

# The Macon Melody

# THE RIFF

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PAGE 2: FORMER BIBB COMMISSIONER LAUNCHES BID FOR LT. GOV., ENDORSES POTENTIAL SUCCESSOR

# The Macon Melody

\$2 » REPORTING FOR MACON, FROM MACON » MACONMELODY.COM » FRIDAY, JANUARY 16, 2026 » VOLUME II, NUMBER 30



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES  
Mary Kathryn Mason, a senior in the pre-physician assistant program at Mercer University, performs a flu test while volunteering at the Macon Volunteer Clinic in December.

## Macon clinicians report severe flu season as cases surge statewide

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON  
Features Editor  
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Macon nurse practitioner Joy King says this is likely the worst flu season since 2020, and she predicts that the numbers aren't going to decline anytime soon.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg," said King, who works at Macon's only CVS Minute Clinic and is president of the Georgia Nurses Association.

Historically, flu season peaks in mid-January through mid-February, according to Michael Hokanson with the Georgia Department of Public Health, North Central Health District.

A map from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reflects an uptick of outpatient visits for respiratory illness throughout the country.

On a scale from "minimal" to "very high," nearly every state ranked "high" or "very high" by the end of 2025.

Georgia is among the states with the country's highest level of flu. Others are Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama and Louisiana.

Roughly 10% of the patients that King diagnosed with the flu have been sent to a higher level of care,

SEE FLU  
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## Macon housing market shifts toward buyers as listings linger longer

BY CASEY CHOUNG  
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High demand and low housing stock in Macon drove up home prices during the pandemic, but now the market is turning in favor of buyers.

Prospective homebuyers have more options and stronger negotiating power, said Taylor Thanos, president of the Middle Georgia Association of Realtors. Prices in Middle Georgia are "more attractive" than the rest of the country, he said.

An influx of 32,810 residents into Bibb County is expected by 2050, according to a December 2025 housing study conducted by the Bibb County Planning and Zoning Commission.

But, even with Macon well below the national average in home prices, the city is still lacking when it comes to affordable housing options, he said.

"Ten years ago, you could buy a nice \$150,000 house. There was just a lot of inventory," Thanos said. "Now, for buyers to buy a \$150,000 house, you're extremely limited in the neighborhood and options."

### What homebuyers see

According to the Georgia Multiple Listing Service, a database used by real estate brokers to list properties for purchase, the average listing price in Macon was \$224,000 last month.

There were 507 total active listings.

Neighboring Monroe County had an average sale price of \$418,381



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES  
Taylor Thanos, a broker at Realty Unlimited, places a pending sign on a home along Audubon Circle in Macon. Longer listing times in the local housing market are giving buyers more negotiating power.

last December, while Houston County had an average sale price of \$324,000.

Nationally, the average price of a home was \$433,214, while Georgia's average price was \$373,000, according to the Redfin real estate website.

Macon remains a cost leader in housing prices when compared to the rest of the country, with a larger number of properties sitting on the market for longer.

On average, homes in Macon sold within two months in November, which is on par with the rest of the United States. However, in November 2023, the median days a

listing spent on the Macon market was 44 days.

Houses in Monroe County stayed on the market for 98 days while houses in Houston County stayed on the market for 74 days in November.

In 2025, a total of 1,766 residential properties were sold in Macon, according to Redfin. The average sale price for a home in Macon rose by around \$42,000 between December 2024 and December 2025, while the number of homes sold in the month of December went from

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Periodical — Mail Label

POWER » OUR ONGOING SERIES ON PUBLIC AUTHORITIES — MACONMELODY.COM/POWER

## The quiet authority shaping the future of Robins Air Force Base

BY LAURA E. CORLEY  
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Two decades ago, Robins Air Force Base was facing several challenges that left community leaders on edge.

The threat of Base Realignment and Closure, or BRAC, loomed large. Because it was hemmed in to the north by a swath of land where homes and businesses stood, the base was in danger of not being able to grow its mission. At the same time, the land couldn't be freely developed because of noise pollution and concerns about the potential of aircraft crashes given the proximity of base runways, where plane acci-

dents are most likely to happen.

In 2006, the Department of Defense came up with a solution. It awarded a grant to the Central Georgia Joint Development Authority so that the agency could begin to address the base's encroachment problem.

Formed to encourage economic development, the authority saw its mission shift to a singular task — securing land near the base to guarantee that Middle Georgia's largest employer wouldn't have its operations interfered with and would not be restricted from future growth.

That shift in purpose makes the authority unique as its focus is "intentionally" different from other joint development authorities, Mid-



Mathis

Central Georgia Regional Commission Executive Director Laura Mathis said. It is not offering incentives, marketing or recruiting

gia in the mid-1990s as counties looked to take advantage of job tax credits offered to the state's poorest counties. The Central Georgia Joint Development Authority was created in 1995 and initially involved only Twiggs and Bibb counties.

### Bigger board, one goal

Now, the Central Georgia Joint Development Authority is a 44-member board that includes four representatives from 11 Middle Georgia counties, spanning from Pulaski County to Putnam County. It has no staff, so it contracts with the Middle Georgia Regional Com-

Joint development authorities started cropping up around Geor-

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# Clark starts bid for lieutenant governor, endorses Cooke for former county seat

BY CASEY CHOUNG  
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After stepping down as county commissioner earlier this month, Seth Clark will run for lieutenant governor, leaving behind his seat that represents the Napier Heights, Ingleside, Pleasant Hill and Vineville neighborhoods.

Although a special election for Clark's District 5 seat has yet to be scheduled, the former commissioner has already announced his endorsement of a potential successor.

Clark is supporting mental health advocate Andrea Cooke in the contest, which will need to be scheduled by the county commission. Cooke announced her bid Tuesday at the Wesleyan Leadership Lab on Cherry Street.

She runs Macon Mental Health Matters, a county-sponsored initiative, and is also co-founder and development director for the Southern Center for Choice Theory, a company providing holistic care services with mental health as its focus.

Cooke said she has resigned from these roles to focus on her campaign. She said a primary focus of her candidacy will be on improving urban development in District 5 neighborhoods, with a special focus on housing and employment opportunities in Napier Heights.

"This campaign is not about ambition. It is about responsibility. It is about taking decades of lived experience in this district and years of professional service and putting it to work for the people who call District 5 home," she said.

Clark said "there is still so much work to be done," but "Andrea is the person to fill this role, to finish this term and to deliver for my neighbors."

**Clark's statewide campaign**  
The lieutenant governor hopeful told reporters he felt compelled to run for state office because of the "void in leadership" and how that affects working families.

He said he is "fed up with lip service at the state's Capitol" and will tackle Georgia's affordability crisis.

Clark said tax codes written by billionaires, including a proposal supported by Republicans that would abolish the state's income tax, would lead to thousand-dollar tax increases for families and reduce tax obligations for the wealthy.

He said families are begging for help to address grocery and utility costs and are increasingly concerned about the potential impacts of data centers.

The former county commissioner said he thought "state government and career state politicians who have been in the state Capitol for years and years and years could learn a thing or two from local elected officials."

Clark was heavily involved with the Ocmulgee National Park and Preserve Initiative, which aims to make the historic park a national park — the 64th in the U.S. and the first in Georgia — and the surrounding area a protected area. Bipartisan bills to do so were introduced in Congress in both 2024 and 2025.

He resigned from the initiative to run for the state office.

"I think that the working folks of Georgia deserve an advocate," he said. "They deserve someone who's worked on their issues for the vast majority of his adult life, and they deserve an advocate — they deserve somebody who isn't going to be a tool for billionaires and corruption."

Clark is running as a Democrat.

Party primaries are May 19, and the general election is Nov. 3.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

**New homes for sale line Barrington Place Way in Macon.**

## HOUSING

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104 to 122, according to the Georgia MLS.

### Buyers have 'more options'

In Macon, there's no one particular neighborhood that is more popular than another, Thanos said, and buyers are more "price sensitive."

Arizona Watkins, a broker for Gateway Realty Professionals in Macon, agreed that buyer interest is balanced across neighborhoods, albeit "North Macon will always be North Macon."

