

CITY & REGION BRIEFS

Elected officials to mobilize Black, Muslim voters Monday

On Monday in Philadelphia, Black Muslim community leaders will join state Senator Sharif Street, Councilmember Curtis Jones, Jr. and Philadelphia leaders for a press conference to highlight Vice President Kamala Harris’ vision as president and sound the alarm on former President Donald Trump and the proposed conservative agenda Project 2025.

Last week, 25 Islamic religious leaders from across the country signed a letter endorsing Vice President Harris.

Speakers Monday will help mobilize Black and Muslim voters in Philadelphia, encouraging them to vote early or return their mail ballots, today. They will also ensure voters in Philadelphia know they have until October 21 to register online or in person at their county election office or a satellite location.

— Tribune Staff Report

American Water cyberattack renews focus on infrastructure

CAMDEN, N.J. — A cyberattack continues to affect the largest regulated water and wastewater utility company in the United States, renewing a focus on the importance of protecting critical infrastructure sites.

New Jersey-based American Water paused billing to customers as it announced the cyberattack on Monday. It said it became aware of the unauthorized activity on Thursday and immediately took protective steps, including shutting down certain systems. Water services have been unaffected as protections remained in place Wednesday.

The company — which provides drinking water and sewer services to more than 14 million people in 14 states and on 18 military installations — said it does not believe its facilities or operations were impacted by the attack, although staffers were working “around the clock” to investigate its nature and scope.

The attack against American Water appears to be an “IT focused attack” more than an operational one, according to Jack Danahy, vice president of strategy and innovation at Colchester, Vt.-based NuHarbor Security in Vermont.

“People haven’t traditionally thought of pieces of infrastructure, such as water and wastewater service as being prone to threats, but incidents like this shows how quickly problems could occur,” Danahy said. “As billing and other services have become more accessible to customers in recent years, they’re now exposed to more types of risks and concerns that were not previously there.”

The U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency and the Environmental Protection Agency urged water systems to take immediate actions this year to protect the nation’s drinking water. About 70% of utilities inspected by federal officials recently violated standards meant to prevent breaches or other intrusions, the EPA said.

— The Associated Press

Contractors hired to replace Newark’s lead pipes charged

NEWARK, N.J. — New Jersey contractors hired to replace lead water pipes in the state’s largest city left lines in the ground and then fraudulently collected payment for work they didn’t do, federal prosecutors said.

Michael Sawyer, 57, of Burlington, New Jersey, and Latronia Sanders, 55, of Roselle, New Jersey, were arrested Thursday and charged with conspiracy to commit wire fraud, according to the U.S. Attorney for New Jersey Philip Sellinger.

Newark, like other cities across the country, struggled for years with replacing its aging lead service lines. In recent years, officials announced it had replaced more than 20,000 lines.

Sawyer served as president and CEO of JAS, which calls itself a construction land development firm, while Sanders worked as a foreperson on the company’s crews hired in a \$10 million contract with the city to replace lead lines.

The pair did not replace all the pipes they were hired to, according to authorities, but still submitted applications for payment. They included false documents like photographs purporting to show the replacement was done or not needed.

Email and phone messages left Friday with JAS have not been returned. Attorneys for Sawyer and Sanders were not listed in online court records.

In a joint statement, Newark Mayor Ras Baraka and Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Shawn LaTourette said officials learned in January that some lines might not have been replaced as expected. That led to a randomized audit of some 400 pipes. Of those, 33 properties were found to contain some remaining lead. They’ve been replaced, the officials said.

“At this time, there is no need for Newark residents to take any additional precautions with respect to their drinking water,” the statement said.

— The Associated Press

Former FDNY chief pleads guilty to accepting bribes

NEW YORK — A former New York City Fire Department chief pleaded guilty Tuesday to a federal conspiracy charge, admitting that he and others solicited tens of thousands of dollars over two years to give preferential treatment in scheduling safety inspections.

