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Polygamous sect member buys land in Dunn Co.

Brother of imprisoned FLDS leader bought 80 acres here after Minnesota plan faltered

MATT MILNER
 Leader-Telegram staff

MENOMONIE — A high-ranking member of a polygamous sect with multiple federal convictions has purchased more than 80 acres in Dunn County. The move appears to parallel prior efforts to establish a similar compound in Minnesota.

Seth Jeffs purchased four parcels totaling 80.5 acres near the Town of Lucas in June 2020. Dunn County records show the sales took place slightly more than a year after construction of a 5,760-square-foot building at a similar site in Minnesota was halted due to wetlands concerns.

Jeffs is the brother of Warren Jeffs, the leader of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints who is viewed as a prophet by his followers. Warren Jeffs is serving a life sentence after his 2011 conviction on two counts of sexual assault of a child. While a fugitive fleeing charges Warren Jeffs was placed on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list.

Seth Jeffs pleaded guilty to federal charges for helping his



STAFF PHOTO BY BRANDEN NALL

A gate with a camera and power box sits about 750 feet off of the road, barring the way to property purchased by Seth Jeffs, a significant figure in the FLDS. The purchase and what neighbors describe as significant construction have raised eyebrows in Dunn County.

brother evade authorities. That case began in 2005 and was prosecuted in Colorado. After police received a report of a possibly intoxicated driver, Jeffs and the

vehicle's driver were taken into custody when a drug sniffing dog indicated drugs were in the vehicle.

A search of the vehicle found

\$142,000 in cash, along with envelopes addressed to Warren Jeffs, church records, prepaid credit cards and cellphone cards, along with seven cellphones. The

court sentenced Seth Jeffs to three years' probation and fined him \$2,500.

More **JEFFS** | A2

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Blinken: Russia must immediately free 2 detained Americans

ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged his Russian counterpart, in a rare phone call between the diplomats since the Ukraine war, to immediately release a Wall Street Journal reporter who was detained last week as well as another imprisoned American, Paul Whelan, the State Department said Sunday.

In the call with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Blinken conveyed “grave concern” over the Kremlin’s detention of journalist Evan Gershkovich on espionage allegations, according to a State Department summary of the call.

Blinken called for his immediate release.

Blinken also sought the immediate release of Whelan, whom the statement said was wrongfully detained. U.S. officials said they were considering a similar determination for Gershkovich that could be made at any time. Should that happen, his case would be largely transferred to the office of the U.S. Special Presidential for Hostage Affairs.

Whelan, a Michigan corporate security executive, has been imprisoned in Russia since December 2018 on espionage charges that his family and the U.S.

government have said are baseless. He is serving a 16-year sentence.

Blinken and Lavrov also discussed “the importance of creating an environment that permits diplomatic missions to carry out their work,” according to the State Department.

The FSB, Russia’s top security agency and successor to the KGB, said Gershkovich was collecting information on an enterprise of the military-industrial complex. Russian authorities detained him last week, the first time a U.S. correspondent has been held on spying accusations since the Cold War.

In its summary of the call,

Russia’s foreign ministry said Lavrov “drew Blinken’s attention to the need to respect the decisions of the Russian authorities” about Gershkovich, whom Moscow claims, without evidence, “was caught red-handed.”

The Journal has adamantly denied the allegations and demanded his release. U.S. officials have also called on Russia to let him go, with President Joe Biden telling reporters on Friday that his message to the country was “Let him go.”

The Kremlin said Lavrov also told Blinken it was unacceptable for U.S. officials and Western news

media to continue “whipping up excitement” and politicizing the journalist’s detention. “His further fate will be determined by the court.”

The State Department described the detention of Gershkovich as unacceptable.

Emma Tucker, the newspaper’s editor-in-chief, said it was “gratifying” and “reassuring” to learn of Blinken’s call because it shows the U.S. government is taking the case “right up to the top.” The Journal has been unable to get messages to the reporter or learn any official information about him, she told CBS’ “Face the Nation.”

