

THE ROANOKE TIMES

DECEMBER 7, 2022

Probe: No conspiracy with Big Red Barn

By Luke Weir

Documents provided by Del. Marie March, R-Floyd, show no proof of a municipal government conspiracy to harm her embattled business in Pulaski County, according to the investigation of a special prosecutor.

An ongoing zoning dispute about an events venue owned by March has created tensions with Pulaski County, specifically County Administrator Jonathan Sweet.

According to administrators in Pulaski County, The Big Red Barn at 4241 Lee Highway is operating without proper zoning permits. Meanwhile, March's management said the venue, now listed for sale, has operated in legal standing.

As early as June 1, March alleged to Virginia State Police that Sweet, among others in Pulaski County local government, were complicit in a conspiracy to injure her trade or profession, according to a letter written to state police by Henry County Commonwealth's Attorney Andrew Nester. It was Nester who was appointed as special prosecutor to investigate March's complaint - an investigation first reported by Cardinal News.

After reviewing almost 50 pages of documentation from March, Nester wrote that there is obviously a disagreement between March and Pulaski County administration, centered around the zoning dispute at The Big Red Barn.

"It is clear to me the messages themselves have a coarse, churlish and, at times, an unprofessional tone," Nester wrote. "However, having read through them on more than one occasion, I cannot find the existence of any conspiracy, or even a hint of one that could be proven, on the part of the Pulaski County officials to harm Ms. March's business, reputation, etc. that would violate this statute."

He said the code section about "conspiracy to injure another in trade or profession" has no application to the dispute between March and Pulaski County.

"The fact that the County Administrator properly, and politely, notified Ms. March of her need for a business license, and any potential ramifications of operating without one may bring, is certainly not illegal and could in no way be viewed as a way to injure her reputation, business, etc," Nester wrote.

The 1960-built Big Red Barn and its 10-acre property were listed for sale in October, at an asking price of \$715,000. The property was last purchased for \$400,000 in 2021, by a company owned by March, according to real estate records.

"While I have had this information and documentation for several weeks, I purposefully waited until after the recent general election to author this letter and provide an opinion," Nester wrote. "The purpose behind this is because Ms. March is a duly elected member to the Virginia General Assembly and I did

not want this letter or opinion to in any way be use for political gain by any individual or party that was on the ballot for election during this cycle.”

Sweet nor March could immediately be reached Tuesday.

THE ROANOKE TIMES

NOVEMBER 19, 2022

Mules on loose in Pulaski County spur tensions between state delegate, county official

By Luke Weir and Yann Ranaivo

Mules apparently loosed onto the fourth hole green of Thorn Spring Golf Course have stoked tensions between a nearby business owned by Del. Marie March, R-Floyd, and Pulaski County Administrator Jonathan Sweet.

The livestock and their damage to the golf course overnight on Nov. 6 are subject of a county sheriff's office report filed the next morning, Nov. 7.

March, who owns the nearby events venue, The Big Red Barn, is mentioned as a party in that report, along with Brenda Blackburn, who is manager of the business.

“Brenda Blackburn called in at 0853 hours stating she believes someone intentionally let the mules out of the fence behind The Red Barn,” reads the incident report. “Blackburn did not have any reason as to why she believed this other than the alleged on-going issues between Marie March and Pulaski County, namely [county administrator] Jonathan Sweet.”

Those ongoing issues stem from a zoning dispute between the business and Pulaski County The barn property was recently listed for sale.

When a deputy investigating the golf course damage called Blackburn about it, she initially denied that mules had broken free, despite earlier statements, the report reads:

“Blackburn then began to mention Jonathan Sweet and discussing the on-going issues,” the incident report said. “Blackburn then mentioned again that someone must have intentionally let the mules out.”

The report, filed by Deputy Trevor Martin, notes that Blackburn continued to discuss the issues as he attempted to end the conversation.

“I explained to Blackburn we received numerous calls from 12:55 a.m. until 1:38 a.m. ... in reference to horses, mules or donkeys in the roadway,” the report said. “Blackburn then mentioned E.W. Harless and Jonathan Sweet were probably involved due to the issues.”

Contacted about the report, Blackburn said to call Dublin-based lawyer Mike Barbour with any questions about The Big Red Barn.

Barbour said he was unaware of any sheriff's office incident report.

"I suppose on any given week in Pulaski County, there's some kind of report about livestock getting out," Barbour said. "I haven't seen the document. I don't know anything about it."

Sent a copy of the report on Friday afternoon, Barbour did not respond to emailed questions by deadline.

Sweet said the report to law enforcement is just the latest in a series of attempts by Blackburn and March to do him personal and professional harm.

He said seeing his name on that report was concerning, and part of a trend of March's opponents being mentioned to law enforcement.

"It doesn't make any sense," Sweet said. "Why would I risk my life and my career and my family to go let donkeys loose in the middle of Route 11, in the middle of the night?"

Sweet said the county attorney had already sent a letter to March's legal counsel regarding zoning at The Big Red Barn, and then came the golf course incident.

"I'm trying to go to work every day, and this is what they're doing to me," Sweet said. "They're trying to ruin me."

The livestock case isn't the first time Sweet has been at legal odds with Blackburn.

