

Robbery adds to string of crimes at LR Food Mart

7 calls made in 18 months

SCOTT CARROLL
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Police are investigating the armed robbery of a Little Rock convenience store that was the third event involving a gun at the store since November.

Officers responded at 11:37 p.m. Saturday to 3323 Fair Park Blvd., a building shared by Fair Park Food Mart and Shark's Fish & Chicken. Ban-snar Gani, the owner of the Food Mart, told police that three men had entered the store and that one of them had walked behind the counter with a handgun, according to a police report.

Gani, 34, initially refused to open the cash register for the armed man. When the man pressed the gun against Gani's head and threatened to kill him, Gani opened the register, the report says.

The three men fled with about \$100, Gani said Tuesday. He said he recognized each of the men as regular customers. The armed man is described as black, 5-foot-3, 130 pounds and between 16 and 19 years old, according to the report. He wore a black hoodie and black jeans in the robbery.

Detailed descriptions of the other two men were unavailable.

Saturday's robbery was not the first at the store. An employee was knocked unconscious in April 2013 when he confronted four men who had stolen a 30-pack of juice, police reported.

Police have been called to the store seven times in the past 18 months — twice for robberies, twice for auto thefts, once for a burglary and twice for shootings.

Police spokesman Lt. Sidney Allen said that if Gani was allowing people to loiter or break the law on store property, it could be shut down as a public nuisance by the city's Criminal Abatement Program. But other than its location, Allen said, the business doesn't appear to be connected to the crimes.

"We cannot penalize a business for being the victim of a robbery or for people not related to the business breaking into cars," he said.

Gani, who has run the store for nearly three years and works behind the counter at night, said he feels safe. The store has surveillance cameras and bars on its windows to deter crime, and Gani said he has no plans for additional security.

"To be honest with you, it's a safe place. But you know, people try to make it like trash," he said.

A man was shot outside the store the afternoon of June 24 while he was watching two other men fight in the parking lot, police reported. One of the men pulled a gun during the fight and fired multiple shots, striking 35-year-old Deshaun Hollis twice.

Gani said Tuesday that the men were friends and that they were arguing over marijuana. He suggested that Saturday's robbery was also drug-related.

"I guess they needed something to smoke," he said. "But they won't ever come back. They know I know them."

In November, a 22-year-old man was robbed and shot outside the store, according to police. Wieland Beck had agreed to meet a Craigslist seller there to purchase two laptop computers. Instead, two people robbed and shot him. Antonio Hampton, 17, and Demontae Berry, 16, were each charged as adults with attempted murder in the shooting.

Late Tuesday, no arrests had been made in Saturday's robbery, and Gani didn't expect the suspects to be caught. He said that his surveillance cameras didn't capture a clear image of the suspects and that police were unable to recover fingerprints from the scene.

"It's just one of those things," Gani said of the robbery, shrugging his shoulders.

Getting ready to see the Wizard



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/RICK McFARLAND

Bob Walls, with Stevens Puppets in Indiana, makes adjustments on the strings of the Cowardly Lion puppet character from *The Wizard of Oz* before a show Tuesday at the William F. Laman Public Library in North Little Rock.

No fireworks shows allowed, LR again tells wedding venue

CHELSEA BOOZER
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

For the second time in two years, the Little Rock Board of Directors denied Tuesday a southwest Little Rock wedding venue's request to display fireworks.

The wedding and reception venue Alda's Magnolia Hill at 5110 Stagecoach Road first requested to use fireworks at the beginning of 2013. The family-owned business had offered fireworks to its wedding parties for an added charge since 2011 before a complaint brought attention to the fact that it didn't have the proper zoning to do so.

Many residents in nearby neighborhoods opposed the fireworks at the time, and the Board of Directors denied Magnolia Hill's request. The board approved rezoning of the property in February 2013 to allow the business to continue on the

condition that the fireworks would not be used.

Venue owner Buddy Ellis re-submitted the request this year, but Ward 7 City Director B.J. Wyrick asked her fellow board members Tuesday to deny it.

"So far, every place I've been, there's been more people in opposition to it than there were in support," Wyrick said, citing two community meetings she attended.

Four residents of the Pecan Lake neighborhood to the southeast of the property and another resident of the Tall Timber neighborhood to the north spoke against the fireworks at Tuesday's meeting. Six people spoke in support and two more submitted cards in support. They included the property owners and residents of Pecan Lake and the nearby missionary school campus.

