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The Macon Melody

VOLUME II, NUMBER 34 » FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2026 » REPORTING FOR MACON, FROM MACON » MACONMELODY.COM

MAPPING PROBLEMS

Macon board of elections works to solve mapping errors ahead of District 5 election

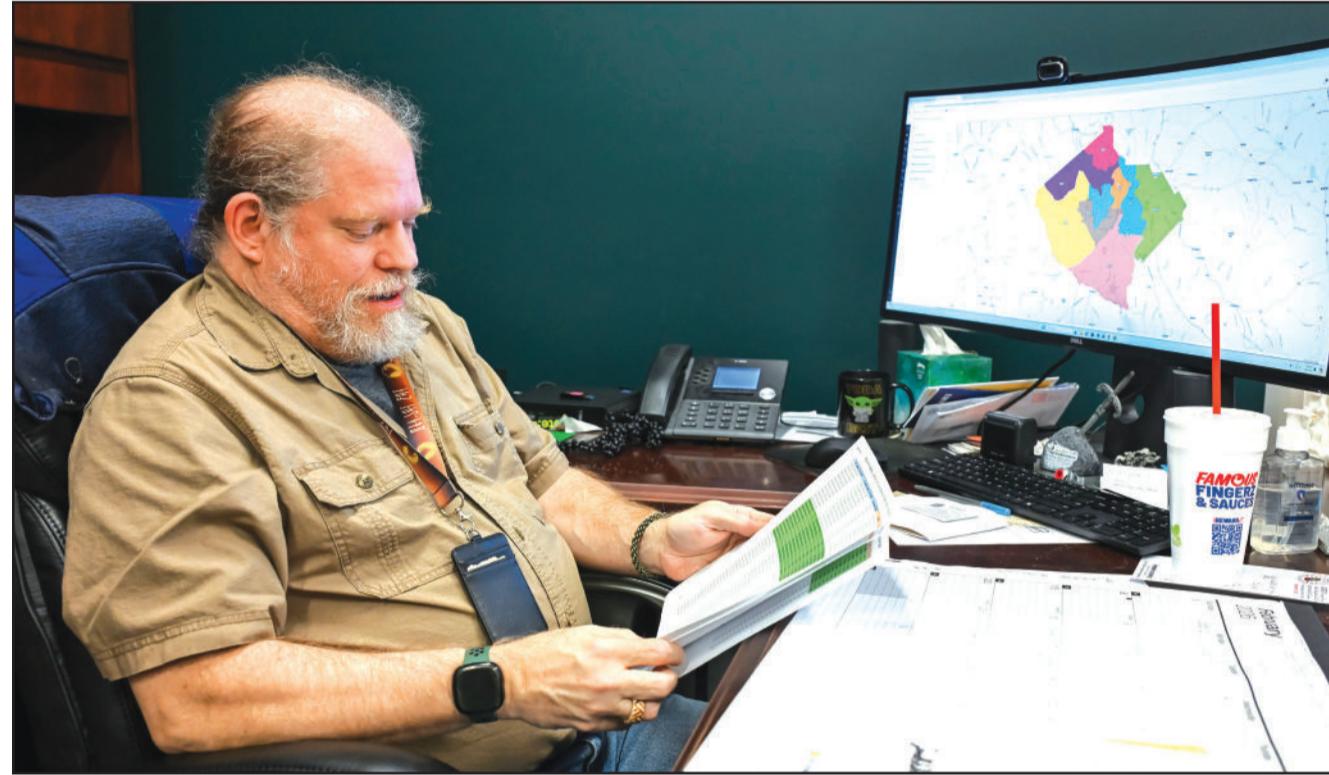


PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Macon-Bibb County Elections Supervisor Tom Gillon looks over a Commission District data sheet at his office last week. Gillon said some problems with voters on certain District 5 streets were resolved.

BY LAURA E. CORLEY

Senior Reporter

laura@maconmelody.com

Some residents in Macon-Bibb County Commission District 5 may be registered to vote in other districts, an error the Macon-Bibb County elections supervisor is working to correct ahead of the special election to fill the vacant seat of Seth Clark, who resigned in early January to run for lieutenant governor.

The Georgia Secretary of State's Office is looking into the matter following a complaint submitted by the chair of the Macon-Bibb County Democratic Party.

District 8 Commissioner Donice Bryant raised the issue at a January commission meeting during which the board voted to approve qualifying dates and fees for the special election in March.

Bryant, who was elected to represent parts of central and west Bibb County in 2024, said she first complained about the issue two years ago after voters in her district said

that only candidates from District 5 were on their ballots.

"I was contacted by a couple of them today," Bryant said at the meeting Jan. 20. "They checked their voter cards and they're still showing District 5. ... What are we doing about that? Who do I need to contact about that because (Elections Supervisor Tom) Gillon says he can't do it. So what are we doing?"

Mayor Lester Miller said he wasn't the Board of Elections or the state department "so if someone has an issue with the board of elections that's something they need to take up direct with them."

Interim County Attorney Duke Groover said the county commission has no control over the Board of Elections and is only required to set fees and dates for qualifying, which is set to take place Feb. 11-15.

Kerry Hatcher, who is campaigning for an at-large seat on the Bibb County Board of Education, was in the crowd. He listened to Bryant and took it upon himself to look into her

concerns.

"I'm a data guy," Hatcher said. "I think this is why it's important that government publishes data automatically, on the regular, without any impediment to accessing it. ... That would solve a lot of our trust issues or uncover problems and allow us to move forward as a community to fix it."

Hatcher told The Melody he downloaded digital maps of the districts and overlaid them with voter registration information. That voter information was obtained from someone in the Macon-Bibb County Republican party whose colleague purchases it monthly from the Georgia Secretary of State's Office. Hatcher's analysis showed as many as 500 voters in District 5 alone were registered in the wrong districts.

"Long story short, there's at least a thousand people across the county who are registered in the wrong commission district," Hatcher said. "That can cause all kinds of issues."

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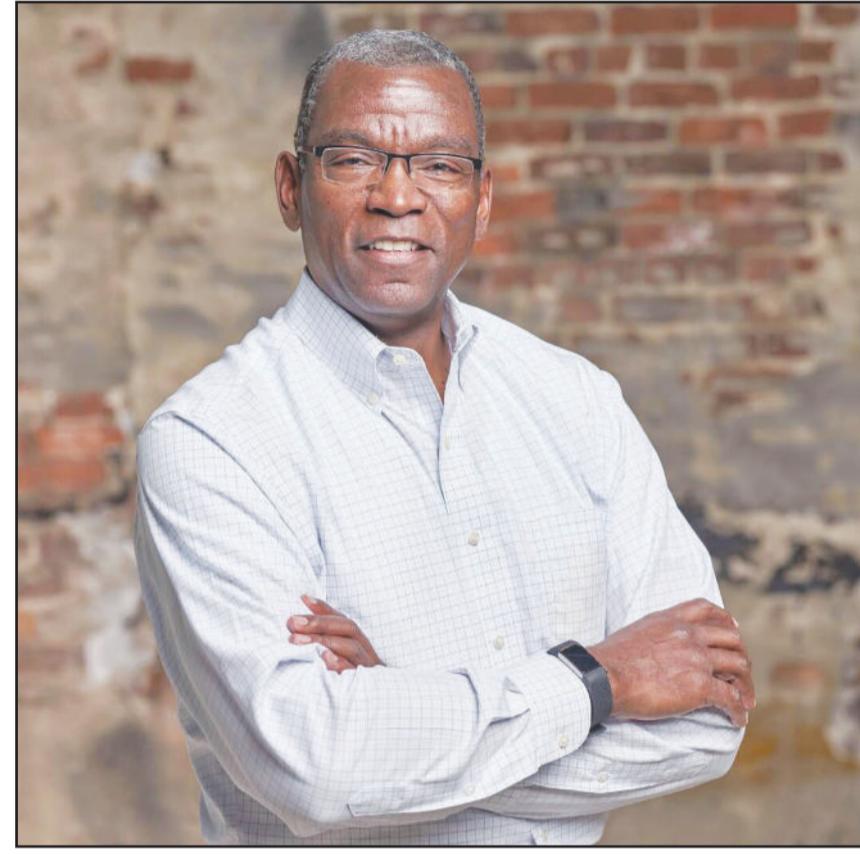
Periodical — Mail Label

From sweets to stuffed animals, here are some of Macon's best Valentine's Day gifts



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Designer Cora puts a rose bouquet together at Lawrence Mayer on Tuesday as the florist prepares for Valentine's Day. Macon has plenty of gifts ranging from V-Day classics to more outside-the-box picks for the holiday.

The Macon Melody



COURTESY PHOTO

Macon Water Authority CEO Ron Shipman died suddenly after a heart attack Feb. 6 while in Thomson, Georgia. The MWA was "sad and hurt" after Shipman's death, board chair Gary Bechtel said.

MWA CEO Shipman remembered for his steady leadership after sudden death

BY LAURA E. CORLEY

Senior Reporter

laura@maconmelody.com

that's what killed him."

Bechtel said Shipman, who was also a pilot, had a physical exam earlier in the week and had "said everything was great."

Bechtel credited Shipman with getting MWA in better shape organizationally.

"Ron had done a lot of work to try to get the administrative and budget side in a great order," he said.

On Monday, MWA announced Michel Wanna, the authority's assistant executive director and vice president of field and plant operations, would take the helm as interim CEO.

"Ron was very organized and he had already begun working on succession planning, so it was already laid in place that Michel would assume this role if for some reason he

SEE SHIPMAN
PAGE 2

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON

Features Editor

evelyn@maconmelody.com

this year, according to the NRF. Roughly 40% of shoppers will opt for flowers, greeting cards or an evening out.

But Valentine's Day isn't just for the romantic couple — everyone deserves to feel a bit of love this year.

Shoppers are budgeting an average of \$199.78 for the holiday, the highest amount since 2020, according to the National Retail Federation and Prosper Insights & Analytics.

The

NRF projects a total of \$29.1 billion in consumer spending for the heartfelt holiday.

Candy — a classic gift for a sweetheart — still stands as the most popular Valentine's Day purchase with 56% of shoppers planning to buy it.

But what lasts longer than a box of chocolates? A quarter of consumers plan to purchase jewelry

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Rutland HS agriculture programs teach Macon students everything from livestock to gardening

BY CASEY CHOUNG
Community Reporter
casey@maconmelody.com

In Rutland High School's agriculture education program, students do everything from growing plants in the greenhouse to carving detailed wooden plaques with a computerized cutter.

The school partners with local farms to house and care for dairy cows that are shown off at the Georgia National Fair. There's a coop nearby with goats and several varieties of chicken.

Students have ample time to get their hands dirty in the Bibb County School District's agriculture program, but their education will continue after they graduate thanks to the new chapter of the Young Farmer Program.

Robbie Bartlett, an agriculture teacher at Rutland High School, is spearheading the new Young Farmer Program in Bibb County, which is operating as an adult agricultural education program within the Future Farmers of America system.

Future Farmers of America has chapters nationwide dedicated to agricultural education, but the Young Farmer program keeps learning going after students graduate and serves as a place for graduates to network and find job opportunities.

Through the program, Bartlett brought a class about urban gardening to Rosa Jackson Recreation Center. The group also plans on teaching a class about hydroponics at Hartley Elementary School later this month.

"It ties the school and community

together," Bartlett said.

State legislators approved Bibb County's application to the Georgia Young Farmer Program last year. The county joins more than 50 other programs in the state.

Cassandra Washington, director of the district's Career, Technical and Agricultural Education department, said the new program will help the community understand the demands of urban agriculture.

Bibb County's program will focus more on the industrial nature of agriculture when compared to programs in rural counties, she said.

"You're looking at industries coming into a community, you want to make sure that you can meet the need and that our students have the academic ability," Washington said.

The school district also has agriculture programs at Northeast High School, Appling Middle School and Bruce Elementary.

The Rutland school zone is one of the few in the state that has a Future Farmers of America program in its elementary, middle and high schools.

