

BURLINGTON

Police more open on records

Still withholding some information

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BURLINGTON — The Burlington Police Department has slowed its practice of withholding public information on calls for service after experts questioned whether doing so violated the state's open records law.

A new disclosure of daily police calls in Burlington shows just 20 instances in which information is being withheld, out of a total of 1,800 calls for service in the 49 days from May 10 and June 28.

The department previously was withholding reports from public access at a much higher rate, surpassing an average of one every day at one point.

In addition, where the department now continues withholding

information about sexual assaults and other possible criminal matters, officials are disclosing the general nature of the incidents while still withholding the exact locations.

Police had previously withheld all information on certain types of calls, to the point where the general public was being kept in the dark about serious criminal activity taking place in the community.

In a report last month in The Journal Times, open records experts questioned the police department's practice of concealing all information about any police call that had resulted — or could result — in the ongoing investigation or prosecution of a suspect.

Although state law allows police records to be withheld from the public in limited instances where ongoing investigations

could be compromised, experts say the law does not permit an across-the-board policy of concealment without equal regard for the importance of public transparency.

Burlington Police Sgt. Robert Jones said the new disclosures on police calls in May and June were subjected to careful consideration on an individualized basis.

"A balancing test was applied to each of the redacted calls for service," Jones wrote in an email. "And in applying the balancing test, it was determined redaction of the call outweighed the need for public disclosure."

Please see **RECORDS**, Page B3

VIEW: To read the police blotter, point your smartphone at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**



GREGORY SHAVER, JOURNAL TIMES FILE PHOTO

The Burlington Police Department has started withholding public information about suspected criminal activity, after Racine County District Attorney Patricia Hanson directed police officials to avoid public disclosure in some instances.

Sheriff's Office advises charges

Case was turned over by Pleasant Prairie to avoid conflict of interest

JOE STATES
 Lee Newspapers

The Racine County Sheriff's Office has recommended four felony charges to the Racine County District Attorney against former Pleasant Prairie Public Works Director John Steinbrink Jr.

The Village of Pleasant Prairie has also announced the retirement of Steinbrink Jr., effective June 28.

The recommended charges included three felony counts of misconduct in public office and one felony count of private interest in public contract prohibited, according to Racine County Sheriff's Public Information Officer Lt. Michael Luell.

The latter refers, according to statute, to cases where courts may determine that a public contract is illegal when it is awarded where an official or employee has a private interest.

The Racine County District Attorney's Office has yet to decide whether to charge Steinbrink Jr.

The investigation of Steinbrink Jr. was turned over to the Racine County Sheriff's Office by the Village of Pleasant Prairie in April to avoid a conflict of interest. Steinbrink Jr., who had been public works director since 2010 and employed with the village the last 28 years, was placed on paid administrative leave following an alleged undisclosed complaint filed earlier this spring.

Pleasant Prairie Communications Manager Steve Linn released a statement from an internal email shared with village staff stating, "The Village of Pleasant Prairie is announcing the retirement of Public Works Director John Steinbrink Jr., effective June 28, 2022."

The Village of Pleasant Prairie declined additional comment on Friday.

Village President John Steinbrink Sr., Steinbrink Jr.'s father, acknowledged the allegations that had been made against his son but declined to comment on them.



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SWEETS TO SHARE

Abby Wiegert, left, and Alex Freitag, who are engaged, share an Oreo brownie shake Friday at Kravings in Mount Pleasant. Kravings, 5509 Durand Ave. Unit D, celebrated its opening Saturday, but some customers have already gotten their sugar fix early. It's the second local spot for the ice cream specialists; the first opened in January in Waterford.

Looking to invest in mental health

County gov't wants to spend \$380K on 12 new positions

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YORKVILLE — Racine County government is looking to spend more than \$380,000 before the end of the year to create 12 positions to support people in crisis.

One position would support those facing violence, while the other 11 would support those experiencing mental health crises.

Improving mental health services has long been central to the platform of Racine County Executive Jonathan Delagrave since he was first elected in 2015.

These proposals could be the next big step in that. The agenda for a special joint meeting of two county committees, scheduled for Wednesday, July 6, was released Friday.