Brian Cordasco, 49, of Staten Island, pleaded guilty in Manhattan federal court to conspiring to solicit and receive a bribe, a crime committed while he was a chief of the department’s Bureau of Fire Prevention.

He told Judge Lewis J. Liman that he and others accepted the bribes in return for ensuring that some individuals and companies received fire safety inspections “earlier than they were entitled to.”

Prosecutors say he pocketed \$57,000 of the \$190,000 in bribes generated by the conspiracy, which stretched from 2021 to 2023.

At a sentencing scheduled for Feb. 19, Cordasco faces up to five years in prison and a fine ranging from \$30,000 to \$300,000. In a plea memo, prosecutors said federal sentencing guidelines would call for a sentence of five years in prison, though the decision will be left to the judge.

Cordasco was arrested three weeks ago along with another FDNY chief. At the time, both men pleaded not guilty to bribery, corruption and false statements charges.

— The Associated Press



On stage at The Center in the Park on Thursday are from left, WURD morning talk host Solomon Jones; Dorothy Roberts, professor at the University of Pennsylvania; Timothy Golden, history and philosophy professor at Whitman College; Christina Kristofic, investigative writer and editor at The Philadelphia Tribune; and Omar Sabor, Philadelphia City Commissioner.

— TRIBUNE PHOTO / O.J. SPIVEY

Community gets informed

Engaging discussion at Center in the Park on conservative agenda Project 2025.

O.J. Spivey
TRIBUNE CORRESPONDENT

Germantown’s Center in the Park was filled to capacity on Thursday evening as a non-partisan, community forum dissected the conservative agenda called Project 2025.

Sponsored by the National Association of Black Journalists’ Philadelphia chapter, or NABJ-Philly, the panel consisted of experts, who broke down the document’s impact on African Americans if a Republican president would follow it.

The panel included: Dorothy Roberts, professor at the University of Pennsylvania; Timothy Golden, history and philosophy professor at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington; Philadelphia City Commissioner Omar Sabir; and Christina Kristofic, investigative writer and editor at The Philadelphia Tribune.

The discussion was moderated by WURD Radio’s Solomon Jones, which served as a follow-up on last month’s Tribune special report written by Kristofic, detailing the top 10 proposals of Project 2025 that could impact Blacks in America.

The audience also received copies of the Tribune’s edition, which was published on September 29.

One of the proposals discussed was the total elimination of any practice of diversity, equity, and inclusion.



The Center’s auditorium was filled to capacity Thursday evening in Germantown. — TRIBUNE PHOTO / O.J. SPIVEY

The talk revolved around the Chevron doctrine, the Supreme Court’s decision affecting the deference to federal agencies’ expertise, particularly in administrative rules.

“It’s obvious, but what you’re saying in taking out these protections is all lives matter,” Kristofic said.

Another proposal discussed was the polarizing topic of reproductive rights revolving around the impact of the Comstock Act from 1873 that classified contraception as obscene material, effectively banning its distribution.

This law has been challenged by the Supreme Court, which has recognized the constitutional right to contraception. Despite not being actively used, the act is still relevant, with concerns about its potential reinstatement and disproportionately affecting Black women.

“It is not far-fetched that the Comstock Act can be reinforced,” Golden said. “There is a point where you could see contraceptives on the black market. You won’t be able to buy them.”

The panel further discussed the potential impact of Supreme Court justice appointments on legal precedents in regards to reproductive freedom and the 14th Amendment. The speakers highlighted the amendment’s historical context emphasizing its role in ending slavery and ensuring equal citizenship.

Forty-two percent of abortions in the U.S. are performed on Black women, who make up 14% of the population, indicating a disproportionate impact.

“Black women are the most likely to have unwanted preg-

nancies,” Roberts said. “Without legal contraceptives, those numbers will go up. You also have a long history of forced labor, sterilization, and taking children away from Black parents.”

