

The Macon Melody

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Experts: ‘Transition’ year ahead for Macon economy

BY CASEY CHOUNG
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Macon and Middle Georgia are heading into what economists describe as a transition year, marked by slower but still positive growth as trade tensions, automation and a tightening labor force reshape the regional economy.

The area will experience “rapid change” from those factors, reported Greg George, director of Middle Georgia State University’s Center for Economic Analysis, during a Jan. 23 luncheon for business and political leaders at the Edgar H. Wilson Convention Center in Macon. The event was held by the University of Georgia in partnership with the Greater Macon Chamber of Commerce.

Shifts and challenges

Last year brought small shifts to Macon’s economy, with the unemployment rate and home prices increasing, George said.

Unemployment, median income and home prices run about “a point-and-a-half higher” in Macon-Bibb County compared to neighboring Houston County, but the counties’ numbers are somewhat connected, George said.

George said Macon should collaborate with neighboring counties and think regionally, since business development in one area often spurs development in others.

“Often people tend to compete with each other, and that drives you away from the best outcome,” added Santanu Chatterjee, interim dean of

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One fire and 16 months later, S&S plans March reopening

BY CASEY CHOUNG
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Carl Mosely has been going to the S&S Cafeteria on Riverside Drive for decades.

When a fire tore through the restaurant’s kitchen in September 2024, the Warner Robins man had no intention of giving up the braised beef and vegetables that he loves. So, several times a week for the past 16 months, he and his wife, Kathy, have been getting their fix of Southern comfort food at S&S’s Bloomfield location.

They’ve also been waiting — and waiting — for the Riverside Drive restaurant to reopen its doors for business.

“If it weren’t that good,” he said, “I wouldn’t drive from Warner Robins.”

Mosely is among the legions of S&S faithful who have been following the progress of the rebuilding of the Riverside Drive cafeteria.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
The S&S Cafeteria on Riverside Drive in Macon is shown closed in September 2024 after a fire damaged the restaurant’s kitchen. The longtime cafeteria is set to reopen in mid-March.

Though the late-night blaze was contained to the kitchen, the restaurant’s entire interior needed to be gutted.

S&S co-owner Rick Pogue said he’s been bombarded with questions about when he’s opening back up. And he’s got good news: The restaurant is set to reopen in mid-March.

The renovated space was originally projected to open in early

2025, but Pogue said dealings with the insurance company have delayed completion.

In the meantime, Mosely has been visiting the Bloomfield location about three times a week.

A lot of the staff know him and his wife, Kathy, by name, he said.

The S&S Cafeteria has been a staple on the city’s dining scene for nearly 100 years and once had a location downtown.

It’s the third oldest restaurant in Macon behind Fincher’s Barbecue and Nu-Way Weiners.

Churchgoers flock to S&S after Sunday services, looking to get their fill of Southern classics.

S&S is the only place Brenda Williams will eat liver and onions. She said she remembers dining at the original location in downtown Macon.

She and her friend Trisha Jordan

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‘WHAT’S RIGHT WITH YOU?’ Recovery center proving sobriety is sustainable

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON
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Outside a one-story white brick building on Wimbish Road, Pamela Fernandez quietly greeted people coming up the sidewalk.

The Macon native made sure to welcome everyone, offering the same kindness shown to her three years earlier when she first started visiting this recovery support center.

Back then, Fernandez, who struggled with alcohol and drug addiction for two decades, “felt like life couldn’t happen without some kind of substance.”

But at Macon Recovers, the local nonprofit focused on sustained addiction recovery, others facing the same challenges taught Fernandez how to channel her time into positive activities, such as journaling, drawing and crafts.

“I was focused on what I couldn’t do, and then they helped me to focus on what I could do,” she said. “They taught me how to just chill.”

Founded in 2019, Macon Recovers is a recovery community organization, or RCO, a peer-run community hub for anyone with addiction or mental health challenges.

Associated with River Edge Behavioral Health, Macon Recovers is the only local RCO. There are more than two dozen in the state. RCOs don’t offer clinical or inpatient programs; they often bridge the gap between more structured rehabilitation facilities and independent living.

The need for such support is clear: In September 2025, Bibb County was in the top five Georgia counties to have 15 or more drug overdose emergency department visits, according to data from the Georgia Department of Public Health.

“It’s a safe place for people,” recovery coach Kristen Camarota said, noting that some people don’t



PHOTOS BY JASON VORHEES
Kristen Camarota sits at her desk inside Macon Recovers, a peer-run recovery community organization that offers support, social activities and connection for people with addiction and mental health challenges.



Tonya, one of the peers at Macon Recovery, studies for her GED diploma while at the recovery center.



Tracey, a peer at Macon Recovers, colors during a visit to the recovery center.

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Recovery coach Carol Goodwin plays pool with Cleo, a peer at Macon Recovers, at the peer-run recovery community organization.

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have a stable space at home. “People can just come and hang out all day.”

People like Fernandez can visit Macon Recovers Tuesday through Saturday to be with others who are trying to mend their lives.

They play pool, do arts and crafts, watch TV, read, or use computers for school or job applications.

The organization hosts several support meetings, including an all-recovery meeting that is open to those struggling with mental health conditions or any form of addiction.

Macon Recovers offers rides or bus tickets for people who don’t have transportation to ensure they can still receive support. There’s also a hygiene pantry for those in need of deodorant or body wash.

“When you’re in early recovery, you’re kind of restarting,” Camarota, who has been sober for 3 1/2 years, said. “If you take a shower, feel better about yourself — maybe it’ll make your day a little bit better.”

Camarota discovered Macon Recovers by attending an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting and participating in

art events. She had finished clinical treatment in Statesboro, but needed to find more support, including an outlet for her anxiety.

As a recovery coach who has experienced addiction firsthand, Camarota is keenly aware of the reality of recovery: You don’t wake up one day completely cured.

“You have to work at your recovery every day,” she said.

Overcoming addiction is a process, and Camarota wanted to help others like her.

“I found that it was kind of my purpose to share my experience with other people, especially women,” she said.

Embracing the slogan

Fernandez started experimenting with drugs at 17. She’d often go to parties to drink and do drugs, something she wasn’t interested in stopping anytime soon.

At one point, her addiction led her to become homeless for nine months. She slept in a parking lot for some of that time.

“I wasn’t used to asking for help,” said Fernandez, who has been sober for 2 1/2 years. “I would just sit in the corner and be quiet.”

A friend recommended Macon Recovers to Fernandez while she was participating in an outpatient rehabilitation

program, also known as a sober house.

In the beginning, she would visit the community center every day that she could. She recalled not knowing what to do with herself outside of a structured program.

“I didn’t see any positive things in recovery until I came here and saw that people were recovering, and they knew how to chill, and they were living a good, comfortable life without the use of drugs and alcohol,” Fernandez said.

She learned to approach recovery and life as a whole from a different perspective, embracing the Macon Recovers slogan, “What’s right with you?” — instead of what recovering addicts often hear — “What’s wrong with you?”

Fernandez still visits Macon Recovers two to three days a week.

When she sees people in the streets, she tells them to come to Macon Recovers and receive the same support she was given.

“Sometimes, it’s OK to just come to a meeting, an all-recovery meeting, and just get it out there — say it out loud, speak about it,” she said.

Macon Recovers is located at 595 Wimbish Road. Learn more and connect with the organization through their Facebook page.

P&Z takes tough stance, greenlights new housing

BY LIZ FABIAN

The Macon Newsroom
macon-newsroom.com

The owner of a fairly new convenience store on a busy entryway into downtown can no longer operate after Macon-Bibb County’s Planning & Zoning Commission revoked his zoning compliance during Monday’s hearings.

Sonal Patel will have to restart the zoning application process if he wants to resume business at 1436 Forsyth St. and also comply with historic district guidelines at the adjoining corner parcel at Monroe Street that has its own issues.

The revocation comes after a long saga of violations involving unauthorized signs, a prohibited driveway and lack of required landscaping on the historic district corner property, 1408 Forsyth St., which once housed the 1966 Handy Andy that a contractor illegally demolished as part of this project.

“We have had a long history with this property and this property owner,” P&Z Executive Director Jeff Ruggieri told commissioners. “We’ve had a lot of discussions, gave a lot of concessions, understanding that we want businesses to be successful here in the county. So, we work with the applicant to provide him a way to do so. The applicant has not done that at every step of the way.”

Commercial realtor Jim Rollins, who represented Patel before P&Z as the applicant on this project, had no excuses to relay at Monday’s hearing.

“The owner of the business is guilty, guilty as charged,” Rollins said, but he still appealed to commissioners for mercy when it comes to the driveway.

He said the owner is struggling to stay in business and has not been able to rent two adjoining storefronts on one-way Forsyth Street.

“I would ask y’all to take into consideration possibly leaving that driveway open to help him and hopefully help his business enough so that he can stay in business,” Rollins pleaded.

After hearing Ruggieri explain that Patel failed to follow through on other promises made, P&Z Chair Jeane Easom said, “I would like to see him not have a license until he actually does what he says he’s going to do.”

In summer of 2022, P&Z denied the original design which included gasoline pumps. Commissioners worried that would be a

safety hazard with fuel tankers turning into the property near a busy intersection.

After agreeing to a rehearing, and more discussion about traffic concerns, Rollins agreed to drop fuel sales.

Zoning compliance for a convenience store with alcohol sales to go was issued in 2023 only after the store scrapped plans for an entrance off Monroe Street. The chair of the Design Review Board at the time objected to that driveway in fear motorists would use it to circumvent the traffic light. That application also did not include any signage, but Patel erected signs without approval.

In October 2024, when P&Z inspectors noticed what looked like driveway construction on the corner lot, they cited Patel. To bring Patel into compliance in February 2025, Rollins secured P&Z approval to build a sidewalk to allow foot traffic from Monroe Street.

