

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

\* \* \* \* \*

Investigation of: \*

NATURAL GAS BUILDING EXPLOSION & \*

FIRE NEAR WEST READING, \*

PENNSYLVANIA, ON MARCH 24, 2023 \*

Accident No.: PLD23LR002

\* \* \* \* \*

Interview of: WAYNE W. HOLBEN, Chief of Police  
West Reading Police Department

West Reading Police Department  
500 Chestnut Street  
West Reading, Pennsylvania

Wednesday,  
March 29, 2023

## APPEARANCES:

SHERYL HARLEY, Investigator  
National Transportation Safety Board

ASHLEY HORTON, Accident Investigator  
Department of Transportation  
Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration

Terri Cooper-Smith, Supervisor  
Southeast Area for Pipeline Safety  
Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission

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I N T E R V I E W

(2:13 p.m.)

1  
2  
3 MS. HARLEY: Okay. So good afternoon. Once again, my name  
4 is Sheryl Harley. I'm an investigator in the Office of Railroad,  
5 Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Investigations for the National  
6 Transportation Safety Board.

7 And today is March 29th of 2023. It is now 2:13 p.m. We are  
8 located at the West Reading Police Department, 500 Chestnut Street  
9 in West Reading, Pennsylvania.

10 And with me, I'm going to ask my colleagues to identify  
11 themselves for the record.

12 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Terri Cooper-Smith with the Pennsylvania  
13 Public Utility Commission, Pipeline Safety Division, and I'm  
14 supervisor for Southeast Area. And I am an engineer and  
15 inspector.

16 MS. HORTON: Ashley Horton, Department of Transportation,  
17 Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, Accident  
18 Investigator.

19 MS. HARLEY: And as you know -- and if you'd identify  
20 yourself please for the record, sir.

21 CHIEF HOLBEN: Sure. Wayne W. Holben, Chief of Police the  
22 West Reading Police Department.

23 MS. HARLEY: Thank you very much, sir.

24 INTERVIEW OF WAYNE W. HOLBEN

25 BY MS. HARLEY:

1 Q. And as you know, this is in regards to the pipeline explosion  
2 that occurred on Friday, at approximately 4:50 p.m. at the  
3 industry located at 17 South Second Street in West Reading. So if  
4 you wouldn't mind, just kind of start me, how you were notified  
5 and just kind of walk me through what happened.

6 A. Sure. So, I was -- I left. I got done work at 4 o'clock. I  
7 went home after my shift. While I was home, I was contacted by  
8 our criminal investigator, Danny Voorhies, that an explosion  
9 happened at the R.M. Palmer Building. And, there were multiple  
10 reports coming in, even that a plane hit the building. So I  
11 immediately responded. While en route to the incident, I asked  
12 for command, incident command. Danny was on location at the time,  
13 and I believe he advised Berks Radio that he was on scene, and in  
14 command. Also, I knew that there was a railroad bridge that went  
15 over the property. So I made sure that Norfolk Southern was  
16 notified that -- of the explosion. Berks Radio informed me that  
17 they had already taken care of that for me or for everyone.

18 I continued in. I advised that I was going to have incident  
19 command set up at our Borough Garage. I responded to the  
20 Department because I didn't have my personal radio. So I came  
21 here, to the Department to gather what I needed and responded to  
22 the Borough Garage to start setting up incident command.

23 While on location at the Borough Garage, it was -- most  
24 everybody was still on scene. And so I decided to -- because  
25 nobody was coming to the Borough Garage. So I decided to respond

1 to the scene to determine what was going on so I could get a  
2 better handle on everything. Once on location, Chief Phillips  
3 from the Wyomissing Police Department was there. I went to his  
4 location. Danny was also in the area as well. Prior to that  
5 though, I'm not sure who called me while I was at the Borough  
6 Garage, but they advised that a second building, Palmer building  
7 was possibly filling up with gas or had gas in it and there was  
8 fires. So I notified Berks Radio to have everyone notified of  
9 that, to move away from that building.

10 And then shortly after that, I did go to the location, and  
11 began to make sure that everybody's -- because residents were out  
12 on the street at that time, too, and John was there, and we were  
13 making sure that everybody was being pushed back away. All the  
14 residents, pushed back to Chestnut Street away from the other R.M.  
15 Palmer building while firefighters and EMS workers were there  
16 doing what they had to do to control the fire and the injuries.