The school's FFA chapter works in tandem with its agricultural education program, which began in 2018.

After completing basic agriculture courses in high school, students can pick a pathway like animal science, horticulture or agricultural mechanics.

"There's a lot of choices and a lot of different pathways students can take that are geared toward hands-on industry that teaches them the life skills based off of what the industry



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Aubrey Moore, left, and Addison Colbert, vice president of the Rutland High School FFA, wrap ribbon around a bouquet of flowers at the school on February 10.

needs are in our area," Bartlett said.

Addison Colbert, vice president of the Rutland High School FFA, joined the Young Farmers program in sixth grade. Now she's a senior.

She won the state competition for floriculture, the craft and science of cultivating flowers. She works in the school's greenhouse to keep plants

watered and curates her own floral arrangements.

Colbert and her classmates are certified under the Georgia Green Industry Association. Membership to the larger plant club got Colbert thinking about careers in agriculture.

"We've learned a lot, not even just

about agriculture," she said. "It definitely feels like we've grown mentally and emotionally."

Macon will host the state's FFA convention in April. With it being the first year of Macon's Young Farmer program, Bartlett said he hopes to bring in greater community involvement.

SHIPMAN

Continued from Page 1

left or passed. And unfortunately it was the latter," Bechtel said.

Shipman helped usher some of

Macon's most powerful institutions through uncertain times before he was hired as the CEO of MWA.

In 2020, he retired as vice president of Georgia Power's Southwest Region, according to his biography on MWA's website.

Two years later, following his brief appointment as interim CEO of MWA, Shipman was hired on permanently to fill the vacancy left by previous CEO Tony Rojas. He served a stint as interim CEO and president of the Greater Macon

Chamber of Commerce before Jessica Walden took the helm of the nonprofit in 2022.

Shipman was the current chair of the Macon-Bibb County Hospital Authority Board and also served on the Macon-Bibb County Industrial

Authority as well as various nonprofit and civic boards.

A private funeral service was held Wednesday in Thomson.

The Macon Melody

REPORTING

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Maintaining Macon's network of Little Libraries takes care and commitment, community shows

BY CASEY CHOUNG
Community Reporter
casey@maconmelody.com

Frank Broome said he's always had the "tinkering" gene. The 70-year-old has long dabbled in woodworking and saw an opportunity to use his skills to fix up something right down the street from his home.

His latest project was unveiled at Tattnall Square Park in Macon on the morning of Feb. 6, a new community bookshelf.

The white, doghouse-sized bookcase is roofed with light brown wooden shingles that form a gable.

A glass door with a magnetic latch opens up to a shelf decorated with colorful children's handprints.

Boxes like the one Broome built are part of the Free Little Libraries program in Macon, where community members can take books to read and contribute their own volumes.

"I think they're a conversation starter," Mercer English professor Thomas Bullington said. "They're a way for people to get involved and get connected to their communities."

There are over 150,000 Free Little Libraries in the world, but Macon's network was established by Mercer professor Jen Look in 2014. Look left Mercer in 2015, and many of the libraries fell into disrepair until Bul-

lington came along.

Right before the pandemic in 2020, Bullington taught his first service learning course based around monitoring and curating the Little Free Libraries of Macon.

Students keep records of book conditions and which books were being checked out and added. They can add books that match the preferences based on what community members have historically checked out.

"Part of it is to get students to see that books aren't just a matter of content," Bullington said. "It's kind of like a librarianship."

Bullington said students helped fix up the Free Little Library outside

Society Garden and plan to work on the one next to the Macon Dog Park.

However, the biggest hurdle for the library's curators is keeping in touch with the original stewards. The organization behind Little Free Libraries has an online map with locations and contact information.

New libraries have to be registered to appear on the map, but not all of the Little Free Libraries in Macon are registered. Registration also allows people to get in touch about their bookshelves and "keep an eye on things," Bullington said.

"It's a feedback loop, and we're trying to make it a positive feedback loop," he said.

The original library in Tat-

tnall Square Park was "decaying," Broome said. The post and braces forming the base of the house for books were part of the original, but he updated the other features to get it looking new again.

The cedar and treated plywood along with several layers of paint should stave off rot, he said.

Broome didn't complete the new library all by himself. He said he and a neighbor donated the expensive shingles and his son helped cut materials.

Mercer University students will fill out the little library with books in the future.



PHOTOS BY JASON VORHEES

LEFT: Alexander II Magnet School students help unveil a new Little Library the morning Feb. 6 in Tattnall Square Park. The original Little Free Library in the park had been in disrepair for some time before Frank Broome helped repair it.

RIGHT: The inside of the new library box in Tattnall already had a few books inside when it was unveiled last week. The shelves will be full once a group of Mercer students, taught by English professor Thomas Bullington, stock it with more books. Bullington teaches classes about the Little Library program and helps keep book boxes in shape.

MAPPING

Continued from Page 1

The state legislature draws new district lines every decade to account for population changes. The most recent redistricting occurred in 2024.

George Thomas Jr., who lost the 2024 election for the District 6 seat to Raymond Wilder, recalled he was unable to vote for himself in the election because he didn't appear on his ballot.

"They had to fix it. It was wrong," Thomas said, adding he was "surprised" to learn some voters were still registered in the wrong districts.

"I would have thought it was done by now," he said.

Hatcher shared his findings with the local elections office as well as the local GOP and Democratic parties.

Renoalda Scott, chair of the Macon-Bibb County Democratic Party, forwarded an email containing Hatcher's findings to the Georgia Secretary of State's Office.

"I think that something needed to be done about it," Scott said of the complaint she submitted that sparked a state investigation. "We should not be going into a district election with those findings."

Hatcher said he was contacted by an investigator with the state office who wanted more details on his findings.

Messages left for Robert Sinners, director of communications for the Georgia Secretary of State's Office, were not returned.

Amanda Prettyman, who is active in the Macon-Bibb County GOP, said the issue of election integrity is not just bipartisan but multi-partisan. She recalled that some candidates in 2024 contested the certification of the election due to voter

registration errors that were only realized when some voters went to cast their ballots.

"Really, the government has the ability to do that analysis," Prettyman said of ensuring voter addresses correlate with the correct districts. "The average local candidate doesn't have the money to mount an election lawsuit. ... That's why it's so important that our local office is accurate."

How districts are checked

Macon-Bibb County Elections Supervisor Tom Gillon said his office "eyeballed it with paper maps" to detect discrepancies with voter registrations until 2019 or 2020.

"Then we got GIS [Geographic Information System] software, and that simplified matters somewhat," Gillon said, referring to the computerized version of district maps overlaid with pins marking voters' addresses. "That helped out a lot because I can bring up maps and just overlay the different districts over any address and one-by-one figure out which" districts a voter should be in."

Gillon said he typically checks districts against voter rolls before a major election and had already been working to verify District 5 voters were accurately registered before Scott sent the complaint to the state.

Gillon said he sometimes recruits help from an election official in Hall County, who "has software that he can compare our voter list to his GIS maps and instantly pull out any discrepancies. ... Every so often I'll hit him up and he will analyze ours and point out any things that need fixing."

The district maps can get complicated. The county has nine county commission districts, six school districts and four water authority districts, plus state legislature and con-

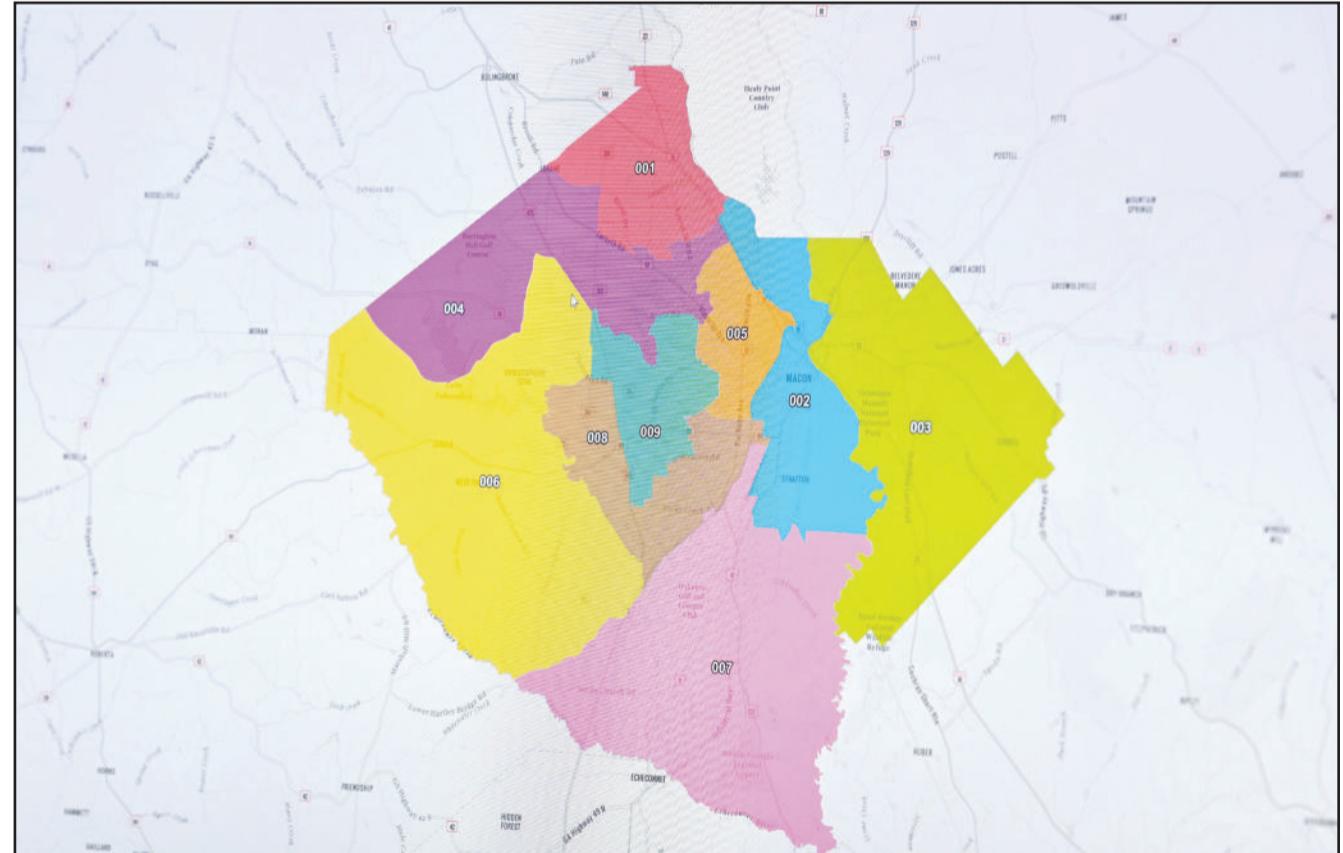


PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

A Macon-Bibb County Commission District map is shown on the screen at Elections Supervisor Tom Gillon's office. Some people that live in homes that lie right on the District 5 line could be registered to vote in the wrong district, though Gillon resolved several of those cases recently ahead of the election.

gressional districts. When there are multiple races on the ballot, a single polling place can have multiple ballot styles with different choices depending on their addresses.

"We can do it in house, but not as quickly, not as accurately," Gillon said. "We did a lot of work in 2024 to fix the issues that we found then. Most of the changes were done after the census in 2023 and a few were changed in 2024 because of some lawsuits."

The digital maps are organized by street segments. Gillon showed The Melody where some district lines cut straight through individual homes, prompting him to determine which district a majority of the home lies within.

In analysing District 5 maps, Gil-

lion said he identified nearly a dozen streets where voters were incorrectly registered to vote including: Arlington Park, Christian Avenue, Churchill Street, Columbus Road, Eveline Avenue, Lowe Street, Melrose Street, Montpelier Place, Napierville Avenue, Oglesby Place and Sharon Drive.

"Those got taken care of today," Gillon said on Feb. 6, adding that he could not determine how many voters were impacted because his role is only "making sure each street segment is properly coded" and the state handles the rest, including sending out new voter registration cards.

