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City prostitution cases plunge

As prosecutions fall, some worry sex workers miss out on aid programs.

By Vinny Vella
STAFF WRITER

Because of a police pullback in response to COVID-19 and policy changes by District Attorney Larry Krasner, prosecutors have almost stopped bringing prostitution cases in Philadelphia.

Prosecutors filed only four such cases last year, official figures show. The year before Krasner took office, his predecessor, Seth Williams, charged 847 people with the same offense.

Like many changes in the criminal-justice system, this shift was greatly influenced by the pan-

“It’s clear that they need help, and hopefully with them getting into the back of the police wagon, going to the district, and going through the process, a light will go off in their head.”

Police Lt. Oronde Watson

demic. The virus prompted the Philadelphia Police Department to temporarily shut its 10-officer Citywide Vice Unit — the small squad responsible for enforcing prostitution laws — reassigning its officers to local districts amid

“What is happening with these laws is that people are being harassed for being poor and trying to survive their acute poverty. They’re not helping anyone.”

Raani Begum, a sex worker and organizer of advocacy group Red Umbrella Alliance

an overall shortage of officers and the surge in shootings.

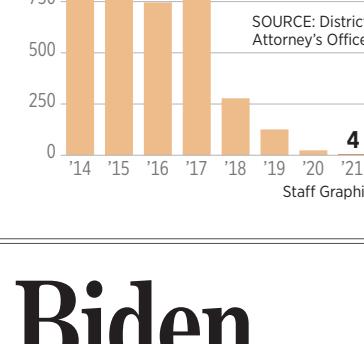
The unit only recently resumed its street-level enforcement, returning to its sweeps at the end of last year, the unit's commander says.

COVID-19 hastened a trend already powered by a policy shift within the district attorney's office. Krasner and his prosecutors have been frank about their decision not to pursue charges against sex workers, saying the cases deliver needless punishment and little deterrence without providing any permanent solutions. Prosecutors instead urge that sex workers be connected to services offered by nonprofits, notably a program run by the Salvation Army.

This shift has sparked debate. See **PROSTITUTION** on A6

Philadelphia's Decline In Prostitution Charges

Prosecutors filed only four prostitution cases last year, compared with 847 in 2017, the year before District Attorney Larry Krasner took office.



Facing the school day



Students outside Masterman School at 17th and Spring Garden Streets in Philadelphia were wearing masks Monday in keeping with a revived mandate. Districts in several suburban counties had announced plans last week to return to mask requirements, but many have since had second thoughts. **Story, B4** ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / Staff Photographer

Biden steps up rhetoric on China

In his first Asian visit as president, he said the U.S. would defend Taiwan from attack.

By Seung Min Kim,
Michelle Ye Hee Lee,
and Cleve R. Wootson Jr.
WASHINGTON POST

TOKYO — President Joe Biden signaled a more confrontational approach to China on multiple fronts Monday, issuing a sharp warning against any potential attack on Taiwan at the same time his administration is embroiled in wide-ranging efforts to beat back aggression by another superpower, Russia.

Speaking to reporters during his first trip to Asia as president, Biden said that the United States would defend Taiwan militarily if it came under attack by China — despite the U.S. policy of remaining vague on the subject — and that deterring Beijing from aggression in Taiwan and elsewhere was among the reasons it was critical to punish Russian President Vladimir Putin for his “barbarism in Ukraine.”

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Ukrainian court imposes life term.

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Phoenixville Borough is finalizing an agreement for affordable senior housing to be built on the former site of its public works building. STEVEN M. FALK / Staff Photographer

Since Floyd's death, little action on police reform

Biden and lawmakers promised change. Advocates are frustrated.

By Cleve R. Wootson Jr.
WASHINGTON POST

A few days after George Floyd was murdered, presidential candidate Joe Biden addressed the nation, speaking passionately about police reforms that he stressed could not wait another month, let alone another election cycle: banning police chokeholds; rules for use of force; a review of every police department's hiring, training, and de-escalation practices.

“No more excuses,” Biden demanded, urging Congress to put a bill on then-President Donald Trump’s desk within days. “No more delays.”