Patel was required to landscape that corner lot with bushes and grass as part of that approval.

Only a handful of tiny shrubs were planted, asphalt pavement was placed adjacent to the sidewalk and a portion of a retaining wall along the dividing line of the store parcel was removed.

As a result, vehicles can now enter the store parking lot from Monroe Street, which was evident by tire tracks shown in a recent photo of the property.

Patel also faces fines of \$1,000. P&Z will notify state and local authorities and request revocation of Patel’s licenses to do business.

Three strikes, turning trucks

After Fatty’s Pizza’s Christine Lee failed to show up for a third scheduled hearing before P&Z to gain approval for a drive-thru at 3955 Arkwright Road, P&Z denied the request.

At each scheduled hearing, commissioners and staff raised concerns that there is not enough room for two lanes of traffic to circle the building that also houses Steve’s Steak & Seafood, Azul Salon & Spa and Republic Finance.

They requested an accurate site plan with distances clearly marked but never received one.

At 4400 Cavalier Drive, a revised site plan sealed the deal for a new 88-space truck parking lot on a 21-acre site.

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Santanu Chatterjee, interim dean of the University of Georgia’s Terry College of Business, speaks during a Jan. 23 economic outlook luncheon at the Edgar H. Wilson Convention Center in Macon as Greg George, director of Middle Georgia State University’s Center for Economic Analysis, listens. The event, hosted by UGA in partnership with the Greater Macon Chamber of Commerce, examined economic trends shaping Macon and Middle Georgia.

ECONOMY

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the UGA Terry College of Business. “It’s all about attracting viable, sustainable jobs to the region.”

He did note some areas of concern. The state’s population saw significant growth during the pandemic as remote workers moved in. That gain is expected to taper off soon, he warned.

Chatterjee also said international trade does impact a significant portion of the Georgia economy — but he noted that local policymakers have little control of some political issues, including the impact of President Donald Trump’s tariffs on certain countries and goods.

Potential developments

Data centers pose an economic question mark for the region, Chatterjee noted.

Georgia ranks first in the nation in data center development, and while new centers will create hundreds of construction jobs

and some operating jobs, local governments need to ensure proper resources, like water and power, are supplied to run these centers, Chatterjee said.

“It’s all about how you manage new technologies and make them more sustainable,” Chatterjee said.

He said the expansion of data centers across the state could also attract manufacturing companies and firms specializing in artificial intelligence.

Information sessions

Chatterjee said UGA is sponsoring events like this throughout the state to help business owners and local leaders adapt to shifting circumstances.

The events also inform the public about policy changes and how they impact the cost of living.

“You can pivot, but to do that, you have to have good information, you have to have good data, you have to have good insights ... so that you can start planning for the future,” he said.

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Land bank converts tax-delinquent properties into community assets

BY LAURA E. CORLEY
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The old Bateman & Wade store operated for decades on the invisible line separating the Pleasant Hill neighborhood from the Ingleside neighborhood.

The era of butcher paper-wrapped meat, candy and salted fish ended when the specialty grocer closed in the early 2000s.

After nearly a decade of abandonment, the small building at Rogers Avenue and Clayton Street was sold in 2013 to a man who converted the place into “R and R Food Mart,” a convenience store with coin-operated gambling machines and smoking allowed inside.

A year after he bought the property, the new owner was among those arrested in the county’s largest-ever commercial gambling raid. The owner lost his liquor license in 2017, which hit the business hard. Not long after that, the store closed for good.

As the years passed, the vacant building seeped into disrepair, turning a once-proud urban landmark into an eye sore.

The owner came to an agreement with Macon-Bibb County in late 2023. In exchange for ownership of the property, the county agreed to have the Macon-Bibb County Land Bank Authority Board extinguish \$9,300 in unpaid property taxes.

The county demolished the building then deeded the property to the land bank authority.

The corner lot today is a green-space where young saplings are taking root. What will become of the property in the future is unclear, but whatever it is will be better than an abandoned, tax-delinquent eyesore.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Everett Verner, executive director of the Macon-Bibb County Land Bank Authority, speaks during a ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrating the completion of the first two homes in the Tindall Fields development along Plant Street on Jan. 26. The land bank works with local government and partners to acquire and redevelop tax-delinquent properties, often for affordable housing.

The county has said the community will have input on what becomes of the land.

The deal to get the property could not have happened without the land bank, the only government entity with the special ability to extinguish back taxes on properties it owns.

That is because the land bank has a renewable 10-year agreement with the county and school district to do so.

“The main thing we can do that no one else can do is abate property taxes,” said Everett Verner, executive director of the Macon-Bibb County Land Bank Authority. “We’re run by a board of directors appointed by the local government.”

Land bank authorities have been operating in Georgia for 30 years. The first one was created by Fulton County and the city of Atlanta in 1991.

The second one was created by the city of Macon and Bibb County in 1996.

As of this year, there are 29 land bank authorities across the state, according to the Georgia Association of Land Bank Authorities.

Land banks are tools counties can use to get unproductive tax-delinquent properties, like the old Bateman & Wade, into something productive and useful.

Powers of the authority are spelled out in state law and then approved by a resolution at the local government level.

The Macon-Bibb County Land Bank acquires, holds, develops and disposes of properties in coordination with the county and the Macon-Bibb County Tax Commissioner’s Office.

That includes homes owned by people who have not paid property taxes, which subtract from the county’s tax base.

The county ultimately wants those properties back on the tax rolls and into productive use, so the land bank works with the tax commissioner and county to identify properties to be sold at a courthouse auction and people or entities interested in developing them.

The land bank also has its own auction each quarter.

“We have an agreement with the tax commissioner where we can actually start the tax foreclosure and that guarantee with him is that we’ll show up to make an opening bid,” Verner said. “That’s the main way we get properties lately, over the last few years. We also buy them directly, depending on the project.”

Verner said the land bank’s current priority is affordable housing and it will work with anyone that wants to work with it, though typically it

works with entities or individual developers.

“We work really well with non-profits when we hold property long term for development,” Verner said, adding that Habitat for Humanity, Historic Macon, River Edge and the Macon Housing Authority are among agencies the land bank has worked with the most.

Fast facts

— The land bank authority’s website is maconlandbank.org.

— The Macon-Bibb County Land Bank Authority Board meets at 4 p.m. on the third Monday of each month at 688 Walnut Street, Suite 102. The public can attend these meetings also through Zoom. Visit the authority’s website for the link.

— Authority board members are nominated by the mayor and approved by the county commission. The board’s bylaws include no limit on the number of four-year terms board members can serve.

— Current board members include Tom Ellington, who served from 2010-19 and was reappointed in 2021; Sundra Woodford, appointed in 2019; Veronica McClendon, appointed in 2022; Sylvia McGee, appointed in 2015; and Bert Bivins, who has served on the authority board since its creation in 1996.

— View the authority’s bylaws by visiting the web version of this story.

This story is part of “Power,” a series by The Melody examining local authorities — quasi-governmental bodies that make consequential decisions about housing, water, transit, development, health care and public spending — that shape life in Macon-Bibb County. A version of this story was originally published in April 2025.

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SNAPSHOTS

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PHOTO NO. 1 — Students from Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary march outside the school earlier this month. The school hosted a week of events in honor of its namesake, which concluded with a parade. *Photo by Jason Vorhees.*

PHOTO NO. 2 — A community member from South Macon holds up a sign reading “Unity” along Poplar Street during Macon’s annual Martin Luther King march. *Photo by Jason Vorhees.*

PHOTO NO. 3 — Bibb County Schools and First Choice Primary Care opened their third School-Based Health Center earlier this month at L.H. Williams Elementary. The center will serve both students and the surrounding community. *Photo by Jason Vorhees.*

PHOTO NO. 4 — Joshua Johnson, a 7th grader from Rutland Middle School won 1st place in the District Spelling Bee for the second year in a row. *Photo courtesy of Bibb County Schools*

PHOTO NO. 5 — Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful hosted their annual Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service Community Cleanup, which attracted more than 100 volunteers. *Photo courtesy of Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful.*

PHOTO NO. 6 — Mercer students enjoy ice skating when the Stetson parking lot became a temporary ice rink. *Photo courtesy of Leah Yetter.*

PHOTO NO. 7 —Actors rehearse a scene from Macon Little Theatre’s production of Agatha Christie’s “And Then There Were None,” which runs Jan. 30 - Feb. 8. *Photo courtesy of JP Haynie.*

This no longer shocks me

Like many of us, I’ve spent a lot of time trying to process the horrible events transpiring in the great American city of Minneapolis.

I told someone the other day I was shocked by all of it, and then I took a step back and thought about that for a minute. I’m not shocked or surprised or dumbfounded that any of this is happening. I figured it would. It’s just a natural progression of the continuing atrocities committed by this presidential administration.

I get a lot of flak for what I write in my opinion columns. I’ve never given that much thought or care. I’m an incredibly thoughtful person and realize that my legacy will be easy to piece together. Much of my life’s work can be found in ink and newsprint.

For years and years, I’ve written about my disdain for Donald Trump and his band of misfits. It’s never been easy to do so, but I’ve always



Joshua Wilson

felt a responsibility to push back on this man and the folks who enable him. I still feel that way.

So, no, I’m not shocked that ICE agents — under-trained men who’ve been told they have “absolute immunity” in their actions and that it’s OK to do their terrible work while hiding their faces — are gunning down American citizens on our streets. That feeling left me long ago.

I’m not sad, either. That’s not quite the right word. Don’t get me wrong. I hate what’s happening, and I do feel terrible for the families of the victims. My sadness has been replaced by something worse, I think, and that emotion is called, maybe wrongly, “numbness.” I feel numb, or, as defined by a Google

search, as having a “reduced ability to experience emotions.”

I still care, but I’m also tired of shouting into a void. I spend a lot of time with fellow journalists, and many of them feel much the same. We’ve reported on Trump’s actions for years. By simply writing about his actions, we’ve proven — over and over — that he’s a bad person surrounded by equally bad, or maybe even worse, goons.