With new construction and better market conditions, she is optimistic more buyers will enter Macon and have an easier time finding homes than in previous years.

"Folks are able to take their time and negotiate because properties are sitting on the market longer instead of having tremendous competition," she said. "They have more options to choose from."

Mortgage rates have risen to around the 6-7% range. But a difference between current rates and those of pandemic homebuyers, which were as low as 2.5% in mid-2020, is making potential sellers wary of trading out their cheap mortgages, the "lock-in effect," Thanos said.

"If they purchased during the pandemic, to sell now and buy something in this market, their interest rate is probably going to be double," Watkins added.

### What about rent?

Demand for rental properties is also high, with long lists for Section 8 properties. Section 8 is a federal housing program that helps low-income households afford private rental housing by subsidizing a portion of their rent.

The 2025 study conducted by the county's planning and

## MACON HOUSING SNAPSHOT

### HOUSING MARKET

- Average listing price: \$224,000
- Active listings: 507
- Homes sold in 2025: 1,766
- Change in average sale price: Up, between December 2024 and December 2025, about \$42,000
- Average time on market — as of November 2025: About 2 months

### HOW MACON COMPARES

- Average sale price, Monroe County: \$418,381
- Average sale price, Houston County: \$324,000
- Average home price, Georgia: \$373,000
- Average home price, United States: \$433,214

### RENTAL NOTES

- Apartment units in Bibb County: 19,967
- Average rent: \$1,057
- Downtown loft weighted average rent: \$1,314

### LOOKING AHEAD

- Projected population growth by 2050: 32,810

zoning commission listed the number of apartment units in the county as 19,967 with an average rent of \$1,057. That's compared to roughly \$1,000 in 2021.

"When we're talking about affordable housing initiatives in this area ... there's a lot of people who can't afford market rent in Middle Georgia," Watkins said. "I see movement in that area, but I think we've got to provide more."

### Downtown draws

The weighted average rent, which accounts for differences in the number of luxury versus affordable units, of a downtown loft is \$1,314, according to a 2025 market research report by NewTown Macon.

The report also emphasizes walkability in downtown Macon when compared to other apartment buildings across the city, something that NewTown is taking into account as they promote downtown living, said James Fritze, president and CEO of the nonprofit organization.

The number of flu cases is difficult to track in the Peach State, he said. Only deaths and outbreaks, defined as two or more individuals with a similar illness and the same exposure, are required to be reported.

Health care facilities are asked to voluntarily report flu data, which leads to "chronic underreporting," Hokanson noted.

The Melody made multiple requests to area hospitals for flu data but did not receive reports by the time of publication.

### Why it's worse this year

There isn't one specific reason for the uptick in flu cases this season, according to Hokanson.

Every year, scientists try to predict in the spring what flu virus strains should be included in the vaccination for the coming flu season.

But a new strain of influenza virus was identified in

Demand for housing in downtown Macon has increased year after year, said Lauren Marshall, NewTown's vice president of community development. Half of the 14 apartment buildings surveyed in downtown Macon were at full capacity when the 2025 report was conducted.

Fritze said higher construction costs have driven up prices and kept supply low.

The next big downtown apartment complex is being built at the former site of the Neel's Department Store. Neel's Lofts will feature 95 new units of luxury housing starting at around \$1,600 a month, with leasing beginning in March.

Marshall said the development features new construction with "luxury finishes and amenities," filling a need in downtown's rental market.

"If you're somebody who wants brand-new finishes, top of the line, well, there's not gonna be a lot of supply in that because there hasn't been a lot of new construction," Marshall added.

August 2025, several months after the vaccination strains were chosen, according to officials at the CDC.

Still, it's important that people get their flu shot, Hokanson said.

Even without an exact strain match, the vaccine can still offer some level of protection, he said.

Hokanson noted that flu vaccination numbers are down this year in the North Central Health District — another contributing factor for the particularly harsh flu season — based on data from the general population and school-based flu clinics.

King also said she has seen fewer people in Macon come in for their flu shot.

She said she believes hypervigilance — masking, social distancing and washing hands — has gone down since the pandemic.

"As a community, we've become a little bit less guarded," King said.

Middle Georgia's  
**Southern Bride** 2026

## Attention, newlyweds!

**Submissions are open for our 2026 Southern Bride magazine cover contest!**

The winner will be on the 2026 Southern Bride magazine's cover and be featured inside. The runner-up will also be featured.

**Any bride who got married in 2025 and is a resident of either the Middle Georgia area or Georgia Trust associated counties\* is eligible to enter.**

Submit a high-quality wedding photo, along with you and your partner's full names, address, wedding date, wedding location and venue, photographer's name, jeweler's name and contact information (phone number & email) to brieanna@hhjonline.com or by scanning the code below.

Voting will start January 19th on hhjonline.com and end at noon on January 30th. The winner will be announced January 30th.

Winners must be available for a phone interview between January 31st and February 5th.

**Submission deadline: January 18th**

Scan here to enter!

\*Eligible counties include Houston, Bibb, Baldwin, Bleckley, Crawford, Dodge, Dooly, Dougherty, Harris, Hancock, Johnson, Jones, Laurens, Macon, Meriwether, Monroe, Montgomery, Peach, Pulaski, Talbot, Taylor, Terrell, Treutlen, Twiggs, Wheeler, Washington, or Wilkerson.

# MLK in Macon and Dublin: A roadmap

## MELODY STAFF REPORT

news@maconmelody.com

When Martin Luther King Jr. traveled through Dublin and Macon, he left a lasting imprint on Middle Georgia's civil rights history.

This guide highlights the key stops where King spoke, organized and connected local struggles to a national movement.

This report was compiled in advance of Monday's Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a federal holiday honoring the life, achievements and legacy of the slain civil rights leader.

### Dreams in Dublin

Before civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream, he had an essay.

Speaking to a crowd in Dublin on April 17, 1944, attendees at First African Baptist Church heard the 15-year-old deliver his first public speech, "The Negro and the Constitution."

King talked as a participant in an essay contest hosted by the "Colored Elks Clubs" of Georgia, which held its state convention at the church.

"My heart throbs anew in the hope that inspired by the example of Lincoln, imbued with the spirit of Christ, they will cast down the last barrier to perfect freedom," King



PHOTO COURTESY OF VISIT DUBLIN

**A mural and monument in downtown Dublin marks the site near First African Baptist Church where Martin Luther King Jr., then 15, delivered his first public speech in 1944.**

said in his speech. "And I, with my brother of blackest hue possessing at last my rightful heritage and holding my head erect, may stand beside the Saxon — a Negro — and yet a man!"

In another pivotal moment following his speech, King was asked — for the first time in his life — to give up his seat on the bus ride from Dublin back to his home in Atlanta.

In honor of King's roots in Dublin, the church hosts an annual oratorical speech contest.

A mural and monument erected in

downtown Dublin near the church honors the place that later became a catalyst for King's work.

This was not King's only visit to Dublin. In 1961, he checked into Dudley's Motel and Cafe, one of the only inns between Macon and Savannah that Black people could frequent, according to an article in The Courier Herald.

While the motel offered accommodations such as televisions, telephones and electric heat, it served an even greater purpose during the Civil Rights Movement. Black min-



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

**A mural honoring Martin Luther King Jr. is displayed in Macon. He visited Macon several times as part of his work organizing and speaking across Middle Georgia.**

isters and other civil rights activists stayed at Dudley's, which acted as a safe house.

### Stops in Macon

King made several trips to Macon and referenced it in his speeches.

In 1957, he delivered a speech at Steward Chapel on Forsyth Street, which is now the site of a ceremony following Macon's annual parade that honors King.

In July 1962, he acknowledged a voter registration campaign in the city.

Just 12 days before his assassina-

tion in 1968, King visited Macon as part of his Poor People's Campaign. He addressed the crowd of 400 at the New Zion Baptist Church, encouraging them to stand up against systemic inequality in wages and advocate for a better quality of life.

King's stops in Macon — and his overall legacy — are commemorated with a mural by a local artist, Kevin "Scene" Lewis, which depicts the civil rights leader gazing into the distance and flanked by clouds and a blue sky. The mural, created in 2024, is located two blocks from the original location of New Zion Church.