17 So after that, it was determining what -- how many people  
18 were in the building, you know, trying to start accounting for  
19 people. Detective Voorhies responded to the back side of the  
20 Palmer property which is by where our Borough Garage is with I  
21 believe Palmer representatives to start taking a headcount of  
22 everyone that was inside the building. They did -- they had like  
23 a roster of people which they apparently did headcounts by each  
24 group. I don't know how they're set up there, but basically say,  
25 okay, you're in chocolate making, you know. Okay. So and so and

1 so is here. Yes, yes, yes, yes. Went down to the next one, so  
2 and so, you here? Yes, yes, and then if there was a no, I believe  
3 they highlighted it on the roster. So a list was compiled of the  
4 eight individuals that were missing or not accounted for.

5 At that time, once we received that list, I advised our  
6 patrol guys over on the case to start running driver's license  
7 information to get pictures of these individuals so we had a photo  
8 of them in case they were pulled out of the rubble, and also ones  
9 that had responded to the hospital so they can start checking  
10 people off the list. And I also obviously advised our fire  
11 department of the list and so forth and anybody that was there, so  
12 we could start, you know, recovering people when we could.

13 Once things started to settle down on location and people  
14 were pushed back, UGI's out there turning off the gas, I guess to  
15 start making that area safe. And there was no more gas issue.  
16 Folks were allowed back in their residences. I don't know the  
17 exact timeline. My whole day was from Friday to Monday night.

18 But, you know, once things started to settle down, I said,  
19 command was going to be at the Borough Garage. A Reading PD chief  
20 came on location and said he could provide his command vehicle  
21 which I accepted. They brought the command vehicle down there,  
22 and we started setting up command down there.

23 Once we were down there, everybody started showing up. It  
24 was -- obviously Reading PD was there. The -- I think they had an  
25 ATF agent was on location. Hospital folks, some employees that

1 were -- had to be transported eventually back to -- I think they  
2 were doing some, I think they were doing some initial interview  
3 down there. Our mayor who happens to be a firefighter who was  
4 down there, she was there. And I do have some names that were  
5 there. I do have like a picture of the board that we -- kind of  
6 like the command, you know, post board, if you want that.

7 Q. Oh, absolutely. Thank you.

8 A. Yep. So, we initially didn't see the explosion, but  
9 apparently Fox News has a traffic camera on top of the Candlewood  
10 Suites. So we looked at the video, and when I showed the ATF  
11 agent the video, he said that's not good. We should start looking  
12 for people on top of buildings. That's how powerful the explosion  
13 was. So at that time, we had a drone already on location. The  
14 drone was set up to start looking on top of buildings in the  
15 surrounding area. I requested the PSP helicopter to be sent to  
16 our location to start look -- searching as well. I believe it did  
17 arrive and conducted their search.

18 And I mean everybody -- I mean there was a lot of people  
19 there to help out which I mean -- it was, it was an overwhelming  
20 amount of help that came there that day and, you know, I think --  
21 I feel that everything as best as it could, you know.

22 So, from there, obviously at that point, I had to start  
23 thinking about the -- and this was after everything was settled  
24 down. The fire I believe was out at that time. I mean they kept  
25 having fires that would pop up, you know, even after, like hours



1 after because eventually it was decided probably around, I want to  
2 say 11 o'clock at night, that I was going to move the command post  
3 up to here because again they already had -- like EMS, there was a  
4 little parking lot next to C&S Medical Supply, where the where  
5 they had already started setting up tents and EMS was there. The  
6 fire department was there. So, we decided to put it right there  
7 basically about a half a block away from where this incident  
8 occurred. So that's where the command post then stayed until we  
9 -- it was basically shut down on like I think Monday.

10 So after that, obviously the media's here at that point, and  
11 I forget what time it was at night, but it has to be close to 11  
12 or so that I had to come up here and give a statement, a brief  
13 statement and advise them that I had to be back down here. So it  
14 was a good excuse not to be in front of a camera too long.