Despite this work and being labeled “fake news” and being treated like the worst villains in the American story, we’re still trying to show folks what’s really happening. And when that doesn’t work, we show folks the raw video — like the footage of Alex Pretti, a U.S. citizen who worked as an intensive care nurse for the U.S. Department

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The Melody, named for Macon’s enormous influence on American music, is the premier community news source in Macon-Bibb County. We are also a national innovation lab testing scalable models and tools for strengthening local news.

We follow the Code of Ethics published by the Society of Professional Journalists, and we believe in doing what is right every time and not just when it is convenient. You can read that code at spj.org/ethics.

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Letters may be edited for length, clarity and style. Submissions must include the writer’s name, city of residence and a phone number for verification purposes only.

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Submissions may be sent to joshua@maconmelody.com.

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Georgians are subsidizing uneven data center boom

For years, Georgia leaders have boasted that a major reason the state became a hot spot for artificial intelligence data centers was a generous tax break passed in 2018.

However, a new state audit tells a different story — most of those data centers would have come here, anyway.

According to the report, only about 30% of Georgia’s data centers can be traced to the tax break. The other 70% were already likely to be built, drawn by cheap land, access to relatively inexpensive power and Georgia’s geographic location. Even so, taxpayers are losing nearly half a billion dollars a year to keep the unnecessary, ineffective incentive in place.

In other words, we’re overpaying, and it will cost us.

Data centers offer a complicated financial calculus. During the construction phase, those in the building trades are the big winners. However, once the massive edifices are built, employment opportunities evaporate.

Buildings dedicated to towers of computer servers and the transfer of electronic information require only a skeleton crew to maintain. Instead of people, what data centers do need — forever — are enormous amounts of electricity and water.

Because of their need for so much power, Georgia is now planning for thousands of megawatts of new demand largely to serve these facilities.

Instead of funding tax breaks to create jobs, everyday Georgians are instead footing the bill through higher power bills, dramatically increased water rates, louder neigh-



borhoods, fewer trees and more strain on aging water systems — but the burden will not be shared evenly.

As those along the I-20 corridor can attest, many of the fastest-growing data center projects are being built in Black communities and in rural areas. Those who know Georgia’s history surrounding land-use decisions know several of these places have historically dealt with the effects of toxic landfills, warehouses and other heavy industries.

Residents often learn about new projects late in the process, when decisions are already made. The limited jobs promised rarely meet the pledges — but the impacts linger.

Democracy is not simply found in the act of voting. Voting is a mechanism through which we demand representative leadership make good decisions on our behalf — and invest our resources wisely. The reflexive tendency to spend billions for headlines and yield little for communities is not right.

It violates the intention of an effective democracy. We cannot justify bad deals under the vague, unproven promise of growth. If the state is giving away hundreds of millions of dollars in corporate welfare, the public should see and feel the benefits.

Technology has been an economic engine for Georgia — from financial tech founded in Columbus to start-

ups powering metro Atlanta. As a legislator, I supported both, and as an author, I have explored the promise and challenges of AI in my books.

I know we don’t have to be anti-tech to be pro-accountability.

During my time under the Gold Dome, I supported tax incentives tied to real prosperity and voted against boondoggles that benefited the wealthy and powerful. Using its authority to protect Georgians, the General Assembly must tighten these tax breaks, require proof of real job creation, demand transparency about water and power use, and give communities a real voice in the process before projects are approved.

Right now, too many Georgians are paying the costs of the AI boom, but they’re not reaping much benefit.

We don’t need ChatGPT or Gemini to tell us that the math doesn’t add up. Old-fashioned calculators work just as well — and also consider the bipartisan rebuke to the state’s Public Service Commission last November.

Affordable choices for constituents make up the “real stuff” of democracy.

As the legislative session heats up and politicians start jockeying for a return trip this coming election season, remember to tell those who speak for you to listen up.

Stacey Abrams is a bestselling author, entrepreneur and host of the podcast “Assembly Required.” She previously served as minority leader in the Georgia House of Representatives.

Make portable benefits a priority

Leadership in the Georgia General Assembly has been crystal clear about one thing: The 2026 legislative session’s No. 1 priority is tackling issues of affordability — namely, identifying and implementing tangible steps to ease the financial burden plaguing Georgians.

Rep. Todd Jones, R-Cumming, is at the vanguard of this effort — and not a moment too soon.

Since the pandemic, just about everything has gotten vastly more expensive. The average price of owning a car has increased over 40% since January 2020. The average price of a home in Georgia has surged by around 63% in roughly the same time frame. Groceries are up by 27%, and health care costs have soared.

Georgians of all stripes feel the sharp pain of this price inflation, but



Marc Hyden

it is particularly acute for some people, including independent contractors.

Unlike many W-2 employees, they do not receive any benefits from work. They must secure them elsewhere, but the high cost of living means that they do not have much left over to purchase health insurance, fund their retirement or even keep for a rainy day.

Jones is thankfully championing an innovative plan to help: implementing a voluntary portable benefits system, saying, “Too many independent workers are forced to choose between flexibility and basic security. Voluntary portable benefits would change that equation.”

In contrast with traditional benefits that are linked to employers, portable benefits are tied to workers — meaning no matter where they work, their benefits follow them.

“This legislation ensures Georgians can access affordable health care and essential benefits without giving up their independence, their livelihoods or the modern ways they work,” Jones continued. “It’s a common-sense update for the 21st-century workforce.” Under Jones’ model, companies may contribute funds into special accounts owned by independent contractors for the purpose of purchasing whatever benefits they choose, and this would be entirely voluntary on all parties involved.

SEE HYDEN
PAGE 7

Resistance to data centers fuels flood of Georgia bills targeting the industry

BY MARK NIESSE

Capitol Beat
capitol-beat.org

Anger and opposition to the rapid rise of data centers across Georgia has led to a surge of bills that would clamp down on the resource-consuming industry.

Georgia legislators have proposed seven bills regulating data centers by eliminating tax breaks, prohibiting costs from being passed on to residential electricity customers or temporarily barring their construction entirely.

Data centers — hulking industrial buildings that power artificial intelligence and technology companies — have emerged as one of the hottest topics at the Georgia Capitol this year as they’ve proliferated across the state’s landscape in recent years. There are over 200 data centers in Georgia, according to Baxtel, a data center industry research firm.

State Sen. Matt Brass, the chairman of the powerful Senate Rules Committee, said residents are worried about the impact of large data centers being built in their communities.

Brass proposed Senate Bill 410, which would end Georgia’s sales tax exemption for new data centers but preserve it for existing facilities. Gov. Brian Kemp vetoed a bill in 2024 that would have eliminated the tax break entirely, citing concerns it

would undermine business investment in the state.

“It started with concerns from folks back home. There’s a lot of angst over it,” said Brass, R-Newnan.

Data centers will still invest in Georgia even if they don’t get a tax break, Brass said, citing the state’s energy rates, business climate, weather and property values.

“There’s all these reasons they want to come here, and the tax incentive I don’t believe is one of them,” Brass said.

Georgia taxpayers effectively gave away \$474 million to data centers during the fiscal year that ended in July, according to a recent report by the Georgia Department of Audits and Accounts.

Data centers produced 8,505 construction jobs and 1,641 operations jobs with a combined \$1.2 billion added to the state’s economy, according to the department’s summary of the report.

The Data Center Coalition, a trade association that includes Amazon, Google and Meta, said Georgia has become the fastest-growing data center market in the country.

“Data centers are committed to being responsible neighbors that pay their full cost of service for the energy they use,” said Khara Boender, director of state policy for the Data Center Coalition. “We will continue to work with stakeholders at the state, local and industry

level to strike the right balance that maximizes the benefit to Georgia taxpayers, protects against rate increases and ensures data centers are a net positive for the state.”

Rising energy costs and data centers have become a major campaign issue this year after two Democrats unseated Republican incumbents last fall in elections for the Public Service Commission, which regulates utilities.

State Rep. Ruwa Romman, D-Duluth, proposed a moratorium on new data center construction until March 1, 2027 in House Bill 1012.

“Before we permanently alter the landscape of our state, we have an obligation to properly regulate and assess both the benefits and impacts of these data centers on our communities,” said Romman, a Democratic candidate for governor. “They come to the table with all these promises, and when those promises don’t come true, it’s too late.”

Another bill that would protect residential customers from electricity costs of data centers is already advancing through the legislative process this year.

Senate Bill 34, sponsored by Senate Finance Chairman Chuck Hufstetler, R-Rome, was debated last year but is being revived in committee hearings this week.

Other legislation calls for local governments to make public data centers’ water and electricity usage.

DATA CENTER BILLS PENDING IN GEORGIA

SENATE BILL 34

Prohibits costs associated with center fuel generation and transmission from being included in residential electricity rates.

SENATE BILL 408

Sunsets Georgia’s tax break for centers on Jan. 1, 2027.

SENATE BILL 410

Eliminates sales tax exemptions for new centers.

SENATE BILL 421

Requires local governments to disclose centers’ water and electricity usage.

HOUSE BILL 528

Requires centers to report their water consumption, electricity usage and community impacts.

HOUSE BILL 559

Sunsets Georgia’s tax break for centers on Dec. 31, 2026.

HOUSE BILL 1012

Bans new center construction until March 1, 2027.

ZOOM OUT: The data center boom is prompting policy debate in all 50 states, with government relations firm MultiState reporting that 238 data center-related bills were introduced across all state legislatures in 2025. More than 40 of those bills were enacted across 21 states, the firm reported.

Support growing for Georgia high school cellphone ban

BY TY TAGAMI

Capitol Beat
capitol-beat.org

Georgia high school sophomores are looking ever more likely to lose their phones during the school day in their senior year, as lawmakers consider expanding a ban on personal devices.