### Remembering King

The public is invited to a free screening of "Made for a King," a documentary by Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful, at 3 p.m. Saturday at the Douglass Theatre on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard in Macon.

The documentary first premiered in March 2025. It gives viewers a glimpse into King's last visit to Macon and documents how Lewis made his mural.

After the screening, U.S. Rep. Sanford D. Bishop, who represents Southwest Georgia, will speak.

*Melody reporters Casey Choung and Evelyn Davidson contributed to this report.*



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

**Laura Mathis, executive director of the Middle Georgia Regional Commission and a contractor for the Central Georgia Joint Development Authority, points to a map guiding the authority's land acquisition plan in southern Macon-Bibb and Houston counties. The authority works to clear land around Robins Air Force Base and reduce residential density to ensure surrounding acreage remains compatible with the base's future.**

### ROBINS

Continued from Page 1

mission to handle its administrative and planning needs, including how to deal with clearing what the Air Force calls the "encroachment zone," an area where incompatible land use poses a threat to the future of the base.

"We came up with a strategy and established policies and procedures on every acquisition," Mathis said.

The authority will not force or pressure residents into selling their homes, a lesson it learned the hard way, Mathis said.

She recalled a "legendary meeting" with the community about encroachment in 2009. Nearly 300 people packed into a church in southern Bibb County, anxious about the authority's plan to buy their homes, according to news reports.

Residents at the meeting were encouraged to move out of the encroachment zone, which officials wanted to restrict to industrial uses only.

"I mean, we got raked over the coals," Mathis recalled of the fallout. "Most importantly, that effort taught us that, if we didn't go into this with willing [sellers] and not pressuring people and not arm twisting and all that, it won't work."

The authority sent out post-cards to property owners in the encroachment zone, asking them to contact the authority if they were interested in selling. The authority started working with people who responded.

"We've been patient," Mathis said, adding the authority has acquired 335 parcels, about 1,164 acres, in the zone since 2009. The state and counties acquired about 836 acres of the zone in the mid-'90s.

Now the residential density is acceptably low in the area, Mathis said.

### Compatible uses

The authority is in its second phase of minimizing encroachment, which involves finding appropriate uses for the land.

The authority's acquisitions took property off the tax rolls. In its redevelopment plan, it identified compatible uses to make those properties taxable again in ways that do not harm the base and even benefit it.

In 2018, the authority issued bonds for Georgia Power to build a 128-megawatt solar farm that powers the grid and supports energy resilience and security goals for the base.

Georgia Power was mandated by the Public Service

Commission to help take care of military installations and has built solar farms at other bases in Columbus and near Augusta.

The authority owns the land, about 584 acres, and leases it to Georgia Power, which makes payments in lieu of taxes to the authority. Those payments are used to acquire more property and repay counties for the money each of them invested to help the authority acquire it.

Mathis said Georgia Power invested \$177 million to build the solar farm, which has capacity to produce energy to power over 25,000 homes.

Last year, the authority issued additional bonds for Georgia Power to build a battery energy storage system to store some of the solar power on about 149 acres. The authority collects payments in lieu of taxes for that project as well.

Mathis said the focus now is on "filling in the gaps," which amount to about 1,000 acres that need to be protected or rezoned for conservation reasons related to encroachment, the Ocmulgee National Park initiative and protection of the Bond Swamp National Wildlife Refuge.

"There's not a lot of property remaining in the focus area in Macon-Bibb, so most of our effort is going to be

focused down in Houston County," Mathis said. "We have a broader scope. Still, a big chunk is encroachment, but we've got these other things that we're doing. There's lots of reasons why this land needs to be protected. ... It brings a whole host of federal agencies to the table around that habitat and the environment around a military installation."

### Fast facts

— Bibb County is represented on the board by Elaine Lucas, Walt Miller, Lester Miller and George Thomas. View all board members in our web version of this story.

— The authority meets on the second Wednesday in the last month of each calendar quarter at 4:30 p.m., with an annual meeting each December. Meetings are at 3661 Eisenhower Parkway, Suite MB102.

— View the authority's by-laws 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.*

## Porter to step down as Georgia Trust for Local News head

### MELODY STAFF REPORT

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Porter

DuBose Porter, the founding executive director of the Georgia Trust for Local News, will step down from his role Feb. 2, transitioning to a publisher emeritus position as the organization launches a search for new leadership.

Porter has served as executive director since the National Trust for Local

News established the Georgia Trust in 2024 to prevent news deserts and strengthen sustainable community journalism across Middle Georgia. Under his leadership, the Georgia Trust has grown to oversee a portfolio of 20 community news outlets, including The Macon Melody.

As part of the leadership transition, Danyale Starley, currently the Georgia Trust's controller, will serve as interim executive director and will remain in the role until a permanent successor is selected. The National Trust has launched a national search for the next executive director. Candidates can learn more and apply at ntnl.org.

"This transition reflects the widening scope of both our statewide mission and our ambitions for transformational reach," said Tom Wiley, CEO of the National Trust. "Our next stage of growth at the Georgia Trust requires an energized operational leader paired with a dedicated statewide ambassador who can deepen philanthropic investment and cultivate new market opportunities. We're pleased DuBose Porter, a longtime leading force in the community, will remain with us as we transition the Georgia Trust to its new phase of development and innovation."

In his publisher emeritus role, Porter will focus on fundraising, partnerships and acquisitions while continuing to support the organization's statewide mission.

Porter, of Dublin, is a longtime news publisher and public servant.

"We have a strong history of impactful, quality journalism here in the heart of Georgia," Porter said. "Expanding the essential work of these newspapers strengthens communities and fosters local engagement. I believe strongly in the power of independent, community news, and I'm looking forward to continuing to build investment and support for the vibrancy of our publications."

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## ABOUT THE MACON MELODY

The Macon Melody is a community newsroom founded in 2024 by the National Trust for Local News, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving America's newspapers, building brighter futures for them and better serving readers in the process.

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](http://spj.org/ethics).

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The Macon Melody welcomes letters to the editor and guest editorials from readers. Submissions should be concise, relevant to our coverage or community issues, and respectful in tone.

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.

Anonymous submissions will not be published. These items are published at the discretion of the executive editor and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Macon Melody or its staff.

Submissions may be sent to [joshua@maconmelody.com](mailto:joshua@maconmelody.com).

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The Macon Melody strives for accuracy in all coverage. When factual errors occur, we correct them promptly and transparently, both online and in print when warranted. Readers may submit correction requests to [joshua@maconmelody.com](mailto:joshua@maconmelody.com).

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We are proud to be one of 20 newsrooms in the Georgia Trust for Local News, the local subsidiary of the National Trust. Our group covers Middle and South Georgia, protecting local news and building it up for a bright future. We serve 1 in 10 Georgians. For more information on the Georgia Trust, visit [gtln.org](http://gtln.org).

## LEGALESE

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# OPINION

PAGE 4 » THE MACON MELODY » [MACONMELODY.COM](http://MACONMELODY.COM) » FRIDAY, JANUARY 16, 2026

## Patriotism now a liability



**Joshua Wilson**

There's a difference between power and character, and the contrast between Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and U.S. Sen. Mark Kelly, a Democrat from Arizona, is unmistakable.

Kelly — who is also a combat veteran and astronaut — did something that should be routine in a functioning democracy. He reminded service members that they aren't required to follow illegal orders. That principle isn't partisan, controversial or novel. It's embedded in military training, codified in law and grounded in the lessons of history. It exists to prevent the armed forces from becoming tools of authoritarian rule.

For that, Hegseth is trying to punish him.

The secretary's attempt to censure Kelly and threaten his retirement rank and pay isn't about military discipline or professional standards. It's retaliation. It's an effort to use the power of the federal government to silence a political opponent and to warn others to keep quiet.

In a sane system, this effort would be dismissed without hesitation — but we aren't operating

in a sane system. The judiciary has been reshaped by President Donald Trump and his loyalists to reward allegiance over law. Judges who once might've served as a meaningful check on executive overreach are now often chosen for ideological reliability.

That reality makes Hegseth's actions more than petty. It makes them dangerous.

