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PAGE 5: MICHAEL PANNELL HIGHLIGHTS ARTS AND COMEDY OFFERINGS COMING TO MACON IN 2026.

The Macon Melody

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BRIDGING THE GAP

Macon Volunteer Clinic provides essential health care services to uninsured patients

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON
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PHOTOS BY JASON VORHEES

John McCard is executive director of the Macon Volunteer Clinic, a role he took on in 2024. That year, volunteer providers at the clinic served more than 350 uninsured patients from across Middle Georgia.

Valda Fout first stepped into the Macon Volunteer Clinic five years ago.

A friend recommended the clinic to Fout, who suffers from lupus, an incurable disease that causes the body's immune system to attack its own tissues and organs, leading to inflammation that can affect joints, skin, kidneys, the brain, heart and other body parts.

She relies on the volunteer clinic for regular checkups and prescriptions as well as dental and eye care.

"If they weren't here, I would not be able to see a doctor," said Fout, who has lived in Macon for 15 years. "I can't afford insurance."

Fout is one of more than 1.2 million Georgians who don't have health coverage, according to data from the Georgia Health Initiative. That's the third-highest uninsured rate in the country.

The clinic was founded 22 years ago to fill the void, and Executive Director John McCard says that mission has never been more critical.

Many experts predict that the number of uninsured people will increase drastically following the Dec. 31 expiration of Affordable Care Act-enhanced subsidies.

The subsidies, which went into effect during the pandemic, significantly lowered the cost of health insurance plans bought through Obamacare-created health exchanges.

Premiums will more than double for exchange enrollees, according to health researchers at KFF.

Even with the ACA and its subsidies, many still couldn't afford insurance coverage or struggled with

health care costs. Located on Walnut Street, the clinic, which offers medical care at no charge, serves 13 Middle Georgia counties with an array of medical services, including primary, gynecological and endocrinological care, cancer screenings and mental health counseling.

The nonprofit accepts employed adults residing in participating counties who are uninsured and earn an income at 200% or below the federal poverty level.

In 2024, more than 90% of patients earned less than \$35,000 a year, according to clinic officials.

The clinic was founded in 2003 by retired OB-GYN Chapin Henley. He died in 2024, and McCard, a retired Episcopal priest from a family of medical professionals, took the helm of the clinic. That same year, the practice — through 150 volunteering doctors, health providers and medical students — served more than 300 patients.

Many of the clinic's providers are retired, including its cardiovascular

surgeon and optometrist. Medical interns complete training and gain firsthand patient experience through their work there.

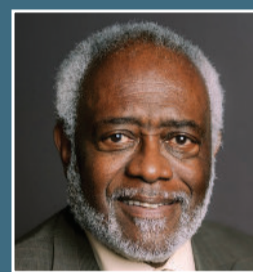
In March 2025, the organization more than doubled its working space, moving from its original location on Rogers and Ingleside avenues to its new 11,000-square-foot space in downtown Macon.

The clinic's new home includes a full dental wing, which is a significant improvement from the original space. That space required workers to use examination rooms for multiple services. It also lacked a designated room for its marriage and family counseling program, McCard added.

McCard said the new clinic is "more accessible," and he hopes to increase the organization's community visibility and bring in more specialists.

The clinic offers more than just

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GRIFFIN



HERRING



JONES



LUCAS



PARIS



WASHBURN

Charter changes, taxes and more: Bibb lawmakers prep for Gold Dome business

BY LAURA E. CORLEY
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As Georgia legislators return to the Gold Dome for the start of the legislative session on Jan. 12, Bibb County's delegation will make decisions on the structure of the Macon-Bibb County government that may impact the county's future.

Local issues of import include whether to amend the county charter to allow the mayor to serve a third, four-year term; allow Bibb County residents ages 65 and older to be exempt from property taxes on an age-based, tiered structure; and allow voters to decide whether to pay an additional penny-on-the-dollar sales tax to help fund water, sewer and stormwater infrastructure.

Most of those decisions may wind up on the ballot for voters to decide — should a majority of local legislators agree to it.

Individually, lawmakers' priorities

range from boosting tourism, continuing a push to ban automated school zone speed cameras, plus education, affordable housing and health care initiatives.

The Macon Melody interviewed all members of the Bibb County delegation except for Sen. Rick Williams, R-Milledgeville, who represents District 25. Several messages left for Williams were not returned.

Senate District 18, which includes part of north Macon, Thomaston, Forsyth and Fort Valley, is vacant. The winner of a four-way race on Jan. 20 will take the place of John F. Kennedy, who resigned to run for lieutenant governor.

Floyd Griffin
D-Milledgeville
House District 149

Three bills Griffin introduced during the legislative session last

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Periodical — Mail Label



'YOU GOT TO PUT YOUR FOOT DOWN'

Blight tax collections surge as county targets neglected properties

BY GABRIEL KOPP
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When potential homebuyers go to take a look at houses that seem picture-perfect in real estate listings, there are things none of them want to see in the nearby properties: broken windows, peeling paint and cracked foundations.

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CLINIC

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medical care, McCard said. A partnership with Piedmont Health Systems allows the clinic to

host classes open to the public. Topics range from diabetes management, healthy eating on a budget and how to transition from insurance to Medicare.

Learn more at maconvolunteerclinic.org.

BLIGHT

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“If they ride through the neighborhood and they see one or two blighted houses, that’s probably going to give them concern, and most likely they will look somewhere else,” said J.T. Ricketson, Macon-Bibb County’s director of code enforcement.

Dilapidated buildings don’t just scare off prospective homebuyers. They take away from community pride. And they’re potentially dangerous. So, over the past several years, Macon has stepped up its so-called “blight fight.”

“It’s a team effort,” County Commissioner Paul Bronson said. “It’s not an attack on anybody or any entity, but you get to a point where you got to put your foot down.”

For properties in Macon-Bibb County that have been deemed blighted by the Department of Code Enforcement, the county can charge a “blight tax” to incentivize upkeep of the land or structure that officials have red flagged.

Bronson said that he has focused on community cleanups in his district, which includes much of downtown Macon, and “litter literacy” programs put on by Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful that work to eliminate illegal dumping.

He added that, when homeowners are hit with the higher tax rate, they will work to get their property back within code. The blight tax, he said, is one way to “ensure people are being held accountable” for their properties.

Authorities have deployed various tactics to reduce the number of properties that are red-flagged. While the tax is not new, the amount of money that it collects each year has quickly grown as more properties have been placed on the blight list since the introduction of the county’s Department of Code Enforcement in 2021.

Ricketson said his officers look for overgrown grass, dilapidated structures and other signs of neglect while assessing properties. He added that running utilities are also inspected because, without them, the structure’s safety could be further compromised.

Only properties that are vacant may be charged a blight tax. After a review by county attorneys, a county website says, a notice is

sent to the property owner with an option to appeal the county’s blight designation. A similar process is used when the county wants to raze blighted structures.

Mayor Lester Miller told The Macon Newsroom that he believes many of the properties designated as blighted are “speculative properties.” County officials said that these properties, left unkept by owners who apparently live in other cities or states, can impact neighbors and prospective property owners in the area.

Ricketson added that blight notices are sent to “wherever we have an address for the owner, no matter where they are.”

Records obtained by The Melody show that more than two dozen properties that were charged a blight tax in 2020 were owned by limited liability corporations based in Atlanta and states as far away as California.

Once the notices are sent out, Ricketson said, property owners often try to repair the property to avoid the blight tax being added the following August, when the list of blighted properties in Macon-Bibb County is sent to the tax assessor’s office and the tax begins to accrue.

While a property’s overgrown landscape is one thing code enforcement assesses, Ricketson said that addressing only cosmetic issues will likely not be enough to clear a property off the blight list.

Since 2020, money collected from the blight tax has been directed into the county’s Blight Elimination Revolving Loan Fund to partially pay for the demolition of dilapidated structures around the county. Under Miller’s administration, the county has ramped up blight tax collection. The county commission voted in October to raise the millage rate for the tax to 15 mills, from 9.575, starting in 2026.

In Miller’s first year in office, the county charged \$251,156 in blight taxes. By 2024, property owners in Macon-Bibb County were charged more than \$1.2 million in blight tax, on top of other taxes, a more than 400% increase over four years.

