

NORTH PORT

Written reviews absent for top city workers

By [Michael Scott Davidson](#)

scott.davidson@heraldtribune.com

Published: Sunday, May 15, 2016 at 11:34 a.m.

Nine of North Port's top government employees will earn salaries totaling close to \$1 million this year, each making far above the city's median household income of \$50,855.

But, if the public wants to see how these city executives are performing, they will not find recent written reviews at City Hall.

North Port's assistant city manager, police chief, fire chief, economic development coordinator and five of its department directors have not received written performance evaluations in years.

While many other local governments require yearly evaluations of most or all non-union employees to be recorded in writing, North Port, the area's largest and fastest growing municipality, has no city-wide policy requiring performance evaluations.

Even when city departments have come under scrutiny, their leaders were not evaluated.

Over the past two years, for example, the North Port Police Department faced a series of challenges including two officers being charged with sexual battery and the subsequent suicide of one of those officers. The Center for Public Safety Management was paid about \$60,000 to do a third-party assessment of the entire department. But Police Chief Kevin Vespia remained without a written appraisal of his job performance.

Governments and private businesses use written performance evaluations in various ways, including to assign pay increases, promote and demote employees and set goals for individual workers.

In lieu of written evaluations, City Manager Jonathan Lewis said he meets with North Port's department directors every month to talk about what they and their departments have done well and what could be done better.

But that leaves no public record available to North Port's city commissioners or the citizens who pay city employees' salaries.

Lewis, city manager since May 2011, said his preference for verbal reviews is effective.

"The intent is not to hide anything. The intent is to get to the goal, which is improving services to the community," he said. "I think the most effective way to do that is to talk to people."

Others see it differently.



North Port City Manager Jonathan R. Lewis
STAFF PHOTO / NICK ADAMS

Vice Mayor Rhonda DiFranco said she is troubled that top city employees have not received written reviews.

“How do you know if your upper echelon is doing their jobs appropriately?” she asked. “Because there's no documentation, and if it's not documented it didn't happen.”

Barbara Petersen, president of the state's First Amendment Foundation, which supports access to public records, said North Port is missing “accountability.”

“I'm kind of dumbfounded by it, that a governmental agency would not have written evaluations of its employees, particularly those making the most money,” she said. “It's all about oversight and accountability. It's not a private matter between the city manager and an upper echelon employee. It's a performance evaluation of a public servant.”

North Port's five city commissioners conduct annual written evaluations of the city manager and city attorney, both charter officers each making more than \$150,000 a year. The evaluations are required in the manager's and attorney's contracts.

The city manager received high marks on his most recent annual evaluation from city commissioners. Lewis averaged a score of 4.37 out of 5 points, with his lowest score, 3.5, coming from Commissioner Linda Yates.

North Port's other two charter officers, the city clerk and deputy city clerk, who are paid a total of more than \$200,000 annually, do not have contracts. They have not received annual written evaluations from city commissioners since 2010.

Determining how long the rest of North Port's 264 non-union employees, 48 percent of the city's workforce of 553, have gone without a written performance evaluation requires digging. The city does not keep a physical or electronic database or list for quick reference.

And while North Port's personnel policy manual specifically states “the city has established a program for evaluating the work performance of employees” — written annual evaluations — newly hired human resources director Christine McDade said it's unclear if employees are required to participate in that program.

“Nowhere can I find in the policy where it addresses if supervisors are required to perform these evaluations,” she wrote in an email. “Some have chosen to do so.”

At the Herald-Tribune's request, North Port provided the dates of the last written reviews for employees in the city's Neighborhood Development Services department.

Of the 49 employees, 23 had not received an annual written review since 2014 or longer. That included four managers and the department's director. Another manager from the department, on the city's payroll since 2014, had no annual written review on file.

No raises, no reviews

One reason that written performance evaluations have not been necessary in recent years, Lewis said, is that raises for non-union city employees have not been tied to job performance since 2011. A majority of city commissioners voted for 3 percent raises across the board in 2014 and 2015 despite that North Port's personnel policy manual states “pay increases are to be earned and based upon job performance.”

Performance based raises may have not been given to city employees for years but that doesn't mean written performance evaluations are not needed, Commissioner Yates wrote in her most recent annual performance evaluation of the city manager.

“Whether or not the city is in a fiscal capacity to afford raises is irrelevant to having performance measures of individual professional growth, ethics, efficiency, successes, goals and expectations,” she wrote.

North Port is implementing changes to its performance evaluation program, Lewis said.

In October, the city budgeted \$631,040 to establish a standalone human resources department with seven full-time employees. Previously human resources was a division within the city's general services department.

McDade, a former human resources director for Fort Myers, was hired in January to head the new department. She said North Port's personnel policy manual, which was written in 2008 and most recently revised in 2013, is undergoing review.

North Port is buying software that will automate and streamline its employee evaluation process and record written evaluations for employees, including department directors, McDade said. A Citizen Services Survey, which Lewis said will allow residents to rate services provided by city workers, is expected to be completed by June.

“We will use that as a benchmark,” Lewis said. “That's real data points for us to use.”

But there's no way to get back years of employee evaluations that were not written, the First Amendment Foundation's Petersen said.

“We're going to take it on face (value) that everybody has been doing their job for the last five years,” she said. “If they don't put it in writing, there's no record, therefore we can't hold them accountable.”

Other local governments

The policies of Sarasota County and Venice state that government employees annually receive written performance evaluations from their immediate supervisors. This includes department directors.