Kelly is a patriot in the most straightforward sense of the word. He wore the uniform. He flew combat missions. He represented the U.S. beyond Earth's atmosphere. He serves in the Senate because he believes the country is worth serving. His record is long, public and unquestionable.

Hegseth is also a veteran, but his standing here isn't rooted in patriotism or service. It's rooted in loyalty to Trump. That loyalty rewards aggression, punishes dissent and leaves no room for independent judgment.

What should trouble Americans most isn't just Hegseth's behavior. It's the number of people willing to defend it. Why do people with any sense of decency still support this conduct? At what point did humiliating opponents become more important than protecting the freedoms that define a republic?

If a sitting U.S. senator and decorated veteran can be targeted for speaking openly about the law, then no one's speech is safe. If patriotism now means obedience to one man instead of loyalty to the Constitution, then the word has lost its meaning.

This isn't just about Kelly. It's about whether Americans still recognize integrity when they see it — and whether they're willing to defend it.

If we can't support our patriots or allow our senators to speak freely without fear of punishment, then the question isn't who's right or wrong. The question is what we've become as a country.

*Joshua Wilson is executive editor of The Macon Melody. Reach him at [joshua@gtln.org](mailto:joshua@gtln.org).*

## Rising health care costs are crushing Georgia families



**FINE PRINT**  
**STACEY ABRAMS**

For too many Georgia families, what comes in and what goes out isn't working — in fact, it hasn't been working for some time now.

Rents are skyrocketing all around Georgia, in urban areas and rural enclaves. In South Georgia, demand outstrips supply, and new homes are a rare sight.

Regardless of where you live or shop, groceries cost more, and those families who need a little extra help aren't getting it.

With summers getting hotter and winter temperatures spiking, data centers popping up and power companies demanding more from ratepayers, utility bills are shockingly high.

Then the cost of child care requires an ever-larger share of paychecks — yet wages, across the

state and across the board, haven't kept pace with a cost of living that is spiraling out of control.

This piles onto a long-term struggle against the constant challenge of health care in a state that refuses to fully expand Medicaid. We've watched as hospitals have shuttered, doctors have fled, and prices continue to surge.

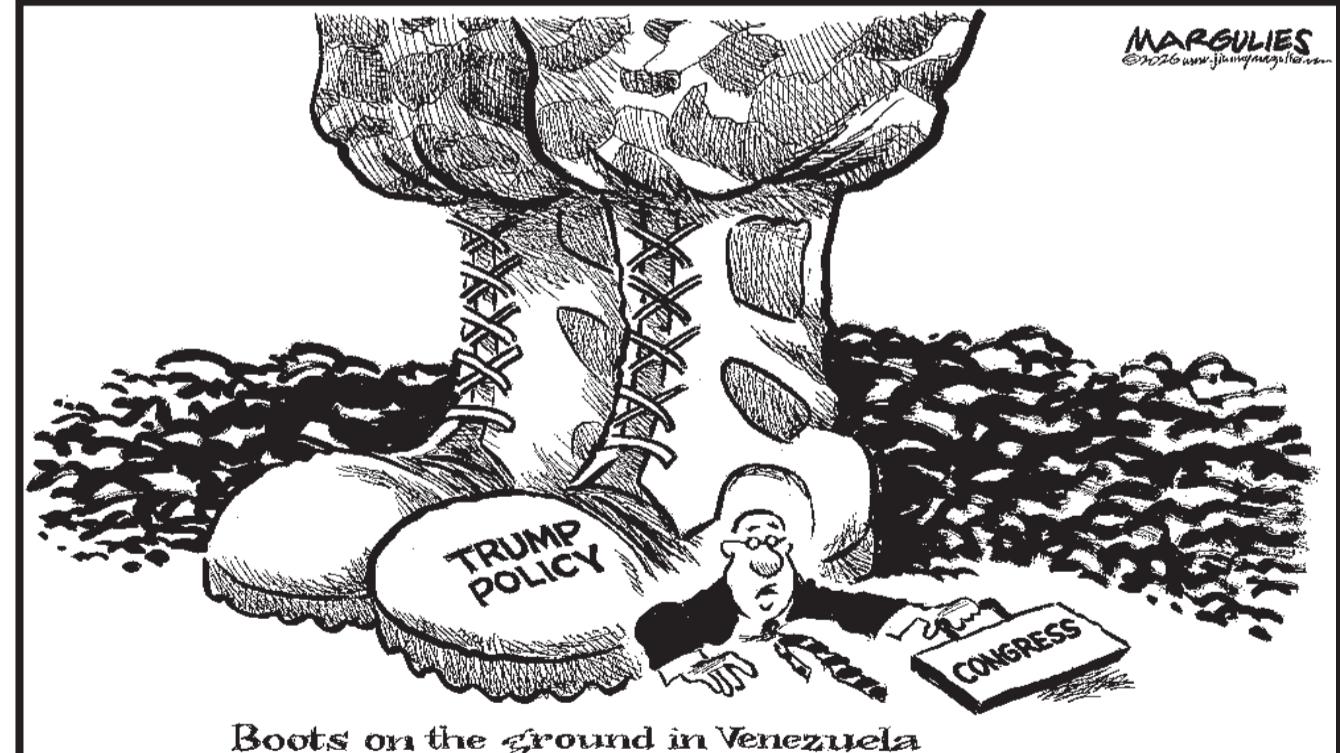
Now, Georgia families are being hit with another major cost increase: rising health insurance premiums because Republicans in Congress

let Affordable Care Act subsidies expire.

As state lawmakers enter the 2026 legislative session, Georgians are suffering the consequences of stubbornness and inaction when it comes to health care costs. Premiums are doubling — even tripling — for hundreds of thousands of Georgians. Half a million Georgians could lose coverage altogether due to cost increases.

In early December, I received a desperate text from a wife and mother who runs a small business. She and her husband rely on the ACA for insurance, but with the cost increasing from \$750 a month to \$2,500 a month — triple the rate — they will

**SEE ABRAMS**  
PAGE 8



## Storm advisory: Brace yourself for this year's legislative session

There's a storm coming to Atlanta, and no meteorologist can predict its severity because it isn't a weather-based phenomenon. It stems from the confluence of fierce political headwinds in the context of Georgia's 2026 legislative session.

The General Assembly lumbered into the Gold Dome on Jan. 12 with the goals of passing a budget, promoting pet projects and — for some members — grabbing as many headlines as possible. While this may not sound different than any prior legislative session, 2026 is poised to be unique thanks to a host of challenging factors — leav-



**Marc Hyden**

ing many wondering what can be accomplished.

Heading into session, House and Senate leadership's concentration appears trained on kitch-

ing many wondering what can be accomplished.

Meanwhile, Lt. Gov. Burt Jones said, "I hope to get accomplished things that mean something to everyday Georgians like lowering the state income tax, giving them a potential tax rebate also working on cost-of-living expenses [and] things of that nature."

These seem like winning topics, but passing legislation is often fraught, especially this year.

Recent turnover and allegations in the House create some uncertainty:

— Rep. Mandi Ballinger, R-Canton, passed away, and Republican Bill Fincher replaced her.

— Rep. Lynn Heffner, D-Augusta, resigned on Jan. 1.

— Federal prosecutors charged Reps. Karen Bennett, D-Stone Mountain, and Sharon Henderson, D-Covington, with fraud relating to COVID-19 government assistance. Bennett resigned on Jan. 1.

— Rep. Marcus Wiedower, R-Watkinsville, resigned, and Democrat Eric Grisler shockingly flipped the seat.

While the resigning Democrats will almost certainly be replaced by other Democrats, Grisler's flip-

ping of Wiedower's former district narrows the relatively slim Republican House majority further. This could make it more difficult to pass some GOP priorities.

Even if it didn't, Republican and Democratic leadership must carefully view every major action within the context of controlling the House. Republicans want to retain their majority, but Democrats are feeling increasingly confident that they might be able to win enough seats in November to seize control of the House.