Bronson believes that the years-long endeavor is paying off.

“We can see the light at the end of the tunnel, and this is one of those big pushes to try to help us get us over the finish line,” he said.



PHOTOS BY JASON VORHEES

Tattnall Place Apartments near Mercer University replaced the former Oglethorpe Homes public housing complex after it was demolished in 2003. Of the 97 units at Tattnall Place, 67 are reserved for low-income tenants using Section 8 vouchers, while the remaining units rent at market rate.

POWER » OUR ONGOING SERIES ON PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

How federal pullback reshaped the Macon Housing Authority

BY LAURA E. CORLEY

Senior Reporter

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When the Macon Housing Authority was created more than 85 years ago, the newspaper described its goal as “Macon’s initial attempt to clear her slums.”

More than 160 homes were demolished. Nearly \$2 million from the federal government helped the authority build the city’s first two, low-rent public housing developments: Tindall Heights and Oglethorpe Homes.

Tindall Heights was for Black residents and Oglethorpe was for white people, in accordance with segregation Federal Housing Administration policies of the time.

When the red-brick buildings at Oglethorpe and Tindall were finished in 1940, a year before America entered World War II, a newspaper cost 5 cents. A pint of peach ice cream from Dixie Dairies cost 15 cents. A Sunday dinner special at a downtown restaurant cost 35 cents.

The more than 500 apartments were snatched up quickly by tenants. A family of four paid about \$13 per month for rent and utilities.

But, over the decades, the federal dollars directed toward public housing has waned, and the authority has been forced to adapt.

Today, instead of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration’s approach to housing as a fundamental right, housing authorities in Macon and elsewhere operate much like for-profit developers, searching for efficiencies and making development deals that hinge on private money.

In 2003, when the 188-unit Oglethorpe Homes, near Mercer University in the Beall’s Hill neighborhood, was razed, a new kind of development took its place.

Tattnall Place is a 97-unit mixed-income development made up of townhouses and duplexes between Calhoun, Hazel, Shamrock and Oglethorpe streets. Tenants living there include 67 who are low-income and pay a reduced rent through the Section 8 program and 30 tenants who pay the market rate for rent.

“You can’t point at one door and say, ‘Oh, that must be Section 8’ or ‘Oh, that must be a tax credit (unit) or a Mercer student,’” Macon Housing Authority CEO Mike Austin said.

The public doesn’t know, he said: “And that’s the beauty of it.”



Mike Austin of the Macon Housing Authority talks on the phone in his office at the authority’s headquarters in Macon. Austin has led the agency since the late 1990s.

Tindall Heights, a 142-unit public housing development where soul music legend Otis Redding grew up along what is now Little Richard Penniman Boulevard, was demolished in 2016. It was replaced by Tindall Fields, a four-phase, \$45-million development featuring an apartment building, a seniors-only apartment building and multifamily homes. All told, 133 of the 270 units are voucher-based or have a capped rent.

Like most of the housing authority’s work, the new Tindall and Tattnall developments were prodded along by the authority’s spin-off nonprofit entities, which are allowed to entice developers with tax credits and special financing terms the housing authority itself can’t use.

A web of nonprofits

The Macon Housing Authority board meets on the second Thursday of each month at 4 p.m. in the board room at 2015 Felton Ave.

Upon adjournment, it is almost always the case that another meeting — held by one of its many subsidiaries — is called to order. Authority members stay seated because they also sit on the boards of these subsidiaries. It makes for a mind-bogglingly complex organizational chart.

The Macon Housing Authority began creating nonprofit subsidiaries in the late 1990s as a way to finance, develop, own and manage each of its residential properties. The authority’s reliance on private money to build affordable housing occurred gradually over decades of political, economic and societal shifts.

The authority’s nonprofits not only help limit liability to the authority but also allow it to indirectly form partnerships with corporations — including monied private institutions like banks and insurance companies.

Some of the nonprofit en-

ties include In-Fill Housing Inc., In-Fill Housing II Inc., Consolidated In-Fill Housing Inc., McAfee Towers Inc., Bowden-Pendleton Inc., Central City Apartments LP, Anthony Homes Inc., Central Georgia Affordable Housing Management Fund, Grove Park Village Inc., Blackshear Village Inc., Northside In-Fill Inc., Mounts Homes LP, Davis Village LP, Pearl Stephens Management Services LLC, Peake Point LP, MA Merger Corporation Inc. — among many others.

These affiliated nonprofits also are able to apply to the state for tax credits to build or rehabilitate affordable housing.

Tax credits work like this: Companies financing affordable housing get a 9% or 4% break on annual taxes each year for 15 years if they put up money to help build affordable housing. The tax break can exceed the amount of money companies loan nonprofit developers, incentivizing companies to finance developments.

The creation of limited partnerships, incorporations and limited liability companies also allow the authority to invest in and develop affordable housing out-of-town and even out-of-state, a drastic change from the 10-mile radius of jurisdiction the authority had when it was formed in 1938.

A recent attempt by the authority to develop an affordable housing complex just outside of Charlotte, North Carolina, ended up falling through. Had it succeeded, it would have marked the authority’s first out-of-state development.

Public housing becomes affordable housing

When Austin started working for the housing authority in 1997, Macon had 2,300

SEE HOUSING
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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 brianna@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, Dooley, Dougherty, Harris, Hancock, Johnson, Jones, Laurens, Macon, Meriwether, Monroe, Montgomery, Peach, Pulaski, Talbot, Taylor, Terrell, Treutlen, Twiggs, Wheeler, Washington, or Wilkerson.

LAWMAKERS

Continued from Page 1

year are still on the table. Griffin said none of the pieces of legislation got a hearing and he plans to push forward on moving them through the house.

House Bill 436 would repeal the Georgia Promise Scholarship Act, which allows parents whose children are enrolled in the state's low-performing schools to receive a \$6,500 voucher per child to pay for tuition at a private school, homeschool or other alternatives.

"We didn't get a hearing on that but I kind of thought through that during the interim," Griffin told The Melody during a recent phone call. "I want to make it a referendum where the voters may vote 'yes' or 'no' on whether that law should be repealed or not in November 2026."

House Bill 40 would require the secretary of state to serve as the chairperson on the state Board of Elections instead of allowing the governor to make that appointment.

House Bill 203 would require the Georgia Board of Regents to include graduates of historically Black colleges and universities on the board, which oversees the University System of Georgia.

The bill calls for at least one HBCU graduate to be appointed to an at-large seat on the board starting in January 2028 and a second HBCU at-large appointment starting in January 2031.

**Tangie Herring
D-Macon****House District 145**

Education is one of Herring's top priorities under the Gold Dome this year. During the legislative session last year, she introduced House Bill 333, which would require the state to update the minimum salary schedule for teachers every year and account for annual inflation and deflation rates.

The bill was heard last February, and it "addresses teacher pay and the growing workforce shortage in education," Herring told The Melody by phone. "We have too many teachers that are leaving the classroom and fewer young people are seeking teaching as a viable profession right now."

Herring said competitive pay for educators is a step in the right direction.

"We have to become more competitive with pay and step increases for our veteran teachers as well as some cost of living adjustments so that educators are not forced to work multiple jobs, which they're doing right now," Herring said. "We're the number one state to do business, and our education system should reflect that kind of success across all Georgia zip codes."

Another priority for Herring is affordable housing.

"That is a crisis across the state, across the country," Herring said. "I'm sure you know rent has surged across the state, and it kind of puts home ownership out of reach for many Americans and many Georgians. We need to look at some incentives to help support housing for teachers, first responders and working families. It's important that the next generation can build stability and wealth by becoming homeowners."

Health care access and affordability is also on Herring's mind as "many Georgians don't have health care, and there are hard-working Georgians who can't afford to see a doctor," she said.

"You know, many of my

constituents have reached out to me ... they're asking us to do our job and ensure that they have health care."

**Anissa Jones
D-Macon****House District 143**

Boosting tourism for Bibb and Houston counties is on Anissa Jones's agenda for the upcoming legislative session.