Blackburn in 2021 submitted a protective order petition against Sweet that was dismissed. In 2019, she unsuccessfully tried to sue him in Pulaski County General District Court for \$25,000.

Blackburn has long followed Pulaski County government. She has for years been a regular seeker of open records through use of the Virginia Freedom of Information Act.

She has submitted more than 100 open records requests since 2010, according to a log provided by Pulaski County. Many of her requests do cover information typically sought from local governments, including items such as employee pay.

Regarding the zoning issue that has led to this most recent spat between Blackburn and Sweet, he said no progress has been made.

"It's a barn. Barns only have so many applications, unless you significantly upgrade and improve the barn," Sweet said. "The property has an occupancy load of only 50 people, and they want to have 300 people. It's not set up for that."

He said complaints were made by the public at county board meetings, and to county administration, about the barn's uses.

"This is all complaint-driven. She'd probably still be operating with no issue if we didn't get all the citizen complaints," Sweet said. "That doesn't make it legal, but the point is, 99% of zoning violations result

from neighbors complaining, because we don't have some Gestapo out there, checking everybody's zoning and what they're doing.”

One person who has addressed the county about the Red Barn is E.W. Harless, named in the golf course-related police report.

Harless said he began pushing the county to take action on the Red Barn.

Harless said he initially became concerned while he was once traveling on U.S. 11, or Lee Highway. He said he drove up a hill and then nearly hit a car after he came to “a dead stop.” He said he was behind a few vehicles and that the one at the front had abruptly stopped because of another car that had turned into the barn property.

Harless said the problem he experienced could have been avoided had a turn lane been formally marked in that area.

“Now look, that’s a dangerous place,” he said. “If something’s going to be there, it needs to be treated as any other business would be treated.”

Harless said he went to the next board of supervisors meeting following the incident and told the county that something had to be done about the potential safety issues created by the Red Barn. He said he vowed to the county at the time that he would be at every following board meeting until the problem was addressed.

“The only thing I asked is: If she was going to have a business or make some kind of place to have weddings and stuff like that, is to abide by the same rules that every other merchant in Pulaski County has got to abide by. That’s all I ask. And all hell broke loose.”

Harless also has a history with Blackburn and March over words that were traded at the New River Valley Fair involving Harless and Blackburn. The group then traded accusations following the dust-up.

For now, The Big Red Barn website is offline. Blackburn previously said church services at the barn would continue, and that she hopes the property does not sell. She declined further comment on Friday.

A real estate agent listed for the 10-acre red barn property did not return a Friday phone call requesting comment.

Harless said he had heard that livestock got on the golf course.

“I’ll be right honest with you. I thought it was comical,” he said. “Who in their right mind lets mules out that’s really that close to Route 11. And they would have to cross 11 to get to the golf course. Somebody would have been hit ... It’s got to the point where it’s totally unbelievable.”

March couldn’t be reached by phone this week, but she has maintained her stance on Sweet in some text messages.

“You ... should be reporting as to why Pulaski County Administrator Jonathan Sweet is sending me pictures of Pulaski citizen Brenda Blackburn in the middle of the night,” March wrote Friday, who sent a

screen shot of what she said shows that. "I am not a friend of Jonathan Sweet and I don't text with him, but he continually sends me strange late night texts that I do not respond to."

Sweet said one of text message he sent to March was just a link to a column in The Roanoke Times.

On a second text message, Sweet said he did accidentally send March a photo. He said the photo was from March's Facebook page, depicting Blackburn in a Halloween costume.

"That was actually an accident, I sent it to several people ... there's no messaging with it or anything like that," Sweet said. "I should have said, 'sorry, I didn't mean to send you this picture by accident,' but I just left it at that."

March also claims that Sweet's actions are to a greater extent a retaliation by the old GOP establishment, which she referred to as RINOs — Republican In Name Only.

Meanwhile, back at the golf course, it took some work to get the green patched up, said Matthew Sale, owner of Thorn Spring, during a phone call Friday afternoon.

"We've got cattle and livestock too, and stuff happens," Sale said. "It's just one of the things. You can't keep them in all the time."

He said hasn't heard back from law enforcement yet about their investigation into the damage to his course. And, Sale said he didn't know anything about the sheriff's office incident report that mentions his neighbors at The Big Red Barn.

"Now you're talking politics," Sale said. "Whatever they've got going on with the county administrator, and her, and all that, that's a rabbit hole I don't want to get into."

THE ROANOKE TIMES

NOVEMBER 2, 2022

Legislator's event venue listed for sale

By Luke Weir

Correction - The Red Barn property in Pulaski County has an agricultural zoning designation. An article published Nov. 2 about the property contained incorrect information about its zoning.

A state legislator's private business venue in Pulaski County is listed for sale, but the manager said she hopes nobody buys it.

"I'm just praying every day that it does not sell," said Brenda Blackburn, manager of the Big Red Barn, billed online as a community worship center. "We have been targeted."

The 10-acre property at 4241 Lee Highway in Pulaski is owned by a company of state Del. Marie March, R-Floyd, but was posted for sale last week, amid an ongoing permitting dispute with county government. Blackburn blames one person for that dispute: County Administrator Jonathan Sweet.