Opponents mostly were

against the loud noise of the fireworks, and those in support of the request argued that the show only lasts about five minutes and starts at 9:30 p.m. Ellis said there were 11 wedding parties that purchased the service in 2011 and 13 that purchased the service in 2012.

The board voted 6-4 Tuesday against allowing Magnolia Hill to use fireworks.

Those against were Wyrick, At-large City Director Joan Adcock, Ward 1 City Director Erma Hendrix, Ward 2 City Director Ken Richardson, Ward 3 City Director Stacey Hurst and Ward 6 City Director Doris Wright. Those who voted to allow the fireworks were At-large City Director Dean Kumpuris, At-large City Director Gene Fortson, Ward 4 City Director Brad Cazort and Ward 5 City Director Lance Hines.

City directors back bond sale for ArcBest

DAVE HUGHES
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

FORT SMITH — Fort Smith city directors Tuesday signaled their intent to authorize the sale of up to \$46 million in industrial revenue bonds for the ArcBest Corp. headquarters project at Chaffee Crossing.

The directors unanimously passed a resolution stating \$30 million of the bonds, if authorized, would be used for construction and \$16 million for furnishings and equipment.

A July 7 letter from ArcBest Vice President for Real Estate Walter Echols to City Administrator Ray Gosack said the cost of building the new headquarters on 30 acres of Chaffee Crossing land was "loosely estimated at \$30 million."

ArcBest is estimating the cost of furnishings for the 150,000-square-foot building at \$7.5 million and the cost of computer equipment ranging from \$5 million to \$8.5 million, according to Echols' letter.

According to the resolution, ArcBest would pay an amount equal to half of what it would otherwise pay in property taxes on the value of the property each year for 12 years. The resolution said the in-lieu-of-tax

payment period on the computer equipment would be seven years, based on the expected life of such equipment.

ArcBest announced in May that it plans to buy 30 acres on a hilltop at Chaffee Crossing to relocate its corporate headquarters. The Fort Chaffee Redevelopment Authority voted in early June to sell the land to ArcBest for \$10,000 an acre. The company is considering buying another 10 acres of adjoining land.

As part of the sales agreement, the redevelopment authority will bear the cost of providing water, sewer, natural gas, electricity, fiber-optic cable and data services to the ArcBest site.

Officials said the company has long outgrown its current headquarters in south Fort Smith and has several smaller offices scattered throughout town. ArcBest plans to continue using the current 200,000-square-foot building as the headquarters for the ABF Freight trucking segment.

City directors and redevelopment authority members agreed last month to split the estimated \$3.8 million cost of building two roads to the ArcBest site.

PB man arrested in shooting of two

ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

PINE BLUFF — A Pine Bluff man was arrested Tuesday in Memphis on a capital murder charge in a Monday night double shooting in Pine Bluff that left one person dead.

Pine Bluff police said Michael Kelly, 38, is accused of killing Brian Almond, 43, of Rison and severely injuring Clayton Hodges, 34, of Pine Bluff.

Police responded to a call at 107 Wildwood Cove about 11:18 p.m. Monday and found Hodges and Almond with gunshot wounds.

Almond was pronounced dead at the scene, and Hodges underwent surgery at Jefferson Regional Medical Center, police said. Hodges' condition was not released Tuesday.

An initial police report said robbery might have been a motive for the shootings, though further information was not released Tuesday.

Vandal-hit runway to get repairs

ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

WALNUT RIDGE — Workers will soon replace directional lights that were damaged by vandals May 10 at the end of one of the Walnut Ridge Regional Airport's runways, and airport officials have reopened the runway for landings and takeoffs.

Airport manager Michelle Anthony said Tuesday that crews received the large set of "rabbit lights" that indicate the end of the runway and should have them installed later this week. Rain has hindered the repairs, she

said. Runway 18-36 has been closed since May 10 when two people rode into the airport shortly before midnight and smashed at least nine runway lights and two of the directional lights. They also tore down large metal signs from frames, Anthony said.

Security cameras captured the vandalism, which lasted about an hour and 10 minutes. Officials estimated the damage at \$60,000.

Police are still investigating, she said. The FBI is also

involved because the damage occurred at an airport.

"The runway is back to normal," Anthony said.

The airport's other runway, 22-04, remained open. Crop-dusters, military aircraft and commercial jets use the airport in northern Lawrence County, she said.



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