15 So I -- but then after that, I went back down to the command  
16 post, and really was probably just there -- well, it was most of  
17 the night. I don't know how long I was over (indiscernible). It  
18 was way over 24 hours. So -- and then I had to start making sure  
19 that we had manpower to shut down the roads that needed to be shut  
20 down which we did at that time. It was -- well, I'm getting ahead  
21 of myself, but eventually in the future I'll start talking about  
22 that, but just to be down there, to have somebody down there.  
23 Because obviously we're 15, well, 14 man department right now.  
24 And unfortunately my one supervisor was had surgery and the other  
25 one was out on vacation. So I made sure I was just down there

1 and, you know, they would have had to make sure that was  
2 eventually manned. So we had representation down there but for  
3 the most part, I was down there for Friday, Saturday, I mean and  
4 Sunday.

5 Q. Okay. So I was curious about this. You said that there was  
6 at one point someone report that it might have been a plane that  
7 hit the building?

8 A. There was also a report of a missile strike.

9 Q. Okay.

10 A. So -- I'm pretty sure. I didn't see that. I didn't, I  
11 didn't see that. I didn't see the missile strike. People were  
12 telling me, yeah, somebody reported a missile strike. So I'd have  
13 to go through the CAD notes but I guess somebody did report a  
14 plane struck and then somebody else said a missile strike. But,  
15 you know, that's all in our CAD notes, I'm sure.

16 Q. Okay. All right. That's good which is off topic there.

17 A. Yeah, yeah.

18 Q. Okay. Let's see. Do you have some sense of how many people  
19 ultimately were not accounted for initially?

20 A. Initially I believe there was nine. There was nine. The one  
21 was located at home. I should have his name. I think his last  
22 name was White. I'd have to look at that.

23 Q. Um-hum.

24 A. So he was located at home. So then we went to eight, and  
25 then obviously seven unfortunately died. You know, one was

1 rescued from inside the building. We did receive a report later  
2 on, I don't know if it was that night or the next night, like a  
3 friend was saying that one of her -- one of his friends, they  
4 hadn't heard from her. I did look into that, and the one of  
5 Palmer's employees eventually called her, and she wasn't -- the  
6 Palmer employee said she doesn't even work at that building or in  
7 that area. So she made contact with her, and she was a little,  
8 you know, she wasn't there herself. So initially I think we had  
9 nine on our list, and then we later found out that that one -- the  
10 mother who made the complaint found her home. She went home.

11 Q. Okay. What's the name of the Reading Police chief?

12 A. Rich Tornielli.

13 Q. Okay. Tornielli. Okay. And you guys put up the drone?

14 A. We did not. I believe it was Western Berks Fire Department.

15 Q. Western Berks?

16 A. Correct.

17 Q. Okay. And you said the Pennsylvania State Police did bring  
18 their helicopter in?

19 A. I'm pretty sure they did.

20 Q. Okay.

21 A. But also just so you know, too, not that's it's -- just  
22 something I thought of. Fox News had their helicopter overhead  
23 for a while, and actually I think Tornielli was able to -- I don't  
24 know. Somebody had a no fly zone somehow.

25 Q. Okay.

1 A. And they left.

2 Q. Okay. Do you have some sense of when the fire was out? Not  
3 the spot fires, but the main bulk of the fire.

4 A. I couldn't give you an exact time. I'm not 100 percent sure.  
5 I don't want to --

6 Q. Okay. I know that there was a report about gas and all that.  
7 Did you smell any gas?

8 A. When I was there, I did not smell gas.

9 Q. Okay. And, let's see. One more question and I'll turn it  
10 over to my colleagues. Are you aware of the church on the corner  
11 that rents out the place? Is it possible for you to give me the  
12 information? We're trying to verify where the occupants of that  
13 house has gone to and who actually owns that house there on the  
14 corner. Do you know -- what church owns that?

15 A. I forget the church's name. I mean I --

16 Q. I mean that's something that can be done later on.

17 A. Yeah. I can --

18 Q. Okay.

19 A. Yeah, that's fine. I thought I had it because we were all  
20 going back and forth to that. Yeah, I don't -- the property  
21 owner?

