

OPINION & COMMENTARY

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EMPOWERING PEOPLE AND THEIR PASSIONS

The Times-Mirror is dedicated to the people of Loudoun County and the passions that define their lives. Tracing its lineage in the county to 1798, the Times-Mirror remains a vital link of communication that keeps the community informed of the changing events, issues and characters in our unique part of the world. Our goal remains to provide citizens with the information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, their communities, their societies and their governments.

OUR VIEW

Release the report

This week, during the Loudoun County Public Schools' most recent board meeting, the school board faced a number of calls to release the school system's commissioned independent review of what happened during and after the now infamous sexual assaults committed by one student at two high schools.

The case, and its extended fallout, likely needs no introduction at this point, taking up the collective attention of Loudoun County for the better part of two years — especially not after the damning grand jury report which led to the ouster of former Superintendent Scott Ziegler.

But the grand jury report, from a grand jury convened by Attorney General Jason Miyares at the behest of Gov. Glenn Youngkin, into the pair of assaults and LCPS's subsequent handling of them isn't the only report to delve into them. A year ago, Fairfax-based law firm Blankingship & Keith finished its own report, commissioned directly by the school system itself.

And yet, as of time of writing, this report hasn't been made public. The question is: why?

A speaker at this week's meeting, Susan Cox, said she's been looking for the review to be released for some time now.

"I have been calling for this release over and over again to no avail," she said during the meeting. "Release the independent investigation. Be a start for healing and rebuilding trust in this community."

Cox's point was redoubled by a number of speakers during the meeting, and they all served as an echo of last week's Loudoun County Board of Supervisors meeting, where a number of supervisors called for the review to be released as well.

At this point, after the release of the grand jury report, it does seem unclear what new revelations are to be gleaned from the school's independent review; it seems perhaps unlikely that there were stones left unturned by the grand jury which were uncovered by this other review.

But on the same token, it seems equally unclear what good comes from not releasing the review. Every day that passes without it being released is another day for the public to question what's in it — and another day for them to draw potentially incorrect conclusions about why it isn't being released.

As Cox and others suggested, releasing the report would be an important step in rebuilding trust with the community. From the beginning, this case has been as much about LCPS's transparency as it's been about the

assaults themselves, and by not releasing the report, LCPS is doing themselves no favors in convincing the public they've made strides in improving transparency.

But releasing it would be far from the only step necessary to rebuild trust, and it must be acknowledged that, this week, Interim Superintendent Daniel W. Smith announced some of the steps being taken to prevent anything like this from happening again, including meeting with top law enforcement officers around the county to increase communications between LCPS and the Loudoun County Sheriff's Office and police departments in Leesburg and Purcellville.

Smith also highlighted the hiring of a new Title IX coordinator, who will oversee the implementation of the federal anti-discrimination law throughout the district, improvements for case management for students with behavioral problems and the creation of transition teams and student bodies to assist students in a number of capacities.

These steps, and others, will be important for convincing the public to trust LCPS once again. And, once enough time has passed, perhaps full trust will be returned to the school system.

But that won't happen as long as the public still wonders what's in the report.

THE BUZZ

Stories from the Times-Mirror that have people buzzing on social media.



"We should focus on protecting against the harms that come from the speech rather than the speech itself"

SAM KROIZ

On "Hate speech" ban sought at LCPS meetings via online petition"



"Should have listened to the parents that he ignored and lied to...."

JACK RYAN

On "Ex-superintendent's attorney says his prosecution politically motivated"



"and in other news, three Loudoun high schools committed the TJ oopsie of not notifying kids of their National Merit awards..."

BARBARA MUNSEY

On "Speakers demand LCPS release sex assault report"



"He has kept our county safe and whatever his politics... that is what he was elected to do. I'll vote for him again because he has proven to be great at being our Sheriff and keeping us safe!"