New surveys suggest overwhelming support for the idea from parents and teachers. A ban from kindergarten through middle school takes effect next fall after state lawmakers passed it last year.

Now, the author of that law has

legislation that would extend the ban to high schools starting in fall 2027. Rep. Scott Hilton, R-Peachtree Corners, said he expects House Bill 1009 to get a first hearing in a couple of weeks.

Hilton said he had heard universal support from parents and teachers about his K-8 ban. Although the prohibition will not be enforced statewide until the fall, many schools have voluntarily banned phones ahead of schedule. He said he expects an expansion to high school to be similarly popular, with some caveats about logistics for older students.

More than two-thirds of the roughly 3,000 administrators, teachers and other educators surveyed in 176 school districts by Georgia’s largest teacher association liked the idea, according to results out this week. High school teachers were even more enthusiastic, with 83% calling for a cellphone ban.

Similarly, a survey released this week by the Emory Center for Child Health Policy found 71% of responding Georgia parents want the K-8 cellphone ban extended to high schools. The 29% of parents who opposed a high school ban were mostly concerned about being

disconnected from their child during a school emergency.

Safety experts have testified at the Capitol that a phone in a student’s hand during an emergency can be a dangerous distraction from safety instructions given by teachers and emergency responders.

But Layla Contreras, 24, said people who think high school students do not need their phone in an emergency have never lived through one.

Her sister, Sasha, is a senior at Apalachee High School in Barrow County and texted her when a gunman entered the school in September 2024, killing four.

Layla said high school students need their phones in an emergency and should be taught how to use them responsibly the rest of the time.

“We need to teach our kids more discipline and more responsibility rather than just taking it away, because when they enter the workforce,” she said, “they’re not going to take away their phones.”

On the Senate side, a bipartisan study committee recommended a ban on cellphones in high schools.

In a hearing last week, Richard Woods, the state superintendent of schools, asked lawmakers for such a ban.

WILSON

Continued from Page 5

of Veterans Affairs, being needlessly and senselessly gunned down by federal agents.

And it still doesn’t work.

So many people are still under Trump’s spell. So many people have allowed their worst impulses, their most horrible traits, to rise to the surface. So many people have indeed been tricked by “fake news,” but it’s not the information coming to them from the media by and

large. It’s from the leaders they trust — even though those leaders have done little, if anything, to earn that kind of loyalty.

It’s maddening, it’s sickening and, unfortunately, it’s downright dangerous.

We can’t have conversations about improving our country when so many people are living in delusion. We can’t unify as a people until everyone accepts the truth and stops believing in the slop pushed to the masses by the administration — you know, the stuff that one of Trump’s

early lieutenants called “alternative facts.”

I’ve warned Republican leaders that history will not be kind to them for their obedience and subservience to Trump. I’ve warned everyday Trump supporters that the “Well, I voted for him for cheap gas and eggs and because Joe Biden was senile” excuse will not tread water when historians catalog this section of our history. I’ve even written that the folks who say they don’t care anything about politics, that they despise all political leaders and par-

ties and thus don’t participate in the process, will not be able to feign ignorance about all of this when the history textbooks are being written.

But, after so many years of shouting, I’m tired. I feel like so many of us — not just the journalists, but the average Americans, the people who just want a safe place to live and a chance to succeed — are exhausted.

Maybe “numb” wasn’t the right word to describe my current feelings after all. WebMD tells me that mental exhaustion is a thing. I’m there. I believe it.

If you’re like me, I hope you can find relief in the good things. I hope the load gets lighter.

And I continue to pray for our country.

I continue to hope that the idea of America — a place where all people, regardless of origin or thought process or any other differentiator, have a chance to peacefully thrive — will one day be realized.

Joshua Wilson is executive editor of The Macon Melody. Reach him at joshua@gtln.org.

HYDEN

Continued from Page 5

This is probably already legal in Georgia, but the code doesn’t explicitly state it. Some companies might be wary of contributing funds to such accounts because they worry that this could be viewed as evidence of an employer/employee relationship, which comes with a lot of responsibilities and strings attached.

Jones’ measure would clarify all of this and state that such contributions are not evidence of an employer/employee arrangement. This will help independent contractors afford benefits and continue

working in their field.

This statutory clarification is sorely needed, too. With the rise of gig work — such as driving for Uber, Lyft and DoorDash — Georgia’s labor market has fundamentally changed in recent years, but our laws have not kept pace. Over 1 million Georgians are engaged in some form of self-employment, and a number of them earn solely through gig work.

Many like it that way, too, because it provides them the flexibility to choose when and how to work. They’re their own bosses.

That flexibility does not currently come with benefits in Georgia, though. To date, there are about

1.2 million uninsured Georgians. Although not all are independent contractors, many of them have no health insurance and want it. A Federal Reserve white paper stated that 28% of gig workers would like health insurance, and another survey disclosed that 80% of self-employed workers would like portable benefits.

Jones’ bill could help close the uninsured gap and put other types of benefits within reach of numerous Georgians while modernizing the code for a changed economy that increasingly relies on independent contractors.

One gig company conducted a pilot program in Georgia to gauge

the likely success and desire for portable benefits, and the results were incredibly promising. Nearly 25% of the company’s independent contractors opted into the system, and many loved it. They were able to use the funds for a mix of benefits they didn’t previously have — vision, dental and health insurance, retirement savings and time off.

While offering portable benefits is a newer, innovative solution, it isn’t a half-baked, untested paradigm. Utah, Tennessee and Alabama have already enacted portable benefits legislation to the benefit of workers and even to the entities that pay them. The latter is especially true because when companies offer portable ben-

efits contributions to workers, this provides them an advantage over their competitors for talent.

Jones’ bill is a win-win solution. It threads the needle by creating an entirely voluntary system that is pro-worker and pro-business. It helps close the uninsured gap and addresses the legislature’s top priority — affordability — by putting benefits within reach of Georgians.

Given this, portable benefits ought to be one of the General Assembly’s top priorities.

Marc Hyden is the senior director of state government affairs at the R Street Institute. You can follow him on X at @marc_hyden.

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Amber Waves

by Dave T. Phipps



Out on a Limb

by Gary Kopervas



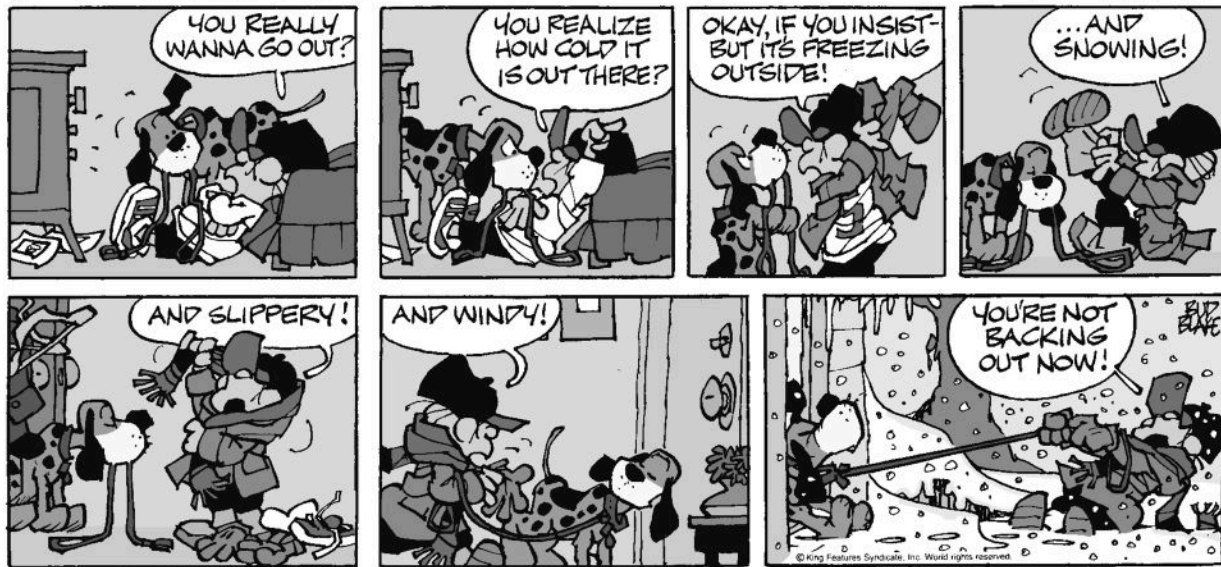
The Spats

by Jeff Pickering



TIGER

by BUD BLAKE



OLIVE & POPEYE

By Randy Milholland



HOCUS-FOCUS

BY HENRY BOLTINOFF



Just Like Cats & Dogs

by Dave T. Phipps



CryptoQuip

This is a simple substitution cipher in which each letter used stands for another. If you think that X equals O, it will equal O throughout the puzzle. Solution is accomplished by trial and error.

Clue: F equals P

FHEFRH JTEQRV GH LHYS
FYQVHAU DTHA JHRHIUOAC
GHLHYXCH IEAUXOAHYJ. ITEEJH
SEQY GEURHJ DOJHRS!

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SCRAMBLERS

Unscramble the letters within each rectangle to form four ordinary words. Then rearrange the boxed letters to form the mystery word, which will complete the gag!