22 Q. Yeah.

23 A. Jeffrey and Christine Reiner (ph.).

24 Q. Jeffrey and Christine Reiner.

25 A. Do you want the phone number?

- 1 Q. Yes.
- 2 A. [REDACTED]
- 3 Q. Um-hum.
- 4 A. [REDACTED]
- 5 Q. [REDACTED]
- 6 A. [REDACTED] That's Chris' number.
- 7 Q. Um-hum.
- 8 A. Do you want Jeff's?
- 9 Q. Yes, please.
- 10 A. [REDACTED]
- 11 Q. [REDACTED]
- 12 A. That's the owner of 5 South Second Avenue which is that whole  
13 thing.
- 14 Q. Okay. Great.
- 15 MS. HARLEY: All right. I'll turn it over to Terri.
- 16 BY MS. COOPER-SMITH:
- 17 Q. Okay. Do you recall who told you that it was safe to go --  
18 to be in that area? You said that you found out that, you know,  
19 the gas was shut off or whatever. Do you know who told you that?  
20 Was it UGI or was it the fire department or --
- 21 A. I don't remember.
- 22 Q. You don't remember. Okay.
- 23 A. Well, see --
- 24 Q. You had stated that you realized that it was okay to be in  
25 that area. Like originally you had heard that --

1 A. Oh, yeah, yeah, yes. Yes.

2 Q. Right.

3 A. Yeah. No, I do not but I don't know if it might have been  
4 fire or somebody from fire, but I'm not sure.

5 Q. Okay. And so, while you were onsite, did you see bodies or,  
6 you know, victims onsite as you were walking --

7 A. In the beginning?

8 Q. Yes.

9 A. No.

10 Q. No.

11 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Okay. That's all I have.

12 BY MS. HORTON:

13 Q. I wanted to clarify what happened with Norfolk. Did you say  
14 you called them or you were going to call them and someone else  
15 had already done that?

16 A. Yeah. So on my way in, I radioed to dispatcher, county  
17 dispatch thing about that track, and our county dispatcher said it  
18 was already taken care of.

19 Q. Okay.

20 A. So the county must have called and said stop all trains.

21 Q. Okay. Do you know if the train was running at the time of  
22 the explosion?

23 A. That I don't know. I know they were running -- they run it  
24 after it.

25 Q. Okay. You don't recall who told you Building 1 was filling

1 up with gas?

2 A. I -- no, because I -- I know it wasn't dispatch because I  
3 told, I told dispatch about that, to tell the other people. So I  
4 don't know if it was John that called me. He might have called me  
5 because he didn't have his radio at the time because he came in  
6 right from home. Like he was more -- I just found out that --  
7 because they had the SWAT vehicles down there. So he thought, you  
8 know, that, you know, initiate that. So he might have called me.  
9 I think he might have called me.

10 MS. HARLEY: I'm sorry. What's John's full name?

11 CHIEF HOLBEN: John Phillips.

12 MS. HARLEY: John Phillips. Oh, okay. All right. I see.  
13 Okay. Yeah, gotcha. I just wanted to make sure.

14 BY MS. HORTON:

15 Q. Do you know if that was after UGI had shown up for gas?

16 A. I don't, I don't think so because I mean I don't even know --  
17 I'm trying to think. I don't think so. And I don't want to -- I  
18 can't say yes or no because I wasn't on location when he provided  
19 me that information.

20 Q. Okay.

21 A. If that makes sense.

22 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Were you en route when he called?

23 CHIEF HOLBEN: So what happened was I came from home.

24 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Right.

25 CHIEF HOLBEN: I went to set up an incident command away from

1 that.

2 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Right.

3 CHIEF HOLBEN: And I -- so I was at the location setting up  
4 the incident command. He phoned me that information --

5 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Gotcha.

6 CHIEF HOLBEN: -- and then since nobody would come, I went to  
7 the location of the incident to start figuring stuff out so we  
8 could, you know, get it, you know, back there.

9 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Okay.

10 BY MS. HARLEY:

11 Q. Because you went straight to -- you went to the garage  
12 first --

13 A. Right.

14 Q. -- and that was where the incident command was, and then you  
15 went to the scene. And then it went back to the garage at some  
16 point?