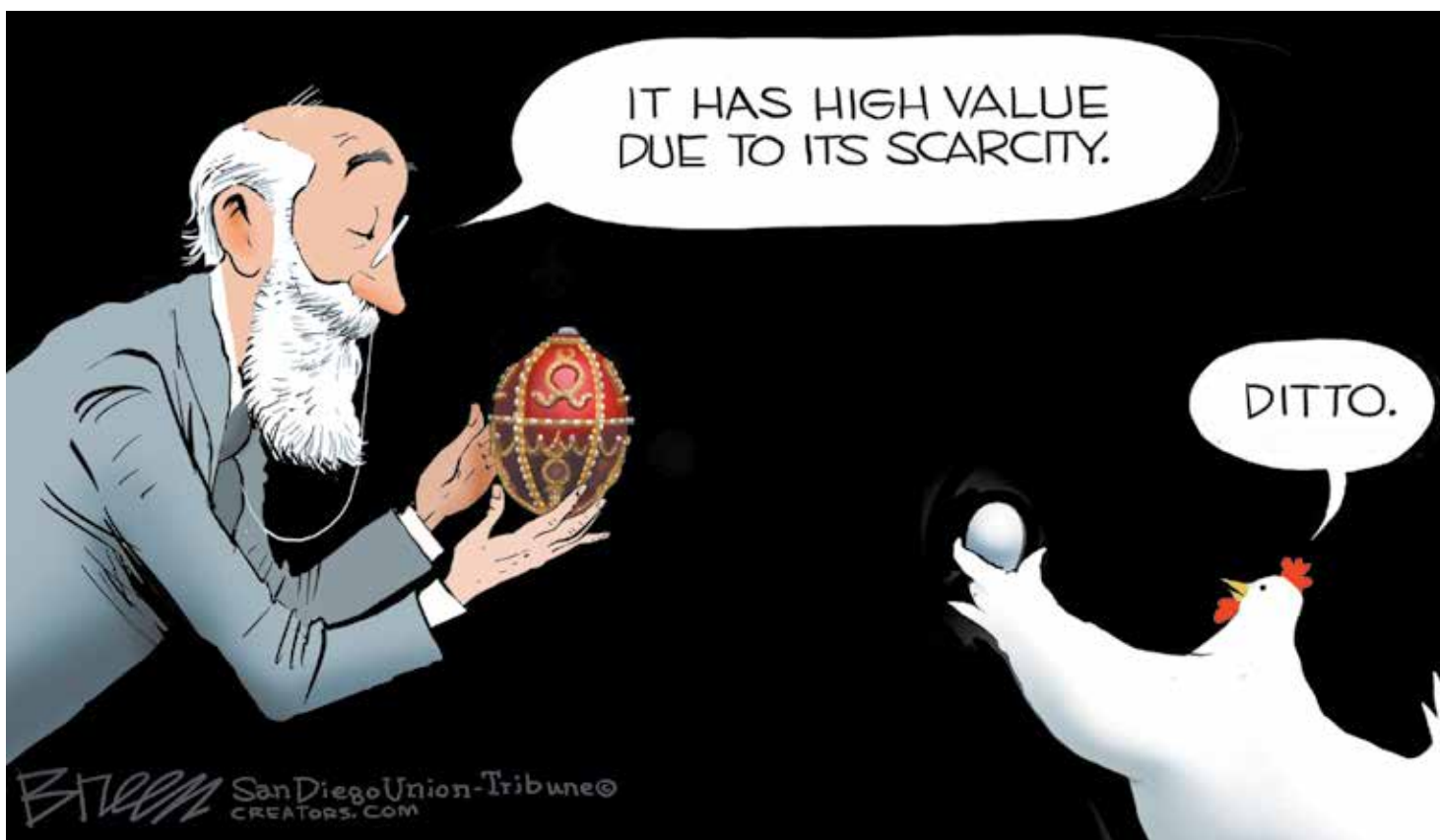
NANCY JACKSON

GIORDANO

On "Chapman announces bid for fourth term as Loudoun County Sheriff"

STORY COMMENTS

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OUR VIEW

Residents should think carefully when asking for fewer data centers

Where here at the Loudoun Times-Mirror hear a lot of talk about data centers.