“The main reason we've been targeted is because of Jonathan Sweet, and I'll tell him to his face,” Blackburn said during a phone call. “This barn has cost Marie a whole lot of money.”

Sweet said Pulaski County has a tremendous amount of written record demonstrating its efforts to work with March and company in allowing the Big Red Barn to legally operate.

“We continue to want to see successful businesses that comply with our zoning ordinance operate and be successful there,” Sweet said during a phone call. “We're happy to work with the existing owner or future owners to help make that happen.”

Blackburn said the barn was meant to become a place to host numerous events, from weddings to receptions to birthday parties, and March had envisioned it would become a local Republican headquarters.

“If it's God's will for her to sell that barn, then she will sell it,” Blackburn said. “But God is in that place.”

Sweet said the county building official, zoning department as well as his administration office have done everything they can to work with the Big Red Barn.

“We're just trying to work with them to allow them to reach compliance, and be consistent with every other business owner, property owner in the county,” Sweet said. “We want them to comply with zoning, and we want them to be successful there.”

While Blackburn said the barn property is zoned for agricultural uses, that statement is not reflected on Pulaski County tax records, which lists the acreage's tax code as “2 SF residential suburban.”

“I was told when it's zoned agriculture, and it is, you can have anything you want to,” Blackburn said. “You can do whatever you want to in the barn.”

The listed asking price of \$715,000 for the Big Red Barn property is 78% higher than its purchase price last June for \$400,000, according to online real estate listings.

Sweet said a lot of people in the county find this to be an interesting turn of events.

“We've had very little productive communication from the Big Red Barn, so we're not certain what their plans are, or what the issues are,” Sweet said. “Looking at what they purchased the property for versus what they're selling the property for, it doesn't look like they're very interested in selling.”

Likewise, Blackburn said she is unsure about future plans for the business. Church services that started a couple months ago will continue at least until the end of the year, she said.

“I don't know why Marie done it, I really don't. But I think she just got fed up,” Blackburn said. “You're going to have to be a real rich person to afford this barn, with the price that's on there right now.”

March did not respond to a request for comment. Blackburn said she hopes Sweet is satisfied.

“You can't fight the devil so long,” Blackburn said. “But you know what, God's still the winner, and I still feel like I'm on the winning side. And so is Marie.”

THE ROANOKE TIMES

OCTOBER 10, 2022

Official outspoken about Red Barn dispute

By Yann Ranaivo

Correction - An Oct. 10 story about state Del. Marie March and a situation involving a property she owns in Pulaski County included a reference to a man who filed a comprehensive request for information to get copies of all the emails of Pulaski County Administrator Jonathan Sweet. It was believed by Sweet that the man made the request because he was supportive of March. The request was made, but it had nothing to with March, according to the man.

PULASKI — A red Chevrolet tailed Jonathan Sweet one morning, an occurrence the baffled local government official captured on video.

“Brenda Blackburn is following me to work. Unbelievable,” Sweet, the Pulaski County administrator, can be heard saying before asking the person filming to zoom in to try to get the license plate number.

“Unbelievable,” Sweet again said.

Blackburn is the manager of the Big Red Barn, a venue on Lee Highway that belongs to Del. Marie March, R-Floyd, who owns a number of businesses in the New River and Roanoke valleys.

Blackburn denies ever following Sweet, saying she drives a red Ford Explorer. She said it is instead Sweet who has harassed her over the years, a claim the administrator himself denies.

“I’ve never been behind him and followed him nowhere,” Blackburn said. “I don’t know what the devil he’s talking about.”

The video is one of a number of things Sweet recently disclosed as part of a dispute between March and Pulaski County over functions at the Red Barn property.

Sweet, as well other Pulaski County officials, have pointed out to the state legislator that she has yet to obtain all the permits required for all the uses they say have been both advertised and carried out at the venue.

“It appears the business had continued to operate without a permitted use stated and without a permit for more than five months,” Sweet wrote last month in an email.

Sweet’s decision to speak out about his dealings with March comes after a controversial encounter between her and Del. Wren Williams, R-Patrick, during a Ninth Congressional District Republican celebration in Wytheville last month.

The two delegates are running against each other for the party’s nomination in a newly formed district.

March filed a criminal complaint against Williams, alleging misdemeanor assault and battery. She said he shoved her at the event that night.

Williams has refuted the allegations, saying he accidentally bumped March's shoulder and elbow on his way toward the exit but apologized before continuing out the door.

Both lawmakers have since provided videos, obtained via Freedom of Information Act requests, in attempts to prove each of their cases.

Sweet said the incident in Wytheville involving March prompted him to highlight and discuss her ongoing issues with Pulaski County.

"Due to the recent charges filed by Delegate March, I am sharing information on a matter involving the delegate and her Big Red Barn that may be of interest to you and shed light on her credibility or lack thereof," Sweet wrote in an email.

March appears to have a track record of dishonesty and engaging in bullying tactics whenever she can't get her way on certain matters, said Sweet.

"This is right out of [her] playbook," he said in an interview a few days after the Wytheville event.

March's issue in Pulaski County isn't the first time she's ran into conflicts with local government in the New River Valley. Before she became a lawmaker, she had been an outspoken critic of Christiansburg town government — to the point where she vowed to work to eventually overhaul its council.