"I sit on the economic development and tourism committee and right now, our tourism budget for Georgia is very low," Jones said, adding the state spends about \$6 million each year while other states are spending as much as \$20 million yearly. "The reason why that's important to me is that I just want to work together so we can create more jobs and opportunities and a strong future for Macon and Houston County."

More visitors would mean more sales tax revenue, which could help keep property taxes from rising.

"It's just going to be a tide that rises all boats," Jones said. "Hopefully the governor will see how tourism is good for Georgia. It's so good that it has now risen to our second gross national product for the state right behind agriculture."

Jones also said she would be working hard on "historic taxes which will affect Macon-Bibb greatly as we are using those historic taxes so that people are able to get into properties that they can afford and use the tax rebate to be able to help them facilitate getting their property better."

If a historic tax credit is awarded but not used, the money comes out of the state's fund anyway, Jones said. She'd like to change it so the money is reabsorbed back into the fund so "somebody else can take advantage of those resources."

Health care is also a priority for Jones.

"Our rural counties are suffering greatly because of the talent not being able to go down there because it's just a lack of opportunity," Jones said, adding that she met with a couple of medical schools. "They're very interested in creating partnerships with some of the doctors' offices that are down there or creating clinics for their students to be able to be out there."

Jones also plans to continue pushing forward with House Bill 292, legislation she introduced last year that would provide a tax credit for employers who hire people to work for at least one year in new, living-wage jobs that pay at least \$15 per hour.

"Small businesses would get allocated a sales tax relief from the state for doing that," Jones said. "I'm still very passionate about getting that done."

**David Lucas
D-Macon****Senate District 26**

One of Lucas's main priorities this legislative session is to pass a bill that would give taxing powers to the Macon Water Authority, redraw its districts, and reduce the number of mayor and county commission-appointed seats from two to one.

Senate Bill 337 also would increase pay for board members, which include his wife, Elaine Lucas.

Lucas wants the water authority to be able to institute a 1% sales tax to help pay for water, sewer and stormwater improvements. The tax can exceed the state-capped sales tax.

The MOST — Municipal Option Sales Tax — has only been used in Fulton County, which includes several cities

that rely on the county-operated water infrastructure. The Macon Water Authority has nearly a half billion in deferred maintenance projects, and its main source of revenue comes from ratepayers.

"When you're doing economic development, they don't come to the water (authority), they come to the county. But then water is always involved, so the county has to deal with the Macon Water Authority," Lucas said.

Lucas also introduced Senate Bill 338, which would amend the county charter and allow the mayor to serve three, four-year terms instead of two terms.

"You got one of the most aggressive economic plans that I've seen in 50 years since I've been in the Georgia General Assembly," Lucas said. "And it does include the Black community, whereas the Black community had been left out of a lot of plans."

The bill also removes the term limit for county commissioners, which would allow previous commissioners who have served their term limits to be reelected to the board.

"Term limits became a problem when we, as Black folks, started electing folks and kept on electing," Lucas said, adding that some other nearby municipalities don't have term limits. "Term limits were put in through consolidation."

**Miriam Paris
D-Macon****House District 142**

Housing is one of Paris' main focuses this session. She said she is working with legislative counsel on several bills to "make purchasing a home more attainable."

Paris, who serves on the education committee, also said she will reintroduce House Bill 674, which aims to increase financial literacy in school-aged children.

"Right now, if you ask a little child — 5,6,7 years old, 'Hold a dime in your hand and say what this is,' they're going to say, 'It's money.' They generally don't know that it's a dime. They don't know it's worth 10 pennies. They don't know it's worth two nickels," Paris said. "That's something we really should have addressed a long time ago."

Paris said she hopes to get money management classes for fourth- and fifth-graders adopted as part of the state standards for instruction.

"That's something I'm going to be really aggressive about when we get back into session," she said.

**Dale Washburn
R-Macon****House District 144**

The heated debate over whether to ban revenue-generating, automated school zone speed cameras remains alive and well nearly a year after the legislature adjourned and left two competing bills on the table.

Washburn's bill, House Bill 225, would prohibit municipalities from contracting with companies for the technology.

Rep. Alan Powell, R-Hartwell, introduced House Bill 651, which would regulate the use of the speed cameras by setting specific hours for their operation and require the use of flashing lights to warn motorists of the radar speed detection ahead.

Washburn said getting his bill passed is his No. 1 priority this year.

He is considering some changes to the legislation and may "try to amend my bill to allow a local referendum," he said.

Between 2022 and April 2024, the more than 20 speed cameras across Bibb County generated nearly \$9 million in revenue for the Macon-Bibb County government.

Companies like Altumint, with which the county contracts for the cameras, has also made millions from fines paid by speeding motorists. Since a 2018 law allowed cities and counties to use the cameras, the companies profiting from them have spent small fortunes greasing the wheels of politicians via campaign contributions.

"Our people are being victimized by them," Washburn said of the speed camera companies. "This is nothing about children's safety. It is all about money being raked in and deceiving our people, and it needs to be stopped."

Washburn also noted the cameras disproportionately affect low-income families because administrators of some private schools in more affluent areas had the county remove the cameras from the public roads in front of their schools upon facing outrage from parents who had been cited for speeding.

Administrators of Bibb County public schools don't have a choice because they all fall under the school superintendent, who agreed to keep them operating.

"I continue to let the public know that the mayor and the commissioners could do away with these cameras if they wanted to," Washburn said. "These cameras were implemented by the mayor and the county commissioners. And I personally, as a Bibb County resident and as a member of this delegation, continue to call on them to end these cameras, to cease to operate them in Bibb County."

Last March, Bibb County Sheriff David Davis stopped signing off on camera company-issued citations because of the apparent "unequal application of the law." A month later, the sheriff resumed approving citations.

Property taxes are another priority this session for Washburn, who aims to pass three related pieces of legislation.

"I believe our property tax system is unfair and outdated," Washburn said. "Two complaints we get most often are about assessment values and the steady increase that comes because of those reassessments. And the other is: Why does property tax have to fund our local government operation anyway?"

Washburn said he will continue pushing for a resolution he introduced last year that would allow counties the option to use the purchase price for properties as the assessed value.

That would eliminate the difficult appeals process, he said.

Another bill Washburn is pushing would give each county the option for a local referendum for a penny-on-the-dollar sales tax that "must be used for property tax rollback," he said.

"Bibb County and other consolidated governments have the option of adding a penny for rollback," Washburn noted. "I am proposing that every county [should] have that opportunity to do that."

A third bill Washburn aims to pass would eliminate school property taxes for homeowners ages 65 and older.

"They have certainly paid their share and they are entitled now to be exempt from that and to have some protection from that," Washburn said.

What are your thoughts on the mayor's request for a charter amendment allowing him to serve a third consecutive four-year term?

— Griffin: "That's a no. I'm not supporting that. The only thing I would support is a referendum to allow citizens and the voters to participate in the process."

— Herring: "The people have elected their commissioners to represent them and it passed with them and now we have to make some decisions as a state on it. ... I'm going to look at everything and whatever the people decided with their commissioners at the time, they voted them in, those commissioners are doing the work of the people. And so who am I to say that the people should not have an opportunity to vote on that? But I'm going to look at all the information and make my decision."

— Jones: "It doesn't become a state issue until it becomes a state issue. This is a community decision. Put it on the ballot."

— Lucas: Introduced the bill.

— Paris: "A charter thing is a very serious thing when there's no scientific data to support changing the charter or nothing that has really pointed to, 'Oh this needs to be changed' or 'This needs to be corrected.' That's pretty much how I feel about changing the charter period, whether it's third term, whether it's any other issue that may come up."

— Washburn: "I do not favor changing the charter. I believe that a lot of work and a lot of study was done when the governments were consolidated. I think our people voted for that system with the term limits in place. And I'm talking to a lot of people and I believe that there are many people who do not think our charter should be changed."

Where do you stand on the automated school zone speed cameras?

— Griffin: "I would have to look at the legislation and see exactly what it says. I supported that and signed onto it with Rep. Washburn. ... I think that he will consider some amendments or changes to the bill."

— Herring: "I don't think we should get rid of them all together, but I think we need to look at finding the balance where ... we're still protecting our children ... and that the speed cameras are working properly and there's not just a heavy fine or cost ... on constituents as well, and I think we can do that."