Delagrave

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Violence

The agenda is led by a request to allocate \$79,727 for a new "Violent Crime Reduction Coordinator" through "a new project for Voices of Black Mothers."

Voices of Black Mothers United is a national nonprofit, and it is led locally by loved ones of people who died from gun violence. The group is working hand-in-hand with local governments and law enforcement to address violence in the Racine area.



RACINE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

In this frame taken from body camera video, officers press their weight down on Malcolm James in the Racine County Jail on June 1, 2021. According to official reports, the officers were unaware that James fell unconscious and stopped breathing as they held him down while trying to get Taser barbs out of James' back.

Mental health

Racine County is also looking to up staffing in its SAIL program. According to the county, "SAIL is a short-term crisis stabilization center for Racine County adult residents having a mental health crisis. SAIL operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. SAIL offers 13 beds available to community residents. While at SAIL, individuals will be closely monitored for safety and linked to resources to address their mental health crises. This service is free to residents of Racine County."

The agenda for Wednesday's meeting includes creating multiple new positions:

- Four community service providers.
- One community service supervisor.
- Five crisis professionals.
- One crisis supervisor.

■ For those 11 positions, the county is looking to allocate \$304,219.

Recent tragedy

A Racine man, Malcolm James, died June 1, 2021, in the Racine County Jail after being arrested four days prior as he was experiencing a mental health crisis; James had called 911 after setting his own apartment on fire. James had twice been taken to Ascension All Saints Hospital because of his crisis, but was returned to the jail after each hospital visit.

He stopped breathing when, after officers entered his cell because he had been hitting his head against the wall and

tased him, multiple officers pressed their weight on James as other officers tried to remove Taser prongs from his back. No charges were filed for the death.

The Racine County Sheriff's Office cast doubt on the medical examiner's conclusion of asphyxia, writing in a release that the medical examiner's conclusion was not based on "physical signs" but solely on a "review of the video," taken from body cameras of the officers who put James into the restraint chair. Outside experts brought in by the Racine County District Attorney's Office, including one connected to a network of known pro-police witnesses, disputed the medical examiner's conclusion and instead blamed the death on a possible heart attack linked to James' weight and heart issues.

The situation brought wider attention to how few mental health beds there are remaining in the United States, leading to many (if not most) people experiencing mental health crises who come in contact with police ending up in jail rather than receiving treatment.

Policy experts who weighed in on the case have said James' case highlights the U.S. need for more investment in mental health facilities, rather than incarceration facilities.

"It's a common fact that incarceration exacerbates mental illness," Elizabeth Sinclair Hancq, director of research with the Virginia-based Treatment Advocacy Center, told The Journal Times last year.

Fraught moment

Anti-Asian prejudice continues to infect U.S.

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MUSKEGO — “When the Emperor Was Divine” is a 2002 historical novel by Julie Otsuka about a Japanese-American family from California that was incarcerated at a Utah internment camp during World War II. Otsuka’s real-life familial ancestors were included with about 127,000 U.S. residents — two-thirds of whom were United States citizens — sent to camps established during the war due to unfounded fears about a West Coast Japanese spy network.

Otsuka wrote the book as a way to better understand her family history.

“In my own family, there was a lot of silence, so I really felt like there was so much that was unspoken, and I wanted to know what the real story was,” Otsuka said.

She did not expect the book to be widely read, much less studied in classrooms.

“I had no idea that it would eventually be taught in schools,” Otsuka said in an interview last week with a reporter. “It’s all been very surprising to me, the life that this book has

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Julie Otsuka, author of *When the Emperor Was Divine*

had.”

Most recently, “Emperor” was considered for an advanced 10th-grade class at Muskego High School — approximately one-fourth of the school’s students are Racine County residents — but was not approved by the school board.

In the past 20 years, Otsuka has traveled the country and spoken to students and teachers who read the book. She has heard from students who had grandparents incarcerated at camps, pupils who learned about internment camps via her book, and students who had never read a book featuring characters who looked like themselves.

The novel’s themes are still relevant, and Otsuka said teachers told her it has often resulted in excellent conversations.

“The book has led to a lot of productive discussions about prejudice and intergenerational trauma, reparations, as well as questions of literary style,” Otsuka said.

Otsuka believes the book remains timely.