"We make the change in GARVis [Georgia Registered Voter Information System] and it gets automatically

changed — sometimes instantly, sometimes overnight, depending on how we change it," Gillon said. "We try to find everything we can, but it's a slow process."

"We're going to keep an eye on it periodically, elections or not," Gillon said of ensuring voters are registered to vote in the correct districts.

Several people have filed declarations of intent to campaign with the state, but the window for local candidate qualifying starts at noon Feb. 11 and ends at 5:30 p.m. on Feb. 15. Early voting for District 5 starts Feb. 23 and the election is slated for March 17.

To view a digital overlay of the district maps, visit maconmelody.com.

SNAPSHOTS

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PHOTO NO. 1 — The Chatham Rabbits perform at Macon Bagel's inaugural concert Monday, Feb. 9. Photo by Mark Powell.

PHOTO NO. 2 — North Carolina-based musical duo Sarah and Austin McCombie of Chatham Rabbits performed at Macon Bagels while touring Georgia. Photo by Mark Powell.

PHOTO NO. 3 — The Mount de Sales Academy Chorale sings on Feb. 4 during a ribbon cutting ceremony of the reimagined Rosa Parks Square. Photo by Matt Odom.

PHOTO NO. 4 — Macon native and international vocalist Jasmine Habersham sings at Wesleyan College's Pierce Chapel for a Macon Concert Association event Feb. 5. Photo courtesy of Wesleyan College.

PHOTO NO. 5 — Many city officials attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony, held on the terrace at City Hall, for the newly renovated Rosa Parks Square. Photo by Matt Odom.

PHOTO NO. 6 — Mercer graduate Nancy Grace shares her journey and encourages students to remain steadfast during her keynote address for Mercer's annual Founders' Day Feb. 4. Photo by Leah Yetter.

PHOTO NO. 7 — More than 100 volunteers cleaned up Bloomfield Road, Rocky Creek Road, Village Green and other areas Feb. 7 for the Hands On Bloomfield Neighborhood Cleanup. Photo courtesy of Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful.

OPINION

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Good care, good people and goodbye, appendix

About two weeks ago, I made my first visit to Atrium Health Navient.

It wasn't for pleasure, that's for sure.

I had been suffering for weeks with GI issues, which I thought were related to a lingering sinus infection I'd picked up around Christmas.

After several urgent care visits and dealing with a severe case of dehydration, I was told to visit Atrium's emergency room, which I begrudgingly did.



Joshua Wilson

A few hours and many tests later, I had the cause of my recent suffering.

My appendix — a really worthless (and, as it turns out, mean) organ — had turned on me and was disrupting its neighboring organs.

It needed to go, and it needed to go fast. The turnaround time, from

ER check-in to the operating room, was nine hours.

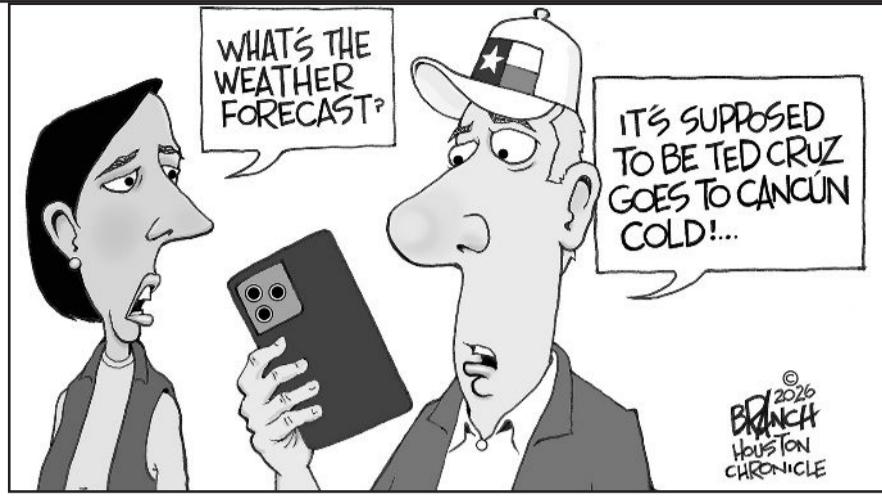
My entire stay at Atrium lasted about 15 hours.

I was wheeled to the car about three hours after the successful surgery. I was blessed to have no complications and a relatively easy recovery.

I lost count of the Atrium medical personnel I encountered during my short stint there, but they were all

SEE WILSON

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Letter to the editor: Georgia continues to fail its citizens

BY ANITA L. BARKIN

The Governor and the legislature are failing Georgia citizens on health care by neglecting to address the significant impacts of the loss of federal health care funding.

In Governor Kemp's State of the State address on January 15, 2026, the impending healthcare crisis was barely noted and Republican state legislators have been silent on the matter.

Georgia's uninsured rate is the fifth highest in the country. Georgia's healthcare performance ranks nationally from 45th to 48th in the country depending on the study. March of Dimes gave Georgia an F rating. The low rankings are a result of high costs, poor access to care

and poor health outcomes.

Failure to expand Medicaid has contributed to a fragile healthcare system.

The passage of H.R.1 by the federal government will exact a further blow and means that even more Georgians will be priced out of the insurance market. There will be more strain on rural hospitals and more financial pressure on Georgia's families.

Studies of the Federal cuts have been consistent in describing the negative impacts on Georgia over the next 4 years.

An estimated 460,000 Georgia Access enrollees will lose coverage. Already in this first phase, approximately 190,000 residents have lost insurance. The impact on Georgia's economy includes the loss of

46,500 jobs and \$336 million in lost revenue.

A report by Regional Economic Models, Inc (March 2024) suggests that Medicaid expansion in Georgia would create additional jobs statewide, stimulate consumer spending, increase the size of the economy and have a positive impact on jobs and income in rural Georgia.

In Bibb County alone, Medicaid expansion would create an estimated 727 jobs, generate \$115.3 million in additional economic output and would have a personal income impact of \$27.7 million.

Healthcare legislation must be a priority.

All Georgians deserve better, affordable healthcare coverage. It makes sense from a public health and economic standpoint.

Georgians are seeing what cruel immigration enforcement looks like

For weeks, we've watched the unraveling of America in Minnesota — where federal agents have taken deadly action and entire neighborhoods are reeling. But Georgia is not far behind, already absorbing the shock of disruptions so sudden that many people don't yet have language for what's happening.

Across our state, federal immigration raids have begun to reshape daily behavior. Lawfully present residents are changing routines to hide from detention without due process. Terrified parents are keeping children home. Neighbors



FINE PRINT

STACEY ABRAMS

hesitate before calling for help, concerned that it may be the last time they are seen or heard. Not because they are dangerous criminals, but because interaction with the outside world is unpredictable and might be fatal.

Their fears are grounded in the lived reality of Georgians. Last fall,

federal authorities detained 475 workers during an immigration raid at the Hyundai Motor Group electric vehicle site outside Savannah — the largest single-site enforcement operation in the history of Homeland Security Investigations. Georgia built its modern economy with a heavy reliance on immigration — more than 11% of our state's population is foreign-born. They staff our hospitals and our doctor's offices, teach and take care of our

SEE ABRAMS

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Bizarre bills obscure General Assembly's quest to address unaffordability, tax burdens

It is easy for some Georgians to look at the General Assembly and wonder, what on earth is going on under the Gold Dome? While legislators engage in meaningful work, it is often overshadowed. After all, media outlets love covering more outlandish pieces of legislation. It's fun for pundits to cover them, and there are plenty of examples of wacky initiatives.

Rep. David Clark, R-Buford, filed legislation urging locals to consider changing Sawnee Mountain's name to Trump Mountain.

"The mountain is named for a local Cherokee leader named Saw-

nee who was forcibly moved to Oklahoma in the Trail of Tears," reports WSB-TV. "He was known to work with early settlers of Forsyth County to build their homes."

In short, erasing Sawnee's name seems misguided.

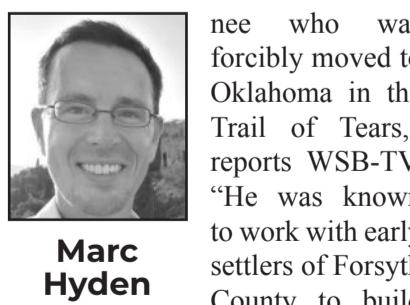
Meanwhile, Rep. Eric Bell, D-Jonesboro, introduced a bill to make lemon pepper Georgia's official state chicken wing flavor. This may not get you shaking with rage,

but I need to put my foot down. Lemon pepper isn't that great. While the original dry lemon pepper flavor wasn't even invented on this side of the Mississippi, the wet lemon pepper sauce does have Georgia connections. It has deep roots to one of Atlanta's strip clubs — perhaps not something Georgians should publicize.

These bills — among others — have received ample attention and could loom large over this legislative session. However, a number of

SEE HYDEN

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Marc Hyden

The Macon Melody

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Evelyn Davidson » Features Editor

Laura E. Corley » Senior Reporter

Casey Choung » Community Reporter

Jason Vorhees » Photographer

To reach a staff member, email firstname@maconmelody.com.

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

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

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

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.

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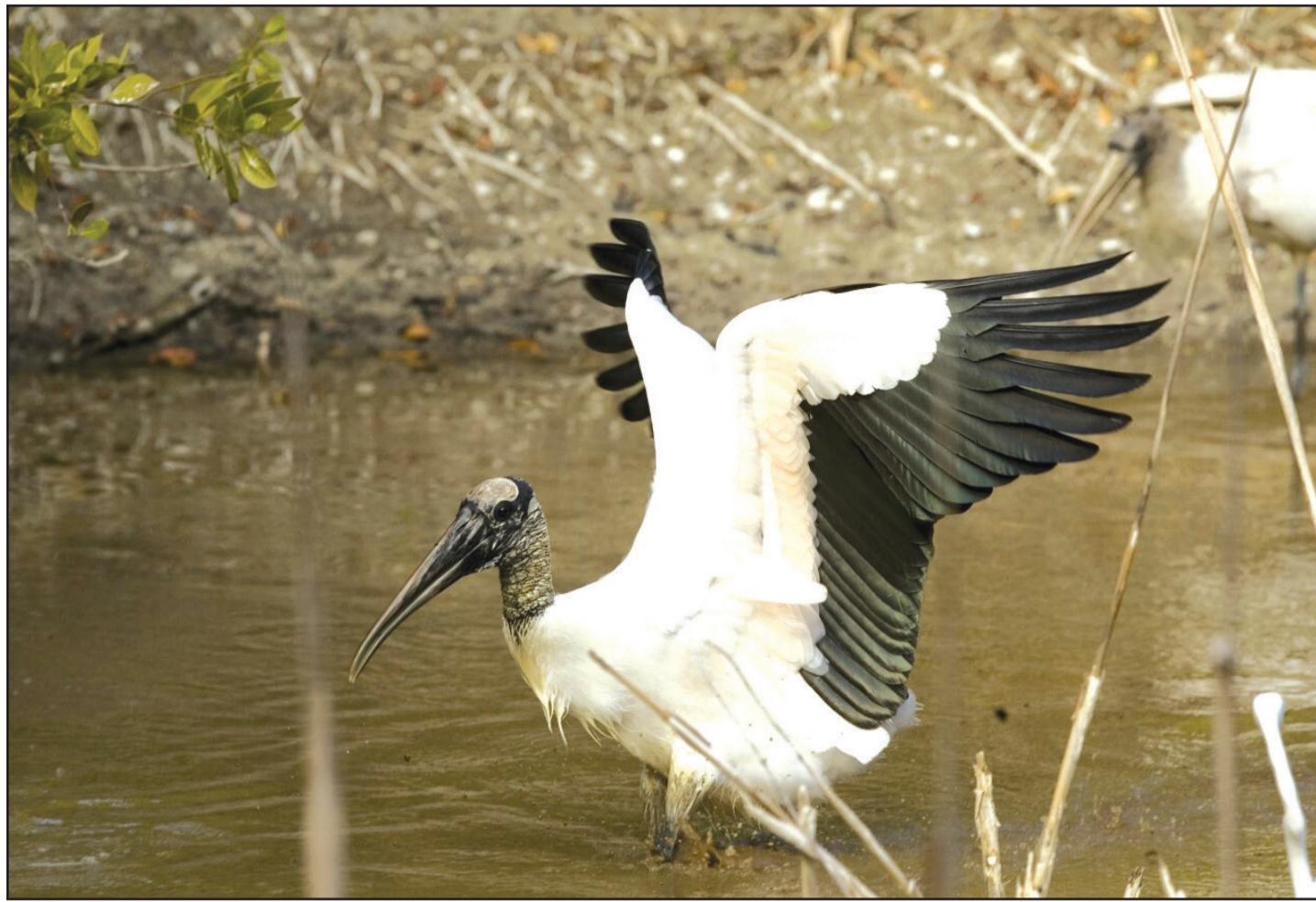


PHOTO BY STEVE HILLEBRAND / USFWS

Wood storks are being removed from the endangered species list, but advocates say it's too soon for them to lose key protections. The iconic bird can be found in the swamps and wetlands of south Georgia, among other locales.