Venice City Manager Ed Lavallee said the written annual evaluations complement more frequent conversations he has with department directors. He said written documents are vital to tracking and encouraging employee development.

“It's just a way of assembling accurately the factual stuff over a long period of time,” he said. “This is a tool to help them identify their strengths and weaknesses.”

In the city of Sarasota, the employee performance evaluation policy appears to be similar to North Port's practice with department directors.

Most of Sarasota's non-union employees receive annual written performance evaluation reports that become a permanent part of their service record. But the city's policy also states department heads and “other key staff members” are evaluated at the discretion of their appointing officer.

City records show Sarasota's Neighborhood and Development Services director Tim Litchet last received an annual performance evaluation in 2006. Police Chief Bernadette DiPino received an annual review in 2014 that consisted of a single page of notes.

Tom Barwin, Sarasota's city manager since September 2012, said written performance evaluations can negatively affect employees' performance and morale. Like Lewis, Barwin said he gives verbal feedback regularly to his department directors.

“Performance appraisals, if not done very well and (not) approached in a constructive and healthy way, can do more harm than good,” he said. “Our system now, it's numerical rating scores and boxes that can be checked and translated to scores. I don't like that. I think it can really misrepresent an individual's performance.”

Barwin added that the city of Sarasota is exploring ways to update its performance evaluation system.

All city of Bradenton employees, including department directors, receive annual written performance evaluations. Employees in leadership positions, such as directors, are evaluated but with a different form than the rank-and-file.

While Palmetto's personnel policy manual does not state city employees must receive annual written evaluations, City Clerk Jim Freeman said the city has web-based performance evaluation software that supervisors are encouraged and reminded to use.

“It is something we do and monitor,” he said.

However, Freeman added, Palmetto's current mayor has moved toward giving the city's four department directors verbal evaluations instead of written ones.

Freeman's last annual written review from Mayor Shirley Groover Bryant, the city's chief executive officer, occurred in 2013.

In North Port, department directors are evaluated on a daily, weekly and monthly basis, Lewis said. Each department provides weekly highlights that in turn go into monthly directors reports, both of which are published on the city's website.

However, neither the weekly nor monthly reports provide an assessment of any department director's individual performance. Instead they record updates on the departments' activities and accomplishments as a whole.

If a city employee's performance falls below expectations, the employee is put on a documented Performance Improvement Plan, Lewis said. Those reports are public records.

Lewis, who has a master's degree in public administration from the University of South Florida and has worked in government administration since 1999, said the way governments evaluate employee performance is evolving.

He also pointed out that some mega corporations have recently left the institutionalized practice of annual performance reviews by the wayside.

In 2015 General Electric replaced its formal annual reviews with more frequent, informal discussions and app-based feedback about employees' short-term goals. Software giant Adobe got rid of them in 2012 and started conducting informal, more frequent conversations with employees about company expectations.

Lewis said his method of evaluations is similar.

“We're running a corporation here. It's a municipal corporation,” he said. “What I find to be more effective is constant feedback.”

Stewart Liff, founder of government performance management consultant firm Stewart Liff & Associates, said transparency is important in the public sector because “you're serving the public, and you're having a huge impact on the lives of people.”

Liff said that giving frequent verbal feedback to employees is a good practice, but he underlined the importance of having written records.

Not having a consistent and transparent evaluation system up and down the chain of command could lead to resentment from employees or accusations of cronyism, he said.

Liff recommended North Port incorporate written, monthly report cards that document and compare employees' performance using data. He used such a system to evaluate 400 employees when he was director of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Regional Office in Los Angeles.

“Having everything in writing ensures the system is operating as intended,” he said. “Making it visual, transparent, honest and open, it makes it less about who you know and more about what you do.”

Copyright © 2016 HeraldTribune.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.

Officer hired as North Port's 2nd in command comes with checkered past

By [Michael Scott Davidson](#)

Published: Thursday, October 8, 2015 at 11:49 p.m.

The North Port Police Department is undergoing a restructuring in the hopes of improving a department that has been wracked by scandals in recent years.

But the officer recently hired to be second in command has had his own problems.

Less than a year ago, a doctor hired by the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office determined that Capt. Mike Pelfrey was unfit for duty as a captain, according to records obtained by the Herald-Tribune.



Capt. Mike Pelfrey of the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office will be North Port's new assistant police chief.

Police Chief Kevin Vespia said he was aware of the issues surrounding Pelfrey at the Sheriff's Office, but said Pelfrey's experience, leadership and skills made him the top candidate among more than 40 applicants. Pelfrey is set to join the North Port force on Oct. 22.

From mid-December to mid-April, Pelfrey, 58, was reassigned as a sheriff's deputy without supervisory duties. He underwent counseling sessions and monthly medical evaluations.

At the time of his evaluation, Pelfrey was the director of Suncoast Technical College's Sarasota Criminal Justice Academy. He was eventually reevaluated and reinstated as captain, assigned to a newly created position at the Sheriff's Office.

Before Pelfrey was found unfit for duty in December, sheriff's Col. Kurt Hoffman wrote in a memo that the captain was exhibiting mood swings, disobeying orders and experiencing a self-described anger issue.

Hoffman wrote that Pelfrey made remarks to students related to killing them. There were two allegations of Pelfrey inappropriately using knives in academic settings.

In an interview Thursday, Pelfrey said that his actions and words were misconstrued and taken out of context. He said that he has never been unfit to serve as a captain and is well-equipped to be North Port's assistant police chief in Sarasota County's largest city.