**SEE HYDEN**  
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# FEATURES

PAGE 5 » THE MACON MELODY » REPORTING FOR MACON, FROM MACON » MACONMELODY.COM » FRIDAY, JANUARY 16, 2026

## New exhibit spotlights culture, identity and the experiences of visually impaired people

The Wesleyan College Leadership Lab has opened an exhibit titled "Echoes of Resilience" that runs through Feb. 27.

The show features Atlanta photographer Eley, who also serves as an adjunct photography professor at Wesleyan.

A reception is set for First Friday on Feb. 6 from 5-8 p.m. at the lab, located in downtown Macon at 522 Cherry St. The reception also includes an artist talk by Eley at 6 p.m.

Entering the Leadership Lab gallery, it's clear Eley is comfortable working on both grand and intimate scales to bring her artistic vision to life — a vision that includes using stereotypes to challenge stereotypes, creating mystery while documenting adventurous lives and employing unusual forms of photography and multimedia to enlighten viewers.

Artful as her work is, Eley doesn't create art just for art's sake; she purposefully explores topics and amplifies voices that are often overlooked.

"Echoes of Resilience" is the compilation of three different bodies of work that focus on illuminating the presence and power of Black and Brown communities," Eley said.

The three distinct but related groups of work, described by Eley, are:



**Michael W. Pannell**

### America's Backbone

A reimagining of iconic national symbols — including the Statue of Liberty, Lady Justice and the idea of warrior-defense — through the bodies of Black women.

The strikingly large-format series confronts historical omissions while honoring the foundational role Black women have played in shaping America and its identity.

### Afronauts

A photo documentary series following individuals who migrated to a largely homogenous country in search of broadened opportunity and a genuine sense of belonging.

Through portraits, interviews and captured moments of daily life, the work reflects resilience within global migration, community-building and cultural infusion.

"Resilience is not only survival — it's a creative act," Eley said. "Visibility is not just being seen; it's being understood."

### Invisible to Others

A mixed-media portrait series exploring the lived experiences of individuals with visual impairments.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL W. PANNELL

Atlanta-based photographer Eley's exhibit titled "Echoes of Resilience" runs through Feb. 27. The show features three bodies of work by Eley, including one geared toward those who are visually impaired.

The work expands traditional ideas of perception by incorporating memory, sensation and nonvisual cues, inviting audiences to consider how visibility and connections are formed.

Eley's exhibit is not the typical framed-photo-after-framed-photo presentation. She uses various forms — from textiles to timelines — to display her work and enhance each piece's meaning, expressing her images in new ways.

This is particularly true in "Invisible to Others."

"This work expands the space of the gallery beyond sight alone and invites touch, sound and light to become equal pathways to understanding," she said.

The work is meant to encourage a better understanding of visually impaired persons and how they perceive and react to typical gallery settings, which often exclude them.

She said "Invisible to Others" is an attempt to "open the experience of photography to a broader range of perception."

The work reflects on the fragility of sight and the intimacy of alternative ways of knowing. The desire for a tangible encounter — one that can be held, traced and felt — guides the creation of images meant to be experienced through more than the eye.

"Invisible to Others" brings together portraits, blind-embossed prints, Braille and sound. Some images reveal themselves through

luminosity; others require touch to emerge."

The work is illuminating to audiences, as well as suggestive of new modes of gallery exhibition that are more inclusive of visually impaired communities.

Gallery officials said groups from the Georgia Academy for the Blind will be visiting the exhibit for tours, including with the artist, and other groups are welcome to contact the Leadership Lab for similar viewings. Email [leadershiplab@wesleyancollege.edu](mailto:leadershiplab@wesleyancollege.edu).

### An early love for photography

Eley's gallery projects run alongside her commercial photography work as the Atlanta-based Eley Photo to LLC.

"I work in the commercial arts a lot, so I do magazine work, advertising and photo documentary projects and more," she said. "A lot of my clients are in either the healthcare world, the documentary space or the entertainment space."

Her interest in photography began when she was a child.

"I started as a portrait artist," she said. "It's been my passion since I was a kid. I was told then to go outside and people-watch if I was bored, so I found myself fascinated with people, their facial expressions and their unique identities."

"It just kind of spiraled over the years into me being a professional photographer."

Though centered in Atlanta, her photography and special projects have taken her throughout the state and abroad.

One such project brought her to Macon, where she shot a series called Boxing in Macon.

"I guess you could say I'm always chasing people and light and paying attention to what scenes are unfolding in front of me," she said. "I like to get close and have the chance to actually meet individuals and understand what their trials, tribulations and triumphs are."

"I want my photos to tell a story about what's going on with them specifically."

Attending graduate school at the Savannah College of Art and Design's Atlanta location brought Eley to Georgia.

"When I got out of the program, I wondered, 'Well, OK, what's Atlanta like?' I realized I didn't know because I'd spent my time there within four walls working on my graduate thesis."

"It's at that point that my documentary work started to surface as I got out onto the streets and into different subcultures and communities to take pictures and do portraits."

To view Eley's work, visit her website, [eleyphoto.com](http://eleyphoto.com).

Contact writer Michael W. Pannell at [mwpannell@gmail.com](mailto:mwpannell@gmail.com). Find him on Instagram at @michael\_w\_pannell.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL W. PANNELL

Atlanta-based photographer Eley, uses various art forms in her latest exhibit on display at the Wesleyan College Leadership Lab in downtown Macon.

## Amaryllis: more than just a one-season plant

When the last amaryllis flower fades, many people assume the plant's job is done. It isn't. With proper care, amaryllis can thrive for decades, blooming year after year.

One bulb that my mother planted more than 20 years ago still rewards me with late-summer flowers, surrounded by others that have quietly naturalized in the garden.

The secret to long-term success lies beneath the soil. Amaryllis grow from bulbs, which act as energy reservoirs.

Each bulb is made of layered scales packed with stored food that fuels leaf growth and flowering. The healthier and larger the bulb, the more dramatic the blooms.

After flowering, the plant's priority is to rebuild those reserves. Here's how to help it do exactly that.



**Rosann Kent**

be saved, allowing seed pods to form weakens the bulb.

I learned this firsthand after leaving a few blooms on too long and finding myself oddly reluctant to remove the small seed pods that followed.

Resist the urge to cut the flower stalk too soon. These thick, hollow stems can reach 1-2 feet tall and may hold multiple blooms.

Wait until all flowers on the stalk have finished before trimming it back to about two inches above the bulb.

Once the stalk is removed and only leaves remain, assess the planting medium. Many holiday amaryllis are sold in compressed coir discs, which should be replaced with standard potting soil to support ongoing growth.

### After the Holidays: What to Do Next

Begin by removing spent flowers as they fade. This prevents the plant from wasting energy on seed production. While amaryllis seeds can

be saved, allowing seed pods to form weakens the bulb.

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SEE PLANT

PAGE 6

### BILLY'S LET'S EAT REVIEW

## Maconites 'showed up' to support this beloved local BBQ restaurant

There are restaurants you admire... and then there are restaurants you root for. The kind you visit once, instantly fall in love with, and then somehow find yourself returning to just a few days later as if pulled back by instinct.

That was my experience during last year's Macon Burger Week with Satterfield's BBQ, which won third place. It wasn't just the burger that impressed me. It was the warmth, the comfort and the sense that I had stepped into a family gathering rather than a traditional restaurant.

Satterfield's feels like that one uncle's house where the grill is always fired up, the stories are always good and the aroma alone could put your whole spirit in order.

The heart and soul behind this eatery are owners Marla Kaplan and Ben Hampton, a husband-and-wife team whose strengths complement each other perfectly. Marla, with her background in retail, has the ease and charm of someone



**Billy Hennessey**

born to run the front of the house. She greets guests, takes orders, floats through the dining room making sure every table is happy and hands out napkins like a mother watching over her BBQ-loving children.

Ben, meanwhile, is happiest in his domain — the smokehouse — where fire, wood and patience all come together in an art form he's mastered. Trained in Texas-style barbecue and seasoned by his experience with Korean-infusion BBQ, Ben is the kind of pitmaster who understands exactly how long a brisket needs, what kind of wood burns cleanest and how to season a cut of meat so thoroughly that it makes an impression before you've even taken a bite.

