for noon to 3 p.m. on July 12 at Our Lady of the Cedars, 507 S. Cleveland-Massillon Rd. Memorial contributions are suggested to the Parkinson's Foundation.

POLLS/STUDIES

A new national poll from Quinnipiac University finds former President Donald Trump leading the Republican field for the 2024 presidential race, though he trails President Joe Biden in a hypothetical rematch. The poll found Trump getting 56 percent among Republican and Republican leaning voters, up from 47 percent in late March, while Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who announced his bid Wednesday, gets 25 percent, down from 33 percent. Twelve other declared or potential candidates receive 3 percent support or less. "The first one out of the gate, in what for now still looks like a two-horse race, is moving at full gallop away from a slowly growing pack of contenders," said Quinnipiac University Polling Analyst Tim Malloy.

The Supreme Court receives a negative 35 percent to 57 percent job approval rating. This disapproval rating among registered voters is the highest since Quinnipiac University began asking the question in 2004. Two-thirds of respondents think Congress should investigate reports that Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas received gifts from a Republican donor that were not disclosed. As for whether he should resign, 46 percent say he should, 42 percent say he should not, and 13 percent did not offer an opinion.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Seat belt usage in Ohio has dropped to its lowest level in nearly two decades, according to the Ohio Department of Public Safety (ODPS). The study, conducted by the ODPS Ohio Traffic Safety Office (OTSO), found that the statewide seat belt compliance rate dropped from 84.1 percent in 2021 to 80.8 percent in 2022, the lowest rate since 2005. To encourage Ohio drivers to buckle up, local law enforcement agencies throughout the state are participating in the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) national Click It or Ticket high-visibility enforcement effort which coincides with the Memorial Day holiday. It started Monday, May 22 and runs through Sunday, June 4.

SECRETARY OF STATE

Secretary of State (SOS) Frank LaRose announced recently that there were 14,765 new business filings in April 2023, down nearly 5 percent year over year. Despite the decline, business filings remain modestly ahead of the previous year's pace by 762 filings, reflecting 66,646 total new businesses filed in Ohio so far in 2023. According to LaRose, who cited the National Federation of Independent Businesses (NFIB), April marked the lowest small business optimism in a decade, with inflation and workforce challenges as their top concerns. He said the decrease comes amid growing concerns nationally about economic conditions, including rising interest rates and the stability of the banking industry.

STATE GOVERNMENT

The Controlling Board Monday approved three requests from the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency (Ohio EPA) that are funded by Ohio's settlement with Monsanto Co. The state had sued Monsanto in 2018, maintaining the company had known about its use of harmful levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), which can cause cancer in humans. Attorney General Dave

Yost announced an \$80 million settlement last year. The items would pay for the Gorge Dam removal project, oversee the demolishing and cleaning up of a contaminated building in Cleveland, and complete remedial design work in the Maumee area of concern.

The president of the Ohio Association of EDGE Certified Companies (OAECC) asked the Ohio Facilities Construction Commission (OFCC) Thursday to consider raising the goal for the procurement of EDGE-certified firms, raising concerns the program is burdensome to small businesses. EDGE stands for Encouraging Diversity, Growth and Equity. The program is designed to assist socially and economically disadvantaged businesses in obtaining state government contracts in construction, architecture, and engineering, among other areas. The program establishes goals for state agencies in awarding contracts to businesses owned by people who belong to a marginalized group, including racial and ethnic minorities, people with chronic disabilities, and women-owned businesses. The goal for state agencies is to award 5 percent of contracts to EDGE certified businesses, which must apply for certification. In public testimony before the commission, OAECC President Melva Williams-Argaw said the EDGE program creates administrative burdens for EDGE firms, and that the state should consider upping its 5 percent goal.

In other OFCC business, it was reported that FY23 project activity, as of March, consisted of 105 projects in design and 250 in construction worth a total of over \$3 billion in construction activity. Eleven school districts sought funding for construction projects on the May 2023 ballot; only two -- Fairborn City School District and Brunswick City School District -- were successful. OFCC closed out seven school construction projects across the state in April.

TAXATION

Facing predictions of average property value increases in excess of 30 or 40 percent in many counties, several Republican lawmakers outlined their plans Wednesday to give county auditors more say in the reappraisal process and to use multi-year averaging to smooth out big fluctuations, in hopes of blunting any property tax increases. The Ohio Department of Taxation (ODT) said it's willing to consider their proposals but is obligated to ensure the valuation process meets certain standards. Reps. Thomas Hall (R-Middletown) and Adam Bird (R-New Richmond) introduced HB187 Wednesday, and Sen. George Lang (R-West Chester) said he's submitting the same language as a budget amendment as the Senate deliberates on HB33 (Edwards). The bill would require using a three-year average for re-evaluating property values, and mandate that the ODT consult with county auditors on the reappraisal process. Sponsors said they want to put the change into effect for tax year 2023, and Rep. Bill Roemer (R-Richfield), who chairs the House Ways and Means Committee, promised hearings in the near future.

The Ohio Department of Taxation (ODT) announced Tuesday that Adam Schwiebert has joined the department as legislative director. Schwiebert will be responsible for legislative engagement with the Ohio General Assembly and external organizations on behalf of the department, ODT said. Schwiebert previously served as a legislative liaison to the agency during the Kasich administration. Schwiebert's professional experiences also include service as government relations director for the Dayton Metro Library, external affairs manager for the County

Commissioners Association of Ohio, and as a legislative aide in the Ohio House of Representatives.

WORKERS' COMPENSATION

The Ohio Bureau of Workers' Compensation (BWC) posted a \$538 million investment gain year-to-date in FY23, just missing expected returns by 1 percent, following a nearly billion-dollar loss for FY22 this same time last year. The agency, which receives no General Revenue Funds (GRF) and survives on insurance premiums and investment returns, also has achieved better-than-expected operating revenues year-over-over and fewer operating expenses than projected. As of May 1, operating revenues are back near levels this time in 2020. BWC's net position has rebounded from lows of \$7 billion on Dec. 31, 2022 to \$7.6 billion on May 1.