

Former Robbins police chief sues

Sheppard files action against mayor, village, citing wrongful termination

By **Alexandra Kukulka**
Daily Southtown

Former Robbins police Chief David Sheppard alleges in a lawsuit Mayor Darren Bryant interfered with police work, including storage of evidence, hiring of officers and how to handle investigations.

In a federal lawsuit citing “concerning behavior,” Sheppard, who was fired by Bryant in April, alleges wrongful termination and violation of the Whistleblower Protection Act by Bryant and the village of Robbins.

Sheppard said he was hired in October 2021 to improve the department, which he said he did by hiring more police officers and decreasing major crime rates. But Sheppard said Bryant displayed “abuse of power” by interfering with his job.

“It’s like the mayor was fighting with me to get things back to the way they used to be,” Sheppard said.

Bryant said in a statement he and the village will “overcome this adversity through the legal process.”

“I will continue to lead the village with integrity, as I have led throughout my tenure thus far,” Bryant said. “I’m overly excited about the future we have with interim Chief Carl Scott. The village is moving forward.”

The lawsuit outlines four events that Sheppard said led to his termination.

One involved the dismissal of Deputy Chief Byron Redmond after Bryant saw a social media video in May 2022 that allegedly showed Redmond drinking alcohol with colleagues in his office while he was off duty, according to the lawsuit.

Sheppard said he wrote up a report in which he did not find



Sheppard

grounds to fire Redmond because others engaged in similar behaviors, including senior village administrators he had seen drinking and offering alcoholic beverages within their offices, according to the lawsuit.

But Bryant fired Redmond without approval from Sheppard, the Village Board or the Police and Fire Commission, according to the lawsuit.

Another involved the investigation of three teenagers who allegedly stole a Kia and crashed into a vehicle, killing 70-year-old resident Donald Carter. As police were investigating the Kia theft in February, officers stored the vehicle inside the Robbins Public Works

Department salt barn because state police had not yet processed it as evidence.

Bryant called Sheppard and told him the car had to be moved because it was blocking public works vehicles, according to the lawsuit, but Sheppard told Bryant the vehicle had to be stored inside to protect it from the elements.

The public works director said the vehicle wasn’t blocking the salt barn, but Bryant continued to ask for the car to be moved, according to the lawsuit.

Also in February, Bryant pushed for Frank Sanders, a 65-year-old retired police officer, to be hired as lieutenant, even though Sanders

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HOMER GLEN

Horse arena fire sparks rescue training sessions

Lessons focus on safe equine handling and proper evacuation procedures

By **Michelle Mullins**
For Daily Southtown

When Marlene Karman heard there was a fire at the Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy where she runs equine therapy sessions for children with special needs, she instantly feared the worse.

As she was traveling to the Homer Glen property in December, she was scared the fire killed 17 horses, and she became physically ill, she said.

Thankfully, she said, the fire was contained to the riding arena and not the stalls where the horses are kept. No people or animals were injured in the blaze, which was caused by a battery that exploded in an arena security light.

But the fire got Karman, the center’s executive director, talking with the firefighters who responded on whether they could benefit from additional training handling emergencies in barns.

This month about 45 firefighters from the Northwest Homer, Homer Township and Lemont Fire Protection districts received hands-on lessons in safe equine handling and proper evacuation procedures for large animals.

Rhonda Cory, who is certified in large-animal emergency rescue, taught firefighters how to read a horse’s expressions to see if they are relaxed, angry, alarmed or worried. She said the most common scenario emergency responders may deal with is a vehicle accident involving a horse trailer, but the most dangerous is a barn fire.

Cory, a Wisconsin resident, said the No. 1 goal is to keep firefighters safe from harm and then to protect the horses.

She asked for firefighters responding to a barn fire to come in with their lights and sirens off as not to alarm the horses and taught them how to halter the horses, blindfold them and lead them to a



Marlene Karman, executive director of the Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy, helps Lt. Frank Chojnacki of the Homer Township Fire Department lead the horse Amir. **MICHELLE MULLINS/DAILY SOUTHTOWN**

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Road repair season shifts into gear in Southland

By **Mike Nolan**
Daily Southtown

Memorial Day weekend didn’t only mark the kickoff of summer, it also meant road construction season in the south and southwest suburbs is heading into high gear.

Road projects are already underway or poised to begin in several area communities, with some work picking up from last year and others slated to finish up in the coming months, according to the Cook County Department of Transportation and Highways.

Many of the projects announced recently are along county maintained roads in the south and southwest suburbs, in addition to street patching and resurfacing taking place by municipalities.

One Cook County project underway earlier involves resurfacing 94th Avenue from 159th Street in Orland Park to 171st Street in Orland Hills.

Work will include replacing curbs and gutters and is supposed to be completed later this summer, according to the county.

Also, in Orland Park and Palos Heights, work is expected to be completed this summer on a rehabilitation of 135th Street, between Howe Drive and Harlem Avenue.

Much of the work was finished last year, with a section of 700 feet west of Harlem Avenue yet to wrap up, according to the county.