"Minimal communication really caused this misunderstanding," he said.

Vespia said Pelfrey has been "very transparent" about the past year and "there's absolutely no question" Pelfrey is qualified.

Before he was hired Pelfrey passed a psychological evaluation and polygraph test, which Vespia said is part of his department's standard hiring process.

"I am very comfortable with him leading this organization with me," Vespia said. "Mr. Pelfrey is an absolute professional and ethical, and I value that."

Hoffman said he believed Pelfrey's experience made him "perfect" to serve as assistant police chief. He said the fitness for duty evaluation was conducted for Pelfrey's welfare.

"Mike Pelfrey has been a valued employee of the agency for a long time," he said. "We just wanted to make sure whatever issues were going on were addressed."

Pelfrey's hiring comes during a time of major transition for the North Port Police Department.

["A Legacy of Leniency," a Herald-Tribune investigation published last year](#), found that 19 North Port officers had been investigated three or more times over a period of 18 years for offenses ranging from conduct unbecoming an officer to burglary. Later in 2014, a veteran North Port officer committed suicide as sheriff's deputies came to arrest him in a sexual battery case.

Meanwhile, a Florida Police Benevolent Association confidential survey last December found that 95 percent of police officers who responded considered morale low or very low in the department.

North Port brought in a consultant last year that resulted in 18 "major recommendations" for the department, including a restructuring of the management team, which is being implemented this fall.

Qualifications

The agency announced its hiring of Pelfrey on Oct. 2 at a salary of \$90,000. The assistant police chief position had been vacant since Anthony Sirianni retired on June 13.

Pelfrey has served with the Sheriff's Office since 1989, spokeswoman Wendy Rose said, and has held the rank of captain since 2006. Pelfrey, who lives in North Port, said he holds two master's degrees from the University of South Florida, in criminal justice administration and in adult education. He said his education, combined with his law enforcement and teaching experience, made him the right choice for the assistant police chief position.

"I have served over 26 years at the Sheriff's Office, 21 of them being in the supervisor capacity from corporal to sergeant to lieutenant to captain," he said. "At one point I was responsible for all of patrol operations which encompassed 197 personnel, prior to that I was responsible for all the school resource officers in Sarasota County."

Questions about his judgment surfaced in late 2014, Sheriff's Office records show.

An internal affairs investigation was launched after a heated Oct. 16 meeting between Pelfrey and his subordinate, academy training coordinator Keith Muncy. The two began arguing in Pelfrey's office and continued the confrontation in the academy lobby. Pelfrey said the argument culminated months of a deteriorating relationship between him and Muncy.

Muncy was found at fault, and in mid-November was given a reminder to be courteous and civil.

On Nov. 4, Pelfrey attempted to enter several unfavorable comments into Muncy's performance management records. Records show Col. Hoffman described the entries as incomplete and concerning.

Hoffman, Maj. Jon Goetluck and Pelfrey met Nov. 13 to discuss the performance management records and the argument between Pelfrey and Muncy that preceded them.

"(Capt. Pelfrey) was very emotional during our meeting and appeared visibly upset," Hoffman later wrote in a memo. "(Pelfrey) went from anger to crying and at several points in the conversation was so overcome with emotion that he could not speak."

During the meeting, Hoffman wrote, Pelfrey said he "internalized" workplace issues and had "anger issues."

But on Thursday, Pelfrey contested that those were Hoffman's words, not his.

"I attempted to explain myself, but that was to no avail," Pelfrey said. "He said 'I believe you internalize this and you have anger issues.'"

Hoffman maintained that his quotations were correct.

"I was very careful in documenting that conversation," he said Thursday. "Maj. Goetluck was also at that meeting. His recollection is the same as mine that those were comments made by Capt. Pelfrey."

In his memo, Hoffman noted that the argument between Pelfrey and Muncy shared similarities to a previous argument Pelfrey had with Lt. Jeff Slapp, now a captain. Hoffman wrote that Pelfrey had started a meeting between himself, Hoffman and Slapp by pointing at Slapp and calling him a liar.

"...(Pelfrey) creates more conflict than reasonably exists for the circumstances," Hoffman wrote. "The incident with Keith Muncy is now the second incident where (Pelfrey) has exhibited an unreasonable reaction to common workplace/employee issues."

Report: Students threatened

As the internal investigation into Muncy's behavior was underway, Pelfrey allegedly exhibited peculiar behavior at the Sarasota Criminal Justice Academy.

At an Oct. 24 class graduation ceremony, Hoffman wrote he observed Pelfrey threaten his students.

"Before anybody leaves this room you will fill out the (Florida Department of Law Enforcement) paperwork, or I will kill you," Pelfrey reportedly said.

When the class went outside for a photograph, Hoffman wrote, Pelfrey opened a pocket knife and made an apparent "shaving motion" at a student's face. But Hoffman noted that the student's appearance was fine.

Pelfrey said that student was a Sheriff's Office employee with whom he shared a years-long joke about keeping a clean appearance. Pelfrey said it was not the first time he had made such a shaving gesture.

As for the "kill" comment, Pelfrey said the comment was not malevolent but a joke to reiterate the importance of completing the paperwork.

"It was for their benefit," he said. "It was taken so out of context."

Hoffman said he believed that Pelfrey probably made the comment as a joke but that the statement was still inappropriate.

"I thought it was a little over the top," he said. "But I wasn't concerned that someone was going to harm someone."

