

Hartford Courant

## CONNECTICUT

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## Hearing set for bear hunt proposal

New bill comes in wake of increased clashes with humans, including October attack on 10-year-old

By Kaitlin McCallum  
Hartford Courant

Connecticut legislators will consider again Friday whether to hold a bear hunt to control the state's growing population.

A public hearing on S.B. 1148, which would allow for an annual bear hunt, create provisions for killing nuisance bears and prohibit feeding potentially

dangerous animals — either intentionally or unintentionally, will begin at 11:30 a.m.

A bear hunt, which would be conducted in Litchfield County with admission by lottery, has been hotly debated for years as bears in Connecticut clash with people, encroaching on homes and yards, killing livestock and occasionally injuring people and pets.

S.B. 1148 would allow for up to 50 bears to be killed in the hunt and for the killing of any bears that damage crops, livestock or bees; that cause harm to a person or pet or that enter an occupied building.

This year's proposal follows the October 2022 attack of a 10-year-old boy who was playing in his grandfather's yard in Morris. The 250-pound male black bear reportedly punctured the boy's thigh, bit his foot and ankle and clawed his back as it attempted to drag him away.

The boy's grandfather was

able to drive the bear off but it returned, approaching the house and peering in the screen door before later being fatally shot by state police.

The incident and a rising number of conflicts with humans have reignited support for a bear hunt to reduce the state's increasing population.

State Rep. Karen Reddington-Hughes, R-Woodbury, who introduced the bill, said the Morris attack is "a disturbing illustration of what happens when we do nothing," she said. "It was

years of not doing anything, and that is basically the unintended consequence of that."

DEEP Commissioner Katie Dykes has previously voiced support for a hunt and reiterated her support this year.

Already hundreds of people have submitted testimony on the bill, both those in support and those who say killing bears is inhumane and that people should learn to coexist with bears on land that was originally their habitat.

Turn to Bears, Page 3

## McGinnis sworn in for West Hartford

Davidoff replacement gives council 'majority of women' for 1st time

By Susan Dunne  
Hartford Courant

Tiffani McGinnis was sworn in on Wednesday night to replace West Hartford town councilman Leon Davidoff, who resigned from the council Feb. 28 to become town clerk.

McGinnis, vice chair of West Hartford Democrats, will serve until Nov. 21. The next general election is Nov. 7.

The vote to approve McGinnis was unanimous. She was sworn in to office by Essie Labrot, the town clerk who will be succeeded by Davidoff after she retires on April 6.

Mayor Shari Cantor commented after McGinnis' swearing-in "On International Women's Day, the council has for the first time a majority of women."

At the council's Feb. 28 meeting, Davidoff was lavishly praised by fellow council members and a General Assembly delegation for his service to the town. This included 16 years on the council, four of them as deputy mayor, and seven years on the planning and zoning commission.

Colleagues poked fun at Davidoff's lengthy testimonies in meetings but expressed admiration for his integrity.

"Leon Davidoff is a wonderful listener who works to find consensus and common ground with stability and decency and is a highly respected elected official," Mayor Shari Cantor said. "Town council meetings have been more meaningful and yes, a bit longer because of Leon."

Councilman Alberto Cortes said he respected Davidoff's insistence on putting his opinions on the record.

"Sometimes it's 22 minutes of 'on the record.' I wish it would be shorter sometimes. But I understand the importance and that shows your love for our community," Cortes said.

Turn to Council, Page 3



## 'SHAME ON US'

Lawmakers, union demand restoration of substance abuse recovery programs

By Deidre Montague | Hartford Courant

Connecticut state employee Latoya Pemberton acknowledged right away that she was nervous about speaking in front of a crowd, but also said she knew her message was too strong to let fear stop her.

Pemberton is a recovery support specialist for the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, and she joined other SEIU 1199 unionized mental health providers, community leaders, and elected officials in a call for Connecticut to restore certain substance abuse recovery programs for women and girls.

"I also crawled into an addiction facility. I did not know where my lifeline was going to come from. And I thought I was dead," Pemberton said of her own experience. "The only thing that was alive about me was that I was blinking. And they took me in. I didn't have to concern myself with dollars and cents, because I needed to save my life that day. I'm so thankful for that amount of love that was given to me when I walked into that detox," she said.

The providers and advocates made their call for restoration as part of International Women's Day at the State Capitol; SEIU 1199 members said the state is turning women and girls away from receiving "life-changing and lifesaving services due to the staffing crisis."

Specifically, they said the DMHAS in-patient treatment STAR program for women had 30 beds that have been consolidated with the men's units since the beginning of the COVID pandemic and has not been restored, and the Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility for girls was closed by the Department of Children and Families.