That will include storm sewer repairs, new curbs and gutters and an asphalt overlay, according to the county.

In Oak Forest, construction continues on 151st Street over

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INSIDE

Cook program lauded

A Cook County program in the pandemic to provide legal and financial support to landlords and tenants behind on their rent has dramatically slowed the eviction process, drawing praise — and pushback — from renters and property owners. **Page 3**

Oak Lawn’s 4-year deal with firefighters includes raises, changes

By **Kimberly Fornek**
For Daily Southtown

Oak Lawn and its firefighters have agreed to a new contract after more than a year of negotiations.

The Village Board unanimously approved a four-year collective bargaining agreement retroactive to Jan. 1, 2022.

Village officials and representatives of Oak Lawn Professional Firefighters Association Local 3405 negotiated since November 2021, and came to a tentative agreement in April, Village Manager Thomas Phelan said.

“There were many topics

discussed during the negotiations, and multiple different offers and counteroffers over that 15-month period, which were at all times professional and respectful,” Phelan wrote in an email.

The firefighters voted unanimously April 24 in favor of the agreement, which gives them an average of 3.25% raises in each of the four years, said union president Jeff Kane, who is a firefighter-paramedic and engineer. The Village Board approved the agreement May 23.

Kane said the main reason negotiations took so long was schedul-

ing difficulties.

Most of the terms and benefits in the new contract are the same as the old one, which ended Dec. 31, 2021, he said.

“We were happy with the status quo of the old contract,” Kane said. “From our standpoint, pay raises and the duration of the contract were the most important issues,” he said.

The prior contract was for three years. If the new agreement was not longer, it would expire at the end of 2024, and it soon would be time to start negotiating the next

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Oak Lawn Fire Department



Village officials and representatives of Oak Lawn Professional Firefighters Association Local 3405 negotiated since November 2021, and came to a tentative agreement in April. **ZAK KOESKE/DAILY SOUTHTOWN**





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Horse

from Page 1

secure location.

A horse's first instinct is to remain in its stall, even if that building is on fire, because that is where it feels the most safe and secure, Cory said.

The lessons can apply to barns throughout Homer Township, and firefighters can apply what they learned to other large animals such as cows or even to smaller animals such as dogs, she said.

In Homer Township, there are several barns and farms with horses, cows and sheep, and residents are attracted to their rural pockets within a suburban lifestyle.

Many residents object to any proposed large or high-density residential or commercial development that disrupts their rural charm, and animals have sometimes escaped their enclosures.

Scott Pucel, a lieutenant with the Northwest Homer Fire District, said more training is always beneficial. Some members of his department have various degrees of experience dealing with large animals, but the training gives the department a standardized approach.

It's also good to get out into the community, which contains well over a dozen barns, Pucel said.

"What can we do to learn their world since it's not something we are well-versed in," he said. "It's nice to work with different partners in our community."

Capt. Brian Jamrok from the Homer Township Fire Protection District said the large-animal training is another tool to add to their toolbox.

"We train for specific situations, such as car accidents, water rescues, ice rescues," he said. "We deal with a lot of different problems."

More training gives firefighters increased confidence when approaching a dangerous situation, Jamrok said.

Lt. Jeff Bailey with the Lemont Fire Protection District agreed.



Lt. Jeff Bailey, of the Lemont Fire Protection District, is introduced to Apollo at the Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy. MICHELLE MULLINS/DAILY SOUTHTOWN

"We are never done with school," Bailey said. "We continue our education constantly."

Karman, a former Lemont Fire District commissioner, became emotional when thanking the firefighters who came out to her center to educate themselves on horse rescues and barn fires.

"I can't tell you how much, on a personal level, I appreciate what you guys do," Karman said. "What you give is priceless in time, in energy, in the risks you take."

The December fire briefly shut down operations at the Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy, which reopened on a limited basis in February, Karman said.

The children who attend classes there have a wide range of disabilities, including autism, cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injuries and Down syndrome. The center sends several children to compete in Special Olympics events yearly.

For Karman, their not-for-profit therapy center is a labor of love, which is another reason why the December fire shook her. The center sees about 125 riders and has more than 80 active volunteers, she said.

"This program is extremely powerful," Karman said.

"We teach individuals who have been taken care of

their entire life how to take care of something that needs them, and that grows their self-esteem and self-confidence right off the charts. We make sure we empower as many people as possible to raise their quality of life."

Karman said there is a special relationship between horses and their riders, and many of the children wanted to continue to ride even through the cold winter months because the program is so important to them.

"When we say there's a power that we cannot explain or understand between a horse and a human, it's completely, 100 percent, unequivocally true," she said.

Holistic Riding Equestrian Therapy has repaired the wall damaged in the December fire, but the organization is still trying to raise money to continue repairs.

Karman said insulation that keeps the arena cooler in the summer and warm in the winter costs about \$55,000.

The group has raised about \$18,000 through its Go Fund Me page and two fundraisers this winter hosted by two restaurants, Tazza Italian Ristorante and Mugshots, in Homer Glen.

Michelle Mullins is a freelance reporter for the Daily Southtown.

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