Muncy would later report that Pelfrey acted similarly at the start of a law enforcement recruit class earlier in 2014. He allegedly pointed an unsheathed tactical knife at the class while addressing them.

"I don't want any drama, or I'll cut your (expletive) heads off," Pelfrey allegedly told the class.

Pelfrey claims that is a complete fabrication.

"That never happened," he said. "I wouldn't tolerate that from anyone."

In retrospect, Pelfrey said he believes that he and Muncy's sometimes contentious relationship sparked all of this.

"This was a one person on one person disagreement that got off track," he said.

Unfit for duty

Sheriff Tom Knight placed Pelfrey on paid administrative leave Nov. 21. He was temporarily stripped of his badge, gun and agency identification card.

Dr. John Super, a licensed psychologist, evaluated Pelfrey and found that he was unfit to serve as a captain at the time.

Super noted that Pelfrey may have been suffering from anxiety and depression.

"I was anxious and somewhat depressed the day that I saw him because the day before I was put on administrative leave for the first time in my life," Pelfrey said. "I thought I was going to lose my livelihood. I thought I was going to lose my profession."

From mid-December through mid-April, Pelfrey worked as a deputy in the civil division, on cases involving evictions, child support and injunctions for protection.

During that time he attended assigned counseling sessions, monthly medical evaluations and one-on-one training.

In April he was reinstated as a captain but no longer worked at the Sarasota Criminal Justice Academy. Instead he served in the Sheriff's Office's newly created staff inspections position, reporting directly to Col. Hoffman.

Pelfrey described the job as a research and development type position where he looked to improve the efficiency and policies of the Sheriff's Office. He's juggling about five projects now.

He doesn't supervise anyone directly in this position, but Pelfrey said Sheriff's Office employees are often temporarily assigned to work under his guidance.

"It's project program driven," he said.

Hoffman said he has been "completely satisfied" with Pelfrey's work.

"I think from time to time we all have stressors in our life," he said. "I've had no issues similar to this with Mike in the entire time he has been back in the position of captain, and we meet on a regular basis."

Pelfrey is scheduled to begin his assistant police chief job at the North Port Police Department later this month. His retirement notice to the Sheriff's Office was brief, only six sentences long.

"I request no retirement ceremony, nor a Sheriff's Office memo reporting my retirement. I'll say my goodbyes personally in the coming weeks," he wrote. "I thank you for allowing me to be a member and for so many great opportunities with the Sheriff's Office."

Copyright © 2016 HeraldTribune.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

Feld's monster truck jam hits Tampa - hard

By [Michael Scott Davidson](#)

Published: Friday, January 16, 2015 at 11:11 p.m.

With the groan of hydraulics, a dump truck emptied its first load of dirt onto the surface in Raymond James Stadium precisely five minutes after noon on Wednesday.

Nearly 21 tons of concrete shards splayed out across the stadium's southwest corner as the weathered truck lowered its container with an overwhelming "BOOM!" With that, it rumbled back out to the parking lot.

One load down, at least 339 more to go.

Raymond James was in the early stages of a two-day metamorphosis from football field to a pit of destruction. Tonight it will host one of the world's most famous motorsport events.

Monster Jam will send 10,000-pound machines barreling across the stadium floor, a trail of crushed cars in their wake. There will be wheelies. There will be flips.

There will also be a display of spectator passion that two of the area's professional sports teams — the Bucs and the Rays — would no doubt envy. Over two weekends, the Monster Jam is expected to draw more than 110,000 fans to Raymond James.

Monster Jam is produced by Ellenton-based Feld Entertainment Studios. The series has become so popular that the company will stage events in nine North American cities this weekend alone, including sending 16 of its 46-truck fleet to Tampa.

But before the engines roar, a stadium must be transformed.

Enter Craig Leiffer, who has a mustache-goatee combo on his face and the weight of bringing this operation together on his shoulders.

As dirt crew coordinator, he was tasked with choreographing construction that includes 100,000 square feet of fabric, more than 7,000 tons of dirt and a crew that will put in hundreds of hours of labor from start to finish.

"Most of these track crew guys are from up north," Leiffer said in an amiable Southern accent. "When winter comes in, this keeps a paycheck coming in and keeps them busy."

By Wednesday afternoon, they had already coated the stadium in a layer of black geotextile fabric and rectangular sheets made of a plastic and fiberglass mix.

The first two layers will prevent any of Monster Jam's dirt from ever touching the stadium's well-kept surface — once dubbed the second-best grass field in the NFL.

Next came the fine concrete to make the road base. Six dump trucks would then deliver clay dug out of a grass parking lot across the street to make the track and its features.

With just under 69 hours until showtime, there was not a second to spare. The crew planned to be on the scene until at least midnight.

“These guys work like a clock,” Leiffer said. “They don't send any rookies out here.”

Leiffer, 47, has spent nearly half his life working with the show.

He said it was his father, Earl, who invented the mixture that comprises the rectangular flooring Monster Jam still uses today. It replaced plywood in the mid-1990s.

“It's real similar to a white cutting board in a kitchen,” he said.

Leiffer was 25 when he started hauling dirt for Monster Jam. He became a crew coordinator at 30.

Since then he has built 10 tracks a year at southeastern venues in Atlanta, New Orleans and across Florida. The tracks are built on surfaces including basketball courts and skating rinks.

Still, Leiffer maintains that Tampa's two shows — less than a month apart — are the best attended of any he has worked.