Wood storks have been removed from the endangered species list. Advocates say it's still too soon

BY EMILY JONES

WABE and Grist
wabe.org | grist.org

This coverage is made possible through a partnership between WABE and Grist, a nonprofit environmental media organization.

Federal officials are removing an iconic bird found in south Georgia from the endangered species list — but environmental advocates say that might not be good news for the birds.

Wood storks live and breed in the swamps and wetlands of south and coastal Georgia, as well as much of Florida and several other southeastern states. The enormous, bald-headed white birds with black-tipped wings have been on the endangered species list since 1984. At the time, their population had declined by more than 75

percent from their 1930s level.

The species has since enjoyed a major recovery. After downgrading the stork from endangered to threatened several years ago, the US Fish and Wildlife Service has decided to remove it from the list.

"The wood stork's recovery is a real conservation success thanks to a lot of hard work from our partners," said FWS director Brian Nesvik in a statement. "The Trump administration is working quickly to remove federal protections from species that no longer need them, and I'm proud that the wood stork is another example of that."

Environmental groups agree the wood stork has been a major success story for the endangered species list. But Will Harlan, southeast director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said it's the "worst possible time" to remove

protections for the storks.

"Delisting them right now while stripping protections for their essential habitat is a really dangerous, premature, and reckless decision," he said.

A recent supreme court decision and a policy change by the Environmental Protection Agency have both removed protections for the wetlands wood storks rely on. Advocates argue those changes will put wood storks at greater risk, making the habitat protections that come with endangered species listing critical.

The storks also haven't achieved two of their three main recovery goals, Harlan said. Although the number of breeding pairs has doubled since the species was first listed, the number of surviving chicks and the population in South Florida have not bounced back enough, according to Harlan.

ing for the report.

Because the data center industry is growing and changing so fast, it's hard to predict accurately. The report finds data center energy use across the region could grow by anything from 2.2 to 8.7 gigawatts by 2031. Still, rapid improvements to technology that could make AI much more efficient in the coming years are likely to dampen the overall increase in energy demand.

But electric utilities across the region are planning for the extreme high end of data center growth, the report finds. That creates a risk that utilities will build more infrastructure than data centers actually need.

"Who's going to pay for that?" asked Gumerman. "Not the data centers that never came." Regular customers, he said, will likely end up paying those costs. "And I think that's the problem in a nutshell."

The Greenlink report is far from the first to question the projections for how much energy data centers require and how much that generation will affect individual ratepayers. Many people, from public commenters to expert consultants to the Public Service Commission's own staff, made similar points last year during hearings over Georgia Power's now-approved expansion. The risk of residential and small business customers paying for infrastructure built mostly for data centers was a persistent concern.

The Georgia PSC has taken several steps to protect ordinary ratepayers from data center costs. New billing terms approved last year allow Georgia Power to collect minimum payments from large power users like data centers and commit them to 15-year con-

tracts — measures designed to ensure those customers pay for any infrastructure built to serve them and continue to pay even if they leave the state. As part of the agreement to approve the 10 gigawatt expansion last year, the utility agreed to backstop costs if the projected demand doesn't materialize. The commission has also stressed it can still halt the recently approved projects. Clean energy and consumer advocates are skeptical these measures are enough.

"We share the public's concerns about costs to provide energy to new large-load customers, including data centers," said commission chair Jason Shaw in a statement when the deal was released. "This agreement ensures data centers — or, if necessary, Georgia Power itself — will pay for this new infrastructure. Existing customers will not."

In addition to the risk of rising costs for ratepayers, the sky-high demand projections for data centers are also stalling the transition away from fossil fuels as a source of electricity. Studies have found much of the coming data center demand could be met without building new infrastructure, through improving efficiency among utilities nationwide and through flexibility by the data centers themselves. Instead, utilities and data centers alike are falling back on natural gas. The U.S. now leads the world in gas-fired capacity in development, nearly tripling the total from 2024 to 2025, according to Global Energy Monitor. Much of the capacity utilities are building is to meet increased demand from data centers, and more

P&Z approves private cemetery but defers Niche nightclub after owner didn't show

BY LIZ FABIAN

The Macon Newsroom

macon-newsroom.com

A new nonprofit, private cemetery can be built across from Macon's Downtown Airport following Monday's hearings of the Macon-Bibb County Planning & Zoning Commission.

P&Z agreed to rezone from residential to agricultural nearly 63 acres in two parcels at 3450 Ocmulgee East Boulevard and 2708 Herbert Smart Airport Road to approve the conditional use of the property as a burial ground.

Applicant Ubaid Saiyed said Peace Garden Cemetery initially plans only five acres of burial sites, but will reserve 30 acres for future use and maintain more than 27 acres as protected greenspace.

"This particular property was the only property that checkmarks all the requirements by the state and the city," Saiyed told commissioners.

Although the required buffer from other properties is 25 feet, the cemetery plans a 50-foot buffer from the property line and will leave 150 feet of undisturbed land from bodies of water.

P&Z Chair Jeane Eason asked about expansion plans, but Saiyed did not anticipate his small community would need much more room.

"This cemetery is intended to serve the long-term needs of our community in a respectful, well-maintained, and environmentally responsible manner," Saiyed wrote in the application.

The proposed owner of a new nightclub at 350 Cherry St. did not show for Monday's hearing, so P&Z deferred until Feb. 23 that application for live music and operating hours until 2 a.m.

Georgette Drafts wants a conditional use permit to relocate her Niche Lounge from Second Street to about 2,000 square feet in a 1950 commercial building next to the Tubman Museum.

At 931 Walnut St., commissioners sided 4-1 with the Design Review Board in approving a proposed fix for a leaning retaining wall. The applicant blamed the compromised wall on a tree the city planted in an easement that serves as the homeowner's driveway, but Commissioner Kesia Stafford warned that unresolved water drainage issues could compromise the repairs.

The historic 1860 "Slate Row" building that was constructed by the slaves who built the Hay House is on the National Register of Historic Places and falls under historic district guidelines.

The original contractor did not apply for the necessary permit and work was halted after two cinderblock columns were added to stabilize the stucco wall.

P&Z staff deemed the fix inappropriate, but the Design Review Board accepted the submitted design from new contractor Stucco Brothers that calls for evenly-spaced, stucco columns painted to match the wall.

P&Z also ratified the Design Review Board's approval of a new house design for 819 Edgewood Ave.

Property owner Johnika Green must meet design guidelines for the Beall's Hill neighborhood including 9-foot ceilings on the first level, smooth-finished siding, a gabled roof, and regulation porch railings and windows.

P&Z also accepted the Design Review Board's recommendation for an accessory building at 267 Buford Place in the Vineville Historic District.

Homeowner Steve Colon failed to get the necessary approvals before adding walls and a roof onto a compost bin in the back of his property to create a storage building.

The review board approved the construction as long as smooth-finished siding is used and a four-inch casing is put up around the door and on the corners of the building.

P&Z commissioners also approved a variance for a parking lot for an automobile service shop at 4700 Sheraton Drive.

To meet floodplain encroachment regulations and sewer easements, Joseph Reeves requested and received an exception from the required parking stall size of 9 feet by 20 feet to 9 feet by 18 feet.

Commissioners also granted a variance to Laura Fussell to plat two properties at 4632 and 4628 Dykes Road into three parcels, per the last will and testament of the late Samuel C. Dykes.

Civic Journalism Senior Fellow Liz Fabian covers Macon-Bibb County government entities for The Macon Newsroom and can be reached at fabian_lj@mercer.edu or 478-301-2976.

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SEE AI
PAGE 7

Georgia Republicans pass surprise ban on puberty blockers for minors

BY MAYA HOMAN

Georgia Recorder
georgiaRecorder.com

Republicans in the Georgia Senate hijacked a bill aimed at increasing access to home health care services by adding two last-minute amendments that would further restrict access to gender-affirming care for transgender Georgians.

Both amendments and the bill passed in a party-line vote Tuesday.

The first amendment to House Bill 54, introduced by Savannah Republican Sen. Ben Watson, would prevent doctors from prescribing puberty blockers to children diagnosed with gender dysphoria, a feeling of distress that comes from one's gender identity not matching one's body.

Watson, a doctor who specializes in internal medicine and geriatrics, said that the bill would not prevent adults over the age of 18 from seeking gender-affirming care.

"If you're an adult and you choose to do that, then that is on you," Watson said.

Another amendment to the bill, authored by Vidalia Republican Sen. Blake Tillery, would bar Georgia's state health insurance plan from covering gender-affirming care for state employees and their dependents, and prohibit Georgia's state-owned hospitals from providing such care.

It mimics Senate Bill 39, which passed out of the Senate during the 2025 legislative session but did not make it to a vote on the House floor.

Lt. Gov. Burt Jones, a Republican who is running for governor, quickly issued a statement praising the bill's passage.

Senate Democrats pushed back against the last-minute changes, criticizing Republicans for what they saw as a pivot from a recent focus on pocketbook issues to polarizing red meat proposals in an election year.

"Culture war bills are the easy

things to do, to pick on vulnerable populations and try to distract your voters and the voters of Georgia from the failure of the Republican agenda in this country and in this state to deliver a good quality of life for Georgians," said Sen. Elena Parment, an Atlanta Democrat.

Sen. RaShaun Kemp, an Atlanta Democrat and one of two openly gay lawmakers in the chamber, also condemned the bill.

"Legislative fear does not reduce the cost of Georgians' everyday lives," Kemp said. "Legislative fear just continues to divide us."

Kemp also warned lawmakers that passing the bill could leave the state vulnerable to costly lawsuits. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported last year that discrimination lawsuits and other complaints involving transgender people had cost Georgia taxpayers at least \$4.1 million since 2015.

Doctors have recommended a variety of options to treat gender dysphoria in transgender Georgians, including social transitioning, which could include adopting a new name or pronouns; hormone therapy, in which patients take estrogen or testosterone; or puberty blocking drugs, which pause the process of puberty.

However, legislation seeking to restrict health care access for transgender Georgians has grown more common in the GOP-controlled state Legislature in recent years.

In 2023, lawmakers banned doctors from performing gender-affirming surgeries or prescribing hormone treatments for minors with gender dysphoria but left puberty blockers available.

At the time, Republicans — including Watson — described the policy as a compromise that would allow children and their families more time to undergo mental health treatments and perhaps decide not to seek hormone therapy.

However, during the 2024 and



PHOTO BY ROSS WILLIAMS / GEORGIA RECORDER

Sen. Ben Watson debates a bill on the Senate floor. Watson and other senate Republicans took over a bill meant to expand access to home health care services, instead amending it to restrict gender-affirming care.