"The bigger issue is there's just a history of this. There's a long history of this," Sweet said. "Christiansburg's been dealing with her for a long time."

March, however, has argued that it is those local governments that have attempted to strong arm her.

"In Christiansburg, I dealt with bullies for many years," she wrote in a text message. "I try to always look out for the little guy, probably because I am the little guy - or girl. It seems the bullies come out of the woodwork or maybe it's because I don't back down to them."

Red Barn ordeal

Pulaski County's issues with the Red Barn began near the start of the spring, although March had been operating the venue for months before that, Sweet said.

When March bought the property, she stated her intent to use it for political purposes, Sweet said. However, staff saw on Facebook that she was advertising for events such as happy hours, weddings, birthday celebrations and "anything your heart desires," said the county administrator, who quoted some of the exact wording he saw.

Staff then relayed to March that the property needed to meet a number of requirements such as the acquisition of a business license, Sweet said.

Ashlyn Shrewsbury, the county's planning and zoning director, addressed the matter herself in a Aug. 12 letter to the editor in the Pulaski-based The Patriot newspaper.

Shrewsbury wrote that she decided to write the letter, which she specified came from her department on behalf of the county attorney, after many citizens had expressed safety concerns over the entrance to the

property and after months of unsuccessful efforts to bring the property into full compliance. The planning and zoning director said her intent was not to point fingers but instead provide facts and transparency to citizens on the matter.

“When Ms. March took over the Big Red Barn property, county staff took the time to meet with Ms. March on site on March 15, 2022 to discuss the future uses of the property and what would be needed at the county level in order to comply,” Shrewsbury wrote. “Over the last five months, most of the requests have not been completed and most all of the issues are still prevalent.”

Shrewsbury spoke on the need for every business owner to get a business license and to file for a zoning permit, which she said is required any time a property changes its use or occupancy. She described the process as “not a tremendous ask,” saying the zoning permit only costs \$25. She said the property has received a business license, but that a zoning permit has never been filed.

Additionally, Shrewsbury said there are several requirements that must be met to operate a legal business at the Red Barn based on the type of uses the property has marketed. She listed a number of required conditions for the operation of a wedding venue, agritourism and a social club or event center, the latter of which she said requires a special use permit.

“All of these types of uses have been marketed by the Big Red Barn owners and staff,” Shrewsbury wrote. “These asks do not put a major strain on property owners and are in place to make sure that every business is safe for users and the citizens surrounding the property.”

Shrewsbury’s letter came out a week after March penned a piece in *The Patriot* about her dealings with the county. In her letter, titled “Appalled at the political games,” the lawmaker argued that it was instead her who was the target of bullying and “dirty political games.”

“From day one, I have received threats, bullying and intimidation from Jonathan Sweet. He just sent the newest threat from the county attorney and is attempting to make us apply for a special use permit to use our barn,” wrote March, who spoke about the property’s history and about once hosting an event there for Gov. Glenn Youngkin. “This reminds me of the story I read a while back about the kid that wasn’t allowed to ride his dirt bike in his own yard. A blatant violation of his property rights.”

Pulaski County Attorney Tim Kirtner sent a letter to the Red Barn owner in July where he covered much of the same points noted by Shrewsbury. Kirtner spoke on the county’s so-called Unified Development Ordinance, which the locality says allows potential buyers of property to know in advance the uses they may make of their own properties and to anticipate the uses that may be made of neighboring properties.

“Unfortunately, it is the matter of enforcement of the UDO that occasions my letter to you,” Kirtner wrote. “The county has received multiple complaints that various land uses at 4241 Lee Highway ... violate certain sections of the UDO. As an initial matter, the property is required to have a zoning permit filed with the Pulaski County Planning and Zoning Department per the UDO.”

Sweet had asked in an April email about the name and business license number for an auto repair and body shop that he said staff had seen in operation during a site visit on March 15.

“Apparently, that fella was fixing his own vehicles there. He wasn’t a business,” March wrote in response.

Still, Sweet pressed the issue of the property still not meeting the zoning requirements.

“Please be advised, pursuant to your website: (<https://bigredpulaski.com/>) you appear to have been, and continuing to be, operating a business operation(s) at the ‘Big Red Barn’ that may require a business license with the Commissioner of the Revenue,” Sweet wrote to March in an April 14 email. “I took the liberty of checking and it does not appear that there is one on file for the Big Red Barn nor any of the previous leased-space operations that have been conducted on the premises (i.e. auto repair).”

March replied, saying the barn was used by the Pulaski County GOP for political events. She said Blackburn, the venue’s manager, had been working with the fire marshal to ensure everything was in compliance.

“There’s many discrepancies, accusations and falsehoods in your email below. I have not been told of any building code violations, zoning or business licensure issues until the email below threatening to charge me with a Class 2 misdemeanor,” March wrote in the April 14 response to Sweet. “Do you treat all new property owners with such treatment or is this merely a political attack?”

In his own reply a few days later, Sweet wrote that the answer to her “poignant question is simply no.”

“No, we do not treat all of our new property owners with such treatment,” he wrote. “We have actually bent over backwards to assist you and have looked the other way when you shared that the only thing that has taken place at the barn are political functions, and then we discover an autobody shop in operation upon the premise with three vehicles being worked on.”