“They almost sellout, both shows,” he said.

Throughout the track building process, a parade of a dozen yellow Caterpillar vehicles — bulldozers, excavators, forklifts — will roll back and forth through Gate D at the stadium.

The equipment will be used to shape ramps and obstacles for the monster trucks. The track's dimensions, angles and layouts are precise; an error could result in a wreck.

Already totaled are 18 sedans waiting to be hauled in from the stadium's parking lot. There's also a faded RV that'll meet its doom this weekend, and a retired double-decker bus that will become part of a backflip ramp.

Even after the track is constructed, Leiffer and his team will be at the stadium.

It's their job to maintain the track's condition during tonight's show and coordinate removal of any wrecked monster trucks.

They'll leave the dirt and return in early February for Monster Jam's second and final Tampa event this year. Then the field will be back to its old self, restoration taking only a third as long as the initial transformation.

“We get up on Saturday morning and we don't go to bed until Sunday when we're done,” he said. “To have the show here on a Saturday night and by 11 a.m. Sunday morning have it all gone, green grass back — that still to this day floors me.”

Leiffer and his crew know they are just setting the stage for the real star: Grave Digger.

The most infamous of the monster trucks, Grave Digger has green flames across its black hood and an image straight from a 1970s horror movie poster airbrushed across its side. Its polished fiberglass body is a 1950 Chevrolet Panel Van.

After three rounds of pummeling, Grave Digger will exit tonight's event with any number of parts, including its six-and-a-half-foot wheels, strewn across a wasteland of squashed cars.

“You're driving blind essentially,” said Charlie Pauken, who will pilot the monster truck from its 12-foot-high cockpit.

“By which way your body is being thrown, you have to react.”

The key to a crowd-pleasing monster truck run is going full throttle during the entire two minutes you're allowed on the track, said Pauken.

“You want continuous action until the truck is unable to move,” he said.

“You may have a wheel come off but you keep going.”

There's something about seeing the jumbo vehicles take flight off massive dirt ramps and crush junk cars like empty soda cans that brings people to their feet.

Pauken said his forte is the freestyle competition — where drivers perform tricks and stunts of their own choosing to wow fans and judges alike. Pauken calls it “making the truck dance.”

“When you can bring the truck around a ragged edge and put it on one wheel, then bring it back down. That's making the truck dance,” he said.

Pauken, 47, could be considered an old-timer among the other drivers. He's driven monster trucks for 27 years total — Grave Digger for 16.

He got his start in his hometown of Maumee, Ohio. A motorhead from the start, he grew up driving go-karts, mini-bikes and four-wheelers.

Before he drove the most famous monster truck of them all, he was behind the wheel of the locally built Excalibur.

“I never thought I'd make a career out of driving a monster truck,” he marveled on Friday, adding that he had no plans to retire.

“If I can climb in and get in the truck, I'm driving it,” he said.

In street clothes, Pauken looks like the kind of guy you'd shoot pool with on weekends or see bowling a few frames with his family. He walks with his hands tucked in the pockets of his blue jeans, a subtle smile on his face.

But when he dons his signature purple, black and green racing suit, there's no more Charlie, only Grave Digger. The truck has its own identity, and Pauken said it's up to him to make it come to life.

“I compare it to being Clark Kent, 'cause I'm a mild-mannered guy,” he said. “You put the suit on. You strap in. You get the adrenaline running. It's like an alter ego.”

He looked down at his arm and chuckled.

“I get goose bumps talking about it.”

The company acquired the complex in May 2012 for \$8.5 million. In two side-by-side buildings it has office, shop and rehearsal space for its entertainment ventures which range from the “Disney on Ice” and Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

Feld got Monster Jam when it bought Live Nation's Motorsports business for \$175 million in 2008.

It's deep inside the complex - a former General Electric plant - that the monsters come to life. Behind a set of giant garage doors, Feld Motor Sports' mechanics and fiberglass crafters build and repair the mammoth motor vehicles.

Measuring roughly 100 feet by 100 feet, the facility is a mashup of a scrap-yard and Frankenstein's laboratory.

Eight of the trucks were deployed from Ellenton to sponsoring businesses in

Hillsborough, Pinellas and Pasco counties Thursday afternoon.

At Elder Ford of Tampa a large group of fans was already waiting when the crown jewel of the fleet was unloaded at 2 p.m.

The DePolis family was among more than 400 fans who came to get a photo with Grave Digger.

Chris DePolis hoisted his daughter Annabelle, 4, onto a wheel three times her height for a picture while his twin 8-year-old boys ran to get an autograph from the truck's crew chief.

Christopher and Michael have gone to Monster Jam with their father for the last four years. At the preshow Pit-Party they get their programs autographed by every driver they can - the driver of Toro Loco signed Michael's face once - and study the books once they get home.

"As soon as we get into the stadium they lose their minds," their father said. "Then it's all popcorn, screaming and yelling for the different character trucks to come out... I just enjoy getting to spend the day with my boys."

For many Americans, going to monster truck rallies have become a family tradition, said Terald Hopkins, the Ford dealership's general manager.

He recalled seeing Bigfoot - widely regarded as the original monster truck - crush (drive over) cars in St. Louis as a boy in the mid-70's.

"Then it was more about racing each other and jumping things," he said. "I'll never forget as a little kid sitting in one of the tires. That was the coolest."

In 2011, Hopkins took his soon to their first Monster Jam as a family in North Carolina. He said the event resonates especially well with children.