— Jones: "School-zone speed enforcement should always be about protecting children, not generating revenue. When used correctly, speed cameras can be one tool to improve safety, but they must be implemented with clear rules, strong oversight and consistent standards to maintain public trust."

— Lucas: "Them speed cameras are about nothing but money. That's all that is."

— Paris: "Some of the disparity with the speed cameras really concerns me. ... Of course, people do need to slow down in school zones, but the speed cameras have just really been a real tremendous taxation on the general public. I'm for them coming down."

— Washburn: Introduced the bill.

How would you receive a request from the county commission to create a police department?

— Griffin: "I don't know enough about that. I just heard about it in the last week or so. No one has talked to me about that issue."

— Herring: "Public safety is important to me and I think we can all agree that we need more policing in our districts in Middle Georgia and Macon-Bibb. I think we have done a lot to help bring crime down but I do think the sheriff's department is doing all that they can do and I do think we probably need to look at considering having a police department and finding ... great officers."

— Jones: "I have had conversation(s) with constituents about this and their concern was that our current sheriff's department isn't doing what they're supposed to be doing to take care of the things ... We need to be doing more to attract more folks to want to be in public service in that way and making sure that they are paid well."

— Lucas: "Well, that ain't going to happen. ... That was part of the consolidation. ... You got code enforcement. I assume that's the police department they got in the city because they are all riding around."

— Paris: "I'm not so sure what ... makes people think that if you can't get people on as a sheriff's deputy, where are we going to get these people that are going to want to be on the police department?"

— Washburn: "I think that goes back ... to this charter when it was created. I recall that there were two priorities for people. One was the term limits and the other was that they wanted the chief law enforcement officer to be elected. Consequently, if I don't favor changing the charter, that would include that change as well."



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Government is to blame for increasing car prices

Not long after my wife and I learned that we were expecting a child in 2024, it became exceedingly evident that I needed to upgrade my car to something more family friendly.

My nearly 20-year-old bright red five-speed Ford Mustang just wouldn't cut it. Mustang back seats just aren't made for convenient baby car seat usage.

This wasn't exactly a surprising revelation, but car prices since the last time I had purchased one were absolutely eye-opening. After weeks of research and test drives, my wife and I ultimately settled on a new midsize SUV in 2024. Was it overpriced? Maybe — but prices have continued to surge since then.

The average cost of a new car is now over \$50,000, but what's behind this trend? While there are a host of factors, it may not surprise you to learn that the government plays a central role in this phenomenon — from provoking trade disputes, to perpetuating restrictive franchise laws and to promoting lawsuit abuse for far too long.

In an effort to encourage people to buy American and encourage industrial reshoring, the White House has picked trade fights with foreign countries and imposed tariffs on a host of them. Unlike what the pro-tariff crowd says, these are little more than taxes levied at the border, which are then baked into the cost of goods and passed onto consumers. This is especially true for new cars.

"No vehicle made at an assembly plant in the United States is 100% made here," Kelley Blue Book noted. "Even Tesla sources its parts from other countries. This means that with tariffs, car prices will increase for American car buyers [...] Shoppers can expect the tariffs to increase car prices by as much as \$6,000 on vehicles priced under \$40,000."



Marc Hyden

are largely barred from selling directly to consumers.

Nearly all new vehicles must be purchased from an independent, third-party dealership — essentially a middleman — and this curious policy is found in a number of states and dates to a bygone era: "... from the 1930-1950 period when there were few manufacturers and many dealers, and the dealers felt the terms of their relationship were one-sided: dealers were not guaranteed any inventory, manufacturers could terminate dealers without cause, and dealers could be forced to accept cars regardless of whether they could sell them," according to the Cato Institute.

Cato also notes: "Dealers also worried about manufacturers distributing cars directly and competing with franchised dealers."

As a result of these concerns, states rushed to pass auto dealer franchise laws to the detriment of consumers. This adds to the cost of car ownership. A 2009 report from the U.S. Department of Justice estimated that this increased the price of car ownership by 8.6%. If that percentage has remained constant, it adds over \$4,000 to the average cost of a car today.

Then there is the legal system that has long burdened car manufacturers, and two Peach State cases epitomize this.

"[Ford] was found liable in the deaths of two Georgia couples and ordered to pay \$1.7 billion and \$2.5 billion, respectively, to their families [...] With these two verdicts,

That is painful — as is the impact of outdated franchise laws like we have here in Georgia. Under state law, car manufacturers, like Ford, GM and so forth,

Ford held the dubious honor of having two of the three highest verdicts in the state," the Atlanta Journal Constitution reported. "Both cases alleged Ford sold more than 5 million Super Duty trucks with weak roofs between the vehicle model years 1999 and 2016. The plaintiffs alleged Ford knew the roofs in those trucks were prone to crushing occupants in rollover situations."

Georgia lawmakers have reformed the tort system, but preexisting cases like these still weigh heavily on auto makers.

Of course, not everything is the government's fault. Safety features, new technologies, an array of sensors, and computerized devices are costly and increase automobile price tags.

Despite this, the government plays an outsized role in mounting auto costs, and this is leaving many Americans in a lurch.

"Increasingly stretched consumers are starting to draw the line on what they will pay for a new car, according to dealers, analysts and industry data," the Wall Street Journal reports. "Car buyers are downsizing, buying used vehicles, taking on longer car loans and holding out for dealers."

These are smarter approaches. Nobody wants a car payment the size of a mortgage, but if Georgians want more affordable vehicles, then it takes the government adopting free-market policies, like reforming franchise laws and adopting more prudent means of securing favorable trade deals.

In the absence of that, prices will likely continue to climb. Thankfully, my wife and I already upgraded before the market worsened.

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



Five years after Jan. 6, clarity still eludes too many

This week marks five years since Jan. 6, 2021, when a violent mob forced its way into the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to halt the certification of a presidential election.

That anniversary should prompt reflection, accountability and a clear-eyed reckoning with what happened. Instead, it has once again exposed how reluctant some Americans remain to name the event honestly.

Even now, there is a persistent effort to argue over language, as if the central question is whether the word "insurrection" is too strong, too political or too emotionally charged. That debate misses the point. Words matter because they describe reality,



Joshua Wilson

and the reality of Jan. 6 is not ambiguous. A sitting president who had lost an election spent weeks promoting false claims of widespread fraud, summoned supporters to Washington and urged them to "fight" as Congress met to certify the results. A crowd responded by breaching security, assaulting law enforcement officers, vandalizing the Capitol and threatening elected officials in a desperate effort to stop the peaceful transfer of power. That sequence of events fits the definition of an insur-

rection in every meaningful sense — not as a rhetorical flourish but as a factual description.

Calling it anything less does not make the country more unified or the conversation more productive. It simply blurs responsibility and softens the severity of what occurred. Jan. 6 was not a protest that got out of hand, and it was not an expression of legitimate political disagreement. It was a violent attack on a democratic process, carried out in service of a lie and encouraged by a president unwilling to accept defeat.

What is most troubling, five years later, is how aggressively some political leaders and institutions have tried to recast that day. The violence

has been minimized, the attackers reframed and the broader context stripped away. In some cases, those who participated have been portrayed as patriots or political prisoners rather than as individuals who made conscious choices to break laws and democratic norms.

Accountability matters precisely because of those choices. The people who smashed windows, beat police officers and searched for lawmakers were not caught up in a moment beyond their control. They acted with intent, and intent carries consequences. Presidential pardons for such conduct do not heal the country or move it forward; they signal that loyalty to power can excuse violence

against institutions. Prison sentences, by contrast, affirm that the rule of law applies even when politics are messy and passions run high.

This is not about partisanship — nor is it about relitigating the 2020 election. It is about whether the country can agree on a basic truth: that violence aimed at overturning an election is unacceptable, regardless of who commits it or why. Without that agreement, democratic norms become negotiable, and history becomes something to be edited rather than learned from.