Two years later — and a week removed from the second anniversary of Floyd’s death — it’s Biden who sits behind the presidential desk. And his emphasis often appears to be less on how quickly the nation’s police departments can be reformed than on how quickly they can add officers.

“To every governor, every mayor, every county official, the need is clear, my message is clear: ... Spend this money now that you have,” Biden said in a speech from the Rose Garden last week, flanked by police chiefs from across the country. “Use these funds we made available to you to prioritize public safety. Do it quickly, before the summer, when crime rates typically surge. Taking action today is going to save lives tomorrow. So use the money. Hire the police officers.”

See **FLOYD** on A6

By Michaelle Bond
STAFF WRITER

Five years ago, more than 1,600 housing units were proposed or under construction in West Whiteland Township practically all at once. Residents of the Chester County community “were a little bit stunned by this and a little bit alarmed,” said John Weller, the township’s director of planning and zoning.

Concerned that some new homes might sit empty, officials asked a developer for its research on housing de-

mand in the township.

“I remember sitting through this presentation and feeling that as much as we have, I feel like we won’t have enough,” Weller said. In the last few years, residential construction has continued to boom in the town of about 20,000.

Last year, 3,743 homes were built in Chester County — more than in any year since 2001, according to the county’s annual housing report, released this

See **CHESTER** on A7



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Early spending on ads attacking GOP's Doug Mastriano

The commercials are targeting the Republican gubernatorial candidate as extreme on abortion.

By Andrew Seidman
STAFF WRITER

Democrats and allied groups are opening the general election for governor of Pennsylvania with an advertising blitz aimed at portraying Republican nominee Doug Mastriano as extreme on abortion.

The early spending, starting a week after the primary election, is the latest sign that Democrats plan to put abortion rights at the center of the midterm election campaign as the U.S. Supreme Court appears poised to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

An affiliate of the Democratic Governors Association has reserved almost \$2.7 million in airtime through early June for a TV ad that says Mastriano, a state senator, would take "Pennsylvania backwards," according to AdImpact, which tracks political advertising.

"The Supreme Court wants to set women's rights back a half-century," the narrator says, a reference to the leak earlier this month of a draft Supreme Court opinion in a Mississippi abortion case. The ad shows clips of Mastriano describing the mantra "my body, my choice" as "ridiculous nonsense" and expressing his opposition to exceptions for rape and incest. It's airing in the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh media markets.

The ad buy is part of a broader \$6 million anti-Mastriano messaging campaign, funded by groups including Planned Parenthood, Politico reported. Mastriano's campaign did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Mastriano's opponent, state Attorney General Josh Shapiro, also started airing TV ads earlier this month highlighting Mastriano's position on abortion.

Mastriano has sponsored a "heartbeat" bill that would ban



Doug Mastriano after winning the GOP primary race for governor.

STEVEN M. FALK / Staff Photographer

abortion after ultrasound screening picks up an embryo's cardiac activity, which can happen as early as six weeks into pregnancy. Many women do not know they are pregnant by that point.

Mastriano has said he would sign that bill into law and also hopes to go further, saying he believes life starts at conception.

"We're gonna have to work our way towards that," he said during a GOP primary debate.

Republicans control both houses of the state legislature, though that could change after the November elections. Outgoing Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf has vetoed multiple bills that would have further restricted abortion access.