Strategies implemented from Project 2025 would also affect funding and restrictions to non-profits such as Planned Parenthood who offer a range of services well beyond abortions, as Kristofic clarified.

“Planned Parenthood also provides various levels of reproductive health care such as annual pelvic exams, Pap smears, etc.,” she said. “They provide care from pregnancy to even after the baby is born.”

The conversation further centered around the importance of federal oversight in education, particularly for marginalized groups like Blacks.

Golden expressed concern that without federal involvement, education could be negatively impacted by state and local decisions, which historically have been detrimental to black communities.

“The people who often say leave it to the states is always a bad thing,” he said.

Sabir emphasized Philadelphia’s importance to participating in the election and educating families of voters.

“We have to get people excited to vote and explain why,” he said. “Motivate our entire households to vote.”

Cornel West loses bid to get on Pennsylvania’s presidential ballot

Mark Scolforo

HARRISBURG — A federal judge has turned down Cornel West’s request to be included on the presidential ballot in the key battleground state of Pennsylvania, expressing sympathy for his claim but saying it’s too close to Election Day to make changes.

U.S. District Judge J. Nicholas Ranjan said in an order issued late Thursday that he has “serious concerns” about how Pennsylvania Secretary of State Al Schmidt is applying restrictions in state election code to West.

“The laws, as applied to him and based on the record before the court, appear to be designed to restrict ballot access to him (and other non-major political candidates) for reasons that are not entirely weighty or tailored, and thus appear to run afoul of the U.S. Constitution,” Ranjan wrote.

West, a liberal academic currently serving as professor of philosophy and Christian practice at Union Theological Seminary in New York, would likely draw far more votes away from Democratic nominee Vice President Kamala Harris than from the Republican candidate, former President Donald Trump. West’s lawyers in the case have deep Republican ties.

“If this case had been brought earlier, the result, at least on the present record, may have been different,” Ranjan wrote in turning down the request for a temporary restraining order and preliminary injunction.

An appeal will be filed immediately, West lawyer Matt Haverstick said Friday.



Progressive activist Cornel West speaks at a demonstration in Union Park outside the Democratic National Convention, Aug. 21, 2024, in Chicago.

— AP PHOTO/ALEX BRANDON, FILE

“This is a situation where I think, given the constitutional rights, that any ballot access is better than no ballot access,” Haverstick said. “We’d be content if Dr. West got on some ballots, or even if there was a notification posted at polling places that he was on the ballot.”

Matt Heckel, press secretary for the Pennsylvania Department of State, said in an email that Ranjan reached the right outcome but that Schmidt “respectfully” disagrees with the judge’s opinion regarding his agency’s enforcement of the election code. Heckel noted state courts had previously sided with the Department of State.

“One of the dangers of such last-minute litigation is that courts do not have adequate time to review the law in

making their decisions,” Heckel wrote.

Ranjan cited federal precedent that courts should not disrupt imminent elections without a powerful reason for doing so. He said it was too late to reprint ballots and retest election machines without increasing the risk of error.

Putting West on the ballot at this point, the judge ruled, “would unquestionably cause voter confusion, as well as likely post-election litigation about how to count votes cast by any newly printed mail-in ballots.”

West, his running mate in the Justice for All Party and three voters sued Schmidt and the Department of State in federal court in Pittsburgh on Sept. 25, arguing the department’s interpretation of election law violates their constitutional rights to freedom of association and equal protection. Specifically, they challenged a requirement that West’s presidential electors — the people ready to cast votes for West in the Electoral College — should have filed candidate affidavits.

In court testimony Monday, West said he was aiming for “equal protection of voices.”

“In the end, when you lose the integrity of a process, in the end, when you generate distrust in public life, it reinforces spiritual decay, it reinforces moral decadence,” West testified.

Ranjan was nominated to the court by Trump in 2019. All 14 U.S. Senate votes against him, including that of Harris, then a senator from California, were cast by Democrats.

The Associated Press