Journalism has a role to play in

FEATURES

PAGE 5 » THE MACON MELODY » REPORTING FOR MACON, FROM MACON » MACONMELODY.COM » FRIDAY, JANUARY 9, 2026



PHOTO BY DAVID DIVAD

The biggest names — and talented, though lesser-known creatives of all sorts — will be active in Macon in 2026. For instance, the pictured Acute Inflections, a New York-based jazzy R&B and comedy duo, will transform the Anderson Conference Center into an elegant Harlem Renaissance revival scene this month.

Goodbye, 2025 — and a peek at things to come

Macon's first-ever Fashion Week, the Nutcracker of Middle Georgia's 40th anniversary and Joy Harjo bringing Indigenous creativity to Macon were but a few of the arts and entertainment highlights of 2025.

As we step into 2026, there are highlights ahead in all the arts, entertainment and related communities in Macon and Middle Georgia. Looking back and forward is warranted to stir memories and get a start on marking 2026 calendars.

This personal look — a writer's notebook in a sense — can only scratch the surface, but that can't be helped. I'll be offering much more as, week by week, I further highlight events, people and the work going on to make Macon a brightly creative community and bring others into the light for maybe the first time.

Looking ahead: music and comedy

First, Bob Dylan is coming to the Macon City Auditorium on April 22. Love him or not, he's been a top-level creative, musical and lyrical force in a class by himself since the 1960s, eschewing fame's trappings for a don't-look-back attitude — see what I did there? — toward keeping his music new.

The folks running the Macon City Auditorium, Atrium Health Amphitheater and Macon Coliseum under the Centreplex umbrella have a tremendous start to 2026 lined up. At the auditorium, Larry the Cable Guy is coming Jan. 20, and Kamala Harris on Feb. 11. That's hitting two ends of the spectrum, right?

At the Atrium Health Amphitheater, look forward to The Masters of Funk (Feb. 28), bluesman-guitar great Joe Bonamassa (March 20), Babyface (May 16) and the Goo Goo Dolls (Aug. 27). Katt Williams brings The Golden Age Tour to the Macon Coliseum on Feb. 21, and there's a whole lot of Macon Mayhem hockey going on — and Monster Jam-ing — there too.

If you're a fan of Irish music and dance, the Piedmont Grand Opera House is the place to be when "A Taste of Ireland" brings award-winning performers to the stage on Jan. 15.

The Bored Teachers' unique comedy show, "Is It Friday Yet?," is on stage Jan. 22, bringing relatable classroom and teacher comedy, and the Macon-Mercer Symphony Orchestra continues its season on Feb. 23 — all at the Grand.

Combining music and comedy with a roaring '20s look and feel is the New York-based jazzy R&B duo Acute Inflections, who will be transforming the Anderson Conference Center on Eisenhower Parkway into



Michael Pannell

an elegant Harlem Renaissance revival on Jan. 25. The duo has been featured on HBO, Amazon and NPR. Find tickets at acuteinflections.com.

Count on the Macon Film Guild to program great, interesting films at the Douglas Theatre all year. This month, it brings the Norwegian film "Sentimental Value" on Jan. 11 and the documentary "Immediate Family" on Jan. 20. It tracks legendary studio musicians Danny Kortchmar, Waddy Wachtel, Russ Kunkel, Leland Sklar and Steve Postell through the 1970s as they back Carole King, James Taylor, Linda Ronstadt, Fleetwood Mac and many more. These are the '70s studio greats who followed their '60s forerunners, known as the Wrecking Crew.

Finally, in this run of coming events is a one-of-a-kind opportunity Feb. 27-March 1 to meet and see the photographic work of May Pang in an exhibit and sale at Gallery West. The photos primarily consist of John Lennon during what's called his "lost weekend" — actually more than a year in the mid-1970s — when Pang and Lennon were a couple, spending much of their time in California collaborating with the likes of Harry Nilsson, Elton John, David Bowie, George Harrison, Mick Jagger and Ringo Starr, all while Lennon produced much of his best solo work.

Stay tuned for news of the Middle Georgia Lit Festival coming to Warner Robins on Feb. 7. It's doubling the number of writers and booksellers from last year's 80, plus there will be more breakout sessions.

On March's First Friday, take the opportunity to visit internationally acclaimed artist Cedric Smith's gallery exhibit and artist talk in downtown Macon at the Wesleyan Leadership Lab. There's more to come but mark those calendars now.

Reflecting on 2025 and welcoming the new year

For me, a highlight of new art in Macon in 2025 was the work of collage artist Maura Luccesse. Moving here last year from Florida, her painstakingly created collages made purely from cut magazine pieces — no drawing or paint allowed — are remarkable.

She's selling her work and picking up local and national commissions all the time as people become acquainted with her art.

You can see examples and make purchases on her Instagram page ([@braincandy](https://www.instagram.com/braincandy)), or see it at Gallery West and soon at Society Garden.

An artist who surprised me was Macon's Colin Penndorf. I've known Penndorf for years, but mainly for his arts organizing, curating work and overall entrepreneurial spirit. I was shocked to finally see his actual work, from illustrating fantasy fiction with intricately drawn maps to creative drawings and printmaking. He is a truly gifted native son as an artist, promoter and community builder.

Among many other elevated moments were celebrating Macon musical icon Newton Collier's 80th birthday; attending the sold-out premiere of young local filmmaker Phillip Serafin Weaver's "Midnight"; touring the newly relaunched childhood home of Little Richard as a museum honoring his career and the Pleasant Hill neighborhood he grew up in; and getting in on activities with photographer/cinematographer Jave Bjorkman and his talented friends at Third Street Studio/And So We Go Productions.

Look closely and you'll see a thread running through all of this, but it's not a singular thread; it's three entwined.

One is the art itself in its many forms and fashions — fine and commonly recognized art and art that is part of our daily lives, such as fashion.

The second is the people who create the art or who make the art happen by setting the stage or working behind the scenes. The last is the resulting community that's built and the good that comes from such efforts aesthetically, economically and even spiritually.

What's cool to do around town will always be in view as I write, but also look for a focus on who's doing it — expected or unexpected. From very visible creatives to art entrepreneurs to those carrying on traditions of creating instruments and even some whose work seems utilitarian but couldn't happen without an artist's view. For instance, Michel Hernandez, a young entrepreneur will open Michel Design Studio, a microblading and permanent makeup services studio at the end of the month.

Or how about those who keep the makeup and greasepaint on our community theater actors? Or a top Macon tattoo artist?

But I need your help. I can't fulfill every request in this space, but I'm eager to hear from you about such worthy folks and happenings of all kinds in our arts community.

My email is always below.

Contact Michael W. Pannell at mwpannell@gmail.com. Follow him on Instagram: [michael_w_pannell](https://www.instagram.com/michael_w_pannell).

Now is the prime time for planting

BY BIBB MASTER GARDENERS
UGA Cooperative Extension
bibb.extension@uga.edu

The holiday decorations may be packed away, but for many homeowners, the garden is still on vacation. But if you're thinking about adding trees or shrubs to your landscape, now is the perfect time to get back to work.

Cool-season planting gives woody plants a strong start that pays off when Middle Georgia's heat arrives.

Trees and shrubs establish roots best during periods of mild temperatures and consistent moisture. Planting in late fall and winter allows roots to grow without the stress of summer heat. A well-developed root system helps plants withstand Macon's hot, dry summers and reduces transplant shock.

Good planting practices matter. Here are four tips to help your trees and shrubs thrive for decades instead of merely surviving:

— Select plants for Middle Georgia's climate. Do a little homework with publications from University of Georgia Extension before heading to the nursery. You need to know what trees and shrubs are already adapted for Zone 8B. For example, native trees and shrubs deserve special consideration because they are already adapted to Georgia's soils and weather. They typically require less maintenance and provide valuable habitat for wildlife. You also need to know mature plant sizes as well as site requirements — essential information for avoiding overcrowding and poor placement.

— Prepare the soil. A test can reveal pH and lime needs before planting. When possible, prepare a wide planting bed and loosen

soil to a depth of about 12 inches. Roots spread more easily through prepared soil than compacted ground. Georgia soils often contain heavy clay or sand, so incorporating several inches of organic matter throughout the planting bed can improve structure and drainage. Avoid amending only the planting hole. Doing so encourages roots to remain confined instead of growing outward, leading to future instability. If drainage is poor, raise the planting bed 6 to 12 inches using soil and organic matter. Raised beds improve root health but dry out faster, so monitor moisture closely.