2025 sessions, Watson introduced additional legislation aimed at restricting puberty blockers from being used to treat minors for gender dysphoria, claiming that access to puberty blockers increased the likelihood that residents will choose to pursue gender-affirming care as adults. He also cited a Feb. 3 statement from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons expressing "substantial uncertainty" around the long-term benefits and harms of hormone therapy and puberty blockers.

Numerous major medical societies, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Pediatric Endocrine Society and the American Psychological Association have stated that puberty blockers, hormone therapy and gender confirmation

surgery are safe and effective treatments for gender dysphoria.

A 2025 law that sought to ban gender-affirming care for transgender inmates in state custody also hit a legal roadblock after a federal judge ruled that the law likely violated constitutional protections against cruel and unusual punishment. The state is currently appealing the ruling.

Bentley Hudgins, the Georgia state director of the Human Rights Campaign, criticized Senate Republicans for seeking to restrict health care access for transgender Georgians.

"They couldn't get their divisive agenda across the finish line last year, so they doubled down on treating children and trans adults as less

than," Hudgins said. "Bullies don't belong in government."

The bill now goes back to the House for consideration. However, a spokesperson for House Speaker Jon Burns, a Newington Republican, signaled there might not be much interest in taking up the measure.

"The House is going to remain focused on what Georgians have told us matters the most, and that's delivering meaningful property tax relief, strengthening healthcare and expanding access to quality education," Kayla Green, Burns' communications director, said in a statement Tuesday.

This story was originally published by the Georgia Recorder on georgiaRecorder.com.

Online tool helps you to compare Medicare and Medicaid, private costs

BY ELLEN ELDRIDGE

GPB News
gpb.org

Georgia residents now have a new way to compare the estimated costs paid for a large variety of health care services in the state, thanks to a searchable "shop for care" resource launched as part of the Georgia All-Payer Claims Database.

After entering information including your ZIP code, the Georgia APCD Cost Comparison Tool will give you the median provider costs on more than 200 medical procedures ranging from cardiac stress tests and childbirth to knee replacement and colonoscopies, the administrator of the Georgia All-Payer Claims Database says.

Dr. Jon Duke directs the Center for Health Analytics and Informatics at Georgia Tech Research Institute's Health Emerging and Advanced Technologies Division, which administers the APCD for the state of Georgia.

While there can be significant ranges for things such as radiology, the No Surprises Act protects patients from getting hit with an out-of-network anesthesiologist, for example, if your chosen surgeon is in network.

"Most people aren't too picky about who their radiologist is, unless they've been getting regular scans at a given location," Duke said. "So, in that context,

someone might say, 'Oh, I can get the low back MRI at this center down the way, and it's \$700, and over here, it may be \$2,000, and those kinds of differences can drive a change.'

In other cases, someone might decide to undergo hip surgery near home or choose a place because they've performed many of them.

The website, which filters by payer type, including commercial insurance, Medicare, and Medicaid, shows the median statewide commercial facility cost for a common surgery.

According to the new tool, the median cost for knee replacement is \$17,199, with a professional provider adding another \$2,239 to that. Across the state, the cost of that procedure ranges on the low end from \$6,833 for the facility and \$590 for the provider to \$22,963 and \$2,673 respectively.

"The tool is a great resource for consumers in Georgia," Duke said. "It should be looked at, however, with all the consideration of looking at one's own insurance, consulting with one's own health care providers, and taking into effect sort of the broader picture that goes into a health care decision. But it's a really great part of that equation and we're excited about it."

This story comes to The Melody through a reporting partnership with GPB News, a non-profit newsroom covering the state of Georgia.

WILSON

Continued from Page 5

wonderful. I've always been in awe of health care staffers, the wonders they work and the challenges they face, and that remains.

I haven't seen the bill yet, so my opinion might change. In all seriousness, though, I'm incredibly thankful for the thoughtful and thorough care I received. Kudos to all.

Across our country and even in Georgia, many communities are losing access to health care facilities and providers. Knowing Macon has so many stellar options is reassuring and a real feather in our overall cap.

While I was recovering, I took some time off and watched a lot of trash TV. My staff took on the extra workload without complaint or

question. I work with the best of the best. We're a small operation, and everyone on our staff goes above and beyond to meet and exceed our tagline, which is "reporting for Macon, from Macon."

To you folks, take a read and know how proud I am of your work, your kindness to your colleagues and your willingness to take on things outside of the job description. Let's keep doing this hard work. It's vitally important, and we do it well.

Six days after surgery, I was on a plane to Miami to meet with colleagues at our parent organization, the National Trust for Local News, and to attend a media forum hosted by the Knight Foundation.

The National Trust is all in on Macon, and Maconites know Knight and its commitment to our city. You can probably infer how excited I

was to be at both events.

I'll write more about takeaways from those gatherings in the coming weeks, but here's a broad stroke: The state of local news is complex, but there are so many people working to make sure you get — and keep — access to ethical, quality journalism.

We'll keep working on it. Hopefully, you'll keep reading and supporting our work.

I'll continue to lead those efforts here in Macon — with the support and expertise of an excellent team.

And with no appendix.

Thanks again, Atrium friends. I'm grateful.

Joshua Wilson is the executive editor of The Macon Melody. Write to him at joshua@maconmelody.com.

AI

Continued from Page 6

than a third of the whopping 252 gigawatts in development is on-site power for data centers. That latter

approach — where data centers are built with their own source of power, known as "behind the meter" generation — addresses the concern over rising costs but not fossil fuel emissions. While some tech companies are pursuing nuclear energy for their data centers, currently most of the power is coming from gas.

In Georgia, for instance, Georgia Power officials have said the vast majority of the projected demand driving the company's expansion comes from data centers. The utility has already delayed plans to close coal-fired power plants and begun adding new gas-fired turbines, and the 10 gigawatt expansion approved in December will come mostly from new gas turbines, which have pro-

jected lifespans of 45 years, and natural gas-generated electricity purchased from other utilities.

"I think people would be a lot less hesitant and a lot less up in arms about these 10 gigawatts if it was sustainable, smart growth," said Amy Sharma, executive director of Science for Georgia, a nonpartisan group advocating for the use of science in public policy.

"The idea that we're going to add this additional capacity with gas-fired turbines is horribly depressing and, as my high school daughter likes to remind me, so last century."

The state legislature in Georgia is currently considering several bills to address data center concerns. One would ensure regular customers don't pay for power generation built for data centers. Others would require more transparency from data center developers or even impose a statewide moratorium.

There are also bills to end the tax

breaks that data centers currently receive in Georgia.

State lawmakers already passed a bill to suspend tax exemptions for data centers in 2024, but Governor Brian Kemp vetoed it.

Meanwhile, some advocates are now trying to get the PSC to reverse its December decision, arguing Georgia Power didn't prove it needs the expansion.

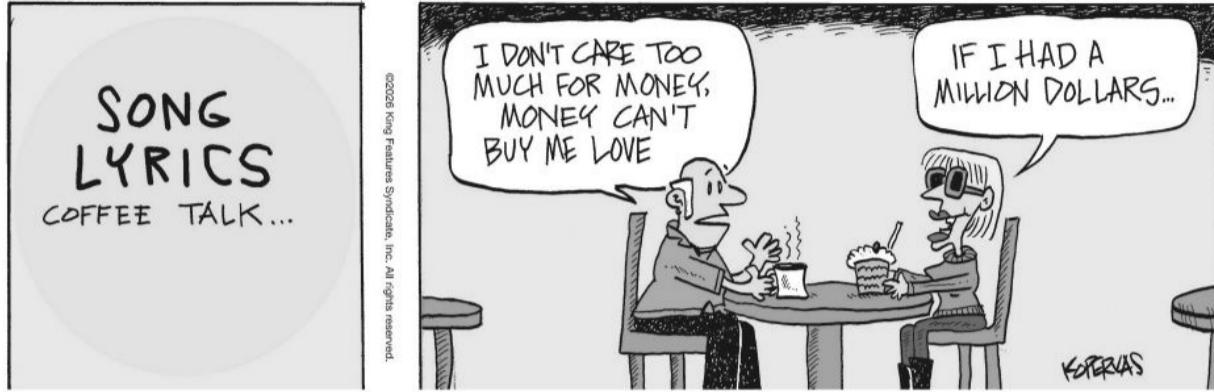


PHOTO BY GRANT BLANKENSHIP / GPB NEWS
Meta's Stanton Springs Data Center near the town of Social Circle.

Amber Waves

by Dave T. Phipps

Out on a Limb



by Gary Kopervas

The Spats

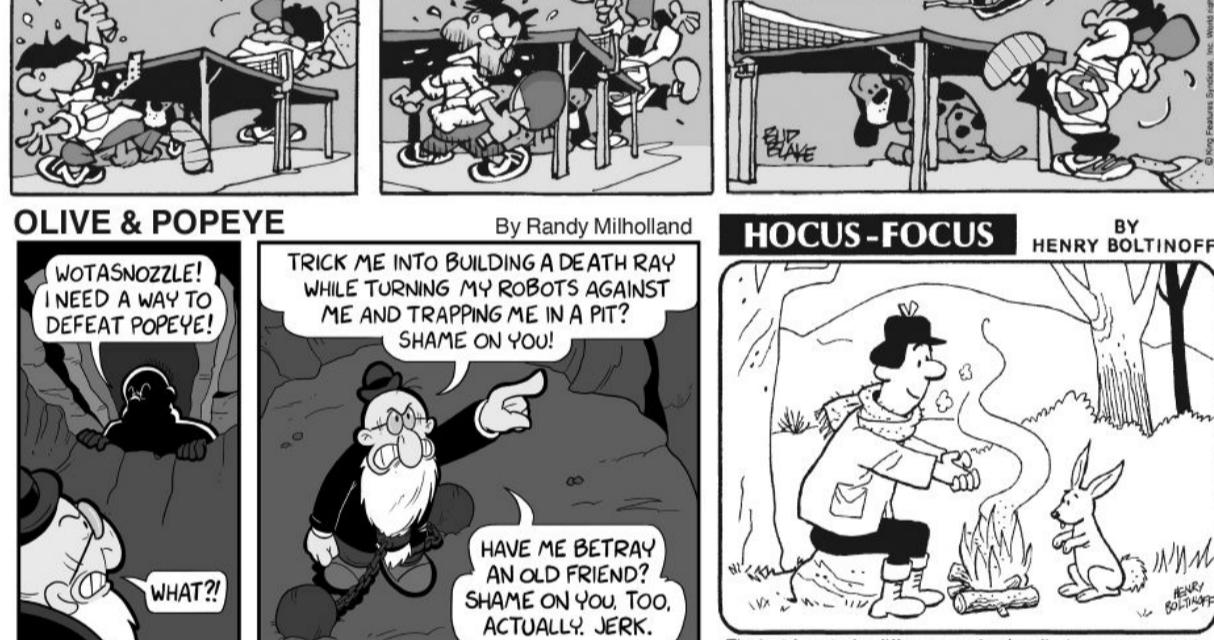


by Jeff Pickering

TIGER

by Bud Blake

OLIVE & POPEYE



By Randy Milholland

HOCUS-FOCUS BY HENRY BOLTONOFF



Find at least six differences in details between panels.



Differences: 1. Tail is smaller. 2. Arms are longer. 3. Backpack is carried. 4. Log is different. 5. Earflap is longer. 6. Rabbit's ear is moved.

Just Like Cats & Dogs



by Dave T. Phipps



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CryptoQuip

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

Clue: Q equals C

COEHOEMQK YVEY E TKOGRK
QWGTEML NMYKMKJ YW
QETYROK YVK FKOL EOWGE
WC TEOEJNBK: VKEFKM-BQKMY.