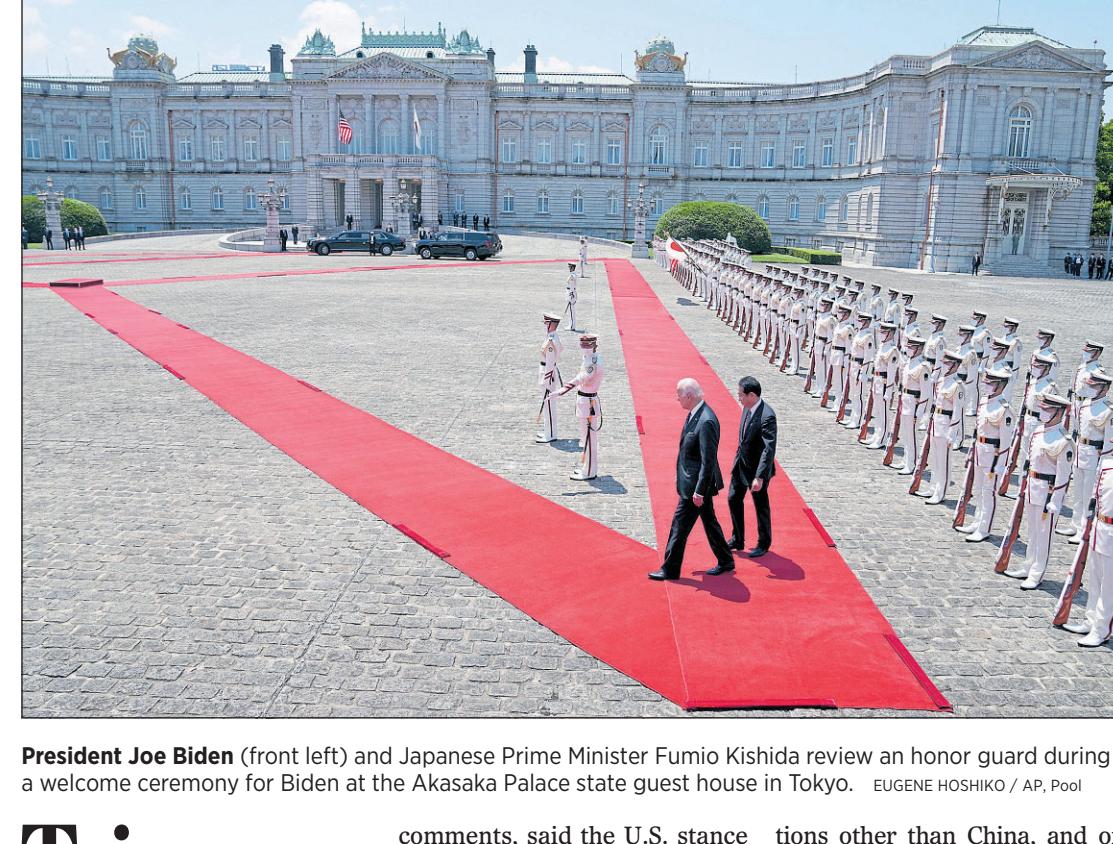
Mastriano is not shying away from the issue. During his victory speech last week, he said: "You want to talk about extreme? Democrat governors around the nation here want to kill babies even up to birth, and some are talking about after birth. That's extreme. That's denying the science. That's immoral. Every baby deserves the right to life."

Asked on CNN Sunday whether he supports any restrictions on abortion, Shapiro said he supports current Pennsylvania law.

Abortion is generally legal in Pennsylvania prior to 24 weeks of pregnancy, with exceptions thereafter if the mother's life or health is endangered.

"My job as governor will be to protect Pennsylvania law — that's what I support," Shapiro said.

✉ aseidman@inquirer.com
📞 215-854-4542
👤 AndrewSeidman



President Joe Biden (front left) and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida review an honor guard during a welcome ceremony for Biden at the Akasaka Palace state guest house in Tokyo. EUGENE HOSHIKO / AP, Pool

Taiwan

Continued from A1

Asked if the U.S. would defend Taiwan militarily if it is attacked by China, Biden said: "Yes, that's the commitment we made."

He added, "We agree with the 'One China' policy ... but the idea that it can be taken by force, just taken by force, is just not appropriate. It would dislocate the entire region and be another action similar to what happened in Ukraine. And so it's a burden that's even stronger."

A White House official said Biden's comments simply reiterated a pledge made through a 1979 law that the U.S. would provide Taiwan with the military means for self-defense. But in the current context — a presidential visit to Seoul and Tokyo and the West's confrontation with Russia over Ukraine — the words had a more powerful resonance.

The United States has long maintained a policy of strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan. The "One China" policy is a long-standing bit of diplomatic legerdemain under which the U.S. recognizes China's position that there is only one Chinese government, but does not accept Beijing's view that Taiwan is under its rightful control.