"It's like the toys that you play with, seeing them out there," he said.

Copyright © 2016 HeraldTribune.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

CRIME

Amid North Port's vacant lots, grow houses sprout

By [Michael Scott Davidson](#)
scott.davidson@heraldtribune.com

Published: Thursday, April 21, 2016 at 3:57 p.m.

Near the city's eastern edge and surrounded by hundreds of vacant, pre-platted lots, the house with a green roof and trim was as inconspicuous as it was isolated.

But inside, police say, a pot-growing operation was flourishing.

In what North Port police say is one of the largest grow-house busts in the city's history, detectives last week found 155 marijuana plants in various stages of development inside the three-bedroom home at 3939 Bridge Drive. Growing equipment including lights and ventilation fans, and police also found reflective insulation board.

"Where houses are few and far between, it lends itself perfectly to these operations," police Commander Andrew Rose said. "You can easily hide in plain sight."

While it stood out for its size, the operation on Bridge Drive was not unusual in North Port, where police have uncovered at least 13 marijuana grow houses since 2011. The city of Sarasota, by contrast, has had no grow-house busts during the same period.

The disparity is caused by key differences in the nearby cities, said Rose, who oversees North Port's special investigations unit, tasked with handling narcotics investigations.

While both have similar populations, North Port's sprawling suburbia is nearly seven times larger than Sarasota's condensed urban core. Sarasota's population-per-square-mile is six times denser than that of North Port, according to 2010 census data.

Rose said marijuana growers target not only secluded areas, but also ones where they can buy or rent houses for cheap or even take over abandoned houses, all of which were in abundance in North Port after the housing meltdown.

The growers take their operations inside because they can produce a high-quality, potent plant while enjoying the privacy of being behind closed doors. Rose said it can easily cost tens of thousands of dollars to outfit a grow house, meaning there's often a good chance of an organized crime ring being involved.

"We've found out that many of these operations are not a mom-and-pop kind of place," he said. "It's not uncommon for these things to be part of a larger organization, and there's just a caretaker at the house."

The largest grow house bust in department history took place in October 2013 when police raided two adjacent rental homes in the rural North Port Estates neighborhood. Police seized about 125 marijuana plants valued at about \$125,000.

Seven grow houses were searched in 2014, and officers seized more than 175 plants and 40 pounds of processed marijuana. An ounce of pot can sell for \$200 to \$500 on the street, Rose said, depending on supply and demand.

While last Friday's bust produced more plants than the record-setting October 2013 investigation, a number of the plants were small, making police hesitant to call it the city's largest bust. The 155 plants' total weight was only about 48 pounds.

Detectives served a search warrant at the home just after 10 a.m. and arrested Nazario Rodriguez-Gil, 50, and Keyla Cid-Garcia, 26, as they exited the back of the home.

Neither suspect had prior arrests in Sarasota County. Both have already posted bond on their cannabis trafficking and drug paraphernalia-related charges.

Rodriguez-Gil told police that he is a handyman from Miami. Authorities have previously connected marijuana grow houses to drug cartels based in the South Florida city.

"We are working with agencies across the state to pinpoint any large connections," Rose said, adding that police were investigating if the pot was being sold locally or transported elsewhere.

County records show Frank Garcia bought the home from Norsota Associates, LP, for \$105,000 in March 2012. Garcia, 39, could not be reached for comment.

Rodriguez-Gil and Cid-Garcia had been sleeping in the home's living room because every other room was being used to store equipment and items to grow marijuana. Police say those items aren't hard to get.

"Ninety-nine percent of it you can pick up at Home Depot," Rose said. "Online, forget it, it's just wide open."

Chris Thomas, owner of a Sarasota County-based damage restoration company that rehabilitates former grow houses, said he's seen some elaborate equipment setups on the job.

Caches of solar-powered batteries can fuel high-intensity lamps while avoiding a conspicuously expensive electric bill. Inches of spray foam insulation block heat from escaping outside the grow house, where police could detect it with thermal cameras.

Hydroponic systems, which grow plants in water rather than in soil, can require even more maintenance and expertise.

"That takes someone who knows about plumping and filtration to run that type of operation," said Thomas, owner of Biologic Waste Solutions.

Thomas said it usually costs at least \$10,000 to repair a house used in a large-scale marijuana growing operation. The home's owner is almost always stuck footing the bill.

"Insurance companies don't cover the damage to these homes or the cleanup because a crime was committed," he said. "We get a lot of emotional people that are very financially stressed by the situation. People are calling me from Michigan saying, 'I got a rental unit, and this is what happened inside of it.'"

Copyright © 2016 HeraldTribune.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

Questions swirl after second infant's death

By [Michael Scott Davidson](#)

Published: Sunday, October 18, 2015 at 1:00 a.m.

They named him Chance, because he was their second.

After the death of her baby boy Duane in April 2014, Kristen Bury seemed ecstatic that she was pregnant again, said her former landlord Diane Wood, 54. It would be the 32-year-old's second baby with Joseph Walsh, 36.

"They had tried to get pregnant after that, so when she finally did she was happy about it. She was happy through the whole pregnancy," Wood said. "They told me they were going to name him Chance because they hoped he had a chance at life when the other baby didn't."

Duane's death hit the couple hard.

Wood remembered meeting them years earlier when they lived at a home across from hers on Lullaby Road. They had barbecued together from time to time.

The couple seemed stable, so it surprised Wood when they showed up at her home unannounced and desperate one night close to a year after Duane's death.