We're sure you do, too.

Over the past few decades, data centers here in Loudoun County have slowly (or perhaps not so slowly) grown to become one of the largest sources of economic gain for the county, and now the so-called Data Center Alley in the Ashburn area is the single largest concentration of data centers on the planet.

If you use cloud storage on any of your devices, there's a good chance your photos are stored on some server somewhere here in Loudoun County, whether you're a local resident or you've stumbled upon this editorial somehow from your home halfway across the world.

It appears a lot of the talk we hear about data centers comes from folks who are upset by how many of them there are, how unsightly they are, how much energy they use and other issues. And while we can understand and appreciate these issues — the hulking, boxy buildings certainly aren't exactly a sight for sore eyes — there's something else Loudouners must consider when thinking about what to do with future data centers.

The county is currently projected to be sitting on a surplus of \$146 million by the end of its fiscal year, at the end of June. The largest portion of that money, according to Caleb Weitz, the county's assistant budget director, comes directly from real estate tax revenue, and the largest portion of that comes from tax revenue on data centers.

And in this coming fiscal year's budget, more than a quarter of the county's entire tax revenue is coming from data centers.

It really can't be overstated how much good can be done with that kind of budget surplus. Let's look at the issues with schools, for example.

Due to an error from the Virginia Department of Education, school divisions around the commonwealth will be receiving millions of dollars less in funding than they should be receiving from the state. Loudoun County Public Schools is expected to receive \$13 million less in funds than it was supposed to as a result of this error at the state level.

But the Finance, Government Operations and Economic Development Committee voted this week to commit \$13 million of the county's fund balance to cover the shortfall for LCPS caused by the state department.

Other counties around the state will most assuredly not be so lucky, especially in rural areas where the Department of Education's error will be more keenly felt.

Here in Loudoun, the error can largely be ignored, thanks in no small part to the massive amount of tax revenue that comes directly from taxation of data centers. Couple this with the fact that the budget for LCPS is so high that \$13 million works out to almost be a rounding error, and it's clear that the tax revenue gathered from data centers is nothing short of a boon for the county.

There are obviously concerns. While we share climate concerns about data centers' massive use of electricity, it's worth noting that, unlike a factory spewing out toxic fumes, data centers' use of electricity doesn't have targeted, sight-specific climate effects. Whether a data center is here in Loudoun or somewhere in Minnesota, the same amount of electricity will be used, and it'll have the same overall

environmental impact for the planet, unlike other sorts of pollutants which will directly impact the area around them.

And, sure. We get it. The buildings are ugly. No disagreement there. But the current and future data centers only account for 1.6% of county land. While they may get an outsized sense of notoriety due to their proximity to busy highways in the area, when 98.4% of the county isn't data center property, it seems perhaps a little silly to complain about their aesthetics so much.

But, when we consider the fact that data centers drive massive revenue surpluses — and the fact that the areas where the data centers are going are zoned for by-right use and there isn't much that can be done to stop them from going in outside of rezoning those areas — Loudoun residents should be carefully considering what, exactly, it is they're asking for when they say they want fewer data centers.



THE BUZZ

Stories from the Times-Mirror that have people buzzing on social media.

“Great, now do the rest of the county!”

JOHN EBERSOLE

On “County explores ways to accelerate data center prohibition in Route 7 corridor”

“Loudoun County has pushed it's long time residents right out of the county because of it's development and high taxes. It's no longer the locals, it's the outer city residents who have moved in and took over turning Loudoun into Fairfax and other major cities.”

CAT COX

On “Loudoun residents give county high marks for economy, quality of life”

“Land cost fees and proffers. It's not going to happen unless you call affordable \$500,000”

RICK THOMAS

On “County moves to incentivize construction of price-controlled single-family detached homes”

“Watch for red flags such as frequent change of positions.”

CONNIE WELKE

On “LCPS board privately interviewing superintendent candidates”

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OUR VIEW

Spence's silence on overdoses risked deadly consequences

Once again, Loudoun County residents are understandably outraged by a botched response to a real and present danger in the place that kids should feel most safe: school.