March again denied the existence of an auto shop at the property.

“There has never been [an] ‘auto body shop’ operating in the barn,” she wrote. “And I’ve told you that multiple times. A friend of Brenda had a young fella that was working on his own vehicles and farm equipment. Brenda let him use the space.”

March eventually made public records requests, asking for Sweet’s expense reports over the past two years, his board appointments and an alleged conversation between the administrator and Pulaski County Supervisor Andy McCready regarding the barn.

Sweet said he obliged as is required of him by freedom of information law. He said he had absolutely nothing to hide.

The county didn’t produce the alleged conversation between Sweet and McCready as staff said the record doesn’t exist.

Sweet said he viewed the records request as an attempt to intimidate him. He said a person connected to March had initially requested all emails the administrator had ever sent. He said he would have had to produce a whopping amount of documents.

“We told him it was going to be very expensive to do, and he ended up backing off and condensed the request,” Sweet said. “This is what they do. She’s a bully.”

While the Red Barn property has satisfied some requirements, such as obtaining the so-called change in use permit, it has not met other mandates, Sweet said.

“A special use permit has never been obtained for certain uses that were advertised and continue to be enjoyed upon the property that do not fall under the change in use permit beyond the stated civic and occasional religious worship services within the agricultural zone district,” Sweet wrote in an email.

Despite repeated requests, March has declined to speak further on the zoning issue and has directed questions about the matter to her attorney, Michael Barbour.

Barbour referred to the fulfillment of the change in use permit request in August. He said he hasn’t heard from the county since, leading him to assume there aren’t further problems.

“I was not aware of any continuing concerns on the part of the county until I read Mr. Sweet’s article in [the Cardinal News],” said Barbour, who was referring to an online news outlet and who described the Pulaski County administrator’s speaking up about the issue to media as unusual.

Sweet said the county has never fined March or ever issued a misdemeanor or zoning violation.

“We went above and beyond to try to work with her while she operated knowingly more than five months in non-compliance,” he wrote in an email.

Alleged incident at NRV Fair

Another situation Sweet brought up was an incident at the New River Valley Fair in Pulaski County earlier this year that he said led March to make “outlandish accusations” similar to the ones she’s currently making against Williams.

Sweet shared a screenshot of a Facebook post from March in which the delegate addresses comments a citizen made about her while at a Pulaski County GOP booth during the fair. March wasn’t present for the incident, but she said she had received a phone call telling her a man had pointed at her picture and stated “that he was going to ‘take her out’ and ‘he is going to get rid of her.’”

March wrote that the comments from the man drew fears at the booth, which prompted the call.

“This is exactly what school shooters do - they boast, make threats on social media and inform the public of their devious, sinister plan before they harm people,” she wrote.

The description of the incident by March was inaccurate and was another example of her tactics, Sweet said.

“I personally discussed the alleged occurrence with neutral witnesses and with law enforcement, what she claims and the hyperbole that she adds was not remotely accurate and was all contrived for her aggrandizement of victimhood,” Sweet wrote.

The man who was at the center of that event at the fair is E.W. Harless, who spoke with The Roanoke Times about the incident.

Harless said he had stopped by the booth where he signed a petition on the subject of school choice.

Harless said he gave the issue some more thought afterward and returned to the booth to scratch his name from the petition. He disagrees with much of the points being raised on the matter by members of the GOP.

Harless, who's no longer a member of the local Republican Party, said he then spoke at greater length with a member of the Pulaski County GOP about issues he's had with the political party in recent times. Among other things, he said he voiced displeasure with many party members' acceptance of QAnon, a political movement that's been adopted by many far-right activists but that has received much scrutiny over its beliefs and claims.

Harless said he at some point made a comment along the lines of "between you and that lady sitting over there." He said the woman he was referencing was Blackburn. Harless said Blackburn then jumped up and made repeated threats to take legal action against him.

Harless acknowledges that he does talk rather loudly due to issues with his hearing, but he refuted the claims that he ever made any threats of harm toward March. Although tensions were raised, he said the incident ended without any serious conflict.

"That's it. That's exactly what happened," he said. "When [March] wrote what she wrote ... my goodness."

Blackburn, however, stands behind the version March referred and said Harless even made a threat toward her that day. Blackburn said Harless indeed pointed to March's picture and said: "I'm going to get her gone' or something like, and 'I'm going to take her [Blackburn] out.'"

Blackburn said she views the recent incidents as nothing more than a series of attempts by several in the establishment to stop her. She said the lawmaker has otherwise brought much good to the area.

"I will stand up for Marie March to the bitter end. She's not a liar. She's not a thief," Blackburn said. "We got a gang of wolves in sheep's clothing."

THE ROANOKE TIMES

OCTOBER 9, 2022

Contention surrounds race

By Luke Weir

HILLSVILLE — State delegates Marie March of Floyd County and Wren Williams of Patrick County are set to faceoff in a courtroom over an assault charge later this year.

But the two Republicans, competing against each other in a new House of Delegates district, are also in a politically charged situation over the method that will decide the nominee in next year's election as both use words such as "liar," "unfit for office," and "bully" to describe each other.

The new 47th House District includes Carroll, Patrick, and Floyd counties, part of Henry County and the city of Galax. The district includes areas that are traditionally majority Republican.