They describe the restaurant's vibe as a "family gathering joint,"

and that spirit is everywhere. Satterfield's doesn't look like a restaurant; it feels like you've been invited into someone's home, a space where people come together not just to eat but to belong.

The journey to get here wasn't easy. Marla and Ben took over Satterfield's, made changes to the kitchen and reopened in February 2020 — days before the world shut down. If that wasn't enough, Marla gave birth to their daughter on Feb. 18. New parents, new business, new building, and then suddenly, a pandemic.

When I asked how they made it through such impossible timing, they answered without a moment's pause: "Macon saved us."

When dining rooms closed nationwide, they set up a tent outside so customers could order and pick up food safely. And if someone couldn't leave home, Ben personal

**BBQ**

Continued from Page 5

ly delivered the meals. He'd spend all day smoking meat, and all night driving around Macon to make sure people could still enjoy comforting, high-quality food during a time when everyone's lives were uncertain. And he did this while caring for a newborn. They told me that Macon "showed up," and even years later, they still say their biggest victory is simply that Maconites continue to support them with loyalty and love.

That sense of community is one

of the things I love most about Macon. It's woven into the dining room itself. If you look around the restaurant, you'll see framed photos of all kinds of famous figures with autographs. Here's the funny part — not a single one of those autographs is real. The previous owner signed every single one. It's a harmless joke, a charming detail that somehow fits the personality of the place perfectly. Perception is everything, after all.

While talking with Marla and Ben, I asked where they like to go when they're not at the restaurant, and they agreed immediately: Oli-

ver's. It struck me, as it has many times before, that restaurant owners in Macon don't treat each other like competitors. They treat each other like essential pieces of one big, shared community. There's a camaraderie and support system here that makes the food scene special.

Right now, Satterfield's is open from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., but that's going to change soon. Mercer University recently broke ground on its new medical school across the street and Marla and Ben fully plan to extend their hours so students and staff can enjoy dinner as well. They also operate a food truck and proudly sponsor Mercer University Athletics.

Now, let's talk about the food — the part that keeps the parking lot full and the brisket selling out daily.

Brisket is the star of the show at Satterfield's, and it's not hard to understand why. Ben explained his process, which is almost ritualistic. The key to great brisket is fat — just the right amount. Too much fat leaves the cut greasy, but too little dries it out before it even has the chance to become tender.

The magic happens when the remaining fat renders down during low, slow smoking, essentially basting the meat from the inside. Add clean-burning, well-seasoned wood and perfectly balanced seasoning that enhances rather than masks the meat, and you've got brisket that people will line up for. Great brisket isn't luck; it's precision and pa-

tience.

While brisket is the customer favorite, Marla pointed out that the smoked turkey breast deserves more attention. I tried the smoked turkey breast during my visit, and it was incredibly juicy and flavorful, the kind of turkey that requires no knife and breaks every stereotype about turkey being dry. It was one of the biggest surprises of the day.

Everything at Satterfield's is made from scratch except for the bread and chips. Every side, sauce and cut of meat is crafted in the kitchen daily. Even their Brunswick Stew, another crowd favorite, is made in-house. Fun fact: the origin of Brunswick Stew is a point of debate. Virginia claims it started in Brunswick County in the 1800s, while Georgia insists it began in Brunswick, Georgia, where there's a marker commemorating the stew's birthplace. And yes, the earliest versions contained squirrel — though you'll be relieved to know those days are long gone. Regardless of its true origin, Satterfield's version is thick, hearty and deeply comforting.

Another major perk about Satterfield's is the free parking — sixty full spots. In a city where metered parking is the norm downtown, finding a place with this much free parking feels like a small miracle.

Toward the end of the interview, I asked Marla and Ben if they had plans to expand the menu. As soon as the question was out of my mouth,

Ben lit up like a kid at Christmas. He wants to add lamb to the menu, and the way he talked about it made it clear that rustic, fire-forward cooking is where his passion truly lives. Watching him give me a tour of his smokehouse was like watching someone lovingly introduce you to their favorite creation — there's pride, joy and genuine craftsmanship in every detail.

What stood out to me most wasn't just the food but the humility, gratitude and heart that Marla and Ben carry with them. After everything they've been through, and all the success they've built, they still say their greatest accomplishment is that the community continues to show up for them. And honestly, when you experience Satterfield's for yourself, that loyalty makes perfect sense. I love a good underdog success story. Marla and Ben are the heart of this story and the followers of Satterfield's are the blood in their veins.

Satterfield's BBQ isn't just feeding Macon; it's part of Macon. It's a place built on perseverance, love, craftsmanship and community. If you haven't been yet, go. And if you have been, you already know why I went twice in one week. This is barbecue with soul. This is family. This is Satterfield's.

*Billy Hennessey is the food columnist for The Melody. Write him an email at [newlifenkiss@gmail.com](mailto:newlifenkiss@gmail.com).*



PHOTO BY BILLY HENNESSEY

**Husband and wife duo, Marla and Ben took over Satterfield's BBQ in 2020, just before the beginning of the pandemic and the birth of their daughter.**

**PLANT**

Continued from Page 5

The leaves that emerge after flowering are not decorative extras. They are essential. Growing directly from the bulb, these long, narrow leaves produce food through photosynthesis, which is stored in the bulb for the next flowering cycle. Healthy leaves mean a recharged bulb and better blooms in the future.

Continue caring for amaryllis as you would a houseplant. Provide bright light, warmth and regular water, but avoid soggy soil.

Amaryllis dislike wet feet. Keep the soil lightly moist and fertilize periodically with a balanced house-

plant fertilizer while the leaves are actively growing.

**Moving Amaryllis Outdoors**

When spring arrives and garden soil warms, amaryllis can be planted outdoors.

A good rule of thumb is to wait until tomato transplants are ready for the garden.

Before planting, harden the amaryllis off by gradually exposing it to outdoor conditions.

Once nighttime temperatures consistently stay above 50 degrees, choose a well-drained site with dappled sunlight.

Plant the bulb with its top portion exposed above the soil. Water

regularly, especially during Middle Georgia's hot summers, and fertilize lightly.

The plant may not bloom outdoors its first year, or it may bloom at an unexpected time, but once established, its summer flowering period becomes more predictable.

With just a little attention after the holidays, an amaryllis can become a long-lived garden companion rather than a one-season decoration.

The reward is a plant that returns each year, carrying both blooms and memories forward.

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



PHOTO PROVIDED BY UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

**Removing spent flowers and repotting are just a couple tips to keep your amaryllis plant healthy all year.**

# FEBRUARY 7, 2026

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# SPORTS

PAGE 7 » THE MACON MELODY » REPORTING FOR MACON, FROM MACON » MACONMELODY.COM » FRIDAY, JANUARY 16, 2026

## YEAH, FIVE'



### *Southwest star Rinaldo Callaway is ready for Rutgers*

PHOTO BY MARK POWELL

Southwest's Rinaldo Callaway rips through the team's banner before their first game of the 2025 season against Macon County. Callaway is committed to play at Rutgers.

BY MICAH JOHNSTON

Sports Editor

micah@maconmelody.com

Five has always been Rinaldo Callaway's favorite number.

It's sort of a lucky number for him and has been for about as long as he can remember. He can't recall a specific reason for picking it. It simply became that way.

So when the Southwest football players were assigned numbers, Callaway — before he towered over his peers at 6-foot-5, before he had become a top recruit, before he had committed to play Big 10 football — snagged No. 5.

That's when it all began. At some point after the star edge rusher and tight end was assigned that digit,

close friend and teammate Montese Green responded in a low voice with a comment that would eventually become a rallying cry for some of Callaway's confidants and fans. "Yeeaaaahh, five."

Those two words — said specifically in that rising, enthusiastic tone — first arrived in a locker room, spoken by friends and teammates. They have since bounced off the walls of Southwest's gym and filled the air at the team's football games, often emerging from the crowd whenever Callaway makes a key play.

Which happens quite a lot, to be clear.

Those big plays became routine as Callaway grew older, smarter, more talented. By his junior year, the defensive end was getting into

the backfield in the blink of an eye, all 200-plus pounds of him bearing down on wide-eyed quarterbacks before they could even begin to think about throwing a pass or scrambling away — and those shouts of "Yeeaaaahh, five" became more and more common.