— Plant at the correct depth. Set plants at the same depth they grew in the container or field — never deeper. Trees and shrubs planted too deeply often decline over time. If roots circle the container, cut them in several places before planting. For balled-and-burlapped plants, remove wire and twine and pull burlap away from the top of the root ball. Remove all burlap in poorly drained sites.

— Don't leave the job unfinished. Gently firm the soil around the plants using your hands. Water as you backfill to settle soil around roots. Water well when you finish and again several hours later. Apply several inches of mulch around the plants, but not up against the trunk. During establishment, the roots should be kept moist. This might mean watering a couple of times per week for the first few months. This will vary depending on rain, soil content and site.

Winter planting rewards a little effort now with healthier, longer-lived plants later. Take a short break from your gardening holiday and give your landscape a strong start.

UPCOMING CLASS

Bibb Master Gardeners will present "Soil and Seeds," a series of vegetable gardening classes, at the Washington Memorial Library in downtown Macon. The first class will be held at 6 p.m. on Tuesday, Jan. 13, and attendees can learn how to make a seed starting mix and when to begin seed planting.

BILLY'S LET'S EAT REVIEW

Oliver's Corner Bistro: A culinary adventure

There's something timeless about a restaurant that feels like it's always been a part of the city's heartbeat. That's exactly what you get at Oliver's Corner Bistro, a downtown Macon favorite that's been delighting guests since 2017. Owned by the dynamic husband-and-wife team Matt and Nikki, this charming spot was named after their son, Oliver — and it carries every ounce of that same love, warmth and authenticity that you'd expect from a family-run gem.

Matt, a seasoned chef, runs the kitchen with passion, while Nikki can occasionally be found greeting guests or dashing through the dining room with the kind of energy that tells you she loves what she does.

Together, they created the type of place they wanted to eat at — somewhere that could be a date night, a girls' night or the perfect gathering spot with friends.

Spoiler alert: they nailed it. When you step into Oliver's, you're wrapped in the kind of ambiance that's both sophisticated and familiar — an eclectic New York-style bistro with cozy seating, soft lighting and that buzz of conversation that lets you know people are happy to be there.

The menu is a love letter to comfort food done right, with inventive



Billy Hennessey

twists that surprise and delight every time.

And let's talk about food, because... wow.

The tempura cauliflower is quite possibly one of the best appetizers I've ever had — crisp yet light, with a sweet and spicy sauce that'll have you questioning everything you thought you knew about vegetables. Pair that with a cucumber basil martini (fresh cracked pepper and basil make this one sing), and you'll understand why Oliver's is the place to unwind midweek, or any day of the week.

If you're a steak lover, the filet mignon will stop you in your tracks. It's cooked to perfection and seasoned with what I can only assume is a magical house blend that deserves its own patent. Add a side of gouda mac & cheese, and you'll be saying, "Hump day, who?"

General Manager Lacey swears by the bourbon glaze salmon for dinner and the reuben sandwich for lunch, but one of the most charming tidbits I learned? The inspira-

SEE BISTRO
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BISTRO

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tion behind their popular superfood salad came from Matt and Nikki's very first date. If that isn't the most romantic bite in town, I don't know what is.

But Oliver's isn't just about the food — it's about the experience. Look around and you'll spot little pieces of personality everywhere, especially in the décor.

Nikki's creative touch is all over the bistro, from the warm lighting to the quirky and fun details like "Maconopoly," a playful nod to our hometown sitting proudly on top of the bar. It's a subtle reminder that Oliver's isn't just in Macon — it's of Macon.

When asked what's next for Oliver's, Nikki smiled and said, "Oliver's will never be finished. It's a living piece of culinary exploration."

And honestly, that tracks. They regularly rotate in seasonal dishes alongside fan favorites, making sure the menu evolves with the seasons — and with their guests.

Still, there's one thing that will



never change: Oliver's will always reflect the heart of Macon — its culture, its diversity and its rich history. Nikki made it clear she won't compromise on that, and you can feel it

in everything from the welcoming staff to the eclectic playlist humming in the background.

The first time I visited Oliver's was thanks to a friendly bartend-

er named Jordan, who slid into the comments on my "Support Macon Restaurants" post to tell me about their Wednesday Night Wine and Whiskey Special. Fifty percent off select wines and whiskeys? Say less. One visit turned into a standing midweek tradition — because after a night at Oliver's, Wednesdays suddenly became something to look forward to.

Bottom line: Oliver's Corner Bistro isn't just a restaurant — it's a vibe.

It's where you celebrate, unwind and remind yourself that good food and good company are the real luxuries in life. Whether you're there for a date night, a dinner with friends, or just a killer martini after work, you'll leave full — heart and stomach alike.

So go ahead, Macon — make your Wednesdays (and every other day) a little tastier at Oliver's, which in my opinion is where comfort meets class downtown.

Until next time, let's eat!

Billy Hennessey writes about food for The Macon Melody. Send him an email at newlifekisses@gmail.com.

WILSON

Continued from Page 4

moments like this by insisting on shared facts and resisting efforts to sanitize or distort the record. Naming what happened on Jan. 6 is not an act of provocation; it is an act of civic responsibility.

Democracies erode when citizens are encouraged to forget, excuse or reframe attacks on their foundations.

Five years later, the obligation is not to soften the language or move on prematurely — but to tell the truth plainly and without qualification. Jan. 6 was an insurrection. It was fueled by falsehoods, and it caused lasting damage. Acknowledging that is the minimum requirement for accountability and the starting point for protecting what comes next.

Joshua Wilson is executive editor of The Macon Melody.

HOUSING

Continued from Page 2

units of public housing, which he defines as residential properties that are owned and operated by the housing authority.

"We've diminished our public housing stock significantly in favor of tax credits and Section 8," Austin said in a recent interview. "Believe it or not, we only have 219 units of public housing."

What happened to Macon's stock of public housing is similar to what happened to those in cities across the country; squalor and concentrated poverty attracted crime.

"The landscape and political support of public housing just fell off the cliff," Austin said.

Changing attitudes in Congress about funding for public housing ultimately resulted in fewer and fewer federal dollars being earmarked for housing authorities, which struggled to shoulder the costs of maintaining

aging stocks of public housing.

In the 1970s, Section 8 vouchers started becoming popular and local housing authorities were charged with administering the program on behalf of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The vouchers allow tenants to rent privately-owned dwellings they otherwise couldn't afford.

Section 8 vouchers work like this: The voucher holder is responsible for finding a suitable place to rent from a landlord who accepts the voucher.

The tenant typically pays 30% of their "adjusted family income" toward rent and utilities. The local housing authority pays the difference between that and whatever amount the private landlord charges for rent.

The era of building new, large-scale, red-brick public housing developments came to a screeching halt when Congress passed the Faircloth Amendment, effectively ending

new construction of new public housing developments in 1999.

Many public housing advocates had been pounding on HUD, "saying 'Look, you owe us billions of dollars in backlog because what you're giving us, it's not keeping up.' That's been a political football forever," Austin said regarding the dearth of federal money. "So, we got wise and said, 'To heck with this. Let's get out of the public housing business.' Most people did that. Most housing authorities were just like, 'no.'"

As federal support diminished, housing authorities across the country took the same path as Macon: They began looking to private money and private property owners to continue providing affordable housing.

Now, the Macon authority is working to convert its remaining stock of public housing into voucher-based properties or transfer them to a nonprofit subsidiary and improve them with tax credits.

The need for a new business model

The Macon Housing Authority's financial margins are thin. Its income takes the form of fees collected from developers, HUD and bond issuance, as well as investments.

"We just try every year we look at the budgets, you know, we only get what we have to get," Austin said, noting that the authority's offices are far from lavish.

Unlike private developers of low-income housing, the authority is obligated to reinvest its profits back into building and maintaining affordable housing.

When it comes to federal funding, "it's never enough," Austin said.

In recent years, he said the authority has had to cut back on how much it contributes to health insurance for its roughly 105 employees.

"We try to be cutting-edge. ... so that we can do a lot with a little," Austin said. "In every area, we try to be lean."

The future of federal housing assistance is uncertain, especially as President Donald Trump plans to gut it. Austin said another overhaul might be due.