Turn to Recovery, Page 3

Latoya Pemberton, a recovery support specialist at Connecticut Valley Hospital, calls for the reopening of the STAR program for women at DMHAS and the Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility for girls at DCF. DEIDRE MONTAGUE/HARTFORD COURANT

## THEATER REVIEW

## 'HadesTown' a hot time in Hartford

By Christopher Arnott  
Hartford Courant

Ever hear the entire cavernous Mortensen Hall at The Bushnell fall entirely quiet in rapt anticipation? Thousands of people waiting for a word or a song or a smile that will quench their anticipation and lead them to the next exciting phase of an engrossing story? Yeah, it doesn't happen very often.

"HadesTown" is casting that special spell at The Bushnell this week.

The hit Broadway musical by Anais Mitchell conjures that spine-tingling suspenseful feeling and does it with a story that's thousands of years old. The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is one of the classic boy/girl love stories of all time. "HadesTown" makes it sound fresh and relevant.

Shivers go up your spine as

**IF YOU GO:** "HadesTown" runs through Saturday at The Bushnell, 166 Capitol Ave., Hartford. Performances are Friday at 8 p.m., Saturday at 2 and 8 p.m. and Sunday at 1 and 6:30 p.m. \$51-\$174. Find more info at bushnell.org.

you contemplate the fate of two people in love who've been brought to the depths of hell. They talk to Hades himself, gain sympathy from Persephone and commune with a stomping, twisting bunch of demonic workers.

Smoke rolls down the aisles of The Bushnell. Ethereal sounds raise your spirits, then doom-laden lighting effects dash them. This is a fraught journey and an endlessly invigorating one.

Besides being mystical, moody and contemplative, "HadesTown" is jazzy and jaunty.

Its style works for fans of traditional musicals, with easy-to-follow songs and stories about finding love and finding oneself. But this is also a show for fans of Tom Waits, Nick Cave, Max Fleischer cartoons, Bessie Smith, Robert Johnson and other gritty jazz/blues totems. It also recalls the experimental Sarah Ruhl play "Eurydice," which was adapted into an opera in 2020, drawn from the same myth but with different conclusions.

Yet "HadesTown" is its own divine thing, not fitting easy comparisons with any other theater event. The earthy atmosphere and haunted bar room setting may remind you briefly of shows like "Once" "Rent" and even "Stomp," and also of the plays of Jean Genet or Jean-Paul Sartre, but all references fall

Turn to Review, Page 3

## Slain Bristol cop's wife gives birth to daughter

Officers gather at hospital to show their support

By Justin Muszynski  
Hartford Courant

The morning after two police officers were gunned down in Bristol in October, the walls of the fire department's Engine Company 4 on Vincent P. Kelly Road were met with gasps.

The grim reaction took place in a room crowded with reporters and camera operators learning for the first time at a news conference that one of the two slain officers had a child on the way whom he would never meet.

Lt. Dustin DeMonte's daughter, Penelope Dustin-Ann DeMonte, was born Monday at 12:35 p.m. at 7 pounds, 3.7 ounces.

On her way out of the hospital Tuesday morning Penelope

and her mother, Laura DeMonte, were greeted by more than two dozen Bristol police officers and warm applause.

"It was nice to go down and have something to celebrate," Bristol police Lt. Michael Duval said.

"We say 'never forget.' It's one thing to say it, but it means a lot more to actually do it. It's not just a slogan or saying."

Duval was part of the group of officers who waited outside the hospital to show support for the newborn and DeMonte — whose husband was gunned down alongside Sgt. Alex Hamzy outside a Redstone Hill Road home on Oct. 12 after they were

Turn to Birth, Page 3

## CONNECTICUT

### Review

from Page 1

short. “Hadestown” conjures a dark spirit and a transformative burst of love all its own.

A lot of this incisive stagecraft springs from the wild imagination of director Rachel Chavkin, who created a similarly crazed dreamworld for the punk rock parable “Fairytale Lives of Russian Girls” by Meg Miroshnik for the Yale Repertory Theatre in 2014. You might also remember her staging of the much more tranquil yet equally engrossing Bess Wohl’s “Small Mouth Sounds” at Long Wharf Theatre in 2017.

“Hadestown” began as a song cycle concert event and then a concept album. There’s almost no spoken dialogue. Its songs are its fortune. Mitchell’s songs are in a consistent style, but not one you can pinpoint. They’re like anti-folk ballads played with instruments you associate with 1920s jump blues. A seven-piece band featuring a trombone, violin and double bass is right onstage with the actors who add train whistles, accordion and electric guitar to the mix.

