

Across the Region

News from Mecklenburg, the region and the state at charlotteobserver.com/local.

POLICE Suspect arrested in third Presbyterian attack

Three weeks after two Presbyterian Hospital employees were attacked in one day, another employee was robbed at gunpoint in a parking deck Tuesday afternoon. Charlotte-Mecklenburg police said a suspect was being questioned Tuesday night to determine whether he might have been involved in the earlier assaults. His name has not yet been released.

Police said Tuesday's robbery happened around 4 p.m. in an elevator in a parking deck at Presbyterian Orthopaedic Hospital on Randolph Road, in the Elizabeth neighborhood just southeast of uptown. The suspect ran from the scene toward Vail Avenue, where hospital security officers tried to arrest him, police said.

Security officers were struggling with the man when Charlotte-Mecklenburg police arrived and took him into custody.

Police said they recovered a handgun and the victim's purse at the scene of the man's arrest. The victim was not injured.

Security had been doubled around the hospital and officers were regularly patrolling parking lots after the June attacks, hospital officials said.

Around 1:45 a.m. June 27, a female nurse who'd finished her shift was approached by a man in a parking lot at the corner of Fifth Street and Hawthorne Lane, across from the hospital. He stabbed her, police said, and grabbed her purse and tote bag. The nurse suffered shoulder injuries and was later released from the hospital.

At 6:20 p.m. June 27, a hospital secretary was assaulted in a parking garage where patients and employees park. She was pushed in a stairwell, police said. — MEGHAN COOKE

SOUTH CHARLOTTE Near-drowning reported at Mecklenburg Aquatic Club

A teen was rushed to the hospital after a near-drowning during swim practice at the Mecklenburg Aquatic Club Tuesday afternoon.

The incident happened about 4:20 p.m. at the club, next to Charlotte Latin High School off Providence Road. The 17-year-old was taken to Carolinas Medical Center with life-threatening injuries, according to Medic.

"The swimmer is a member of the club's competition team and was at the pool for practice," said a SwimMAC Carolina spokesperson. "SwimMAC coaching staff administered emergency life-saving measures immediately after removing the swimmer from the pool."

The teen's name had not been released. — WNCN-TV

CAROWINDS Problems also reported at Ohio WindSeeker ride

After a mechanical malfunction stranded nearly 30 people atop the WindSeeker ride at Carowinds Saturday, WNCN-TV has discovered a similar incident on the same ride at Cedar Point amusement park in Ohio.

Carowinds said a safety sensor triggered Saturday's incident, which left passengers dangling for two-and-a-half hours. No one was hurt.

In June, a different mechanical problem caused a similar outcome on the WindSeeker at the park in Sandusky, Ohio.

According to published reports, a few dozen people were stuck on the

Lottery Results

N.C. LOTTERY

» Numbers drawn Tuesday

Midday Drawings

Pick 3: 5'-8 Pick 4: 9'-0'

» Numbers drawn late Monday

Night Drawings

Pick 3: 6'-8 Pick 4: 1'-8*

Cash 5: 6'-10**=24

S.C. LOTTERY

» Numbers drawn Tuesday

Midday Drawings

Pick 3: 1'-2 Pick 4: 7'-8*

Evening Drawings

Pick 3: 6'-7 Pick 4: 8'-2*
Cash 5: 5'-33**=35 Mult.: 2

Change afoot at shopping hub

Park Road Shopping Center tenants nervous about new owner's plans, rent increases

BY KERRY SINGE

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A year after new owners bought the Park Road Shopping Center, the developer is sprucing up the 1950s-era strip mall. But some tenants are nervous at the changes in the air.

The new owner, Columbia-based developer Edens, plans to add outdoor

seating, expand sidewalk dining, and make the center feel more like the community's "living room."

Already changes are evident. The long-popular rose garden is gone, replaced by boxwoods and trees. Scraggly bushes have been cut down. Faded "No Parking" signs have been replaced.