"I'm looking at Trump's ideas and he's like, 'Well, let's give all the housing to the states. This is new.' And I'm like, 'No, it's not. Clinton-Gore came up with that years ago.' That's not nothing new. It's not necessarily a bad idea. It just never really took hold."

Asked how the housing authority stays afloat with thin margins for income and expenses, Austin said, "We're not going to stay afloat if we don't adopt a new business model."

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.

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SPORTS

PAGE 7 » THE MACON MELODY » REPORTING FOR MACON, FROM MACON » MACONMELODY.COM » FRIDAY, JANUARY 9, 2026

With high expectations, Taylor takes over

Mercer's new head football coach will try to continue the Bears' run atop the Southern Conference

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
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About 15 years ago, for only a few short months, Joel Taylor made his living at a table lined with felt instead of a field made of turf.

The former South Carolina State football player had just been laid off at his alma mater, where he worked as an assistant coach for part-time pay.

"I don't think it was like, 'I'm not doing a good job' or anything, it was just because of what was happening economically across the country," Taylor said of losing his gig at South Carolina State.

So, with his back against the wall and dreading the possibility of working in a cubicle, Taylor turned to one of the things he loved most besides football: poker.

The man who had been crushing opposing players with tackles and picking off passes as a defensive back just a few years prior made a living at the table, outwitting others while getting a little lucky with the draw.

Instead of reading the quarterback's eyes, Taylor read the expressions of his opponents. He studied probabilities instead of playbooks, sometimes taking a gamble on a hand the way he might have gambled on jumping a route.

That life feels worlds away now. Taylor — who eventually returned to the gridiron after those few months at the poker table — became Mercer's newest head football coach in December. He succeeded

Mike Jacobs, a coach who took the Bears to new heights. Taylor took over a program with some of the best momentum in the country at the FCS level.

He is already familiar with Macon, as he spent three years as Mercer's defensive coordinator from 2020-23 while the Bears began their climb to the top of the Southern Conference. Though he has big shoes to fill now that Mercer has won back-to-back SoCon championships, he seems like a home-run hire.

Indeed, Taylor's brief poker career does seem like a distant memory — until it doesn't.

Taylor's time playing poker was, in some ways, indicative of the incredible journey that led him to Mercer. It showed how his mind works, how he could apply his smarts to the field and make football decisions with both analytics and his gut feelings. It showed how willing he was to grind.

The chance of poker also mirrors Taylor's coaching career, which feels a bit like it is guided by destiny.

"People always said, 'You're going to be a coach one day.' I didn't know what they meant by that," Taylor said. "But now I love the game, and I understand."

A fish out of water

Surprisingly, the Brooklyn-born, South Carolina-raised athlete who is now Mercer's head coach did not play football until he was in high school.

Baseball was Taylor's first love. He was a pitcher, first baseman and outfielder and enjoyed every second



PHOTO COURTESY OF WEST GEORGIA ATHLETICS

Coach Joel Taylor ponders a call during a West Georgia game last season. The former Mercer defensive coordinator is back with the Bears this year as the program's head coach.

of it. After he broke his wrist two seasons in a row, though, he eyed football when he got to tenth grade.

"I was a fish out of water. I didn't know much about it," Taylor said. "I started out as a running back. I got smoked one time and I was like, 'Yeah, this is probably not for me.'"

It didn't take long for Taylor to find his niche as a defensive back. He quickly excelled in high school despite his late start, then moved on to South Carolina State. Though he was declared ineligible his freshman year because of academics — Taylor said he became a diligent student after that tough first year — he eventually became a team captain for the Bulldogs and finished his career with a conference championship.

Then there was the question all

athletes must answer, the one some struggle with more than others: what's next?

"When my coach asked me that, I didn't know. I knew I didn't want to work in a cubicle ... but I had been kind of brainwashed to think I had to get a 9-to-5 job like that," Taylor said. "He said, 'Why don't you come work with me?' And that sounded pretty good."

There was just one problem. "The next words out of his mouth after that was, 'Okay, I can't pay you,'" Taylor said, recalling the interaction with a grin. "I was like, 'Huh? Are you kidding?' I just got my degree, I'm ready to get paid."

But by then, Taylor had fallen in love with football. It was too late to turn back. He took the job and

scraped by until he became a paid assistant with the Bulldogs.

That was from 2005-08. After his brief foray into poker, Taylor joined the staff at Lenoir-Rhyne. He would return there later on, part of a trend of Taylor coming back to different schools for a second stint as a coach — just as he eventually returned to Mercer.

After heading back to South Carolina State from 2010-13, Taylor made a coaching stop at The Citadel that proved to be an impactful post for the budding football mind.

"That's probably my greatest memory, when we upset South Carolina," Taylor said. "I mean, we're

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Mount de Sales girls win ninth straight game, defeat FPD 48-45

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
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The Mount de Sales Lady Cavaliers extended their winning streak to nine games Tuesday night, fighting through a physical show-

down with crosstown rival FPD to defeat the Lady Vikings 48-45 on the road.

It was the first GIAA Class 4A/3A District 6 game of the year for both teams, and it came down to the wire between the two squads after neither team had a lead big-

ger than four all night. The Cavaliers got the edge thanks to timely free throws down the stretch and points from eight different players — led by Payton Latimer and Lau

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

FPD's Elcee Leslein (10) upends Mount de Sales' Kenadi Lightfoot (12) as the teams battle for possession in their game Tuesday night.

Cavs boys beat FPD 66-63 to open region

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
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The Mount de Sales Cavaliers fended off a valiant fourth-quarter comeback attempt by the FPD Vikings Tuesday night, hitting crucial free throws to secure a 66-63 victory in the region opener on the road.

Star senior Jackson Rowley did what he does best as the Cavaliers' standout player, finishing with 29 points — including three crucial free throws in the fourth quarter to stave off the Vikings' comeback — to lead the floor and fuel a key win.

"I think we had some pretty bad turnovers and cut it close between that and them getting to the free throw line. Even with that, we did a decent job against their press. We got some key free throws ourselves. Jackson Rowley hit some big ones," Mount de Sales head coach Deion Taylor said. "Having an early lead really helped. If we had come into the fourth quarter tied, things could have been a lot different."

Rowley's performance, along with Terry Odom Jr. scoring nine of his 11 points in the opening quarter, helped Mount de Sales build a decent cushion early that it held onto that lead for most of the night. The gap hovered between 7

and 10 points for the vast majority of the game, and it was 51-41 when the fourth quarter rolled around.

Then the Cavaliers made a mistake. They looked over their shoulder — perhaps even taking their foot off the gas a bit — and FPD was there to greet them.

Despite trailing for most of the night, the Vikings stormed back down the stretch, taking advantage of rushed Mount de Sales possessions and a decently effective press to close the gap with clutch shooting from Breck Griffin and Brett Roper.

The 10-point lead slowly dwindled away as FPD scored 22 points in the final quarter, culminating with a three-point play from Griffin that cut the deficit to 64-63 with about a minute to play.

"Throughout the game we would go down and then come back, go down and come back. Then right there at the end, it felt like we might just come and take the game over," FPD head coach Greg Nix said. "We're up and coming and on our way. It was a great region game. I'm proud of my team for the way they fought."

But the Cavaliers found their cool, finding a way to beat the press and force FPD to foul Rowley with just less than 10 seconds

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ra Lillie Sparks — to balance the scoring. “Our girls are learning. Haven’t been the most relevant in girls basketball here since about 2012, I think. I’m proud of ‘em. They get better each day. I can’t thank them enough for accepting hard coaching and working every day at practice,” Mount de Sales head coach Craig Carroll said.

The game finished with an entertaining back-and-forth sequence that began when the two teams were tied at 44 with about three minutes to play.

Senior Payton Latimer snagged a great layup to make it 46-44, then drilled a pair of clutch free throws inside the two-minute mark to give the Cavaliers a four-point lead. In between those buckets came turnovers, missed shots and even a kicked ball call.

It looked like Mount de Sales would pull away when FPD fouled Mount de Sales again and struggled to score inside the final minute, but the Cavs left the door open and missed some free throws.