"They just came knocking on my door at about 11 at night one night saying they were homeless and needed place to stay," she said.

Kristen was pregnant with Chance, so Wood gave them a room.

The couple paid rent when they could. She let it slide when they couldn't.

Prior to Duane's death, Walsh and Bury had appeared inseparable from him. Wood said the couple often talked of their lost baby boy while living with her, their conversations ranging from sorrowful to fond recollections.

"He was never forgotten," Wood said. "He was their pride and joy."

'Unusual finding'

Duane Walsh died from a severe, acute kidney infection on April 4, 2014. He was 22 days old.

According to interviews, police records and investigatory documents:

Early that afternoon, Duane's parents called 911 and reported that he was unresponsive.

A North Port paramedic found Duane in his parents' bedroom, lying face up on the ground between the playpen and the door. His heart was not beating.

Duane was pale with dark colored patches on his skin. Blood was coming from his nostrils.

He was pronounced dead at the scene.

Bury told paramedics that Duane had been vomiting earlier that week and that

morning. She took Duane to a doctor, she said, but was told his condition was normal.

She, Walsh and Duane took a nap in their bed sometime after feeding Duane at 8 a.m. They woke up around 1 p.m. and found the baby unresponsive.

As police escorted the couple from the home, Bury was reported as saying "I killed my baby."

Sarasota County's chief medical examiner, Dr. Russell Vega, later determined Duane died a natural death.

Vega said it was the only time in his nearly 20-year-long career that his office had handled an infant who died of an acute kidney infection. But, he stressed, the cause of death was natural.

"Both the autopsy and the background investigation, were not very different than most other infant deaths we see," he said. "It didn't raise any red flags for me. It was just an unusual finding."

Vega's office will conduct an autopsy on the body detectives found Thursday, which is believed to be Chance. A positive identification could spark a review of Duane's autopsy, Vega said.

Fateful meeting

Douglas Card, 69, said Walsh and Bury met while renting separate rooms at his home.

When he looks at their mugshots now, he has a hard time recognizing the sunken and disheveled faces staring back at him.

Things have changed since the summer of 2012.

"Joe looked like he was a space cadet. That's not Joe," Card said. "That's not the way Kristen looked when I met her."

There were other differences as well, Card said. First of all, Walsh and Bury didn't know each other when they moved into his home on Lullaby Road.

When Bury arrived, she was married to and living with another man, according to Card. Not long after, Walsh began renting a room as well.

Walsh was working at Charlotte Motor Cars after finishing a drug rehabilitation program, Card said. He was shy and reserved.

At first, Kristen Bury didn't want Walsh living in the home, Card said. But eventually her husband moved out, and she and Walsh became a couple.

Time passed. Walsh lost his job. Duane was born, then died.

The grief-stricken couple left Card's home and bounced around from place to place in southern Sarasota County, the landlord said. Walsh called him once, crying because they were homeless.

Eventually they wound up at Wood's home across the street. Calamity was not far behind.

Drug trouble

Walsh and Bury were nice people, Wood said, but they had their vices.

While living with her, she said, they both took Subutex, a medication to fight opiate dependence. Kristen was pregnant with Chance at the time.

On June 10, Walsh had a bad experience with cocaine.

North Port police responded to their home shortly after 7 a.m. that day, police records show. Walsh was calling 911 nonstop for no apparent reason.

Bury told police that he was paranoid after taking two lines of cocaine, records show. He was dialing a phone in each hand.

Walsh refused to talk to the responding police. He was later charged with misuse of the 911 system.

Three days later — a month before Chance was born — Wood's house caught on fire.

The fire's exact cause remains undetermined.

According to official reports, it started in the home's garage. It was where Bury and Walsh stored their baby items.

Wood and Bury reported they were cooking when they heard crackling in the garage. Walsh was not home when the fire was reported.

The fire spread to the wooden-frame home's attic and roof before firefighters extinguished it.

Everyone had to move out. The American Red Cross put Walsh and Bury in room No. 208 at the Budget Inn in North Port.

The Florida Division of State Fire Marshal responded to the scene and found no physical evidence that the fire was deliberate.

Wood said she believes the fire was electrical in nature. However, the fire's cause was never determined.

The case was closed for lack of further leads.

Charity

All her life, Christine Zagrobelny said she has tried to help others.

So when she heard of a local family that lost almost everything in a fire, the 66-year-old restaurateur sprang into action.

“No job. No home. Baby on the way,” Zagrobelny recalled. “These people needed help.”

So in mid-summer, The Olde World Restaurant in North Port hosted a quarter-auction fundraiser for Bury and Walsh. More than a dozen vendors donated merchandise.

The event, according to Zagrobelny, was a marked success.

Attendees crowded the restaurant's Sherwood Forest Lounge, a white room with big windows and black chandeliers. Spices, candles and other donated auction items lined the walls.

“Our customers at the bar gave money, even though they weren't part of the fundraiser,” Zagrobelny said. “This was a miracle baby for them. Everybody tried to chip in.”

At that point Chance had just been born. He was cute and healthy looking.

Bury showed up in slacks and a nice top, Zagrobelny said. Walsh mostly sat in a corner; he appeared sick.

“I felt they were embarrassed,” she said. “He didn't speak much. She did all the talking.”

Afterward, Bury told the staff that they had made enough money to buy a used car. She asked about coming back and working at the restaurant.

It was the last time Zagrobelny saw them.