Jeffs/ from A1

He took a plea deal in 2016, when he was a defendant in a federal case

accusing him of millions of dollars of food stamp fraud. That case resulted in a fine. While the FLDS is best known for its presence in

southern Utah and northern Arizona, Jeffs has been linked to at least two sites outside that region. In January 2021 a South Dakota court ordered the FLDS to sell a compound in the state to cover debts from a 2017 federal lawsuit. Authorities said Jeffs ran that compound.

neighbors. She said construction is already well underway at her neighbor’s land. A large building at the site Bertetto spotted using a drone wasn’t present in earlier satellite images of the property.

The first sign of Jeffs’ presence in the area came “a couple years ago,” but Bertetto didn’t think much of it at the time.

LLC, filed with Wisconsin regulators in February 2022.

Bertetto said there had been construction on the site, but that could not immediately be confirmed. A gate bars the drive to the property, and trees block any view beyond it. A public records request made with Dunn County for any building permits issued for the properties owned by Jeffs remains pending.

Not all tips are credible or have enough information for action. Such a tip led to what is probably the best-known event linked to the FLDS: The raid at the Yearning For Zion Ranch, also known as the YFZ Ranch, in Eldorado, Texas.

In March 2008 a call to Texas authorities falsely claimed to be from a girl at the site who said she was being sexually and physically abused. Authorities raided the site the next month on the basis of that call. Authorities took more than 450 children into the custody of Child Protective Services. The Texas Supreme Court later issued a ruling returning the children to their parents.

While several men from the ranch were eventually convicted of sexually assaulting underage girls, the raid has been criticized for its reliance on a caller who had previously made similarly false claims and removing children for whom there was no evidence of imminent or ongoing abuse.

The State of Texas seized the ranch in 2014 after arguing in court it had been authorized by Warren Jeffs for its remote location and ability to hide the abuse of underage girls from authorities.

The site was later purchased by ETG properties and is now a law enforcement and military training ground.

Leader-Telegram reporter Madeline Fuerstenberg contributed to this story.

CORRECTIONS

The Leader-Telegram strives for accuracy in all stories. But if mistakes occur, a correction will be printed. Contact Assistant Editor Liam Marlaire at 715-833-9215 for assistance or email liam.marlaire@ecpc.com.

MINNESOTA ... AND WISCONSIN

The 40-acre Minnesota site, to which Jeffs was linked in 2019, drew strong concerns from neighbors. Law enforcement said at the time it was monitoring the situation, but there was little it could do unless evidence emerged of laws being broken.

News reports from the time show authorities ordered a halt to construction of a compound on the land after an inspection found “disruption to the landscape ... outside of all relevant permits.”

Dunn County Sheriff Kevin Bygd said his office is well aware of Jeffs’ purchase of the land. He received an anonymous tip around the time of the purchase. Given the previous history of the Jeffs’ family and FLDS encounters with law enforcement, it’s something he keeps in mind.

“The name’s come up. It’s on our radar,” he said.

Publicly available records show Jeffs received a \$405,000 mortgage to pay for the properties in Dunn County. The mortgage, dated June 30, 2020, was filed with the Dunn County Register of Deeds two days later.

The loan came from Supreme Lending, a subsidiary of Everett Financial, Inc., located in Dallas, Texas. Supreme Lending was founded in 1997 according to the Better Business Bureau.

A NEIGHBOR’S CONCERNS

Lissa Bertetto, owner of Essential American Firearms, is one of Jeffs’

neighbors. She said construction is already well underway at her neighbor’s land. A large building at the site Bertetto spotted using a drone wasn’t present in earlier satellite images of the property.

Bertetto admitted to wondering about the girl, but didn’t connect that event to the FLDS until later.

“I didn’t think anything of it until I heard that he possibly had bought the property right next to ours. And that’s kind of when it started clicking and I started looking online,” she said. “And I found out, sure enough, the business name that he has been known for is associated with the address.”

The Minnesota construction involved Emerald Industries LLC, a company linked to Jeffs. The same company filed in Wisconsin in August 2020, less than two months after Jeffs concluded the purchase of the Dunn County site. Jeffs is listed as the registered agent for the company, and the company’s address is identical to the one listed for Jeffs in connection with the land sales.

Jeffs’ Emerald Industries may cause some confusion among consumers, though, since there is another Emerald Industries based in Brookfield, Wis. That company manufactures industrial machinery, and there is no apparent link between the two.

A second company linked to Jeffs, Emerald Farms

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