With only 3.9 seconds remaining, Mount de Sales had the ball for an inbounds pass when FPD star Bowen Matthews somehow leaped in the air as the Cavaliers threw the ball in, snatched it with one hand and began calling a timeout before she even hit the ground.

The Vikings had life with 2 seconds left, but it was not to be — they could not get a shot off in time, and the Cavaliers snagged the win.

“We had so many players contribute tonight. Conditioning made a difference, we play physical ... it’s a 12-round fight,” Carroll said. “We made a few more plays right there at the end. Payton made some plays for us there at the end. Kenzie Jordan in the post, good to have her in there.”

Latimer finished with 11 points. Sparks netted a team-high 12 points as part of a group effort to help Mount de Sales improve to 11-1.

“We tell them it’s hard to guard five girls. That’s what we preach,” Carroll said.

Matthews had a game-high 15 points and nearly helped the Vikings win it with her last-gasp steal. Freshman Bri Crosby was

quiet early but scored all 11 of her points across the last three quarters.

Both coaches seemed frustrated on the sidelines by the game’s officiating — there were 10 fouls in the first quarter alone and the two teams combined for 28 of them by the end of it — but FPD head coach Doug Wasden made no excuses for the tight loss.

“We probably missed enough shots under the basket to win by eight or ten points,” Wasden said. “Our girls played hard. Their shots went in, our shots didn’t. They played a great game. Mount de Sales has improved tremendously over the past two years. Craig has done a great job over there.”

The ending was indicative of the entire game. It was a scrappy showdown early, with Mount de Sales getting the edge because of longer possessions and slightly better shooting, though neither team found much success from close range or long distance.

The Cavaliers got solid contributions from multiple players in the opening half, with Sparks, Latimer and Kenadi Lightfoot making key plays. The Vikings were clearly paced by the duo of Matthews and Caroline

Chancellor, though Crosby made more of an impact in the second half.

Matthews in particular changed the pace of play while she was on the floor, often pressing FPD possessions and creating decent looks even if the Vikings could not always convert. Mount de Sales got under the bucket a bit more frequently, but both teams did well on defense to double up at the right time to force reckless passes or jump balls.

“We knew it was going to be a physical game, and in a game like that you have to play through. We knew it would be tight, we just have to deal with whatever’s there,” Wasden said. “It’s any given night. What matters most is that region tournament, and we’re gonna be getting better by then. Our goal is to be playing our best ball in February.”

Both teams are set to continue region play Friday night, with the Cavaliers taking on Piedmont at home in search of their 10th straight win and FPD facing Stratford on the road.

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remaining. “I think we had pretty good contributions from all the guys (down the stretch). I tried to tell them to be calm and not do too much. Once we managed to break the press, we could find decent shots,” Taylor said. “We were able to be aggressive and attack the basket for lots of the game as well.”

While the comeback made up for earlier miscues — and brought what had been a quiet FPD gym to life at about 9:30 p.m. — the Vikings’ woes at the charity stripe still came back to bite them. In what ended up a 3-point game, FPD’s 12-for-30 effort from the free throw line stung a little more once the final horn sounded.

“Mount de Sales hit their free throws better than FPD did tonight. That’s what it comes down to,” Nix said. “Region games are tough, they’re always gonna be like that. Just a couple more free throws or another layup away from winning the game. I’m real proud of our players.”

Griffin finished with 15 points, while Jones Handberry followed with 14. Roper, who hit

some acrobatic layups during the final few minutes, finished with 11.

“FPD has those talented shooters. Especially since they were at home, we tried not to give them those easy shots. You have to respect the guys who can shoot,” Taylor said of the Vikings’ key scorers. “I put my lengthier guys on players like that, and it helped us defend pretty well tonight.”

The Cavaliers improved to 9-3 with the victory and are 1-0 in GIAA Class 4A/3A District 6, while FPD dropped to 10-4 overall and 0-1 in the region. All four of the Vikings’ losses, surprisingly, have come on their home court, though FPD has only played three games on the road so far this season. The win moved Mount de Sales to 4-0 in away games this year.

Both teams are set to continue region play Friday night, with the Cavaliers taking on Piedmont at home and FPD facing Stratford on the road.

Stratford lost to John Milledge in its region opener Tuesday while Tattnall defeated Piedmont, making the Cavaliers one of Macon’s two GIAA 4A schools to win their region openers.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Mount de Sales senior Jackson Rowley (14) reaches past a defender for a nifty shot with his back to the net. Rowley scored 29 points in the Cavaliers’ win over FPD on Tuesday.

MERCER

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talking about The Citadel. They don’t always get the best players. We went out there, they played their butts off and we beat an SEC team.”

After that, Taylor kept moving up. He returned to Lenoir-Rhyne and became a full defensive coordinator for the first time, then moved to become Mercer’s DC when head coach Drew Cronic stepped in.

From 2020-23, Taylor helmed a Mercer defense that produced the program’s two all-time leading tacklers, Ken Standley and Isaac Dowling. The Bears reached the FCS playoffs for the first time ever in 2023.

Taylor’s most recent stop was his first head coaching gig. At West Georgia, he only won four games in his first season but turned the team around for an 8-3 campaign in 2025 that saw the Wolves average more than 350 yards per game on offense.

Now it’s time — as is the nature of a football coaching career — for Taylor’s biggest challenge so far.

He’s not too worried.

Taking it to the next level

Taylor will have high expectations at Mercer. The Bears have grown tremendously in the past decade — Taylor was there for part of it under Cronic — but the past two seasons have taken that to a new high with back-to-back conference titles.

Previous head coach Mike Jacobs finished his time at Mercer with an incredible 20-6 overall record and a 15-1 mark in conference play. Taylor thinks he can sustain some of that momentum.

“The biggest thing for me coming back here was taking it to the next level. I kind of equate it to running a race, right? (First Mercer head coach) Bobby Lamb had the first leg, Drew had the second leg and Mike had the third one,” Taylor said. “I want to be that last leg, the finisher.”

To achieve that, Taylor recognizes he has to develop a culture and learn how to navigate the Southern Conference, one of the most talented football leagues in the FCS.

“I take a little bit from everybody. I call myself a chameleon,” Taylor said of his coaching style. “I can be the motivator, I can be the schematical guy, I can be the guy that

brings hell down on you. I can be cool, but I’m gonna be on you like white on rice. If you don’t like it, you can leave.”

Mercer’s defense, which was one of the best in the country against the run last season, will look to thrive again under a defensive-minded coach. Taylor will also try to keep the offense rolling.

Mercer’s immense success, ironically, makes said momentum harder for Taylor to sustain. The Bears have lost some significant playmakers — guys like Jerry Rice Award-winning quarterback Braden Atkinson and the Southern Conference’s top defender, edge rusher Andrew Zock — to the transfer portal, a fact Taylor readily acknowledges.

“In this era, the Braden Atkinsons of the world and the Andrew Zocks of the world, when they have tremendous years like that, you’re going to lose those kids,” he said. “The key is to keep as many quality players as you can... if you offer them development, you will get commitment.”

Taylor hopes to instill that culture and have an intense focus on recruiting, which he says is more crucial than ever in today’s college football landscape. He wants to build off of Jacobs’ explosive success while carving out his own niche — one that players can immediately identify with.

“We’re building relationships. That’s what I want to be, a good relationship builder,” the head coach said. “It might be like, ‘For the first month or so, you gonna hate me. But after that, we’ll be bonded for the rest of your life.’ If you ain’t buying into our standard, you can go kick rocks in flip flops.”

That’s Taylor’s mindset — he’s intense, but personable. He described himself as a “normal dude,” but it’s clear his passion for football has become immense.

“I did one interview where they asked me what my hobbies were. I said football,” Taylor said. “My wife said, ‘You can’t say that.’”

The one hobby he does still engage with is — fittingly, even if it’s on a limited basis — poker.

Taylor puts it on the TV while he pieces together plays, develops recruiting strategies and knocks out other coaching duties. He doesn’t participate anymore, but something about that strategy always draws him in and offers a pleasant backdrop to his work.

With a dedicated leader and someone familiar with Macon at the helm for Mercer’s next chapter, it seems the Bears — and Taylor — have been dealt a pretty good hand.

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