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SCRAMBLERS

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

King

HICLAP

Inset

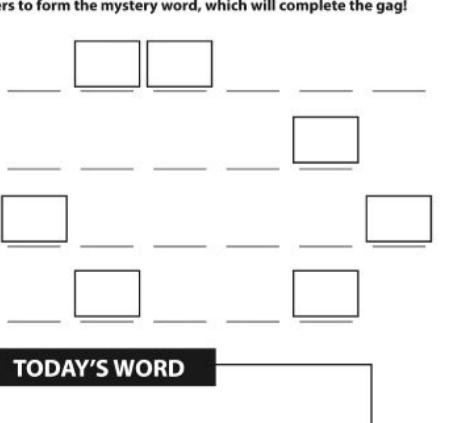
ALIYN

Weight

REDBUN

Feint

ODDEG



TODAY'S WORD

King Crossword**ACROSS**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12				13				14		
15			16						17	
18				19		20				
21	22			23		24				
25			26		27	28		29	30	31
32		33		34		35		36		
37			38		39		40		41	
42			43		44		45			
46	47	48			49		50			
51				52		53			54	55
56				57				58		
59				60				61		

DOWN

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1. Canine cry

4. Dalai —

8. Sultry Horne

12. Uncle, to Juan

13. Bard's river

14. 401(k) relatives

15. Provider of free groceries

17. Lapel jewelry

18. Fawn's mom

19. Nome resident

21. Nuanced

24. English cathedral city

25. 100%

26. Poseidon's realm

28. Follow

32. L-Q bridge

34. Cover

36. Gear teeth

37. Avid

39. Kauai souvenir

41. Last (Abbr.)

42. Conducted

44. Justice Antonin

46. Movie promo

50. Sprite

51. Campus mil. group

52. Eats for parakeets

55. Director DuVernay

56. Jazzy James

57. Singer Braxton

58. French assent

59. Twain hero

60. Jazz legend Getz

61. ER workers

9. Composer Satie

10. "Peter Pan" dog

11. Professional gp.

16. Speck

20. Pub pint

21. "Ditto"

22. Forearm bone

23. Snaky fish

27. Be sick

29. 1997 Vanessa Williams film

30. Hybrid fruit

31. "Como — used?"

33. Louisiana symbol

35. — Moines

38. Seminary subj.

40. Stranded during a blizzard

43. Unpaid bills

45. TV alien

46. Not kosher

47. Indian flatbread

48. Envelope abbr.

49. Funny person

53. Genetic letters

54. Wilder's — Town

55. Insult, slangily

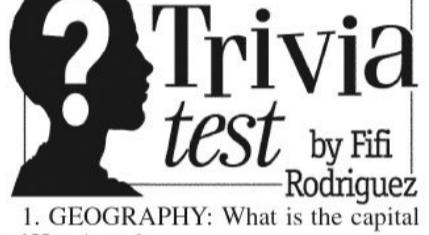
Weekly SUDOKU

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

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

DIFFICULTY THIS WEEK: ♦♦♦♦ Moderate ♦♦ Challenging
♦♦♦ HOO BOY!

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**Trivia test** by Fifi Rodriguez

1. GEOGRAPHY: What is the capital of Honduras?
2. FOOD & DRINK: What is the name of the Pillsbury Doughboy?
3. TELEVISION: In which state is the sitcom "Roseanne" set?
4. PSYCHOLOGY: What is the fear represented in the condition called arachibutyrophobia?
5. MUSIC: Which 1992 Radiohead song has the lyric "I wish I was special"?
6. MOVIES: Who is Indiana Jones' nemesis in "Raiders of the Lost Ark"?
7. U.S. PRESIDENTS: Which president is known for giving the longest inauguration speech to date?
8. LITERATURE: "Cry, the Beloved Country" is a novel set in which country?
9. HISTORY: Which organization was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1917?
10. ANATOMY: Which element is a primary component of bones?

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BALONEY

Today's Word

3. Burden: 4. Dodge

1. Grief; 2. Inlay

solution

SCRAMBLERS

solution

FiveSpot

Night out

D	A	N	C	E

<tbl_r cells="5" ix="5" maxcspan="1" maxrspan="1" usedcols="5

FEATURES

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2026 » THE MACON MELODY » REPORTING FOR MACON, FROM MACON » MACONMELODY.COM » PAGE 9

Billy's Let's Eat Review

Fountain of Juice is an homage to old and new

Macon has always been a city where food carries stories, and sometimes those stories travel across generations, oceans and even a few restaurant concepts.

At Fountain of Juice, known to regulars simply as FOJ, the story begins long before the first smoothie was ever blended. The roots go back to a family with deep culinary ties to the city, including the well-known Natalia's — a downtown restaurant that built a loyal following for years before changing hands. Today, that same family legacy continues in new ways, including FOJ and Roma's Pizza, where traditional Italian influences meet the tastes of a modern Macon crowd.

Natasha grew up with her Italian mother, who founded the renowned Natalia's in Macon.

From childhood, Natasha was steeped in hospitality and authentic cuisine. Today, her ventures honor that legacy with every dressing and sauce made in-house. The chicken salad, featuring locally sourced chicken from Springer Mountain, right here in Middle Georgia, shines with a nod to the iconic former Macon eatery Len Berg's famous dressing — a perfect blend of history and local pride. Let me know if that hits the spot!

FOJ might be known first for fresh juices, bowls and lighter fare, but spend a few minutes talking with the staff and it becomes clear that the menu is more than a collection of healthy options. It's a reflection of memory, heritage and a genuine affection for local food culture.

General manager Brittany Cater describes the place as somewhere people can feel good about what they're eating without sacrificing flavor, which, if you've ever endured a truly disappointing "healthy" lunch, is no small achievement.

One of the more intriguing inspirations behind a dish on the menu reaches back to a restaurant



Billy Hennessey

that many long-time residents still talk about with a kind of reverence usually reserved for high school football champions and grandmothers' Sunday cooking.

Len Berg's, which operated in Macon for decades before closing in 2005, was widely considered a local institution. Accounts from longtime residents and archived references describe it as the sort of place where generations of families gathered, where recipes stayed consistent and where regulars could walk in and be greeted like relatives who happened to pay their tab.

While Len Berg's is gone, its influence lingers in small but meaningful ways. At FOJ, one recipe was developed as a nod to that tradition, not as a direct copy but as a respectful wink to a restaurant that helped define dining in Macon for much of the twentieth century. It's the culinary equivalent of sampling an old record in a new song: familiar enough to spark recognition, fresh enough to stand on its own.

The atmosphere at FOJ reflects that same balance between past and present. It's bright, welcoming and energetic, the kind of place where you might see a group of friends catching up, someone tapping away on a laptop or a customer staring thoughtfully at the menu as if choosing between smoothies is a life-altering decision. And, to be fair, on a hot Georgia afternoon, it can feel that way.

Meanwhile, just across the family's culinary portfolio, Roma's Pizza carries the torch for classic Italian flavors, offering pastas and pizzas that lean into tradition. Together, the two restaurants show the range of what the same passion for food can produce: one focused on freshness and

vitality, the other on comfort and time-honored technique. It's a combination that reflects the family's background and their ongoing connection to both Italian heritage and the Macon community.

What makes FOJ particularly compelling, though, is the sense that it's still evolving. Restaurants often chase trends, but FOJ seems more interested in building something lasting, something that might, years from now, be remembered the way people still remember Len Berg's. That kind of reputation can't be rushed; it's earned one satisfied customer at a time. If you want to try it for yourself, make sure you get Car's Chicken Salad and get a side of one of their house made dressings — the Poppyseed! It's sweet and tangy all at the same time.

For now, FOJ stands as a reminder that Macon's food scene isn't just about where you eat today, but about the stories that carry forward from yesterday. And if history is any indication, those stories tend to taste pretty good.

When I sat with Brittany and we were talking about FOJ, she told me she's been there since opening day. That's 18 years of watching this eatery grow into what it is today. We both laughed when we spoke about the popularity. Your grandparents probably took you to Len Berg's for dinner and now those grandchildren are bringing their kids to eat at FOJ! It's not just about a good meal, it's a walk through memory lane.

I am always amazed when I come across a restaurant's history. For most people, they are just looking for a good meal — not me. I am looking for the story because, let's face it, a story along with a meal just makes the food taste better. Until next time Macon, Let's Eat!

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



PHOTO BY BILLY HENNESSEY
A cobb salad is one of many options at Macon's Fountain of Juice. The restaurant focuses on bringing both healthy food and flavor to each plate, according to The Melody's food reviewer.



PHOTO BY KATHY HENSLEY

The first blooms in a Middle Georgia rose garden appear in April, which means pruning in preparation must begin around Valentine's Day.

Garden roses need some love, too: Prune soon



Make cuts in relation to the buds on the stem

Cut $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch above a bud eye and at a 45-degree angle away from it.

Since new growth will emerge from the bud, choose a bud facing out from the center of the plant.

Remove dead and diseased wood

After making a cut, examine the inside of the cut cane. If the pith is brown or black, continue to cut until healthy green or white pith shows.

Encourage good air circulation within the plant

Remove crossing branches and branches growing toward the center of the plant.

Favor healthy, larger canes

Prune away weak, spindly stems. If the rose bush is a hybrid tea or grandiflora variety, remove any cane whose diameter is smaller than a pencil.

Prune according to rose variety

The general rule-of-thumb is to reduce rose canes by at least a third. Weaker varieties and young plants should be pruned lightly, while vigorous varieties may be pruned more severely. Hard pruning yields fewer but larger blooms. For a colorful garden display, landscape roses should be maintained in a bushier form to

SEE ROSES
PAGE 10



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ROSES

Continued from Page 9

produce an abundance of smaller flowers. February is the best month of the year to plant rose bushes as well as to prune them! Perhaps a new rose bush that produces beautiful blooms for months would make the perfect Valentine's Day gift—even bet-

ter than cut flowers that last only a few days.

Kathy Hensley is the Agriculture and Natural Resources Program Assistant for the University of Georgia's Bibb County Extension. If you have other gardening or landscape questions, call the Bibb County Extension at 478-310-5350 or email them at bibb.extension@uga.edu.

Correct**Incorrect**

Angle too steep Too low Too high

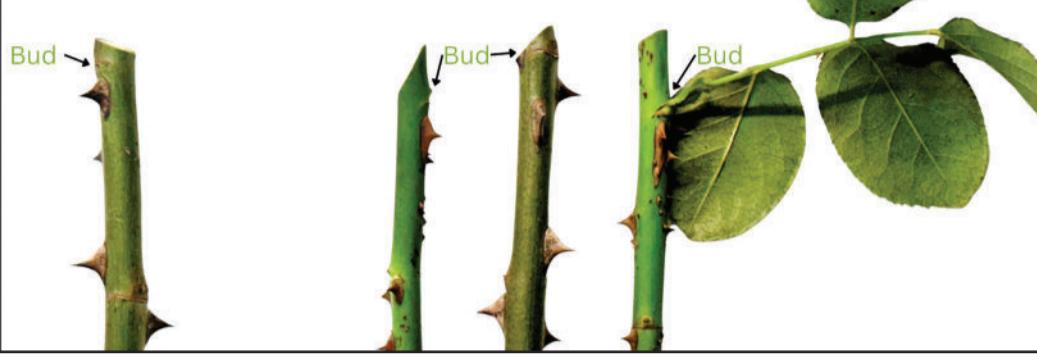


PHOTO BY KATHY HENSLEY

There is a correct and incorrect way to prune your garden roses, according to Kathy Hensley with the University of Georgia's Bibb County Extension.

HYDEN

Continued from Page 5

lawmakers are working on serious endeavors, and as session progresses, legislative priorities are coming to light with a keen focus on dollars and cents.

In an effort to save taxpayers some money and make housing more affordable, House Republicans unveiled a stepped plan to gradually phase out and eliminate home-state property taxes by 2032.

While Rep. Shaw Blackmon, R-Bonaire, is the bill's primary sponsor, he enjoys powerful backing from Speaker Jon Burns.

"This historic tax relief would be delivering on our commitment to making life more affordable for our neighbors across this entire state of Georgia, starting where it matters most—at home," Burns announced at a press conference on the homestead property tax elimination.

Within his budget, Gov. Brian Kemp is also pushing for additional tax relief.