As if that wasn't enough, Callaway became a star for Southwest's basketball team. He was dominant on the court by his junior year as well, warranting more hoots, hollers and clamors of "Yeeaaaahh, five" from the crowd.

"I really didn't pick up on it until last year or this year, but I can totally believe Montese came up with it. At this point I'm out there calling him 'five,'" said Southwest basketball coach Monquencio Hardnett of

the chant's origins. "They've both always had a great relationship and been really important leaders."

But Callaway will leave for New Jersey on Jan. 17 to begin his football career at Rutgers. The basketball team — in the middle of an important season as they attempt to defend a region title and return to the state championship game — will miss him. Callaway will miss them right back.

"It's hard to leave them. But we're brothers. They understand it," Callaway said.

While the departure is bittersweet and will leave a void on Southwest's basketball team, it will also leave something else for Patriots students and alumni across Macon: hope.

"We're all excited to see what he

can do," Hardnett said. "We're going to watch a lot of Rutgers football."

#### Growing up

Callaway is fiery when he's in game mode. He's been that way since he watched football with his great grandma as a boy, when he could practically feel the game's heat and energy through the TV screen.

"The more (we watched), it just got more and more intense. That's when I knew what I wanted to do. So then we played throw 'em up buss 'em up," Callaway said, referring to the "kill the man with the

SEE CALLAWAY  
PAGE 8

## Southwest coach Dupree to leave for McDonough

BY MICAH JOHNSTON

Sports Editor

micah@maconmelody.com

Southwest High School Athletic Director and football coach Joe Dupree Jr. will depart at the end of the school year to become the head football coach at McDonough High School in Henry County, McDonough announced on social media this week.

Dupree, who starred at Southwest as a quarterback in the 1980s, became the school's head coach and AD in 2013 after a collegiate playing career at Georgia and Georgia Southern.

"It just felt like it was time. It's a new opportunity, professionally and personally. I've lived up in Henry county since about 2010 now, so my family is up there," Dupree said Tuesday night during halftime of the

Patriots' boys basketball game. "I'm getting a little emotional. There's a lot of memories here."

Dupree went 44-94 at the helm for Southwest as a coach, second only to Edgar Hatcher — his coach when he was a player — on the Patriots' all-time wins list. Hatcher had 61 wins while leading the program from 1980 to 1993.

The team's best single-season record under Dupree was 6-5, which the Patriots achieved three times (2016, 2017 and 2023). Southwest made the playoffs in those three seasons, as well as in 2024.

Under Dupree's watch as Athletic Director, Southwest saw particular success on the basketball court. The Patriots improved steadily after adding head coach Monquencio Hardnett in 2021, eventually reaching the GHSA Class A-Division I state championship in 2025. Dupree was

also named Bibb County's Athletic Director of the Year by the school district in 2025.

Dupree is well-known at Southwest. At Tuesday's basketball game, the coach could hardly walk for more than a minute before a friend, student or fellow Patriots alum walked up to shake his hand and chat, be it about his impending new job, his son — Chase Dupree stars for the basketball team and was the quarterback under his father — or that night's game.

"It's home. I came back and gave to my community. I gave 'em everything I had. I'm hoping I left it better than I found it," Dupree said. "That's the hard part. With the kids, you become family after 12 years. You tell them it's not about them, it's just a decision you make for

SEE DUPREE  
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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Southwest coach Joe Dupree yells to his players during a game this season. Dupree, the head coach and athletic director at Southwest since 2013, announced his departure this week for McDonough.

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**CALLAWAY**

Continued from Page 7

ball" sort of game that shapes many a football player's youth. "That makes you tough, more physical."

But the backyard brawl iteration of football wasn't enough to sate his appetite. So, at age 6, Callaway began playing at Central City Park in Macon. Two years later, he moved over to Bloomfield to play. That's when the game really clicked.

"I was playing linebacker and running back, I got used to hitting people. I knew I wanted to keep doing that for as long as I could," he said.

Because of that, football always came first. In fact, Callaway's first try on the hardwood wasn't exactly a success. After running suicides for a bit at his first tryout in seventh grade, Callaway passed on hoops altogether.

"I got a little more motivated the next year and came back. Coach (Maurice) Major helped me learn the footwork, took me home from practice and stuff," Callaway said. "Then I got into it."

Hardnett first met Callaway when he arrived at Southwest four years ago as a ninth-grader, but he'd already seen Callaway's athleticism on display.

"I saw him playing at Ballard-Hudson in eighth grade, and I was definitely impressed. He had all the measurables," Hardnett said, "but I never expected him to blossom the way he did."

Callaway's football coach, Joe Dupree Jr., saw him play on the gridiron in seventh grade. Even then, the youngster knew what he wanted to do on the field.

"I saw him out there at Ballard and said, 'You're gonna come play for me.' He told me right back, 'I'm gonna be a D-I football player,'" Dupree said.

**A recruiting whirlwind**

Callaway's hard work in basketball demonstrated his fire, something he also showed in his pre-

ferred sport. While he was not a top recruit in his first two years playing Patriots football, he attracted some recruiting attention by his junior year.

Then it happened: the 2024-25 basketball season.

Callaway and the Southwest team played lights-out all season, winning their region championship in a triple-overtime thriller over Dublin before streaking all the way to the GHSA Class A-Division I state championship. The run attracted much fanfare in Macon, as it reigned a fanbase and returned Southwest hoops to the winning ways it found in the 1970s, '80s and '90s.

Callaway — the team's big and a crucial leader on and off the court, according to Hardnett — caught the attention of the University of South Florida's football program. Callaway said the team's coaching staff were calling during that frantic tournament stretch in February.

"We had to have our phones off in class. I missed the call," he said. "So my coach came and told me, and I had to get back with them."

Whether it was the basketball team's tournament run that accelerated Callaway's football profile or not, he was a hot ticket and four-star prospect by the time summer workouts arrived for the 2025 football season.

"I don't know if it was his athleticism during that run or whatever it was that he was showing. They might not have paid attention to it," Hardnett said of the attention, "but he is the total package."

But it was hard to commit to the first team that came his way. Callaway wanted to keep his options open. It was a situation Dupree remembered vividly — he had to convince Callaway that if he committed to USF, other offers would eventually come rolling in.

"It's not that he committed to get anything, but that's just how it works. I remember that conversation most with him. He eventually told them he'd play there, and he came to me afterward with these happy tears," Dupree said. "That's something I'll never forget."

So Callaway committed to the Bulls, a prominent program that, while a decent bit away from home, would not be too isolated from his hometown and family.

That was when many schools — including Rutgers from way up north — started calling.

"It kind of blew up," Callaway said.

The Scarlet Knights' staff loved Callaway's athleticism, particularly his speed while being able to move from sideline to sideline. They "recruited their tails off," Callaway said, setting up meetings in Macon and taking him to games.

When Callaway watched Rutgers nearly topple Penn State at home Nov. 29, feeling the cold Piscataway air at SHI Stadium and the intensity on the field he so desperately craved, he made a decision.

"It's cold and the (football) is a different level," he said. "It's going to be a new experience."

**A bittersweet ending**

Callaway's last official day on Southwest's campus was Jan. 9.

Already graduated and simply hanging out with some of his teammates during a free period, he reclines against the bleachers next to the court where he made thousands of Maconites cheer. He wears glasses and sports an outfit that accentuates his red Rutgers gear featuring a stylish scarlet watch that might be a G-Shock, a pair of Purple jeans — the brand, not the color — and wired headphones.

He seems introspective, relaxed but still alert. As he walks down a concrete path to Southwest's ant-hill-ridden football practice field — his Scarlet Knights hoodie almost too warm on an unseasonably muggy January afternoon — he gestures toward the field and nearby facilities.

"When I come back," he says with quiet confidence that does not seem cocky but instead simply hopeful, "I'm going to change all this."

Callaway's love of the people that made him — he credits his family with helping fuel his rise to



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

**Defensive end and basketball star Rinaldo Callaway poses for a picture in Southwest's gym on his last official day on campus. The football phenom is slated to leave for Rutgers on Jan. 17.**

a top prospect, talks about Dupree's "hard love" and how his coaches are the reason he's grown — is one of the things that makes him a great player.