Sweet

MEALCAR

Cipher

DECO

Exclusive

INDIES

Clumsy

TIPEN

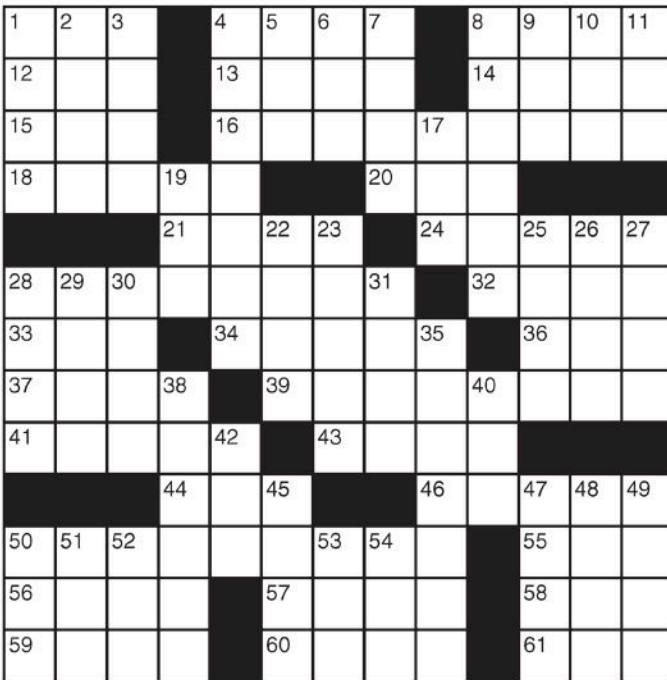
TODAY'S WORD

"Sure, I've got a great diet — the low- diet!"

King Crossword

ACROSS

- 1 Nile biter
4 Chat
8 Job for Holmes
12 One of the five W's
13 "East of Eden" son
14 Makes a choice
15 Snaky fish
16 Fruit salad ring
18 — Lama
20 Humorist
21 — Raton
24 Settle a debt
28 Holiday wreath adornment
32 Ms. McEntire
33 "I love," to Livy
34 Passion
36 "The One I Love" band
37 Attempt
39 Pesto ingredients
41 Bar mixer
43 Salinger girl
44 Sticky stuff
46 Tuscany setting
50 Forest-inspired color
55 Uncle, to Pedro
56 Romanov ruler



- 57 Hardly hirsute
58 Help
59 Rental units (Abbr.)
60 Totals
61 24 horas

DOWN

- 1 Dumbstruck
2 — butter
3 Survey
4 Bubble tea ingredient
5 Shapiro of NPR
6 Horror star Chaney
7 Recognized
8 Whirlybird

- 9 Smartphone download
10 Cardinal cap letters
11 Jargon suffix
17 Tire filler
19 Jurist Fortas
22 Business abbr.
23 MacDowell of "Green Card"
25 Andean land
26 Help a hood
27 Thanksgiving veggies
28 Bygone days
29 Texter's "As I see it"
30 Lunch hour

- 31 Billions of years
35 Prompts
38 Detroit team
40 Mosquito barrier
42 Gearwheel tooth
45 Spheres
47 Slightly
48 Ovid's 53
49 Luke's teacher
50 School org.
51 MSN, for one
52 Rebel Turner
53 Vichy water
54 Stately tree

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Weekly SUDOKU

	8	1				7	3	6
		4	6				1	2
6				2		9		
		5		9			8	4
	3		4		5			1
	6			3	1	9	5	7
	4	6	9			1	7	
9	2	8			7		4	
		7						

Place a number in the empty boxes in such a way that each row across, each column down and each small 9-box square contains all of the numbers from one to nine.

DIFFICULTY THIS WEEK: ♦♦

♦ Moderate ♦♦ Challenging
♦♦♦ HOO BOY!

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Space mission

O	R	B	I	T

Go around
People
Steel fastener
Starbucks' Large
They give the Ivy League its name
Famous armless statue

Solve each row by replacing one letter from the answer above or below and scrambling to make a new word. When complete, the top and bottom words will have no letters in common.

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02624



Solution time: 24 mins.

Answers

King Crossword

Trivia test by Fifi Rodriguez

- HISTORY: When did the Easter Rising insurrection take place in Ireland?
- GEOGRAPHY: What is the capital of India?
- MEDICAL TERMS: What is a common name for lateral epicondylitis?
- MOVIES: The "Back to the Future II" characters travel forward in time to which year?
- LITERATURE: What color is the badge of courage in Stephen Crane's novel about the Civil War?
- GAMES: How many points is the center red bullseye on a dartboard worth?
- ANIMAL KINGDOM: What is a group of floating otters called?
- AD SLOGANS: Which car company used the slogan "Drive your dreams"?
- TELEVISION: What is husband Darrin's profession in the "Bewitched" sitcom?
- SCIENCE: What part of the brain controls hunger?

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INCOME

Today's Word

3. Inside; 4. Inept

SCRAMBLERS

S	U	N	E	V
S	E	N	I	V
I	N	E	V	R
T	E	V	I	R
E	B	I	T	O
T	R	B	I	O

Solution

5	1	7	3	6	4	8	2	9
6	2	8	1	5	7	6	4	3
3	4	6	2	8	1	5	7	9
4	9	2	8	3	1	5	7	6
8	3	6	4	7	5	2	9	1
1	7	5	2	9	6	3	8	4
6	9	3	7	1	2	4	8	5
7	9	4	6	8	3	5	1	2
2	8	1	5	4	9	7	3	6

Answer

Weekly SUDOKU

your bottles wisely!

People should be very prudent when selecting beverage containers. Choose

CryptoQuip

answer

1. 1916
2. New Delhi
3. Tennis elbow
4. 2015
5. Red
6. 50
7. A raft
8. Toyota
9. Advertising executive
10. Hypothalamus

Ralston Hall: The story behind a former cultural hub for the Macon community

BY LIZ RILEY

Features Columnist
news@maconmelody.com

Directly in front of the Johnston monument in the Holly Ridge Section of Rose Hill Cemetery is the Ralston family lot. While James A. Ralston, who is buried in this lot, may not be well known today, he was once a prominent citizen in Macon.

Ralston married Aurelia Lamar in 1845, and they had five children. Mr Ralston was a planter and a speculator.

The 1860 census lists his personal estate as valued at \$60,000 and his real estate holdings at \$120,000. The real estate holdings would be the equivalent of approximately \$4.7 million in today's dollars.

The Ralston home overlooked Macon from the top of Coleman Hill, where the Mercer Law School is now. According to pictures, it was as large as the neighboring Bond house.

During Macon's first quarter century, meeting and entertainment space was scarce. This changed in 1853 when Ralston built Ralston Hall at the corner of Third and Cherry streets.

Ralston Hall sat 1,200 people and was described as "exceedingly plain" yet "possessing fine acoustic properties." The surrounding build-

ings included restaurants, a bakery, clothing shops and grocery stores.

Ralston Hall quickly became a centerpiece of Macon's cultural life. Ads during the 1850's and 1860's mention performances by "the eminent tragic actress Mrs. W.M. Ward," "the greatest comedian of the age, Mr. J.B. Tozer" and "world-renowned and greatest of living violinists, Henry Vieuxtemps."

In addition, fundraisers featured local performers, and occasionally, political rallies drew people to Ralston Hall.

Oliver Wilde, John Wilkes Booth's father, and John Wilkes Booth himself performed at Ralston Hall, according to a Macon Telegraph article from 1953.

While Ralston Hall was an important part of Macon in the late 1800's, fire was its enemy. In 1856, Ralston Hall partially burned, but was rebuilt by 1857.

In 1859, another horrible tragedy involving fire also occurred at Ralston Hall. George Marsh and the Marsh Juvenile Comedians were scheduled for a performance.

George and his wife let their daughter, Eliza, take part in the performance for the first time. Eliza, aged nine, stepped too close to the stage lighting, and her dress caught fire. She died the next day.

The last fire to strike Ralston Hall was in 1886. On one of the coldest

nights in Macon, when the Ocmulgee River is said to have frozen solid, a fire started in the kitchen of a bar attached to Ralston Hall.

While the Macon fire department came out in force, their efforts were nearly useless because the fire hydrants were frozen.

Ralston Hall, along with seven stores and a number of offices were destroyed. Today, The Bohemian Den sits where Ralston Hall once served as a cultural hub for the Macon community.

Ralston didn't live to see the destruction of Ralston Hall. He acquired tuberculosis while he was a prisoner in Kentucky during the Civil War and passed away in 1864.

Ralston, his wife Aurelia, and their children are buried in a family plot in the Holly Ridge section of Rose Hill, overlooking the river.

Little Eliza Marsh, whose real last name was Guerineau, is buried alone in a plot in the Magnolia Ridge section of Rose Hill.

In 2025, Liz Riley and Kathleen O'Neal began a visual inventory of every monument in Rose Hill Cemetery. The goal of this project is to provide a free, complete and accurate database of those interred, as well as maps for locating them.

This column shares the fascinating stories discovered during this project.



PHOTO BY LIZ RILEY

James A. Ralston is buried in a family plot in the Holly Ridge section of Rose Hill, overlooking the river.

Lit Fest to bring together Middle Georgia book fans



PHOTO PROVIDED BY THE MIDDLE GEORGIA LIT FEST

Warner Robins Mayor LaRhonda Patrick joins local cookbook author Dawn Pace at the 2025 Middle Georgia Lit Fest. From cookbooks to science fiction and whodunits the festival brings indie authors, publishing experts and more from across the state and beyond.

The Middle Georgia Lit Fest is just days away, so mark your calendar for the Feb. 7 event that brings book lovers together with indie authors, publishing experts, editors, designers, illustrators, story coaches and others.

Attendees will have the opportunity to browse, meet writers, get books autographed and attend workshops and activities for both authors and readers young and old.

Organizers say the event will be almost double the size compared to last year, with about 130 authors



Michael W. Pannell

plus dozens more publishing and arts-related vendors attending.

Admission and parking are free, as are all the day's activities. Food trucks will be on hand, too, allowing patrons to purchase snacks and meals.

Victoria Hawkins of Between Friends Publishing, one of the event's host organizations, said

the festival's popularity is growing among the public as well as among indie authors.

"Last year, there were about 80 authors and vendors; this year, we could have had 200, but we limited it because we want to do a good job of managing our growth," she said.