Resentment

Soon after Chance's birth, Bury's joy seemingly turned to resentment.

Bury complained that her new baby was fussy and cried too much, Wood said. The family moved into a duplex on Orduna Drive and became reclusive.

“The difference between the way they were with Duane and the way they were with Chance was totally a 180,” Wood said. “Her words were 'I thought it would help with the loss of Duane, but it's made it worse.'”

A week before she and Walsh left Florida, Bury told Wood she might give the baby up for adoption. Investigation documents indicate that Chance might have been already been dead. Bury reportedly said that she “despised” the baby and would harm him.

Wood's gut tells her that the body detectives found Thursday is Chance. She has a hard time fathoming how it could all end like this.

“I've been sitting here and trying to figure out why,” she said. “What happened that was so horrible with Chance that they would choose death over life for this child? They had so many options.”

Copyright © 2016 HeraldTribune.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

NORTH PORT

North Port gives up on hospital

By Michael Scott Davidson

scott.davidson@heraldtribune.com

Published: Tuesday, March 29, 2016 at 6:30 p.m.

In an abrupt about-face, a divided North Port City Commission on Tuesday voted to abandon efforts to obtain the state's permission to build a hospital in the city.

The 3-to-2 vote came after a months-long effort that cost taxpayers an estimated \$100,000 to bring a hospital to the county's largest and fastest-growing city.

It also reflected the reality that North Port could not find a hospital company with which to partner. Going alone meant long odds at getting a certificate of need from Florida Agency for Health Care Administration, according to consultant Kathy Platt.

Even so, the decision sparked rancor from dissenting commissioners and advocates who had collected more than 2,000 letters from residents in support of a hospital.

Mayor Jacqueline Moore made the motion that ultimately passed: "to decline to move forward with any (certificate of need) for a new hospital in North Port, and instead continue to collaborate with (Bayfront Health) and/or (Hospital Corporation of America) and/or anyone else with healthcare options for North Port."

Bayfront Health, a hospital network owned by Tennessee-based Community Health Systems, includes Venice Regional Bayfront Health and Bayfront Health Port Charlotte. Hospital Corporation of America, based in Nashville, owns Englewood Community Hospital, Doctors Hospital of Sarasota and Blake Medical Center in Bradenton.

Dissenters Vice Mayor Rhonda DiFranco and Commissioner Cheryl Cook said the motion's language prohibits the city from further attempts to pursue a hospital.

"This ended it," Cook said. "Nothing will change. As the city continues growing, this will never come up again."

Commissioner Linda Yates, who supported the motion, said it still kept the door open for a hospital company to bring a hospital to the city.

"It puts an end to the prospect that the city would be a filer for the certificate of need," she said. "It would be a private entity that would pursue the certificate of need if they determine they're willing and able to put a hospital here in North Port."

Sam George, chairman of the Community Health Action Team of North Port who spearheaded much of the effort, said the decision increases the chances Sarasota Memorial will be allowed to build a new 200-bed acute care hospital in nearby Venice.

If that happens, it will likely be years, if not decades, before the state will allow a hospital to be built in North Port, George said.

"I'm disappointed in the short-sightedness of our commissioners," he said. "I think they were in way over their heads."

George added that he had collected more than 2,000 letters of support from city residents this month.

On Tuesday, Sarasota Memorial spokeswoman Kim Savage said the hospital is on schedule to submit its final certificate of need application by April 13.

Platt told commissioners that the city could protest Sarasota Memorial's proposal to construct a new Venice hospital. That includes writing an opposition letter to the state and making public statements at a public hearing on April 19.

Platt said she expects both Hospital Corporation of America and Bayfront Health will oppose Sarasota Memorial's plans during the public hearing.

City Manager Jonathan Lewis said his staff had reached out to eight hospital companies, none of which offered to partner with North Port. That included Community Health Systems; Tennessee-based Hospital Corporation of America and a hospital company based in Toronto.

"I've personally talked to all of them that would return our phone calls," he said. "I can't speak for all of them, but one of the major issues with them was the time frame. ... It's something they do over a year or so, not six or seven weeks."

Lewis estimated that it cost the city about \$100,000 to get this far in the process, including consulting fees from Platt and law firm Greenberg Traurig, and \$10,000 the city paid to file its initial certificate of need shell application.

On Tuesday, commissioners unsuccessfully attempted to pass two motions that would have kept the process alive, before a majority voted in favor a third motion that essentially ended the city's effort to seek state approval.

Yates presented the first failed motion, asking commissioners to not submit a final application for a certificate of need during the current application cycle and instead continue searching for a hospital partner.

That failed 1-to-4. DiFranco said she would have voted in favor of the motion, had it set a strict deadline on when the city would file an application.

DiFranco then presented the second failed motion, asking commissioners to file an application this fall during the next batching cycle. That failed 2-to-3, with Yates saying she would have supported it had it stipulated that the city must have found a hospital partner before applying.

When the third motion passed, DiFranco said she was "shocked" and "baffled."

"I didn't think it would at all go this direction," she said. "As a city, we're not growing in the right direction."

Both she and Cook alleged that the decision would benefit private interest groups and the motion needed more scrutiny.

Two former city commissioners in the audience agreed it was the wrong decision to make.

"They ignored the citizens," Fred Tower III said.

"I think what you've seen today is politics at its worst," Jim Blucher said. "You've seen some people who dislike each other and vote against each other because of that, and it certainly did not help the city of North Port."

Copyright © 2016 HeraldTribune.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.