But tenants say they aren't sure what to expect next. Some say Edens hasn't fully communicated its plans, and they worry rents will rise significantly.

SEE PARK ROAD, 10B



ROBERT LAHSEY - rlahsey@charlotteobserver.com

At Park and Woodlawn roads, the shopping center is near some of the city's wealthiest neighborhoods.

Wreck hidden by deep thicket



WNCN

This aerial view shows the car in the woods off the I-485 ramp near its intersection with I-77 in southwest Charlotte. The body found in the car is believed to be missing DJ Max Espinoza.



DIEDRA LAIRD - dlaird@charlotteobserver.com

Police believe the car was going west on inner I-485 when it reached the point where the ramps for north and south I-77 form a V in southwest Charlotte. Instead of getting onto one of those ramps, it continued straight, driving through a grassy area, down a slope and into woods. There was no guardrail there.

Body found inside car that searchers hunted for weeks

BY ANN DOSS HELMS

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It sounds unlikely, almost impossible: A popular DJ runs off the road at one of the busiest intersections in North Carolina's largest city, an interchange monitored by camera, and vanishes for more than two months.

Family and friends quickly reported him missing. Police and volunteers searched the area, even checking the location of his last cellphone use. Roughly 100,000 people a day drove by the interchange of Interstates 485 and 77 in southwest Charlotte, while the wreckage of the one-car crash lay about 75 yards away.

But it wasn't until Monday, when another car wrecked nearby, that officials found the body they believe to be Max Espinoza, who apparently ran off the road early in the morning of May 6. If not for that



Espinoza



WNCN

The car wrecked near one of Charlotte's busiest intersections but wasn't visible from the road.

INSIDE

DOT to examine exit ramp. 3B

coincidence, police say he might not have been found until autumn thinned the foliage that hid his overturned car.

Police were waiting Tuesday for formal identification of the body found in Espinoza's white Volvo. But friends were grieving for a man who loved his two young daughters and Latin music, an immigrant from Ecuador who recently celebrated his U.S. citizenship.

SEE MISSING, 3B

Dems, I've got a convention theme for you

Political conventions require themes.

They usually run in the upbeat genre of "Forward Together" or "Chicken in Every Pot," unless they're held in Chicago where more traditional catchphrases are popular, like "One More Word Out of You And You're Going To Get Clubbed."

Here in Charlotte, the Democrats have not yet announced their theme for their September convention. They may be keeping it dark so the Republicans don't make fun of it, or they may still be thinking up something good.

To be helpful, a few suggestions: ■ "Hey! - 92 Percent Employment Ain't Bad." This is one of those glass-half-full approaches that emphasizes the positive in such a way that even the Negative Nellies among us are struck speechless for a time. At least 92 percent of them,

IN MY OPINION



MARK WASHBURN

anyway.

■ "Clearly, You've Never Been Stuck With A Fixer-Upper." This goes to the emotional core of anyone who has ever acquired property with confidence they could fix it up. Years later, they're still at it, weary and aware that every stroke of the hammer only makes things worse. ■ "We're Still on Target." This one reassures the public that there is a target and everything will be peachy in time. It also dovetails nicely with the Democrats' assurances that fundraising to underwrite the convention is "still on target,"

though no one will say whether they're going to need a big bake sale at the end to make their numbers.

■ "If You Like French Fries Now, You'll Love Obamacare Later." This provocative slogan goes right to the heart of the American experience.

■ "More Investment From China Than Any Other Administration." Most people don't understand the complexities of unbalanced budgets and international finance. Such ignorance can be exploited.

■ "If Your Kids Can Afford Those Fancy Phones, They Can Certainly Handle the National Debt." Point out that at a penny per text, the millennials could erase the national debt in a couple hours. That may even be true.

■ "Anybody Seen Bin Laden Lately?" I'd run that down to the copyright office today. In some ways, we are better off than four years ago.

Man arrested on meth charges

He's charged with possession and distribution

BY CLEVE R. WOOTSON JR.