17 A. Correct. I mean my first stop was here at the hall, but  
18 then --

19 Q. Right.

20 A. -- yeah, I went to the garage to start setting up. Nobody  
21 was coming.

22 Q. Yeah.

23 A. So I went to the location because our mayor called, too --  
24 called me, too, because she was on scene because she's a  
25 firefighter. So, then I went there and -- because she was asking



1 for me, too. So, I went there to figure the stuff out and so I  
2 moved it back to the Borough Garage.

3 Q. Okay. So I'm just trying to get straight on documentation  
4 here. So we have the Western Berks Fire Department that had a  
5 drone. We had the Pennsylvania State Patrol who had their  
6 helicopter. Were you aware of anyone else that was either  
7 videoing, taking photographs or anything at the scene? Did you  
8 have like a crime scene officer or something out there?

9 A. No. I mean later on our criminal investigator snap photos of  
10 the scene just to take photos, but I knew obviously the state  
11 police were involved. So they have their photos.

12 Q. Um-hum.

13 A. Eventually we did -- I forgot, while we were at incident  
14 command, ask for PEMA and their dogs and the SARS team just  
15 because of, you know, they're offering their services, to get them  
16 out there because of the magnitude of what happened.

17 Q. Okay.

18 A. And, you know, we're missing people. So they came out as  
19 well. And I know that PEMA, they have -- I have learned that they  
20 take pictures of everything when they -- especially when they find  
21 bodies and they also ping, they also have things to ping locations  
22 of people. So I think they could map out where people were when  
23 they found them.

24 MS. HORTON: Are you saying FEMA or PEMA?

25 CHIEF HOLBEN: PEMA, yeah, so PEMA, Pennsylvania Emergency

1 Management.

2 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Yeah.

3 CHIEF HOLBEN: Yeah, I'm still trying to get all the acronyms  
4 straight.

5 MS. COOPER-SMITH: And PEMA was the organization that set up  
6 for U-S-A-R.

7 CHIEF HOLBEN: SARS.

8 MS. HARLEY: SARS.

9 MS. COOPER-SMITH: SARS.

10 CHIEF HOLBEN: Of the main cell, yeah.

11 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Okay.

12 CHIEF HOLBEN: Yeah.

13 BY MS. HARLEY:

14 Q. And with that, are you aware of who extracted the victims  
15 from the Building 2 which was the building that was actually part  
16 of the explosion? Was it the fire department or --

17 A. So initially I believe there was a female found under some  
18 rubble. Well, I have to think about that, because I know PEMA's  
19 mostly taken, taken the bodies out because they were taking  
20 pictures. And then obviously like -- I mean if there's something  
21 that could help, they would, like EMS or, you know, help pull them  
22 out.

23 Q. Yeah.

24 A. But I think PEMA or that group, that search and rescue, were  
25 the ones like --

1 Q. The ones doing the extrication.

2 A. -- they take the pictures, they ping their location, and then  
3 they brought in the gurney to help bring them out.

4 Q. Got it.

5 MS. HARLEY: Terri.

6 MS. COOPER-SMITH: I'm good.

7 MS. HARLEY: Ashley?

8 BY MS. HORTON:

9 Q. I have a few other clarifying questions.

10 A. Sure.

11 Q. Okay. You said you all saw the video and sent the drone.  
12 Was that the video from Candlewood Suites?

13 A. Correct.

14 Q. Okay.

15 A. So when I showed the ATF agent that video, that somebody sent  
16 or had on their phone or sent it to me, it was from -- it said Fox  
17 News.

18 Q. Okay.

19 A. And it showed like the live feed right before it exploded  
20 and, you know, boom. So that's what we -- that's the video was  
21 saw.

22 Q. So that wasn't --

23 A. That wasn't drone footage or that was -- what's your  
24 question. I'm sorry.

25 Q. You're good. I didn't know if someone from Candlewood Suites

1 like came out and --

2 A. No, no, that -- I believe they just got that online because  
3 that was literally like online instantly --

4 Q. Gotcha.

5 A. -- which is probably why it got caught up in the news as much  
6 as it did.

7 Q. I have another question just about UGI. Have you worked with  
8 them on any other incidents?

9 A. I mean they're always in the borough, you know. We also have  
10 streets that need to be -- whatever they do, paving and all that  
11 stuff. I'm trying to think of any other incidents. I mean there  
12 were times we've called them out for gas leaks. So they've been  
13 out and taken care of the problem for sure, yeah.