March and Williams, both in their first legislative terms, know the winner of their intraparty race will make them the likely frontrunner in the 2023 general election.

That alone makes their race more intense.

At a Republican function in Wytheville last month, as Williams was leaving the meeting, March alleges that he made physical contact with her to the degree that she filed an assault charge. Williams has denied that.

At play that evening was the issue of the nomination process.

“They’re actually trying to rig a convention against me,” Williams said to police that evening, according to body-camera footage.

Williams says he would prefer a primary, which would include voting at regular precincts across the district. A convention, on the other hand, would be a set event in one location where nominations are traditionally decided by fewer people.

March declined a request for an interview about the ongoing politics. When asked over text message whether she supports a primary, March said to contact her campaign team.

“None of that is up to me. It is up to the GOP chairs in the district,” March said in a text message.

“There’s a variety of ways to elect candidates including firehouse primary, convention, state primary.”

She provided a phone number for political consultant Chris Shores, whose phone went straight to voicemail when called, and the voice mailbox was full.

Shores and his wife Diana drew numerous comments from others, including Williams.

“The Shores are well known in the Republican Party of Virginia to work the party system and manipulate outdated rules and things like that, in order to rig the method of nomination,” Williams said. “They will help manipulate the chairman of the different units within the district, in order to determine what that method of nomination is going to look like ... And they operate in a ‘catch me if you can’ fashion.”

“It is one of those things that is a little back-room,” said Phil Hawks, acting Carroll County party chairman. “It’s troubling, because to me, it kind of stinks of, well, in one way, it’s almost like an election rigging.”

Contacted by phone for comment about Chris Shores’ alleged activity in Carroll County, Diana Shores also declined to answer questions.

“We don’t give out any of that information, and we don’t have any comment on anything that you’d be working on in relation to any of the clients that we work for,” Diana Shores said. “I have no comment about any of the clients we may or may not have.”

Carroll County Republican David Riggen sent emails to fellow party members detailing his concerns.

Problems seemed to arise in Carroll County during an impromptu Republican meeting that was meant to coordinate volunteer planning efforts ahead of an October dinner fundraiser, Riggen said and Hawks confirmed.

“A couple of agitators started complaining and causing strife, which led to all this, which is just the undercurrent, apparently, of stopping the primary, so the people don't have a right to vote who we appoint,” Riggen said. “Instead of fighting for the betterment of our country, we’re dividing ourselves up and not accomplishing anything, which is causing a lot of people to second-guess their volunteering in a situation like this.”

According to members of the party, Chris Shores was present at that unofficial Carroll County GOP organizational meeting in September.

“The Shores, they’ve been known for having a reputation for manipulating conventions, and that's just something we're not used to,” Hawks said. “In Carroll County, we have a storied history of holding primaries, and allowing our citizens to have a say in who represents them.”

Riggen sent an email to fellow party members to share a text message received ahead of the unofficial September meeting. That text, according to Riggen's email, was from Carroll County Board of Supervisors member Jody Early.

“If you two would like to come a little early you can meet with Chris Shores, an advisor to Marie March,” the text message reads. “He is going to help us change leadership in the party.”

Early said in an email that he is uninvolved.

“I have nothing to do with the change of leadership in the party,” Early wrote. “The extent of my interaction with our local party is as a committee member because I am an elected member of the Carroll County Board of Supervisors.”

When asked about the text message, he would neither confirm nor deny the authenticity of that interaction.

“Perhaps you should bother someone more aligned with your agenda,” Early said in the email.

U.S. Rep. Morgan Griffith, R-Salem, whose congressional district overlaps the 47th District, said he has heard about the rumblings, but he did not weigh-in on the debate over a primary, convention, or some other means of determining the Republican nominee.

“That’s up to the district committee to figure out, and I’ll leave it up to the district committee,” Griffith said during a phone call. “Obviously, it’s a very tense time for the two announced candidates.”

The district committee is automatically comprised of the chairpersons from the local Republican parties, Griffith said. In this case, five Republicans, each with a weighted vote based on their localities' populations, will meet sometime in the early part of 2023 to decide the nomination method.

“Normally the district committee meeting is not a public meeting,” Griffith said. “This one is a little more contentious than some, but I have known of situations where they do it by phone.”

Continuing, Griffith said: "In theory, this could have some positive side effects. As people get interested in an election, more people will go, whether it's a primary or a convention, or a mass meeting or firehouse primary. Whatever the committee decides to do. It has a tendency to bring more people into the party. Some will show up just once, but some will actually show up and become more active in the local units across the entire area."

THE ROANOKE TIMES

SEPTEMBER 30, 2022

Williams' witness: No shove in Wytheville

By Mike Gangloff

Brush, bump, or shoulder slam: The tiff between Virginia House of Delegates members — and expected GOP primary opponents — Wren Williams and Marie March continued Thursday with Williams announcing that a witness had come forward to back his version of events.

That version was that Williams did not commit assault and battery against his legislative colleague, as March claimed in a criminal warrant sworn out at the end of a Republican Party gathering Saturday in Wytheville. March said that as people were walking out of the event at the Wytheville Meeting Center, Williams changed course in the center's lobby to ram into her, or "intentionally pushed/shoulder slammed into me," as she said in the warrant.