What’s amazing is that when Orpheus tells you that he’s written a song that will change the world, that melody actually gets heard — and it’s pretty convincing. “Hadestown” draws you in and makes you believe.

The cast at The Bushnell does not try to ape the original Broadway players, as touring shows often feel they have to. The performers are free to bring their own special talents to the roles.

At Tuesday’s opening night performance, both Orpheus and Eurydice were played by understudies, J. Antonio Rodriguez and Belén Moyano. Rodriguez has a withdrawn, unassuming manner that made it all the more magical when he grabbed an electric guitar (the modern translation of Orpheus’ mystical lyre) and warbled song that miraculously made plants grow. Rodriguez came off like an indie-pop Mario Lanza. Moyano, by contrast, had a tough survivor’s mien. Her singing voice was often lower than Rodriguez, which adds one more unpredictable stylistic surprise to a show that’s full of them.

Nathan Lee Graham was supremely smooth, sinuous and self-confident as the narrator god Hermes. He sang the metaphorical intro song “Road to Hell” which connects the ancient Greek myth to 20th-century blues tropes by invoking trains, depression and lonesome wanderings.

Lindsey Hailes (who alternates performances with Nyla Watson) sings in a lovely bluesy voice while swaying intoxicatedly as Persephone. The three Fates provide soulful backing as well as philosophical insights, not unlike the girl-group trio of “Little Shop of Horrors” but in a very different manner. There’s also the downtrodden and largely silent but physical quintet of netherworld laborers. The show’s secret weapon is its range of perspectives. Orpheus and Eurydice’s journey, together and separately, is not a simple love story. It’s open to interpretation both psychologically and musically.

Some of the best moments come from the maelstrom of the entire cast and orchestra bracing for “The Gathering Storm” or leading you down “The Road to Hell,” but the pretty love songs like “Promises” or “All I’ve Ever Known” can be just as stunning. “Hadestown” has showstopping moments that genuinely stop the show, which is some trick for a show that the majority of the audience is likely experiencing for the first time.

“Hadestown” has been on Broadway since the spring of 2019. The national tour was supposed to start in 2020 but was delayed a year by the COVID pandemic. The Bushnell was originally scheduled to get the show in October 2020. It might have felt very different seeing this show about isolation, severed relationships, darkness, hopelessness and extreme challenges back before COVID vaccines or during major surges. The advantage now is that “Hadestown” doesn’t force comparisons to current events quite as strongly. This tale of love torn asunder in a world of chaos and confusion stands on its own terms, as it has done for over 2,000 years.

### Bears

from Page 1

**How many bears are in Connecticut?** The Department of Energy and Environmental Protection estimates the state’s bear population at between 1,000 to 1,200 — up from 800 in 2019 and double what it was a decade ago. Most are concentrated in the northwest part of the state, but bear sightings have been reported in 158 of the state’s 169 towns in 2022 and in every town over time. DEEP says the population continues to grow due to an abundance of habitat and available food.

**Conflict with humans:** About 3,200 incidents of conflicts between black bears and humans were reported in 2022, most in the western part of the state. Bears are often drawn to homes by food, DEEP says, and there were 67 incidents of bears entering a home last year — the highest ever. There were two reported attacks on humans.

Conflicts begin to rise in March as bears emerge from hibernation and peak in July, dropping off in late fall and winter.

**What is DEEP doing?** The state is focusing on education to curb conflicts between people and bears, both by addressing children in schools and various methods of outreach to the public. People are advised to call DEEP when bears are sighted to help the agency track the animals, but some say that’s little comfort. The agency infrequently relocates bears because they tend to return to their original territory.

**The issue is food:** As winter wanes, DEEP is urging residents not to invite trouble. The best advice? “NEVER feed bears, intentionally or accidentally!” The agency has warned for years not to leave out bird feeders or trash cans but now says that continued easy access to those things has lessened bears’ fear of people and emboldened them to enter homes. Several towns across the state, including Farmington, Simsbury, Granby and Manchester, have created ordinances against feeding bears and other wildlife, including stocking bird feeders during the warmer months.

**What are other state doing?** Ten surrounding states allow bear hunting to help control the population, according to a DEEP report. On average, 246 bears are killed annually in Massachusetts.

*Reporting from Courant reporters Kenneth R. Gosselin and Ed Starnard is included in this report.*

### Recovery

from Page 1

Pemberton said these closings are deeply personal to her, as she understands the critical importance of STAR program offerings and similar programs for girls and women, as she was in need of and received those services at a point in her life.

“They deserve the right to live, and not have to worry about criteria, dollars, and cents. They should not have to worry about that,” Pemberton said.