AND GARY L. WRIGHT

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Federal investigators believe a man arrested Friday at his father's home near Cotswold was distributing methamphetamine, according to court documents unsealed on Tuesday.

Raameen Shiraz, 24, of Charlotte, is charged with unlawful distribution of a chemical used to make meth, possession of the drug with intent to distribute and possession of a firearm by a convicted felon.

Law enforcement agents seized a 100-pound container of iodine from the home, according to a criminal complaint. The chemical is one of several used to make meth.

At a storage unit on Park Road used by Shiraz, authorities found a plastic bag with 315 grams of the drug, a hotplate plugged into a light fixture and several other chemicals, according to the complaint. Authorities say they also found four

SEE SHIRAZ, 4B



Shiraz

Huntersville says no more smoking in town parks

BY APRIL BETHEA

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Mecklenburg leaders could decide later this year whether to ban smoking or other tobacco use at county parks.

The move - which must be approved by park and recreation staff as well as county commissioners - could add Mecklenburg to a growing number of local governments in North Carolina that restrict or prohibit tobacco use in public parks.

On Monday, a majority of Huntersville commissioners voted to ban smoking in town parks effective immediately. Violators could face a fine if they don't stop smoking after a warning.

Davidson also bans smoking in town parks. Meanwhile, Cornelius, Kannapolis, Concord and Cabarrus County ban all tobacco use in parks.

Mecklenburg parks director Jim Garges said a committee from his agency and the county health department are discussing a potential ordinance on smoking or tobacco use at parks.

A formal proposal hasn't been drafted yet, and it's not yet known how far any prohibition would go.

Smoking is already prohibited in public buildings in the state, including the county's. But some communities have gone further to restrict tobacco in public areas as well.

Across the state, about a fifth of the state's 100 counties, and 48 municipal-

SEE SMOKING, 4B



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PARK ROAD

from 1B

Woodlawn roads, the shopping center lies near some of Charlotte's wealthiest neighborhoods. Rents at a newer mixed-use center across Woodlawn Road are double what they are at the Park Road center, say people familiar with commercial real estate. The center also is at the heart of a neighborhood plan being discussed by city officials that aims to make the area more pedestrian friendly and accessible.

"The demographics are incredible," said veteran commercial real estate appraiser Fitzhugh Stout, managing director with Integra Realty Resources. "At some point, they are going to have to make some changes. It being older stores, it's not as functional by today's standards."

None of the roughly dozen merchants who talked to the Observer wanted to speak for attribution, for fear of upsetting their new landlord.

"Change is coming," said one store employee who said surveyors for the developer have been on site lately. The manager said the store's owner had talked to Edens about future plans.

"There's no way it's going to stay the same," the worker said, noting trash cans have been painted and dim light bulbs replaced. "It's like moving into a new house. You want to make it yours."

In an email response, Edens' president and chief investment officer Jodie McLean didn't answer specific questions about tenant concerns. But she said the plans "are squarely aligned with Park Road Shopping Center's heritage."

A brochure created by Edens and obtained by the Observer hints at other specifics.

The plan talks about "enhancing the iconic nature of the center and making much needed improvement to enhance the pedestrian experience" and introducing lighting and signage "to promote eve-



The shopping center's long-popular rose garden is gone, replaced by boxwoods and trees.



A handful of businesses occupy the center's back court.

ning shopping."

The plan also mentions "remerchandising" continuing "in earnest" through 2015 but doesn't provide more detail.

Concerns about higher rent

The center is home to an array of enduring local tenants, including a piano store, anchor tenant Blackhawk Hardware and A Time N' Place, where the owner fixes Rolexes and repairs grandfather clocks. The architecture is an eclectic mix, ranging from an Art Deco styled movie theatre to the stand-alone Tudor-style pipe and tobacco shop.

When it opened in 1956, Park Road Shopping Center was the first open-air shopping center

in Charlotte, and the largest of its kind between Washington, D.C., and Atlanta.