Williams said Sunday that he accidentally bumped into March and apologized. He presently has a hearing on the misdemeanor charge scheduled for Dec. 15 in Wythe County General District Court.

March and Williams, both first-term delegates, presently represent the 7th and 9th House districts, respectively. But redistricting approved in December put both delegates in the new 47th House District and both have said they plan to compete for the Republican nomination for the new seat. The nomination process probably won't start until next year but Williams and March have been criticizing one another's positions for months.

This week, however, it was the accusation of delegate-on-delegate assault that stirred hubbub. The legislators issued dueling statements and both sent out video clips that they said supported their accounts.

Williams' released grainy footage from the meeting center's security cameras that was too indistinct to show details of the encounter. But the video did not show anyone reeling away from anyone else. A second part of the video that Williams released was higher resolution and showed March reenacting the encounter for police officers, waving her arms over her head and taking three steps backward.

March responded with body camera videos from police officers, including one that showed Williams, a criminal defense attorney, at first declining to give even his name to an officer who followed him into the parking lot.

March's version of events has been supported by Carroll County Supervisor Jody Early, who said Sunday that he was standing near March and it looked to him like Williams "intentionally veered over" to run into March.

On Thursday, Williams presented his own witness: Debra Atwell, the treasurer of Washington County's local Republican Party.

In a news release, Williams relayed that Atwell, of Abingdon, was standing directly behind March when the two delegates met.

It was not a hard bump, Atwell said in Williams' statement. "It was just like if you passed someone in the airport and brushed against their shoulder. She didn't waver at all, or even move."

"He did not veer to hit her ... As soon as they had the shoulder tap, Wren turned around and said, 'Oh, excuse me, I'm sorry.' ... I didn't think anything of what had happened," Atwell continued.

It was not until Monday, when a friend showed Atwell a news article, that she realized a criminal charge had followed, Atwell said.

"I think these charges are ludicrous. ... I was shocked and appalled and disgusted that Marie March had blown this so far out of proportion — way, way out of proportion. Marie's response has been ludicrous and crazy."

In Williams' statement, Atwell called on March to drop the charge, adding, "I hope that we can all heal as a party from this misunderstanding."

Reached by telephone Thursday, Atwell said that if the charge actually makes it to court, she was ready to testify on Williams' behalf. Atwell said that she was moved to contact Williams by the video that showed March talking to police and seeming to show the contact made her lurch backwards.

"I was standing right behind her. She did not stagger. If she did stagger, she would have knocked right into me," Atwell emphasized.

"That totally did not happen," Atwell said.

Atwell said that she had known Williams for several years and did not think of him as a troublemaker. She said that she knew March through being at party events but did not know her personally.

Atwell said that she had not realized until this week that the two delegates were now in the same district.

March did not reply to a message seeking comment Thursday afternoon.

In his statement, Williams thanked Atwell.

Of his likely primary rival, Williams said, "It is sickening that March has continued to double down on her lies to police officers that evening, claiming this was 'Assault and Battery.' Nothing could be further from the truth. This is truly unhinged behavior. March is putting spectacle over decency, and that is unbecoming of an elected official."

THE ROANOKE TIMES
SEPTEMBER 28, 2022

Delegates offer videos in assault allegation

By Luke Weir

Two competing state delegates have provided video related to an alleged shoving incident at a Wytheville GOP event last weekend, as the case awaits a December court hearing.

Del. Marie March, R-Floyd, filed a criminal complaint Saturday against Del. Wren Williams, R-Patrick, alleging misdemeanor assault and battery, saying he shoved her at a Ninth Congressional District Republican celebration in Wytheville that night.

In response, Williams said he accidentally bumped March's shoulder and elbow on his way toward the exit, then apologized and continued out the door.

Late Monday, Williams submitted to The Roanoke Times a copy of surveillance camera video from the Wytheville Meeting Center, where the Republican gathering was held. In a written statement, Williams said the security footage shows the moment of the alleged incident.

"In the black-and-white clip, you can see me walk with my [legislative aide] and my wife toward the exit," Williams said. "Ms. March moves towards me, I move away from her and check back to see if she's OK before leaving the building."

But the security footage is of poor, grainy quality, making it difficult for viewers to distinguish anyone specific in the video, or the finer details of their actions. A spokesperson for Williams said the footage was acquired through a Freedom of Information Act request.

"The worst part is that she is lying to police and wasting their valuable time and resources," Williams said of March. "I want to thank all of the law enforcement involved on that evening. I appreciate your patience, your thoroughness, and your willingness to serve, even in a situation you should have never been placed in."

When asked for comment on the video submitted by Williams, March on Tuesday responded with three clips of video footage from Wytheville police body cameras, also acquired through freedom of information requests. Those videos show a police officer stopping and questioning Williams outside the event venue as the delegate attempted to leave.

"I'm sorry that she is telling you these things," Williams said to the police officer in the body camera recording. "I walked through the door. I did not do anything intentionally to Marie March."

Minutes later inside the event venue, March told police she wanted to file charges, according to the body camera footage.

"He body-slammed me as hard as he could," March told a police officer. "I don't know if he's lost his mind or what, doing that in front of a group of people, but I'm not going to get picked on."