Others agreed with Pemberton and called for Gov. Ned Lamont to meet with front-line staff and with mental health and addiction advocates this month, in hopes of finding solutions to lead to the reopening of the STAR program and DCF’s Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility for women and girls after three years of temporary closure.

Donna Brooks, retired director of the STAR program for women at Connecticut Valley Hospital, said part of the need is demonstrated by what she has seen: when a woman starts a journey towards recovery, they can become contributing members of their communities, and often inspire other women to embark on recovery journeys.

“She becomes a mentor. She becomes a sponsor. She becomes a speaker at AA meetings, they do all kinds of things. We never turned a woman away before private sector care institutions, which is why the governor and legislature are committed to continuing to fund job training programs in the healthcare industry long-term,” he said.

### Staffing issues

Pemberton said her heart broke when she recently checked in with women and children at a program, as they shared that they would be displaced in two days with their babies, due to staffing issues.

She said that before the pandemic addiction services in Middletown offered detox and rehab for up to 110 people, with 30 beds for the women’s-only STAR program and now, with staffing shortages, there are just 15 beds

## New charges for diner crash suspect

By Justin Muszynski  
Hartford Courant

A man shot by a police officer in January after allegedly stealing a Bristol police cruiser that later crashed into a city diner was charged by Farmington police on Wednesday in connection with a car crash and alleged carjacking in their town.

Jimmie Shoemaker-Gonzalez, 39, of Avon, was driving a stolen car from Hartford when he crashed into a rock wall outside an apartment complex near Berkshire Lane in Farmington on Jan. 12, Farmington police said. He allegedly tried carjacking two people at knifepoint in the complex’s parking lot unsuccessfully before stealing a car from a 27-year-old Farmington man who suffered minor slash injuries, according to police.

Farmington police on Wednes-

day served Shoemaker-Gonzalez — who has been held in custody since Jan. 12 — with two warrants at Hartford Superior Court, where he was charged with first-degree robbery, second-degree assault, two counts of attempted first-degree robbery and a slew of other charges. He is being held on bonds that exceed \$1 million.

According to authorities, Shoemaker-Gonzalez committed a carjacking in Hartford before the crash and subsequent carjacking in Farmington, where a Toyota was stolen. He stole a police cruiser after officers in Bristol located the stolen Toyota in the area of Quaker Lane and Davis Drive around 12:30 p.m.

Shoemaker-Gonzalez was the sole occupant of the Toyota, which Bristol police said was running when officers drew their handguns and ordered the suspect to

surrender. According to Bristol police, he fled on foot once the Toyota became stuck.

Following a foot chase, Shoemaker-Gonzalez stole a Bristol police cruiser. Body cam footage released by the Office of the Inspector General shows the suspect speeding away in the cruiser while multiple officers shout “don’t do it” and “get out of the cop car.”

A Bristol policeman — identified as Seth Petzing — opened fire on the suspect as he passed the officer, body cam footage shows. The suspect was struck in the leg with at least one of the shots, according to investigators.

Shoemaker-Gonzalez drove about 2½ miles before crashing the cruiser into the front of Palma’s Diner on Stafford Avenue in Bristol. No injuries were reported in the diner crash.

### Council

from Page 1

Others focused on Davidoff’s tendency to search for bipartisan solutions.

“I often refer to Leon as a statesman, because he exemplifies a leader who promotes the public good, reaches across the council table and possesses all the necessary qualities to govern,” Carol Blanks said.

Cantor read a town proclamation thanking Davidoff for his service. State Sen. Derek Slap and State Rep. Kate Farrar also presented a commendation for Davidoff. It had been introduced in the General Assembly by them and other members of West Hartford’s coalition: Jillian Gilchrest, Bobby Gibson and Tammy Exum.

In 16 years and 321 council meetings, Davidoff missed only one: On March 13, 2012, the day his mother died.

“We have made a difference in shaping our community,” Davidoff said at the Feb. 28 meeting. “While we have not always agreed, I’ve listened to your viewpoints and at times have seen things in a different light.”

Before moving to West Hartford, Davidoff, 60, was on the Newton Town Council. A former Republican, Davidoff switched parties to Democrat while serving on the council in West Hartford. With his sister Susan, he also owns The Paper Station, a stationery and gift shop in Newington.

*Susan Dunne can be reached at sdunne@courant.com.*

### Birth

from Page 1

called there for a phony domestic violence report.

The morning after the shooting — which also injured Officer Alec Iurato, who was able to fatally shoot the gunman — authorities read the names of those who were killed and the loved ones they left behind.