The center has remained virtually 100 percent occupied since attorney and philanthropist Porter Byrum bought it in 1967.

Last year, Byrum donated the center to Wake Forest University, Queens University of Charlotte and Wingate University. Shortly after, the universities sold the center to Edens, then known as Edens & Avant, for \$82 million. The privately held developer owns and operates grocery store-anchored shopping centers throughout the East Coast.

Efforts to reach Byrum, known favorably to some long-

time tenants as "Mr. B," were unsuccessful. A woman who took a message for Byrum said "we don't know anything" and the new owner hasn't told them much about what they plan for the center.

Edens also owns Atherton Mill and Market in Charlotte's South End and Kenilworth Commons in Dilworth.

McLean, Edens' president, told the Observer that small, intimate gathering spaces will be distributed throughout the Park Road site to help "break down the scale and length of the center." Outdoor dining and outdoor furniture will play a key role, she said.

Landscaping is expected to be finished by the end of the

month, with new signage coming by the end of October.

One store employee said he was told a fine dining restaurant may be built in the middle of the center's fairly large parking lot. Half a dozen employees said they believe stores will be expected to be open later hours.

Davidson-based retail analyst Kathleen Rose said shoppers prefer mixed-use "village centers," which offer the basics, such as grocery stores, post offices and dry cleaners, along with live entertainment, civic opportunities and living options.

"Shopping is not only a functional experience, but it's now become a social experience," she said. "We don't go shopping for the utilitarian function. We can all order what we want on the Internet."

Commercial real estate broker David Tschirhart said he'd like to see the owner add "vitality" to the center. He lives in the area and says he and his family drive elsewhere for family fun.

"It's a shame that we have to hop in a car and drive to Stone-Crest so the kids can run around the fountain," Tschirhart said, speaking of the mixed-use center in south Charlotte.

"I think it needs to be more of a neighborhood center than a strip mall," he said. "I think the neighborhood's screaming for it."

Given the talk of updates, and the center's prime location, some tenants told the Observer they worry they could be priced out of the center.

Many stores pay below average rent for the area, which Byrum, the previous owner, was able to offer because he didn't have debt on the property, say people familiar with the project.

Across the street, lease rates at Park Towne Village Shopping Center can be in the high \$20s a square foot, roughly double what people pay at Park Road, brokers say.

One mile away, at Park Selwyn Terrace, average rents are

between \$22 and \$25 a square foot, according to Charlotte research firm Karnes.

"I'd like to stay but I'm looking for new space," said one Park Road tenant who worries the store's lease may not be renewed at the same rate or terms.

Edens didn't respond directly to questions about potential rent changes but said it is "mindful of the retailers' personal connection with the community and plan to continue fostering these relationships."

Back court 'possibilities'

Perhaps some of the biggest uncertainty involves Park Road Shopping Center's back court, a handful of businesses set behind the main shopping center.

Tenants include an Indian restaurant, consignment store, a Tae Kwon Do studio and dance school.

Last month, the city of Charlotte held a workshop for residents to share what they would like to see for the area. The back court faces the Little Sugar Creek Greenway, and city planners have said the back court could be a key to connecting the greenway to shopping and restaurants.

Edens told the Observer the back lot has "endless possibilities" but didn't provide more detail.

Edens representatives have attended public meetings on the area plan, said Alberto Gonzales, the city of Charlotte's area plan project manager. The company has talked about bringing more restaurants to the area but otherwise kept fairly quiet, Gonzales said.

Rose, the Davidson-based analyst, said the Park Road center's owners have a "huge opportunity."

"It's obsolete but the center has got such a rich history," she said. "It's retro and funky and a beloved place that everyone identifies with."


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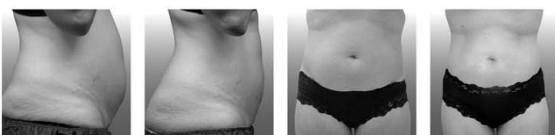
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