“Given the level of hatred that so

many Asian Americans are experiencing now in this current moment, I think it’s really more important than ever that students learn about our country’s racist past and that the legacy of Japanese American incarceration is not forgotten,” she said.

According to a national survey by AAPI Data released in March, one in six Asian American adults reported experiencing a hate crime in 2021, up from one in eight in 2020. That rise has been partially blamed on anti-Asian sentiments connected to the COVID-19 virus originating in China, despite the absurdity of blaming someone of Asian descent in the U.S. for having anything to do with the still unconfirmed origins of the virus that has been linked to more than six million worldwide deaths.

The nonprofit organization Stop AAPI Hate recorded 6,273 hate incidents against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in 2021, an average of 523 incidents per month. That is up from March 19 to Dec. 31, 2020, when 4,632 hate incidents occurred,

an average of 493 per month.

Otsuka lives in New York City and has not ridden the subway in a year out of an abundance of caution. The city has seen numerous incidents of violent attacks against Asian Americans since the pandemic began. These include the death of Michelle Go, who was pushed in front of a train in January, and an 89-year-old woman who was set on fire in July 2020.

“Many of us are fearful every time we step out onto the street,” Otsuka said.

Indeed, a May Pew Research Center survey reported that 21% of Asian Americans say they worry daily or almost daily that they might be threatened or attacked because of their race or ethnicity, 51% say they worry sometimes and 18% say they worry rarely. Among people who worry rarely or more often, 36% say they have altered their daily schedule or routine in the past 12 months due to worries that they might be threatened or attacked.

Otsuka said the idea that “balance” is needed when discussing Japanese American incarceration during World War II plays a role in making Asian Americans feel unwelcome.

“It’s this kind of thinking, that Japanese Americans or Asian Americans are somehow ‘other,’ that is also responsible for Asian Americans, in this moment, feeling very uncomfortable and targeted,” Otsuka said.

Steinbrink

From B1

Instead, he spoke about the numerous programs his son had worked on during his 28 years with the village, ranging from snow removal to the water distribution system, and what his retirement would mean for Pleasant Prairie.

“He’s built bridges over rivers and parking lots,” Steinbrink Sr. said. “It’ll be a loss to the village. I’m proud of the work he did here.”

Steinbrink Sr. said his son has saved the village millions of dollars over the years through his efforts.

“If you go out there and talk to people who really know the village, you’ll hear the same thing,” Steinbrink Sr. said.

Steinbrink Sr. said he had not seen the charges recommended by the Racine County Sheriff’s Office and could not comment.

Steinbrink Jr. pointed to recent changes in the work force and staffing shortages for his reasoning for retiring.

“I am proud to have been a part of the growth of Pleasant Prairie for the last 28 years. It has been satisfying watching a rural farm community develop into a desired location for people to live, tourists to visit, and businesses to locate,” Steinbrink Jr. said in a statement. “Pleasant Prairie has been and will always be a great place to live work and play.”

Records

From B1

The 20 incidents where police redacted certain information, usually just the locations, included three sexual assaults reported on June 25, June 20 and June 3.

Other incidents where police withheld the locations included — as described in police terminology — family trouble, bail jumping, a mental subject, domestic abuse, a suspicious person, and several

welfare checks.

In citing a legal basis for redacting the information, Jones invoked laws that provide for discretion to protect the rights of victims and those under treatment for mental health problems.

The police department previously had invoked only an open records exception that applies to ongoing investigations and prosecutions.

The Journal Times report last month showed that Racine County District Attorney Tricia Hanson

has urged police in Burlington and elsewhere to withhold public records in any case that remains unresolved in court — a process that can last months or even years.

Hanson has since defended the practice, saying that releasing police reports could endanger the lives of police officers, could expose law enforcement strategies, could prompt suspects or witnesses to flee or cause other issues.

She also invoked “Marsy’s Law,” a victim-rights law added to Wisconsin’s state constitution by

voters in 2020 that critics say undermines the rights of the accused and causes undue secrecy in police records.

“The Racine County District Attorney’s Office and all law enforcement agencies within Racine County work very hard to be as open and transparent with the public as we are able to,” Hanson wrote in response to The Journal Times report. “The work we all do, however, requires that the timing of releasing information is done with great caution and care.”

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