14 Q. Do you all have meetings with them to talk about what their  
15 role would be in this kind of situation?

16 A. Meetings specifically with them? No, I know -- I think we  
17 went up to their -- I have to make sure of this. I think it was  
18 their main building or whatever and they had a tour in case  
19 something would happen. Like I don't know if it was just at the  
20 building or not, but I don't think we've ever sat down here and  
21 specifically talked about it.

22 Q. Okay. Did you see what they were doing on scene?

23 A. I know when I was on scene, they were going around -- I don't  
24 know how to describe it, almost -- it's probably like a  
25 stethoscope going around the street with, you know, I'm assuming

1 seeing if gas is coming out of asphalt, and I don't know how those  
2 things work. Also, they dug a big hole right at the corner of  
3 Franklin and South Second, but they were all around. I know every  
4 specific thing.

5 Q. At the intersection of Second and Franklin. Is that what you  
6 said?

7 A. Yeah, on second but at that intersection, there's a big plate  
8 there now. And then eventually later on, they were -- because  
9 they did that that night I think. But all the other ones, you  
10 know, later on.

11 MS. HORTON: Go ahead, Terri.

12 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Yeah.

13 BY MS. COOPER-SMITH:

14 Q. I wanted to piggyback. Do you recall at all having -- did  
15 you see any kind of correspondence from UGI to talk about doing an  
16 emergency drill or to -- you said you've gone somewhere.

17 A. Yeah.

18 Q. Their building or something.

19 A. I think it was their building. I'd have to look to be honest  
20 to make sure. I think it was UGI. But, you know what? It might  
21 have been -- I'm sorry. That might have been Met-Ed.

22 Q. Oh, Met-Ed, okay.

23 A. Yeah. So disregard that.

24 Q. Okay.

25 A. But, no, I don't -- we never had any correspondence I believe

1 on any kind of emergency drill or anything like that.

2 Q. Okay. All right. Thank you.

3 BY MS. HORTON:

4 Q. When you got to the incident, did you take over as incident  
5 commander?

6 A. Yes.

7 Q. Okay. And that would be you over the fire chief?

8 A. The incident command is people but, yeah, I've --

9 Q. It's kind of like a parallel incident command or --

10 A. I mean it's, you know, you're I guess in charge of the whole  
11 scene, but the fire chief is in charge of his people obviously. I  
12 don't know if it's parallel, but it's close enough. Everybody's  
13 working together at that time, you know what I mean?

14 MS. COOPER-SMITH: Right.

15 MS. HORTON: Yeah.

16 MS. COOPER-SMITH: I'm good.

17 MS. HORTON: I'm good, too.

18 BY MS. HARLEY:

19 Q. All right. Well, this is a question that I always ask all  
20 our interviewees. Is there anything you think we should have  
21 asked you and failed to ask you about this incident?

22 A. That's a good question. I can't think of anything.

23 Q. You can't think of anything. Well, you have our cards. So  
24 if you ever have something come to mind or you want to add  
25 anything, please feel free to reach out.

1 MS. HARLEY: And what I'm going to do now is go ahead, and  
2 I'll end the interview. And, it's now 2:44 p.m.

3 (Whereupon, at 2:44 p.m., the interview was concluded.)  
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the  
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

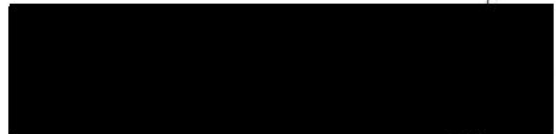
IN THE MATTER OF:           NATURAL GAS BUILDING EXPLOSION &  
                                  FIRE NEAR WEST READING,  
                                  PENNSYLVANIA, ON MARCH 24, 2023  
                                  Interview of Wayne W. Holben

ACCIDENT NO.:                PLD23LR002

PLACE:                         West Reading, Pennsylvania

DATE:                         March 29, 2023

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,  
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed  
to the best of my skill and ability.



\_\_\_\_\_  
Kathryn A. Mirfin  
Transcriber