In addition to having a baby on the way, Dustin DeMonte — who was 35 years old — was a father of two children. He would also leave behind his parents and siblings.

Hamzy, who was 34, left

behind a wife as well as his parents and sisters.

Police and their loved ones are one big family, Duval said. Going down to the hospital to greet the slain lieutenant’s newborn child “just felt right.”

“It was something to celebrate,” he said.

Duval also said he has no doubt that the support the families of DeMonte and Hamzy have received, as well as the surviving officer Iurato, will continue.

Bristol police chief Brian Gould, who also attended the gathering Tuesday, echoed Duval’s sentiments.

“It’s all part of that ‘never forget’ mentality,” Gould said.

available for women in a coed unit.

Pemberton said she has witnessed women in treatment come into coed groups only to be confronted with men who had caused traumatic experiences for them. She also said she has seen women and their children displaced and in one facility, where 21 beds were dedicated to women, 11 of those beds were taken away and repurposed to treat men.

“Women deserve to be safe. We deserve to have a right to feel and have recovery without our abuser worrying about traumatizing us even further,” she said.

She said she hopes Lamont hears their pleas to have a meeting to talk about helping women.

“We just want to have a meeting and talk to , so can help us prevent our daughters, sisters, nieces, wives, mothers, and grandmothers from dying in the streets alone or hit their head or in the bathroom of a Dunkin Donuts overdosing on fentanyl, we need help. And I’m here to ask for that help,” she said.

Saleena White, a child services worker at DCF’s Albert J. Solnit Children’s Center South Campus, a state-administered Psychiatric facility for Connecticut’s children younger than 18, said her unit was closed in 2019 and COVID-19 took them offline, due to staffing shortages and now only two of three units are open.

Her unit admitted adolescent girls 12-18 years of age, taking clients in from all walks of life.

“They needed us, we needed them. What we need is staffing. We need money. We need help to help them,” she said, noting they had 24 clients three years ago, but now are only serving seven girls.

“Something is wrong in this system. I don’t know what it is. I don’t know how we’re gonna fix it. But that is not fair to these young girls that need us. Twenty-four beds, seven girls right now. All these girls are in our local hospitals, waiting eight months to 10 months to come to our program. Why? Where is the money? Help us,” she said.

White said these programs also are needed because many of the girls are on the street and dealing with serious issues, including teen pregnancy and sex trafficking.

## Couple charged after party in Shelton

Allegedly allowed underage drinking on night teen was killed

By Justin Muszynski  
Hartford Courant

A Shelton couple was arrested Thursday and charged with allowing an underage drinking party where a dispute between opposing high school students led to an altercation at a separate party in which Fairfield Prep student James McGrath was killed.

Shelton police said Paul Leifer, 59, and Susan Leifer, 51, were each charged with permitting minors to possess alcohol.

Susan Leifer, who police say had interactions with some of those in attendance at the Lazy Brook Road party on May 14, additionally faces one count of second-degree reckless endangerment.

According to police reports, the party on Lazy Brook Road in Shelton was hosted by teens from St. Joseph’s High School. Some students from Shelton High School who weren’t invited showed up to the party and a fight allegedly ensued. Raul Valle, then 16 and a student at St. Joseph, was in attendance at the party.

The confrontation continued via group chat and the groups met again at a crowded party hosted by teens from Shelton High School and Fairfield Prep on Laurel Glen Drive, where police allege Valle got out a dark-colored SUV and fatally stabbed McGrath — who was 17 years old when he was killed — during a fight, according to the warrant for Valle’s arrest. Three other teens also suffered stab wounds.

The three surviving victims told police after the uninjured teens got out of the SUV, a first punch was thrown and a fight erupted, with teens from St. Joseph’s tumbling onto the ground with the partygoers from Shelton High School and Fairfield Prep, the warrant said.

### NEW BRITAIN

## Fentanyl dealer gets federal prison for drug, gun offenses

A New Britain drug dealer was sentenced to more than six years in federal prison this week for fentanyl distribution and firearm possession offenses, according to federal officials.

Roberto Mercedes-Rodriguez, 43, of New Britain, was sentenced Tuesday by U.S. District Judge Robert N. Chatigny in Hartford to 78 months in prison, followed by four years of supervised release, the U.S. Attorney’s office said Wednesday.

Mercedes-Rodriguez pleaded guilty to one count of unlawful possession of a firearm by a felon and one count of possession with intent to distribute 40 grams or more of fentanyl on Dec. 12, 2022.

An investigation by the Drug Enforcement Administration New Haven Tactical Division Squad and the New Britain Police Department revealed that Mercedes-Rodriguez and others were selling fentanyl in the New Britain area, according to court records.

— Staff report