In 2021, it was a sexual predator inexplicably transferred from one high school to another without any safeguards to protect the students to whom he would have access. That institutional incompetence gave him the opportunity to sexually assault another girl. He took it.

Two years later, we are again left confounded. Pills laced with a deadly synthetic opioid, fentanyl, are circulating in high schools and nearly two-dozen students have overdosed. Fortunately, all survived. Fentanyl, 50 times more potent than heroin, is essentially a loaded gun with the safety off.

Nearly 71,000 people nationwide died from synthetic opioids in 2021, the most recent year complete data is available from the CDC.

But Loudoun County Public Schools administrators, led by newly christened Superintendent Aaron Spence, made the unfathomable decision to withhold even basic information from the School Board and the public.

The only reason we know about any of this today is because of the Sheriff's Office. Sheriff Michael Chapman tried to convince Spence to do the right thing and inform the public. When that failed, Chapman authorized a press release on Oct. 31. The day before, the Times-Mirror, using information listed in a search warrant affidavit filed by a Sheriff's Office detective, was the first to report that at least one student had overdosed.

"There was not a decision made to withhold information, but I accept responsibility for your lack of awareness as I did not decide or direct my team to make you aware specifically," Spence said in a Nov. 1 email to a School Board member.

In a situation that requires forthrightness and clarity, those are hardly inspiring words. And it's telling that it took a Freedom of Information Act request to find out Spence "accept[ed] responsibility," even if he chose to do it in classical Bureaucratese.

Whether there was "a decision made to withhold information" doesn't matter. Warning the public that fentanyl was a tangible and present danger in schools could have made students think twice about swallowing the pills that could have killed them. Informing the community was the right thing to do. And Spence chose, whether actively or passively, not to do it.

Here's what Spence said at his introductory press conference in August, a few weeks before he began the job officially: "We know that for some, we need to rebuild trust and we're going to be working on that. But I also want to assure parents that the incredible experiences their children are having in our schools are going to continue."

Spence even created a new position, "chief of communications and community engagement," and hired Natalie Allen, his communications chief in Virginia Beach, to fill the role. "My intent always will be that communications are proactive and engagement is intentional, informative

and collaborative," Allen said in August.

The gravity of this situation compels us to be blunt. The inaction of Spence and his administration could have cost young people their lives. It could have extinguished a young person's opportunity for "incredible experiences."

Illicit narcotics are an international problem, and the school division can hardly be blamed that Loudoun is subject to the same forces that have destroyed lives across the globe. But Spence and his administration had in their power the ability to warn parents and students that these pills, circulating in at least several high schools, could be deadly. He did not.

"Intentional, informative and collaborative."

Spence reports to the School Board. The School Board is, collectively, his boss. Yet he didn't "inform" or "collaborate" with them — much less the parents and students with whom he promised to "rebuild trust."

Spence, to his partial credit, has been consistent in arguing that federal student-privacy laws — specifically, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act — may prohibit sharing any information about overdoses at schools, since doing so might effectively identify the student and their medical condition.

If that's true — if prohibiting schools from notifying the public about a deadly threat to students is the intent of the law — the law should be amended immediately. Even a hopelessly gridlocked Congress can agree that trying to prevent the deaths of young people is the bare minimum for a government entity responsible for their welfare.

But Spence also undercut his own argument after his hand was forced by the Sheriff's Office. He authorized a division-wide email to parents on Nov. 1 informing them of 10 overdoses at six high schools since August. (That number has since risen to 20.) Either notifying the public about overdoses violates federal privacy laws, or it doesn't. Figure it out.

Legal niceties aside, this is a life-and-death situation. We suspect most county residents would support Spence taking decisive action that could save the lives of young people, even if doing so meant the school division might have to settle a lawsuit over the interpretation of federal privacy laws.

This is institutional incompetence that looks a lot like the institutional incompetence Spence promised to reverse. We are exhausted by the PR-speak and excuses.

Fix it.