A peek at Lit Fest activities
Hawkins said growth is happening in several ways, not just in the

SEE BOOKS
PAGE 10

BILLY'S LET'S EAT REVIEW

Brasserie Circa's unique selection delights foodies

Some restaurants impress you. Others charm you. And then there are places like Brasserie Circa that make you realize halfway through the evening that you're not just having dinner—you're having a moment. The kind where the wine keeps flowing, laughter gets a little louder and you suddenly understand why people keep coming back again and again.

Located in Macon and open since 2013, Brasserie Circa has long been a staple for locals who appreciate good food without the attitude. In January 2025, the restaurant entered a new chapter when Chris Barton officially took ownership, though his connection to Circa goes back much further than a title on paper. Along with Miramar, Circa now sits under the same ownership umbrella, and while the restaurant has evolved over the years, its heart has remained firmly in place.

The first thing you notice when you walk into Brasserie Circa isn't the menu or the wine list — it's the room. Guests greet each other before they even make it to their tables. Conversations overlap. Familiar faces light up. It feels less like a restaurant and more like an extension of the neighboring country club, where everyone seems to know everyone, and if they don't, introductions happen quickly. It's polished but approachable, ele-



Billy Hennessey

vated but friendly and comfortable without ever feeling casual in the wrong way.

Chris Barton's story feels very Macon. Born and raised here, he left college

without finishing his degree, spent some time working construction, and eventually found himself back home, unsure of what was next. A job waiting tables — thanks to a friend managing a restaurant — changed everything. The instant gratification of hospitality, of making people happy in real time, hooked him. From there, he worked his way through nearly every role in the industry, learning the business from the ground up and training under some of Macon's most respected chefs. He even worked for the man who originally started Circa, making his eventual ownership feel less like a takeover and more like destiny catching up.

What drives Chris now is the idea of bringing things to Middle Georgia that diners don't always expect. He sources fresh seafood that isn't easy to come by locally, sometimes receiving photos of fish just pulled from the waters off

SEE FOOD
PAGE 10



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Tips for a smart start to spring gardening

Even with recent cold weather across Middle Georgia, spring gardening in Zone 8b often arrives sooner than expected. A few warm days can quickly ignite the urge to plant early.

To make the most of that brief spring window, focus on a few key steps that prepare your soil, your space and your plants before the season is fully underway. These tasks may not be as exciting as flipping through seed catalogs, but they are research-based practices that help turn gardening hopes into healthy, productive plants. A little planning now can make the difference between a garden that thrives in spring and one that struggles once summer heat takes hold.

Step 1: Test your soil before you add anything

Soil testing is the single most important step you can take to



Rosann Kent

improve your garden — and one of the most overlooked. Without a soil test, it's impossible to know whether your soil needs lime, fertilizer or nothing at all.

Adding amendments without guidance can waste money and, in some cases, create more problems than it solves.

Many Middle Georgia soils are naturally acidic, which affects how plants absorb nutrients. A soil test measures pH and nutrient levels to provide clear, crop-specific recommendations. Testing early allows time to adjust soil conditions, so nutrients are available when plants need them most.

Step 2: Plan your garden layout and rotate crops

Before planting, take a few minutes to sketch your garden beds or containers. Identify areas that receive full sun, spots that stay wetter and locations where taller crops may shade smaller ones. This simple planning step helps prevent overcrowding and improves air circulation and light exposure.

Crop rotation is equally important. Avoid planting the same vegetable families in the same location year after year. Rotating crops helps reduce disease and insect pressure while balancing nutrient use in the soil. Even small gardens benefit from thoughtful rotation.

Step 3: Cleaning and preparing



PHOTO FROM UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Master gardener, Rosann Kent, offers several steps to take in ensuring a healthy spring garden, from testing your soil and rotating crops to preparing an effective watering system.

Many spring garden problems begin with remnants from the previous season. Old soil, dirty containers and unclean tools can harbor plant diseases that affect new growth. Wash pots and seed trays thoroughly and sanitize them before reuse. Remove plant debris from garden beds and refresh mulch as needed.

Taking time to clean now can prevent disease issues later, when they are more difficult to manage.

Step 4: Match crops to the right planting window

Planting too early can slow growth

and stress plants, while planting too late can shorten the harvest period. Following recommended planting dates helps crops establish quickly and produce before intense summer heat arrives.

Cool-season crops such as lettuce, potatoes and English peas can be planted early, while warm-season vegetables like tomatoes, peppers and okra should wait until soil temperatures warm.

Step 5: Prepare watering and protection systems

Before planting begins, make sure

your watering system is ready. Check hoses, drip lines and sprinklers for leaks or clogs. Inconsistent watering can stress plants and reduce yields.

Keep lightweight row cover or frost cloth on hand in case of late cold snaps. Quick protection can make all the difference for tender seedlings.

By following these simple steps now, you can set your spring garden up for a strong, healthy start.

Rosann Kent is a Master Gardener Extension Volunteer for Bibb County Extension.

FOOD

Continued from Page 9

New England, only to have them land in his kitchen two days later. It's that level of intention that keeps the menu exciting while still feeling accessible.

And while Macon diners can be famously cautious about trying new things, Circa has found ways to gently push boundaries without losing its audience. A sushi roll added to the menu took off almost immediately. A surf and turf special — a tempura-fried lobster roll topped with filet mignon — flies out of the kitchen every Friday and Saturday night. Chris knew it would be a hit, and he was right.

The menu itself walks a careful, confident line. It's approachable but thoughtful, familiar but elevated. Chris is quick to tell anyone who will listen that the Blackened Mahi Mahi is wildly underrated, and once guests try it, they tend to agree. Manager Kristin has her own favorite in the Circa Burger, made with specialty beef from Rocking Chair Ranch in Forsyth, the same source used for other premium cuts throughout the restaurant.

Behind the scenes, one of Circa's greatest strengths is something

diners may not immediately see but absolutely feel: consistency. Staff retention here is remarkable. The sauté chef, Bert, has been cooking seafood and pasta since opening day in 2013. Sushi chef Gabe has been there for a decade. Kitchen Manager Suleman has been manning the grill since 2018. Several front-of-house team members have also crossed the ten-year mark. That kind of loyalty translates directly to what lands on the plate and how guests are treated — it's confident, seamless and calm.

There's also a sense of playfulness tucked into the walls. Somewhere around the restaurant, there are smiley faces drawn in pen by a former employee who left more than two and a half years ago. They're still finding new ones to this day, like tiny little time capsules reminding everyone that restaurants, at their core, are built by people.

Brasserie Circa doesn't just serve the community — it actively participates in it. During the holidays, the restaurant chooses a charity and encourages both staff and guests to contribute, matching donations to amplify the impact. This year's focus is Toys for Tots. They also help feed children from the Otis Reading Camp and regularly give back in ways that feel genuine rather

than performative.

Catering has become another growing extension of the Circa brand. Originally launched in 2018, paused during COVID and reimaged in 2022, the program now includes weddings, corporate events, charity functions and even intimate dinners hosted in people's homes. It's another example of how Circa adapts without losing itself.

There's also no denying that Brasserie Circa shines brightest during romantic moments. The lighting, the pacing, the energy — it all lends itself perfectly to date nights, Valentine's dinners and Galentine's celebrations. On Feb. 8, Circa will host a Galentine's Day Brunch from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., complete with a drawing for a gift basket, giving friends an excuse to gather, toast and linger just a little longer.

And then there are the wine events — like the one that started this whole love affair. Thoughtful pairings, a relaxed crowd and the kind of atmosphere that makes time disappear. It's easy to see why these nights are such a hit. They capture everything Circa does best: great food, great people and a space that encourages you to stay awhile.

Brasserie Circa isn't trying to reinvent dining in Macon. It's doing



PHOTO BY BILLY HENNESSEY

Melody food reviewer, Billy Hennessey, calls Brasserie Circa “polished but approachable, elevated but friendly and comfortable.”

something far better. It's refining it. Honoring the past, investing in the future and creating a place where locals feel seen, welcomed and well fed.

If you've been, you already know.

If you haven't, your table's waiting. Until next time Macon, Let's Eat!

Billy Hennessey is the food columnist for The Melody. Write him an email at newlifenkiss@gmail.com.

BOOKS

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number of authors wanting to be a part of Lit Fest.

A glimpse into the festival

— This year, the festival will offer even more workshops than last year. These include 16 confirmed sessions on topics like telling a good story, the psychological impact of storytelling on readers, as well as poetry and various aspects of creating a book from concept to writing to design and marketing.

“Sessions cover pretty much everything from A to Z, and they're not just of interest to writers,” Hawkins said. “Artists and creatives of all types can benefit.”

— There will be several podcasts originating from the festival using the facility's new InnoLab, a wide-ranging, community-based digital innovation hub and workspace.

— Georgia Public Broadcasting and Public Broadcasting Service Kids will be involved in several activities. Besides offering informa-

tion about GPB and PBS resources for kids and families, they will provide a PBS Kids Writers Contest workshop to guide kindergartners through third graders in preparing stories for this year's contest.

“We're excited about growing a partnership with GPB and PBS,” Hawkins said. “Within the InnoLab, they'll have the GPB Gasha Go! interactive, tablet-based story-builder game for kids that teaches story development.”

— And of course, there will be books and book-related items to buy, authors to meet, conversations to have and memories to make. While the event offers all manner of story genres from all kinds of authors, Hawkins said the best-selling genre is children's literature.

The festival's origins

The festival was begun by Hawkins and Jamie Miller in 2017. The two own and operate Between Friends Coffee, a literary-themed coffee shop café located in Warner Robins at 1080 Ga. 96.

A literary festival — though smaller then — was a natural exten-

sion of their shop. In the following years, it grew despite having to take time out due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Also in the following year, the two created Between Friends Publishing, which offers publishing services to indie authors. Miller is a writer and editor. Hawkins is an artist and graphic designer. Similar to their café endeavor, the two blended their skills together, once again, to help clients create books.