The White House official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to clarify Biden's

comments, said the U.S. stance had not changed.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin played down the president's comments as unremarkable. Biden restated "our commitment to peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait," Austin said, while highlighting "our commitment under the Taiwan Relations Act to help provide Taiwan the means to defend itself."

He added: "I think the president was clear on the fact that the policy has not changed."

But given that Russia's contention that Ukraine is simply a renegade region echoes China's position on Taiwan, Biden's comments took on the tone of a global doctrine that autocracies should not be allowed to swallow up smaller nations by declaring them rebellious provinces.

"Russia has to pay a long-term price for that in terms of the sanctions that have been imposed," Biden said during a news conference with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at Akasaka Palace. "If in fact there's a rapprochement met between ... the Ukrainians and Russia, and these sanctions are not continued to be sustained in many ways, then what signal does that send to China about the cost of attempting to take Taiwan by force?"

The Biden administration later announced the outlines of a new trade framework that is meant to strengthen U.S. economic ties with Indo-Pacific na-

tions other than China, and on Tuesday Biden is to participate in a summit of the Quad, the partnership made up of the United States, India, Japan, and Australia that is meant in part to counter China's power globally.

Taken together, Monday's rhetoric and accompanying events underscored the administration's aggressive strategy to blunt Beijing's rising influence. Though Biden said he did not expect China to invade Taiwan, he added that Beijing was "already flirting with danger."

Taiwanese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Joanne Ou said her agency "sincerely welcomed" Biden's comments, but the Chinese ministry's spokesperson, Wang Wenbin, expressed his government's "strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition" to them. Beijing says Taiwan is an inalienable part of its territory.

At Monday's summit, Biden and Kishida also reinforced their commitment to the alliance and their cooperation on responding to the Russian war.

Part of the U.S.-Japanese response to China's rise is the launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, the contours of an agreement designed to be a bulwark against China. The administration says it improves on the political and substantive shortcomings of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, negotiated during the Obama administration when Biden was vice president.

Chester

Continued from A1

month. And despite rising housing costs that pushed the county's median sale price in 2021 to a record \$420,000, more homes sold last year than in any year since 2005.

Chester County's population grew by 7% from 2010 to 2020, according to census data, on par with Montgomery County and faster than any other county in the region.

"We're a place where people want to live," said Brian O'Leary, executive director of the Chester County Planning Commission. "We have a lot to offer in Chester County."

Like the rest of the country, the county — one of the wealthiest in Pennsylvania — hasn't built enough housing to meet demand and is trying to figure out how to make sure residents across job types can afford to stay.

"If any time was good for making a dent in the issue, now's the time," O'Leary said.

At the same time, county officials have prided themselves on the preservation of open space, shown to improve quality of life and increase nearby property values. As of early 2021, 30% of the county was protected open space, according to county data.

"It is a balancing act," O'Leary said. He estimates that the county is roughly 40% developed. "There's still a lot of land."

Tackling affordability in a wealthy county

About one in seven of the homes sold in Chester County in 2021 were considered "affordably priced" at under \$250,000, according to the county. Both home buyers and renters are getting squeezed. The apartments being built in the county tend to be high-end.

"There's rents that you hear and you're kind of astounded," O'Leary said.

More than half of the homes built in the county in 2021 — 1,963 — were apartments. That's more than three times as many as were built in 2020, according to the county. Construction of many of the apartments began in 2020, but the county doesn't consider an apartment building to be "built" until it is 50% occupied.

Apartments are unlikely to keep accounting for such a high share of housing construction in the future,



The Hanover Apartments at the Exton Square Mall. West Whiteland officials are excited about the planned sale of the mall and the potential to add homes in a redevelopment project. TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer

O'Leary said. But an aging population, smaller household sizes, and the cost of for-sale homes will ensure a continued strong demand.

To make homes more affordable, O'Leary said the county needs more units that are smaller in size.