In a written statement, March said the police body camera footage shows Williams carefully choosing his words, and that the truth will prevail.

“He states that he did not act ‘intentionally,’ however he did not deny the action itself,” March said. “In addition to his attempts to avoid legal responsibility, he released an incomplete and grainy video in an attempt to conceal his actions.”

Williams said the police body camera footage showed him acting understandably frustrated, as he was caught off-guard by the spectacle.

“I am also a criminal defense attorney by trade and understand what can happen when falsely accused people speak emotionally in these situations,” Williams said. “I conducted myself in exactly the way that I would advise any of my falsely accused clients to conduct themselves in that kind of situation.”

Both first-term Republican state delegates anticipate competing against each other in 2023 to represent the newly drawn House of Delegates District 47, which includes Carroll, Floyd and Patrick counties, plus western Henry County and Galax.

But before they compete in a Republican primary, they will contend against each other in Wythe County General District Court, with an arraignment for Williams scheduled Nov. 21, and a hearing set for Dec. 15.

Near the end of the police camera footage, one officer says to March:

“I mean, this is... this is teenaged ... If you wish to go down to the magistrate’s office, I’ll go down there with you.”

THE ROANOKE TIMES

SEPTEMBER 26, 2022

Delegate claims she was assaulted

By Mike Gangloff

Correction - An article published Sept. 26 about an allegation of assault made by state Del. Marie March against fellow Del. Wren Williams incorrectly reported the date of Williams' November arraignment in Wythe County General District Court, which is scheduled for Nov. 21. A subsequent hearing in the case is scheduled for Dec. 15.

Del. Marie March, R-Floyd, filed a criminal complaint Saturday against another Republican delegate who is expected to be her primary opponent next year, saying the other delegate shoved her at a GOP event in Wytheville.

The misdemeanor assault and battery charge against Del. Wren Williams, R-Patrick, means that he and March will face one another in a courtroom before they compete for the party's nomination to represent a redrawn legislative district. A hearing was scheduled for Nov. 24 in Wythe County General District Court.

Both delegates were upset Sunday as they described the incident.

"Another explosive, unhinged reaction," Williams said of his fellow legislator's response.

"He's a bully," March said.

Unsurprisingly, the two General Assembly members had very different descriptions of what occurred the night before at the Ninth Congressional District Republican Celebration.

Both said that the gala — held at the Wytheville Meeting Center with dinner, live music and speeches from Ninth District U.S. Rep. Morgan Griffith and others — was winding down when their paths came together. March said she was standing near an exit with some staff members, talking to people as they left. Williams said that he and his "team" watched for about 20 minutes, waiting for March to leave.

But Williams said that eventually, he and his wife, who he said is six months pregnant and had had enough of the noise, decided it was time to go home.

The two delegates collided.

Williams said that as he made his way through the people at the exit, he accidentally bumped into March's shoulder and elbow. Williams said that he apologized and kept going. "I did not intentionally do anything to Ms. March," Williams said.

March said that Williams "kind of came barreling out of the room" and that "one of my witnesses" saw Williams change course "to slam into me."

"The fact that we're in an election, it obviously was intentional," March said.

March said Sunday that though the impact had been forceful, she was fine.

March said that earlier in the evening, before the physical contact, Williams picked a verbal fight with one of her staff members and grabbed one of her interns by the arm. "I definitely think he's unfit for office since he can't control his emotions," March said.

Williams said that after the contact, March "just lost her mind. She was racing around the room trying to convince everybody that I'd bumped into her."

But, Williams continued, "the only person who thinks this is a crime is Marie March."

However, Carroll County Supervisor Jody Early said Sunday that he was at the GOP dinner and saw what he thought was Williams purposefully shoving or elbowing March.

Early said that he had his own unpleasant encounter with Williams just before March's — that he was near the exit talking with the party's state chairman when Williams approached, pointed at Early and told the chairman to watch out, that Early was "trying to screw me over," apparently a reference to the upcoming nomination contest.

Williams walked away, then came past with his wife a few moments later, Early said.

"At that point most everybody had left, it wasn't that crowded. ... If they wanted to leave they could have said excuse us," Early said. "... It appeared to me that he intentionally veered over toward Del. March."

The conflict between the two first-term delegates began when Virginia's every-decade re-drawing of legislative lines erased their existing seats and left March and Williams both in the new 47th District, which includes Floyd, Patrick and Carroll counties, western Henry County and Galax. It is seen as a district likely to favor Republicans in the November 2023 election.

The date and other details of the GOP nominating contest for the new district have not been set but Williams and March began positioning themselves months ago.

Williams called March's actions Saturday "a complete political hit job."

Williams said that he was wary of March before Saturday and that he and an aide had once declined to ride an elevator alone with March and one of her aides because he was worried that she would claim something inappropriate was said or done.

"You can't be alone with her, you can't be on the phone with her, you can't trust her," Williams said.

March said that it was Williams whose behavior was inappropriate. "He's a spoiled rich kid and he's never been told no and he runs around bullying people," March said.

The scathing comments and criminal warrant were a stark contrast to what Williams said was the message that Griffith and other speakers tried to deliver earlier Saturday, before the delegates' confrontation: a call for party unity.