Last year, the city of Warner Robins became an event sponsor, and the festival moved to the new, spacious North Houston Sports Complex.

“The Middle Georgia Lit Fest reflects Warner Robins' commitment to literacy, creativity and community engagement,” said Warner Robins Mayor LaRhonda Patrick. “We're proud to host this event and welcome families, students and readers of all ages to celebrate literacy and the power of storytelling in our city.”

Patrick has said the festival fits well within her Literacy Legends Initiative, an effort to foster literacy and a love of reading in Warner Robins and beyond.

From a writer's perspective

R.C. Qualls is a local writer living in Bonaire and has been a frequent participant in regional book fairs, writers' conferences and similar events.

A Georgia native, the Air Force brought him to Middle Georgia, and he now works at Robins Air Force Base and writes on weekends. Qualls recently earned a Master of Arts in Technical and Professional Writing at Middle Georgia State University. He writes science fiction and is currently working on two novels.

“The Middle Georgia Lit Fest is one of the best I've been to, and I've been to quite a few,” he said. “I was recently at one in Snellville and sold only two books. Last year, at the festival here, I almost sold out. I even had someone come from Lawrenceville to get one of my books and have it signed.

“Having a festival anywhere to support indie writers is great, but to have this here is really wonderful.”

Qualls said there's also value in the camaraderie of writers and publishing professionals getting together. Tips are traded and at times

craft problems are worked out. And he clearly believes there's value for those who come to browse the Lit Fest.

“People should come check out the local writers and the international writers who come. You never know who you might run into or what you might be inspired to do yourself,” he said. “I don't think people realize how many writers there are in the area.

“Of course, dedicated readers come and families come because it's a great place for children's books, but even if you just come out of curiosity, I think you might be surprised and find something you like. And you might even get it signed by the author.”

The Lit Fest is on Feb. 7 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Warner Robins' North Houston Sports Complex, 900 North Houston Road. For more information, visit middlegalitfest.com.

Contact writer Michael W. Pannell at mwpannell@gmail.com. Find him on Instagram at @michael_w_pannell.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRYAN MEEKS / MACON MAYHEM
Roanoke emergency backup goalie Bill Yox, a Middle Georgia taxidermist, skates around on the ice before a Macon Mayhem game last week. The Monticello resident is 65 years old but still gets around on the ice, and Roanoke used him as a reserve goalie on a whim.

Hockey, hecklers and taxidermy

Meet the SPHL’s newest — but oldest — emergency backup goalie

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
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As Bill Yox walked toward the visitor’s locker room during a Macon Mayhem hockey game last week, he heard someone shout a simple phrase.

“Hey 35, you suck!”

Yox thought little of it. The Monticello, Georgia resident had heard plenty of jeers at sporting events before. This one was fairly unoriginal, not to mention the fact that it was aimed at the visiting team, the Roanoke Rail Yard Dawgs. Yox, a Mayhem fan, was not particularly familiar with Roanoke’s uniform numbers, after all.

He heard the fan yell again: “35, you suuuuuuuck!”

“Boy,” Yox thought, ‘I wonder if

he’s right. Maybe No. 35 does suck.’

But Yox had forgotten one important thing: he was the one wearing No. 35.

The 65-year-old man from Middle Georgia suited up for Roanoke to play against his beloved Mayhem for two games Friday and Saturday as the emergency backup goalie — and, it turns out, he had forgotten his own uniform number.

“I usually wear No. 70 in my (amateur) hockey league,” Yox said. “Once I realized, I cracked up. I thought, ‘Dude, I’m just the (emergency backup goalie). All I have to do is open and shut a door.’”

No, Yox did not get into the game. Roanoke’s main goalie remained healthy, much to the relief of their emergency backup who could qualify for the senior menu at IHOP. Despite one amusing moment where an

equipment malfunction made Yox think he might have to go on the ice, the Rail Yard Dawg’s impromptu elder statesman got the night off.

It was Yox’s first experience as a professional hockey player, and one he sincerely doubts he will ever replicate.

Playing time or not, Yox was fascinated by the experience. A man with no real professional or even collegiate hockey experience got to put on a uniform for a game in the SPHL, a league where players are paid to put their bodies on the line each game.

So how did Bill Yox — an award-winning taxidermist, it turns out, but a relatively inexperienced hockey goalie — end up playing for the opposing team?

It’s kind of a funny story

Yox is originally from Buffalo, New York, right across the border from Ontario. Hockey is a “way of life” for most people there, he said, but a young Yox surprised many by not really dedicating himself to the sport as a child.

“I did not do the hockey route, although I liked hockey. I always followed it, I followed the Buffalo Sabres since 1970 — yes, I’m that old,” Yox said. “My school had a good high school team, too, but I didn’t do any of that. All I did was mess around on ponds or play street hockey.”

After spending his life watching hockey, a new relationship brought Yox to Middle Georgia in 2013. He opened Bill Yox Taxidermy right

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NOTEPAD

CFCA pulls away late for key 64-54 win over Brentwood

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
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The Central Fellowship Lancers got sweet revenge on their home court Tuesday night, defeating the Brentwood Eagles 64-54 to make up for a loss at the buzzer earlier this season and take control of their region in clutch fashion.

The 10-point margin once the final buzzer sounded did little to indicate the intensity of the showdown between GIAA Class 2A Region 2 rivals, as the Eagles and Lancers traded the lead four times in the second half with two additional ties.

It was a familiar feeling for both squads, as Brentwood won their last meeting Jan. 6 on a buzzer-beater in Sandersville.

“Our season’s been up and down a bit, we’ve had some good

games, some bad games, some okay games. This one’s a true test of, ‘Hey, this comes down to the No. 1 seed (in the region), you gotta win by more than two,’” Central Fellowship head coach Jacob Kline said. “To prove that we can win, that just generates a lot of momentum going into our last three games and going into the region and state tournament.

“I think the way the guys played, it proves that we’re built for this moment.”

The victory gives the Lancers the top spot in Region 2 with a point differential tiebreaker over Brentwood. Should they win their final three region games against Trinity Christian, Gatewood and Windsor, the No. 1 seed will belong to them — even though Brentwood is set to host the region tournament.

While the entire Central Fellowship team played well, it was a

clutch fourth quarter from Judson Walls that pushed the Lancers over the top.

Walls scored all nine of his points in the final period, including two 3-pointers that got the home crowd on their feet. He also stole the ball on a crucial Brentwood possession with less than a minute to play, more or less icing the win as the Eagles’ attempts to extend the game with fouls were all for naught.

“Judson’s been battling that jump shot for a while. To see him hit big threes in big moments in the fourth quarter and get that monkey off its back, I know that’s a relief to him and a relief to us. Judson stepped up in big ways in that fourth quarter for us,” Kline said.

The best player on the floor,



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Central Fellowship’s Joshua Sanders (23) stretches to steal the ball during the Lancers’ 64-54 win over Brentwood Tuesday night.

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Mercer hoops on track as conference play intensifies

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
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The Mercer men’s and women’s basketball teams have both made marked improvements since last season and will head into the second half of Southern Conference play optimistic after offensive success in recent games.

The men’s team is particularly hot at the moment. The Bears won five straight conference games — they scored more than 100 points in four of them — before a three-point loss to Wofford ended that streak Saturday. Head coach Ryan Ridder still thinks the team is the strongest it’s been all season.

“We’re playing with confidence on offense. We feed off each other. We’re a really fun offensive unit to watch,” Ridder said at Mercer’s press conference Monday. “We think we’ve got a chance to finish in that upper echelon and compete for a conference championship.”

The offensive effort has been keyed in part by Zaire Williams, who scored 23 points against Western Carolina and 17 against UNC-Greensboro in two recent contests. The fifth-year player, a New York native who transferred to Mer-

cer from Wagner, has also been a crucial defender for the Bears.

“We count on Zaire in a big way on both sides of the ball. He’s gonna lick his chops for that matchup, he wants to guard the best guy,” Ridder said. “He’s one of the most consistent guys I’ve ever coached.”

Armani Mighty (averaging a double-double with points and rebounds) and Baraka Okojie (averaging 18.6 PPG) also lead the charge for Mercer this year. The team once again features many transfers, but the team chemistry has led to an impressive run thus far, especially after the Bears lost their first two SoCon games.

Ridder recalled one of his concerns in the preseason with a wry smile Monday afternoon.

“We couldn’t put the ball in the bucket this summer, right? I said in August, ‘I don’t know if we’re gonna be able to score, but we’re gonna be able to guard.’ Man, I don’t know if someone should pay me to be the coach anymore,” Ridder joked. “Was I wrong, or what?”

The scoring has driven Mercer to a 13-8 overall mark and a 5-3 SoCon record, good for fourth in the conference. Its defense looks solid as well, if a bit more inconsistent. Ridder said there have been a few halves this season — at UNCG, the

second half against VMI and others — where he’s seen everything click at once.

“We’re putting together really good stretches, but can we put it together for 24 minutes, 28, and ultimately 40? I know we will, it’s just about continuing to punch the clock and figure it out,” Ridder said.

The loss against Wofford last week showed some of the improvements Ridder wants to make before the conference tournament arrives next month. Okojie scored an impressive 27 points, but Wofford battled back from a 7-point deficit at the half to beat the Bears by 3.

“We knew it would be tough to sweep those guys,” Ridder said of the Wofford team Mercer scored 109 points against earlier this year. “Give them credit, they made adjustments on their home court.”

Now Mercer gets two more home games to get back on track. The Bears will face UNCG on Thursday for the second time after scoring 102 points against the Spartans on the road earlier this season, then take on VMI at home in another attempt to sweep a conference foe.

Mercer women ready for road test

While the women’s team does not boast a five-game winning streak, head coach Michelle Clark-Heard

has her squad scoring at a much higher rate than last season.