Tredyffrin Township had the widest range of home sale prices in the county in 2021, according to the housing report. Erin McPherson, Tredyffrin's director of planning and zoning, was surprised but pointed to the variety of home types in the township. A lot of the housing stock is detached single-family homes, she said, but there are denser pockets such as the Chesterbrook section that have more townhouses and twins, where parcels are smaller and less expensive.

Phoenixville Borough tried to get developers to commit to certain numbers of affordable units in their projects, said Borough Manager E. Jean Krack, but "we began to realize that's really an untenable thing, because there's so many rules with [the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development] about what that means and how to go about it and how to verify it." The borough doesn't have the staff.

Instead, developers have contributed more than \$150,000 so far to a fund managed by a public-private affordable housing coalition that is exploring ways to offset housing costs for residents.

One idea is to guarantee deposits for people who can afford monthly rent but not high up-front costs.

Rising construction costs also have hiked home prices. And a growing number of regulations at all levels of government for safeguards such as water-quality protection and storm-water management adds time and cost to projects, said Peter Rotelle, owner of Chester County-based Rotelle Development Co. Streamlined processes would help lower costs for builders and homeowners, he said.

"We need proper balance between the costs, the environment, and time where everything can be done and accomplished but expedited and more cost effective," he said.

The county has been a great place for his company, Rotelle said. It's got a "great buyer pool" and the median home price is in his company's sweet spot for single-family homes.

"The challenge is that the land inventory is pretty thin," he said. He's lost out on land to preservation, an effort he supports. But it's a balancing act, he said, and "there really isn't any control measures put in place to ensure that seesaw is level."

County influence on local growth decisions

Municipalities ultimately make zoning decisions, but the county can guide those decisions. The

county awards urban revitalization and planning grants to support certain projects. It advises local governments on planning work. Its open space program preserves land where it doesn't want development.

The county's comprehensive plan identified suburban and urban centers as important areas for growth, given existing infrastructure and access to transportation systems and jobs, O'Leary said. Areas such as Exton in West Whiteland are seeing more mixed-use development.

In 2020 and 2021, the township saw projects with nearly 500 new housing units, Weller said. West Whiteland has directed most of its development to its core around the Main Street at Exton shopping center.

Almost 1,000 of the more than 1,600 townhouses and apartments proposed in a handful of major developments from 2015 to 2018 were in the town center area, Weller said. The township is zoned to allow commercial spaces, apartments, townhouses, offices, "everything you would need to make almost a downtown kind of area," he said. It didn't specify maximum housing units per acre, "which is pretty radical, particularly for a suburban community," he said.

Reimagining malls and government property

Although West Whiteland offi-

cials planned for growth, the pace and all-at-once timing of development has stunned them. And it's left some residents, especially those who remember a more rural West Whiteland decades ago, uneasy. Township officials are educating residents about their plans through a campaign called "Development By Design."

"We've built up a good bit," Weller said. "It's not acknowledging reality to think we're still going to be the country. We're not."

Brandywine Realty Trust plans to buy Exton Square Mall from Pennsylvania Real Estate Investment Trust, and West Whiteland officials are excited about the potential to add homes as the township runs out of developable space and looks to redevelop.

Encouraging municipalities to use land in new ways is one step county officials can take to influence local development, O'Leary said. He pointed to Phoenixville as an example.

In 2018, the borough built a new public works building in an industrial part of town. Now Phoenixville is finalizing an agreement with the Hankin Group to hand over the roughly one-acre former public works site in the heart of downtown. In return, the developer plans to build 50 apartments for residents 62 and older. Most units will cost between \$400 and \$500 a month, said Krack, borough manager.

A deed restriction will mean that if the property owner ever stops offering affordable housing on the site, the owner must pay the borough however much the land is worth at the time.

The Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency approved tax credits for the project in November, and officials expect a groundbreaking in late summer. The project could get 10 times more applications than there are apartments, Krack said. "It's that needed."

But the plan "wasn't an easy sell," he said. Some wanted the borough to sell the land — in a valuable location — and put the money in the general fund. Instead, he said, "we're contributing to affordable housing for seniors in the borough."

✉ mbond@inquirer.com

📞 215-854-4546

👤 MichaelleBond