"My budget proposal will include a fourth, one-time, 1-billion-dollar tax rebate this year that will return or save the average filer 250 dollars and a married couple up to 500 dollars. With this rebate, my administration and this General Assembly will have returned over 7.5 billion dollars in surplus revenue to the taxpayers of our state over the last four years!" he explained at the State of the State address.

This comes on top of a years-long effort to gradually reduce the income tax to 4.99%, although the Senate is pushing for the complete elimination of the income tax. While that sounds nice in theory, the proposal faces strong political headwinds and policy challenges. Income taxes account for around half of the state's revenues, which would be difficult to replace without making drastic changes.

With some of these proposals making their way through the legislative process, Rep. Todd Jones, R-Cumming, is looking to

deliver a different kind of relief.

If passed, his Voluntary Portable Benefits Act could help independent contractors afford benefits, like health, dental and vision insurance, as well as retirement.

This is long overdue—especially considering that more than 1 million Georgians are involved in some form of self-employment and around 1.2 million Georgians are uninsured—and would help align Georgia's code with the modern economy that relies heavily on gig work.

"Independent workers deserve flexibility, choice and access to benefits that fit the way they work," Jones said in a press release. "The Voluntary Portable Benefit Plan Act would empower contractors to voluntarily build portable benefits without threatening their independence, while ensuring transparency, consent and the ability to opt in or out at any time."

"This legislation strikes the right balance between innovation, worker freedom and responsible safeguards as our workforce continues to evolve."

If passed, Georgia would join the ranks of Utah, Tennessee and Alabama which provide a wholly voluntary path toward benefits for independent contractors.

The legislative session is more of a sprint than a marathon—only lasting 40 legislative days—and is set to adjourn on April 2.

As the clock ticks, lawmakers are frantically shepherding their priorities through the legislative process. There are many that could go far toward easing tax burdens and today's lack of affordability.

Yet with so many unserious bills dominating news cycles—from Trump Mountain to favorite wing sauces—it's important that legislators remain singularly focused on legislation that delivers relief to Georgians.

Marc Hyden is the senior director of state government affairs at the R Street Institute. You can follow him on X at [@marc_hyden](https://twitter.com/marc_hyden).

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GIFTS

Continued from Page 1

Keepin' it classic

— Sweet and simple: \$35 for a big teddy bear from Walmart

— Cupid approved: \$165.00 for an hour

and a half pampered spa experience at Sacred Space Day Spa

— Love Boat: \$6,280 for a sapphire and

diamond ring from Bashinski

For the floral enthusiast

— Sweet and simple: \$19.99 for a dozen pink or red roses from The Fresh Market

— Cupid approved: \$59.99 for a bouquet of Lego roses

— Love Boat: \$329.99 for an arrangement of two dozen red roses from Lawrence Mayer Florist and Flower Delivery

Sweets for your sweet

— Sweet and simple: \$10 for five chocolate-covered strawberries from Sweet Eleanor's

— Cupid approved: \$15.86 for a 17 piece Russell Stover heart box of chocolates

— Love Boat: \$75.50 for a 12-person cake from Layers bakery

From the heart to the stomach

— Sweet and simple: \$12.50 for a meal for two at Taco Bell

— Cupid approved: \$30 for a tomato soup and grilled cheese plus cocktail meal for two at Longleaf Distillery

— Love Boat: \$154 for an elegant four-course meal for two at Hotel Forty Five's Loom Comfort Kitchen & Cocktails.

Cheers to love

— Sweet and simple: \$20 for a charcuterie board and two beers at Just Tap'd

— Cupid approved: \$32 for two Valentine's espresso martinis from Parish on Cherry Street

— Love Boat: \$120 for two at The Great Valentine's Wine Mixer at Switch Macon

Entertainment

— Sweet and Simple: \$25 for a romantic carwash with light show included at Big Peach Car Wash

— Cupid approved: \$50.15 for two large drinks, a large popcorn and two adult tickets for an evening showing of "Wuthering Heights" at AmStar Macon.

— Love Boat: \$200 for a glassblowing date night for two at Startup Studios

For the paw-fect companion

— Sweet and simple: \$4.98 for a three-pack of Valentine's Day tennis balls from Pet Supplies Plus

— Cupid approved: \$7.99 for a box of Claudia's Canine Cuisine gourmet dog treats at from Pet Supermarket

— Love Boat: \$55 for a 15-minute pet portrait session at Pet Party Palace

When you just can't put a price on love

— Pick flowers and make a homemade bouquet

— Plan a picnic dinner at Amerson River Park

— Grab a pen and paper to write the special someone in your life a love letter

— Swipe a couple chocolates from the office candy bowl to gift to your sweetie



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

If you're looking for a classic romantic gift for your partner, a giant stuffed bear could be the perfect, affordable gift to show your love.

ABRAMS

Continued from Page 5

children, plant and harvest our crops and start businesses that employ our neighbors. Now, due to the chaotic, indiscriminate and willfully violent approach being taken by the Department of Homeland Security, many of our neighbors are being forced into the shadows, menaced by ICE.

This year, the brutal cost of Trump's regime became even more explicit in Georgia. Heber Sánchez died while in ICE custody at the Robert A. Deyton Detention Facility. The official cause of his death remains under investigation. But what we do know is that he was a husband and a father of two, including a child with Down syndrome—a family forced to grieve while navigating a legal system that intentionally offers answers slowly, if at all.

But the climate of fear doesn't end with detention, and it doesn't stop at non-citizens.

From Charlotte to Memphis to New Orleans, stories continue to pour in about how those charged with protecting us have instead become a legitimate cause of abject fear.

In Minnesota, federal enforcement actions have turned deadly, including shootings, the seizing of toddlers and chemical attacks by ICE in residential neighborhoods. American citizens, including Renée Good and Alex Pretti, have been killed by these operations, and their reputations willfully smeared by our own government.

The message is clear: unregulated violent forces can appear anywhere, and accountability is optional—because they are the government at work. Entire communities are learning—quickly—that visibility and speaking up is dangerous.

Across Georgia, people are encountering the same truth: that everyday life under Trump's watch has become more precarious, more unpredictable, and less protected by the laws we were told would keep us safe.

But this isn't purely about the man in the White House. When the political party in power refuses to hold their leaders accountable, they are complicit in the consequences.

Republicans, at every level of power, are now active participants in destroying the fabric of America, if they continue to condone what is happening. When Republican elected officials—once the defenders of the 2nd amendment—are quiet when a man lawfully carrying a weapon is shot in broad daylight while lying on a frozen sidewalk, they own the consequences. Because they are telling Americans everywhere, you can follow the rules and still lose everything, go to work and never come home, get shot for protesting inhumane immigration raids or you can die in government custody and your family will be left begging for basic facts.

Georgia's Republican leaders should join their counterparts in Oklahoma and Utah to demand accountability. More importantly, Georgia voters should not give them a pass for what is being done in all of our names.

When the government exercises power this way—sweeping, lethal and insulated from liability—the public is conditioned to accept fear as normal and stop asking questions to save their lives.

What is happening in our communities and across the country is wrong.

ICE killings, uninvestigated violations of human rights in Customs and Border Protection custody and the lies to cover up the truth violate our principles and demean our moral standing.

The Republican authoritarian takeover of our nation has a devastating human cost, and Georgia is already starting to feel the pain. What happens next depends on whether everyday people—neighbors, faith leaders, educators, elected officials—are willing to name what this is, refuse to accept it as normal and stand with the families living through its consequences.

These abuses require independent scrutiny, public accountability and a demand from our citizens that we are unwilling to move on until justice arrives.

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

SPORTS

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Westside head coach James Harris is very familiar with Westside's field house after serving as the Seminoles' defensive coordinator since 2018. Harris said he wanted to stay in Macon and guide Westside in an attempt to continue the school's history of football success.

With big shoes to fill, new Westside coach James Harris is ready to work

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
micah@maconmelody.com

As James Harris waited around this offseason to see whether he would become the head football coach at Westside, he admittedly got a little bit anxious.

Harris has been involved with Westside and its feeder school, Weaver Middle, for about 15 years now. He started coaching with beloved Westside coach Sheddrick "Spoon" Risper in 2013 and has been Risper's defensive coordinator since 2018. The former Albany State linebacker has been committed to Seminoles football since he arrived in Macon.

Harris formed some meaningful relationships in that time, to say the least — but he was nervous nonetheless.

theless.

"Obviously we knew (Risper) was retiring, but you still have to wait until the season is over. I applied and then went through the interview process, but I still had to wait over the winter break," Harris said. "I honestly wasn't sure whether I was going to get it."

Harris was finally announced as Westside's new coach last month, much to the McDuffie County native's relief. He will take over one of the most successful football programs in the Bibb County School District, though new region alignments and playoff formats will prove a challenge.

Harris doesn't mind.

"There's some schools with a winning tradition (in our new region), but Westside has a winning tradition, too. I just want to take it

one day at a time and focus on getting better every day," he said.

Building relationships

After growing up in Dearing near Augusta and playing at Thomson High School, Harris played at Albany State until 2006, where he was one of the team's top tacklers. A stint in arena football followed, which is where he forged a connection that would go on to shape his coaching career.

A friend of Harris' from arena football who was a fellow Albany State grad connected him with Risper, who also played arena football. At the time, Harris had actually just returned to playing football after his first foray into coaching at Coffee County lasted only two years.

"I was one of the last people

hired to coach (during a hiring cycle), and then there were furloughs, so it was just something I had to figure out. It wasn't easy," Harris said of his first coaching experience. "But everything happens for a reason."

The brief stint at Coffee County got back to Risper through their mutual friend, and the soon-to-be-icon at Westside was looking to fill out his staff. Most of the high school spots were occupied, but someone needed to help build the pipeline up from the middle school level.

"I was actually on a bye week (from arena football) when I first talked to the principal at Weaver. I came down to Macon and they

SEE WESTSIDE
PAGE 12

Mercer baseball set to host Troy to begin 2026 season

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
micah@maconmelody.com

Another season of Mercer baseball is set for first pitch this weekend as the Bears host Troy University in a three-game set to open the 2026 season.

As one of the more consistent programs in the country under longtime head coach Craig Gibson, Mercer will have high hopes yet again as they compete for a Southern Conference championship. The Bears finished 35-25 last season with a 12-9 conference record, coming up only one game short of the SoCon championship game before losing to Samford in the semi-finals.

While Mercer did lose some key

contributors like outfielder Ty Dally (transfer), shortstop Bradley Frye and pitcher Colton Cosper, Gibson is plenty confident in the group he's assembled to begin this year's campaign.

"I think we've done a really good job getting a good group of young guys in. We certainly like what we have. They've been great in the preseason and great in the classroom. It's a pretty low maintenance group as far as distractions or those kinds of things," Gibson said. "In today's game it's all about the newness and the fluidity of your roster. We have a lot of guys we're really excited about."

Before he praised some of his new players, Gibson hit on some returning players who will be crucial for the Bears.

Senior Titan Kamaka, a star de-

fender who emerged to hit nearly .300 last season, will shift from the keystone to shortstop to take over for Frye.

He, along with third baseman and star slugger Brant Baughcum, will be important leaders from the left side of Mercer's infield. Baughcum came to Mercer from Gulf Coast State last season and slashed .320/.415/.502 in 225 at-bats.

"I think Titan can step into that role, he's a natural leader. Brant is a guy who's a fixture for us and plays well and gives us consistency in the hot corner," Gibson said.

On the mound, returning players with lots of talent include Colin Ewaldsen and Jess Ackerman. One of the most interesting pitchers to

SEE BASEBALL
PAGE 12

Region tournament in full swing



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
The GIAA Class 4A/3A District 6 tournament began this week at Tattnall, with the boys and girls region title games set for Friday. For full coverage, visit maconmelody.com/sports. For a recap of opening round action from Tuesday, see page 12.

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NOTE PAD

Bibb hoops teams get into brawls; region seeds nearly final

BY MICAH JOHNSTON

Sports Editor

micah@maconmelody.com

A brawl broke out at the end of a heated region game between the Central and East Laurens girls basketball teams Tuesday night in Dublin, marking the second scrum involving a Macon basketball team in the past week.