The Bears are 12-8 overall and 2-3 in SoCon play after losing their last two contests against Furman and Wofford, two of the top three teams in the conference. Heard still likes the strides her team has made.

“We didn’t get the wins we wanted, but we’re still growing and getting better. These two games at home, we didn’t start out as well as we wanted to. We kind of had to play comeback a little bit,” Heard said of the SoCon defeats.

And come back they did — the Bears overcame a 13-point deficit in the second half against Wofford and even took the lead with about 2 ½ minutes left, but the Terriers regained the lead with free throws and eventually defeated Mercer 67-64.

Nonetheless, the Bears have the luxury of three players averaging more than 11 points per game — lineup staples Ariana Bennett and Nahawa Diarra returned after Heard’s first season, while newcomer Abigail Holtman gave Mercer another jolt of energy — and have reaped the benefits of a balanced roster.

“Abby’s contributions come from all the other players, too — having guards where everybody on the floor, they [opposing defenders] have to

make sure they know where Nahawa is,” Heard said. “It’s so many different avenues and different ways we can go. I think that’s helped Abby out a lot. ... This is just a close-knit group of ladies. The credit goes to everyone on the team.”

Diarra and Bennett are two of the closest teammates, and two of the most important leaders returning from last season’s lackluster 8-22 finish. The two Bears are only one win shy of their conference win total from last season with nine SoCon games still on deck. Mercer is currently in fifth place in the SoCon.

The schedule gets more challenging from here. The Bears’ two wins are over the bottom two teams in the league, and Mercer will have to face the top team in the SoCon when it travels to Chattanooga on Friday.

“The biggest thing, they have a lot of returners on their team. They were runners up last year in the league and they do what they do. They shoot the three, they get the ball down the floor really fast. Defensive transition is gonna be crucial for us,” Heard said. “Their point guard is really crafty. She can get downhill, so she’s sort of the engine that makes them run.”

The Bears will take on the Mocs at 5:30 p.m. Friday in Chattanooga.

YOX

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near Monticello Square, just less than an hour north of Macon.

At 53, the lifelong fan decided it was finally time to get on the ice and play for real.

“I never thought I’d be able to play because I’d blown out an ACL playing ball hockey, of all things. For a while I couldn’t quite run or walk right,” Yox said. “Somehow I started playing goalie (in Macon). I had to learn a lot because the style had changed. ... I had followed it enough that I kinda adapted, but then it was just trial by fire.”

Yox plays most of his hockey with a group at the Macon Coliseum on Thursdays. He’s slowly adjusted to being goalie, especially since one team that picked him did so because “he just looked like a goalie,” he said. Even at 65, Yox is spry and does a decent job in the net.

There are plenty of talented guys playing on Thursdays — Yox even played with Scott Pearson, a former NHL player — but former Mayhem player and coach Caleb “Cam” Cameron is a staple of the group.

“He’s a pretty darn good player, so sometimes I get the better of him and a lot of times he gets it past me,” Yox said, laughing. “Being able to play with him is real fun.”

Luckily for Yox, Cameron got a call from the Roanoke head coach Thursday night after Yox and friends had finished playing hockey in Co-

lumbus: the Rail Yard Dawgs needed a goalie, ASAP. One of their two goaltenders had been called up to the next level.

“I’m convinced they could’ve gotten a college goalie or signed somebody to some type of contract, but Cam told ‘em, ‘I got a guy,’” Yox said. “Cam says, ‘he’s not a guy who’s got visions of grandeur, he’ll just go in and play.’”

So, just like that, the taxidermist from Buffalo got the gig.

A day in the life of a pro
What shocked Yox the most during his brief but memorable stint as an emergency backup goalie in the SPHL was the efficiency and routine of it all.

For starters, Yox had a game up in Sandy Springs at 3 p.m. that Friday. He thought he’d make it with plenty of time but was told he had to rush down to make it for pregame preparations, which were very new to him.

“There’s a lot of cool feelings that come through all at once. As much as I thought I knew about hockey — I knew how fast the puck could get to me, and I knew my way around the ice — what hit me right off the bat was the extreme structure of professional hockey,” Yox said.

First the team had to go to the trainer’s room for warm-up clothes. Then there was a different process for getting uniforms on. Yox was also intrigued by the pregame rituals of the Rail Yard Dawgs, who did everything from riding the exercise bike to juggling rolls of tape.

somebody else up. So yeah, I guess we consider Josh our little cheat code,” Kline said.

Shaheem Barbosa also played well for the Lancers, scoring 13. Sirron Chambers followed with 12.

The Lancers started off hot with a 6-0 run highlighted by a dunk from Sanders, who had two other slams and a menagerie of blocks throughout the opening half. Central Fellowship got hot shooting early to keep the momentum going, with solid efforts from Barbosa and Abram Austin leading to an 18-12 lead at the end of the first quarter.

But then Brentwood’s Tristan



PHOTO BY DONN RODENROTH

Bill Yox skates around the ice as the emergency backup goalie for the Roanoke Rail Yard Daws last week.

“Every guy knows exactly what calms them down before a game,” Yox said. “Then there’s the trainer who knows exactly what guys need. The equipment manager knows exactly whose skates to sharpen. It’s so regimented and structured.”

Yox also felt humbled at how kind the Roanoke players were, how they received him with camaraderie. Some of his Mayhem fan friends supported him at the games, making the ordeal all the more fun. Mayhem players joked about wanting Yox in

the net so they could score some easy goals.

One funny moment came when Roanoke’s main goalie, Austyn Roudebush, bent down to adjust one of the straps on his goaltender’s equipment. Yox thought just for a moment that Roudebush was hurt and he might actually have to play in the net.

“I was kinda joking that I had to pray for a hangnail,” Yox said of his chances of playing. “Then that happened, and I was scared stiff that I

had to go in, but also excited.”

Overall, Yox loved every second of the experience. He thanked Cameron for setting him up and also credited Raymond Smith, the operations director at the Macon Coliseum, with getting him on the ice for a couple nights.

And then there was that heckler. Even if Yox forgot his own number, he’ll never forget his time as a back-up goalie against his own favorite team.

CFCA

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though, was eighth grader Josh Sanders. Towering above his peers at a gangly 6 feet, 8 inches, Sanders snatched rebounds with ease and shook the entire gym with four dunks on the night. He finished with 17 points for the Lancers.

“It’s nice when you have 6’8”, 6’9” down low. He just draws so much attention, whether it’s a touch down low, whether it’s to score or not to score, you know that double team’s coming so it’s gonna open

Robinson flipped the game on its head almost single-handedly. The sophomore guard hit bucket after bucket in the second quarter, often looking at the Lancers’ bench or some hecklers in the crowd after each impressive make. He ended the first half with a whopping 19 points, higher in two periods than any Central Fellowship player could tally all night.

Kline and the Lancers took heed, though — Robinson only scored two points in the second half, which made all the difference for Central Fellowship.

“It was just to take his airspace

away — do the best we can to make sure he doesn’t get the ball,” Kline said of the halftime adjustment. “You saw whenever we didn’t, he can elevate over anybody. Tristan’s an incredible athlete. For us to contain him to two points and really hone in on making sure he’s not in rhythm, that was huge for the guys in the second half.”

Robinson’s efforts gave Brentwood a 29-28 lead at halftime, and things stayed close in the third quarter. Baylor Cobb and Jaelen Johnson picked up the slack with six points apiece for the Eagles in the third, but a measly nine points combined

for the entire team opened the door for the Lancers to run away with it thanks to Walls’ clutch shooting.

“This was a team effort, all the way. I think everybody made good plays,” Kline said. “Even the guys on the bench, the energy was there. For me, from top to bottom, whether they got in the game or not, that was a total team win.”

Central Fellowship is set to host Trinity Christian in another region matchup Friday before a non-region showdown with Heritage on Saturday. Brentwood will host Gatewood in a region clash Friday in Sandersville.

BUXTON

Continued from Page 11

“Definitely Chipper Jones,” Buxton said, talking about how he looked up to the Atlanta Braves’ MVP-winning third baseman. “I grew up playing shortstop, and I thought I was gonna play shortstop for the Braves — play right next to Chipper, just like (former Braves shortstop) Rafael Furcal.”

Buxton’s younger imagination was off by a few years. Jones played his last season in the majors in 2012,

the year Buxton was drafted No. 2 overall out of high school by the Twins.

“Yeah, that wasn’t going to happen,” the center fielder said.

While he might not be Atlanta’s shortstop, Buxton has certainly made a name for himself. As one of the best outfielders in the game, he also boasts a powerful swing that truly broke out in 2022, his first All-Star season. He hit a career-high 35 dingers last year despite only playing 126 games due to some time on the injured list.

That’s another aspect of his career

that Buxton was quick to address — the slugger has become known as much for his injury history as he has for his skills on the field.

“I got to the big leagues and now I can’t stay healthy,” he said. “Two days into this year I’ll be at 10 years (in the majors). So 6 out of those 10 years I’ve probably been hurt. It takes a toll on your body to go through some of the injuries I’ve gone through. I’ve definitely wanted to give up, but I know my wife, my kids, my support system — I didn’t want to let them down.”

Even before he got injured, Bux-

ton faced hardship. When he first got to pro ball as a prospect, he started his career in unceremonious fashion: 0-for-27 with 17 strikeouts.

The outfielder “thought he left his swing in Georgia” for a bit, but eventually rebounded with the help of an Australian minor league teammate named James Beresford.

“He wasn’t the best player, not the most talented guy in the world, but he brought that positive attitude and work ethic every single day. Every day he came to the ballpark he was smiling,” Buxton said of Beresford. “I would have my head down be-

cause I struck out three times that day. He could let that go. That was something I had to learn.”

That’s how Buxton transferred his high school athleticism — he helped Appling County High win a state championship on the diamond — to the professional level.

And that was his main takeaway for some of the young ballplayers in the audience, many of whom he signed autographs for prior to dinner: stay disciplined.