It can be seen Tuesday night at Southwest's basketball game. Callaway, now unable to play, still shows up to root for his teammates as they roll to an easy win. He puts his arm around Dupree and smiles, talks to Hardnett and casually shoots 3-pointers with Green after the game is over and the gym lights are turning off.

"That's the thing you have to know about him: he's an even better person than he is a player," Dupree said. "Watching him grow like this since that first time I saw him has been rewarding. It's just amazing."

That's the attitude at Southwest High School about Callaway's future. He appears poised to be Bibb County's next great football player at the collegiate level, something Macon has been sorely missing in recent years.

As much as his teammates will miss him, Hardnett said the group is thrilled to see him take the next

step.

"I think he could've gone somewhere for basketball, honestly, but I've watched him play football a lot. As soon as I saw him chasing around quarterbacks, I knew we wouldn't keep him too much longer on the basketball court," Hardnett said. "He's what you call a coach's dream. I look forward to possibly seeing him on Sundays. He's got all the intangibles to do that."

"After some of us got over the sadness and the worry, it just became excitement."

It will be tough for Hardnett and the Patriots as they try to return to the title game. Callaway's closest friend and fellow leader for the basketball team, Green, is currently injured to worsen the blow.

But while the choruses of "yeaaaahh, five" may not be heard at Southwest again this year, that chant might just catch on in New Jersey soon.

If, that is, Callaway can snag his favorite number.

"I told them I wanted No. 5," Callaway said, smiling. "Hopefully it works out."

**DUPREE**

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your career and your family."

Some of his favorite memories at the school came long before he was an athletic director, though. In the hallway next to the locker rooms, an older Dupree recalled conquering Northside on the road in Warner

Robins as one of his best wins.

"My best moment as a player was easily beating Northside-Warner Robins," Dupree said.

The Patriots went down and defeated Northside 14-11 on the road for an impressive upset region win in 1989. Dupree would later win the Macon Telegraph's All-Middle Georgia Player of the Year award that season.

"That win, along with being with my guys that senior year. We were all just texting in a group chat just this week, actually about the new job," Dupree said of some buddies from his playing days.

Dupree also relished the students he met during his time as a coach and AD, mentioning how watching those players grow and move on to better things was key for him during

his Southwest tenure.

"It's just seeing guys going to the next level, whether it's college or the workforce. Seeing those guys progress and seeing I have an impact on them, that's close to my heart," Dupree said.

Nonetheless, Dupree seemed optimistic about his impending tenure at McDonough.

"I'm excited because the resourc-

es are there and the potential is there. Personally, it's great because it means more time at home. I won't be the AD, so that means more time with family," Dupree said.

The Warhawks, who compete at 4A level, went 3-7 last season and were 4-16 overall under previous head coach Earthwind Moreland.

**ABRAMS**

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have to forgo coverage. Her daughter may be able to stay on Peachcare for Kids, but she's not sure.

Georgians aren't surprised by what's happening in Washington as Republicans refuse to simply extend the subsidies that have worked. Here at home, Republicans annually reject billions of dollars to save rural hospitals and reduce costs across the state. Instead, we get piecemeal policies that serve far fewer than needed and pad the pockets of consultants.

Republican lawmakers point to Georgia's Pathways to Coverage program, but that only offers limited assistance to certain low-income residents who otherwise do not qualify for Medicaid. Pathways reaches only a narrow slice of Georgians and leaves working families exposed —

particularly those who rely on ACA marketplace plans.

Too often, corruption is a companion to authoritarianism, a useful byproduct of ignoring the will of the people to serve the ideological and economic whims of those in charge. If Georgia wants to instead take care of its people, then state lawmakers must pursue real plans to address the affordability crisis, starting with the ACA and Medicaid.

Democrats have said they plan to revive legislation to create a state health care affordability program aimed at lowering premiums.

Refusing to follow the proven success of 40 other states, Georgia Republicans are going to bid for \$1.4 billion to salvage rural health care, money made available with the signature Trump bill that slashed ACA subsidies to fund tax breaks for billionaires.

This pursuit for a slice of a \$50

billion hush fund for states facing the economic cliff on rural health care costs is particularly absurd for Georgia, as lawmakers have refused more than \$20 billion that could have funded much more. They have repeatedly rejected a loaf of bread and now seek praise for begging for crumbs.

The disconnect is cruel, and it has deep consequences for our families.

Rising health care costs are accelerating the broader affordability crisis. When the cost of taking care of illnesses and injuries rises, families do not suddenly find extra money. They cut back elsewhere. A doctor's visit gets postponed. A credit card balance grows. Rent is paid late. Less food gets put on the table.

In a state where many households are already living paycheck to paycheck, higher health care costs have the potential to ruin people's lives. Sen. Jon Ossoff put it plainly: "This

is life or death. People will die."

Georgia's safety net is already weaker than most. More than 450,000 Georgians are without insurance despite the failed Pathways program and due to the Republican refusal to expand Medicaid.

For years, ACA subsidies have helped bridge that coverage gap divide for middle- and lower-income families. Those are the same families seeing premiums spike for 2026 coverage.

The question before Georgia lawmakers is not whether Congress might act — they've already shown an inability (or unwillingness) to do so. It's whether Georgia leaders can acknowledge the pain families are feeling and whether they'll abdicate the responsibility to help their constituents.

Affordability isn't a "hoax" or a "con job" as Trump has said. It shows up in kitchen-table decisions

and late-night calculations. It determines whether parents can keep coverage for their children, whether workers can manage chronic conditions and whether a single unexpected bill tips a household into crisis.

As the 2026 session begins, lawmakers have a choice. They can argue over ideology, debate process and posture for the future — or they can confront the present and recognize that health care affordability is at the core of the economic pressure crushing Georgia families. They can decide to finally take action.

For Georgia families, democracy must finally deliver — or we'll all pay the price.

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**HYDEN**

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The Senate has faced some of its own turnover — plus a different, unique situation. Sen. Jason Esteves, D-Atlanta, resigned his seat to focus on his gubernatorial run, and Sen. John F. Kennedy, R-Macon, did the same as he ramps up his campaign for lieutenant governor.

Sitting members of the Legislature are forbidden from fundraising for state office during session, so stepping down has its benefits. Others within the Senate are also seeking higher office.

Sens. Blake Tillery (R-Vidalia), Greg Dolezal (R-Cumming), Steve Gooch (R-Dahlonega) and Josh McLaurin (D-Sandy Springs) are likewise running for lieutenant governor. Sens. Bill Cowser, R-Athens, and Brian Strickland, R-McDonough, are running for attorney general.

The lieutenant governor is vying for the governor's office. Sen. Colton Moore, R-Trenton, is looking to succeed Marjorie Taylor Greene, and Sen. Nabilah Parkes, D-Atlanta, launched a campaign for insurance commissioner.

There is a lot happening in the

Senate, but the question remains: How will this impact Senate business? Murmurs in the halls of the Capitol reveal a fear that it will lead to dysfunction as aspirants for higher office use their roles to grandstand and snipe their competition.

This is certainly possible. I can almost guarantee there will be tense moments this session, but it is important to keep in mind that the Senate's members are professionals who have taken their oaths of office.

With so much at stake, it is easy to envision scenarios in which the session goes sideways and a host of good bills simply die. That would

be unfortunate and could be the session's fate, but it sounds like Burns and Jones have smart plans in place to focus on a nonpartisan issue that weighs on all Georgians: affordability. Meanwhile, it may take some time to see what agenda Democrats develop.

If I were advising both sides, I would suggest that Republicans and Democrats focus on commonsense solutions to kitchen-table issues that are so unobjectionable that they are difficult to oppose.

A few policy solutions immediately come to mind, including letting Georgians keep more of their

own taxpayer money, making benefits — like health insurance — more affordable by implementing a portable benefits system or cutting burdensome red tape that inhibits housing development.

It's too early to tell if anyone will heed my unsolicited advice but keep your eyes on the Gold Dome this session. A storm is certainly brewing, and the coming weeks and months will show how it plays out.

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