The tiff started with about 8 seconds left in the contest, a video recording on NFHS Network shows. Central trailed East Laurens 41-38 and was inbounding the ball after the Falcons shot free throws. The Chargers took the ball up the floor and made it past halfcourt before a few East Laurens players cornered Central's ball handler.

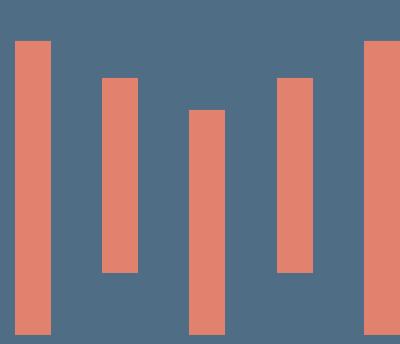
The refs blew the whistle as a Falcon and Charger got tied up with about three seconds left, video shows. The East Laurens player then appeared to shove the Central player with the ball, which sparked both teams to rush toward the sideline near the scorer's table where the tie-up began.

The most intense part of the fight occurred when a fan in a yellow hoodie appeared to come onto the court from the crowd, enter the fray and run into a Central player while throwing punches. Each sideline dispersed from there as players held back teammates while refs, security guards and others tried to restore order.

The brief brawl comes just after the Northeast and Southwest boys got into a scuffle in a game on Feb. 6 with about five minutes remaining. The disagreement began after a tie-up underneath the Northeast basket and escalated when a Southwest player and Northeast player bumped into each other near the bench and a Southwest player threw a punch. The Patriots won the game 63-49 after it was called following the fight.

It was unclear as of Wednesday

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PAGE 12



Mount de Sales rolls past Stratford for 64-53 victory in first round of GIAA region tourney

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
micah@maconmelody.com

The Mount de Sales Cavaliers rolled to a region tournament win over the Stratford Eagles on Tuesday, riding a second-quarter scoring surge and a stingy defense to the 64-53 victory at Tattnall to advance to the second round of the GIAA 4A/3A District 6 tournament.

The Cavaliers, who were 5-5 in region play during the regular season but 13-8 overall, will play top-seeded Tattnall on Thursday in the semifinals. They were 10th in the GIAA Class 4A rankings entering the tournament, virtually securing them a spot in the tournament.

"I thought we played really well in the first half, really aggressive. It started on the defensive end holding them to 13 points when they have skilled guys that can score," Mount de Sales head coach Deion Taylor said. "That really helped us kinda deal with the second half setbacks that were going on for us."

An 18-2 point differential in the second quarter was the difference-maker for Mount de Sales. Jackson Rowley and Evan Talton both scored 6 points in the period. Rowley finished with 16 points, tying for the game-high. Elijah Battle also had a great night for the Cavaliers, scoring 11 of his 13 points in the second half to help stave off a Stratford comeback attempt.

"It was just keying in on certain guys, knowing our personnel and who we were guarding," Taylor said

of the defensive gameplan. "It was also ending each possession making sure they only got one, making sure they didn't get offensive rebounds inside."

Head coach Jarvis Smith and the Eagles felt the disadvantage on the glass.

"Coach Deion does a great job with those kids. They fought and they killed us on the glass. They fought and got those opportunities, those second and third chances, and then they got and-1s. When they turn it into 3 points, it was just back-breaking," Smith said.

Stratford's Waldron Hiley Jr. tied with Rowley for the game-high with 16, all of which came in the second half as the Eagles tried to pull off the shocker after going down by as many as 24 points. Loads of free throws gave them an opportunity — the two teams combined for an incredible 54 fouls on the night as several players fouled out — but Stratford's young squad could not get closer than 9 points.

"We knew coming into the season what we were, as far as inexperienced. We had kids that were in the program, but they played JV. That varsity experience, there's nothing like it," Smith said. "We looked good sometimes for a half, but it was hard to put 32 minutes together."

Thus the 2-point second quarter, which frustrated Smith and his staff.

The loss ends the season for the Eagles, as they are currently No. 15 in the GIAA 4A rankings. Stratford will only lose two seniors, though, making next year a source for some

optimism after a tough loss.

"I just told 'em in the locker room, we have everyone coming back from two guys, plus we had two guys injured this year," Smith said. "We fought and showed what we could do if we can be more consistent. That's what it is, building consistency — that's what the off-season is for."

Both teams struggled a bit offensively early, but Mount de Sales ultimately shot the ball with more precision and managed to draw more fouls. Stratford's guards moved with quickness but simply could not find a way to get into the lane and drive to the baseline, making any offensive rhythm difficult to come by.

The Eagles' defense kept them within reach through the first quarter to hold the Cavaliers to a 15-11 lead, but Mount de Sales found its groove midway through the second period. Combined with Stratford's measly 2 points in the entire quarter and some timely and-1s, the Cavaliers were able to open up a stifling 33-13 lead at intermission.

Landon Gates scored the 2 points for the Eagles, part of his six for the game before fouling out. Despite the uneven performance Tuesday night, the senior earned a postgame shout-out from his coach following his final outing in the silver-and-blue.

"Landon is my first four-year player. He was here as a freshman when I came in as the coach. He played all four years, and it's been great to see him grow," Smith said.

Stratford outscored Mount de Sales by one in the third before re-



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Mount de Sales' Evan Talton (1) reacts after being fouled and making a shot during the Cavaliers' 64-53 win over the Stratford Tuesday night. It was the Cavaliers' 13th win of the season.

ally turning it on in the fourth to come within 9 points. Some fouls and rebounds on missed free throws helped, as did some subpar Cavalier shooting over a couple stretches, but it wasn't enough. Rowley and his cohorts did a good job staying composed and making buckets to keep the Eagles at bay.

"You always like to see how your team responds to adversity, whether it's foul calls, the run the other team's run they're making or your own turnovers," Taylor said. "I think all those things were part of the kind of comeback in the second half, but we were able to stay consistent as far as our scoring. I think the foul

calls slowed things down, which worked in their favor, but our guys did a good job finishing."

The Cavaliers take on Tattnall, which defeated Mount de Sales 41-37 and 71-46 in their two meetings this season, at 8 p.m. Thursday at Tattnall.

Other Macon teams were in action Tuesday night as well. The Tattnall girls were eliminated from the region tournament by John Milledge in a 59-54 loss.

The FPD girls advanced to the semifinals with a dominant 76-33 win over Piedmont.

For coverage of the entire tournament, visit maconmelody.com/sports.

BASEBALL

Continued from Page 11

watch will be Garrett Lambert, a redshirt freshman who was the SoCon's Preseason Freshman of the Year before injury derailed his debut season with the Bears.

The highly-touted pitcher is back from Tommy John surgery and will start Friday's opener for the Bears. Gibson thinks that Lambert could be a huge asset for Mercer.

"He's ready and he's looked great in the preseason," Gibson said of Lambert. "His pitch limit will probably be around 70 or 75 pitches. He's just chomping at the bit to get back out there."

WESTSIDE

Continued from Page 11

actually offered me the job the same day," Harris said. "I went and got fingerprinted and everything."

That was in 2011. Only two years later, Harris started helping Risper at Westside. Those years blend together a bit for him now, but he says he loved the job from the minute he started.

"I first knew I wanted to coach when I was at Albany State. We would have camps for the teenagers. The joy of coaching them, showing them what I know and them being so grateful, that really made me want to do that," Harris said.

As passionate as the former linebacker is about coaching, it was something else that made him want to succeed Risper as Westside's head coach.

"It's the winning tradition they

have at Westside. Coming from Thomson, they had that winning tradition. To me, it's harder to start in a place that doesn't have it," Harris said. "I've also known these kids for a long time. I know families where I coached their older brother, and I get to know the parents."

Harris will be just the third coach for Westside since the school opened. His two predecessors combined to win 220 games from 1997 to 2025. Risper, the man who guided him to Westside and installed him as defensive coordinator in 2018, had 119 of those wins and only 73 losses. The Seminoles did not lose a game against a fellow Bibb County School District team until a loss to Southwest in 2016.

They are undoubtedly large shoes to fill, but Harris is ready.

"The biggest thing I've learned is to help the kids become better people. It's not just about winning, it's about making them ready for life af-

ter football."

New foes and familiar rivals

Harris will have his work cut out for him. As if Westside's history of success wasn't enough, the Seminoles will enter a tough region when the GHSA realigns yet again this offseason.

After moving down to 2A two seasons ago, the Seminoles will shoot up to 4A thanks to the revised A-7A structure in GHSA. More importantly, though, Westside will share a stacked region with some of the best programs in Middle Georgia in recent years.

Region 2-4A will consist of eight teams including Baldwin, Howard, Mary Persons, Peach County, Spalding, Troup County and Upson-Lee along with Westside. Peach County should prove particularly challenging, as the Trojans have become perennial state title contenders under former Warner Robins head coach

Sun Belt conference, which includes powerhouse programs like last year's CWS runner-up Coastal Carolina — will be a tough opponent to start the year.

"You're talking about a top 30 team in most (publications). It's probably the toughest season opener I've ever had," Gibson said of Troy.

Coming from a coach who has run the ship at Mercer for more than two decades, that says a lot.

One player to watch as the Bears take on Troy will be pitcher Ben Stubbs, the Sunday starter for the Trojans. The southpaw transferred to Troy from Flagler, but he was a Trojan before in high school — he played for Macon's own Tattnall Square Academy, in fact, and Mer-

cer recruited him.

Blake Cavill will also be a player to keep an eye on for Troy. The Australian infielder was an All-Sun Belt First Team player last season and was third in the entire nation with 65 walks.

"(Cavill's) got really great bat-to-ball skills, doesn't swing and miss a lot. That's their most talented player," Gibson said. "Troy will be a big challenge."

The Bears begin their season with a 6 p.m. first pitch at OrthoGeorgia Park on Friday, followed by 2 p.m. and 1 p.m. start times on Saturday and Sunday, respectively.

NOTEPAD

Continued from Page 11

morning whether any players were suspended following either game, though Southwest defeated Washington County in an important region contest Tuesday night.

The fracas between the Patriots and Raiders comes after the two teams were put on probation because of a football fight in October.

Region tournaments nearly set

As Macon private schools wrap up their region tournaments this

week, the GHSA tournament details are finalizing ahead of next week's action.

Region 2-A Division I, which features four Macon schools in Central, ACE, Southwest and Northeast, will begin Monday with the girls seeding serving as the basis for host schools.

The No. 1 and No. 2 seeds for boys and girls both get the first three rounds of the region tournament off and will not have to play until the semifinals. The No. 3 and No. 4 teams get the first two rounds off, while Nos. 5 and 6 get to skip the first round Monday. The No. 7,

No. 8, No. 9 and No. 10 teams in the standings play in the first round.

The first three rounds on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday will be hosted at the higher-seeded girl's team, including the boys games. For the semifinals Thursday and the region title game Friday, the No. 1 girl's team will host all games.

East Laurens is the most likely No. 1 seed for the girls after defeating Central on Tuesday, making the Falcons' court in Dublin the most likely spot for both of the Region 2 championship games.

Region 2-2A and Region 4-3A,

which had not announced their region tournament formats or locations as of Wednesday, when The Melody went to print.

Mercer hoops falters on road

The Mercer men's basketball team lost a second straight Southern Conference game on Feb. 7, this time by a shocking 20 points against the Samford Bulldogs.

The Bears went down 40-22 in the first half and could not recover despite solid performances from typical stars Baraka Okojie (25 points) and Armani Mighty (11 points, nine rebounds).

Mercer's shooting, which had been a strong suit in conference play before last week, has cooled off significantly in its last two contests. The Bears went 16-for-59 from the field, good for a measly 27.1% shooting. They also shot 23.5% from beyond the arc, again breaking away from a trend of solid 3-point shooting this season.

Mercer is still in fourth place after the two losses with a 7-5 SoCon record and 16-9 overall mark. The Bears are set to host Furman, the third-ranked team in the conference, on Wednesday, after The Melody goes to print.