XXX

The Macon Melody

VOLUME II, NUMBER 38 » FRIDAY, MARCH 13, 2026 » REPORTING FOR MACON, FROM MACON » MACONMELODY.COM

Commissioner proposes more stringent curfew to address local violence

BY ALAYSIA EZZARD
Community Reporter
alaysia@maconmelody.com

Responding to a recent weekend of violence that left four people dead and nine others injured in Macon, County Commissioner Stanley Stewart says he plans to introduce an ordinance to expand the current curfew for residents under the age of 18.

The change is not a "cure-all," Stewart acknowledged. "It's just one initiative to try to make sure that we, No. 1, as Macon-Bibb, are doing something proactive rather than being just reactive to a situation. This is one of many things."

Stewart proposes raising the age of individuals affected from 16 to 17 and extending the curfew to run from 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. Currently, it begins at midnight and ends at 5 a.m. He announced his proposal after a rash of shootings that occurred between Feb. 21 and 22. Commissioners are also discussing other measures to combat crime, he said.

But some experts question the effectiveness of juvenile curfews in reducing the number of young people who participate in or become victims of crime.

Thaddeus Johnson, an assistant professor at Georgia State University in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology and former Memphis police captain, notes that there isn't any evidence that suggests there is public safety value in enforcing a curfew. He said he un-

SEE VIOLENCE
PAGE 6

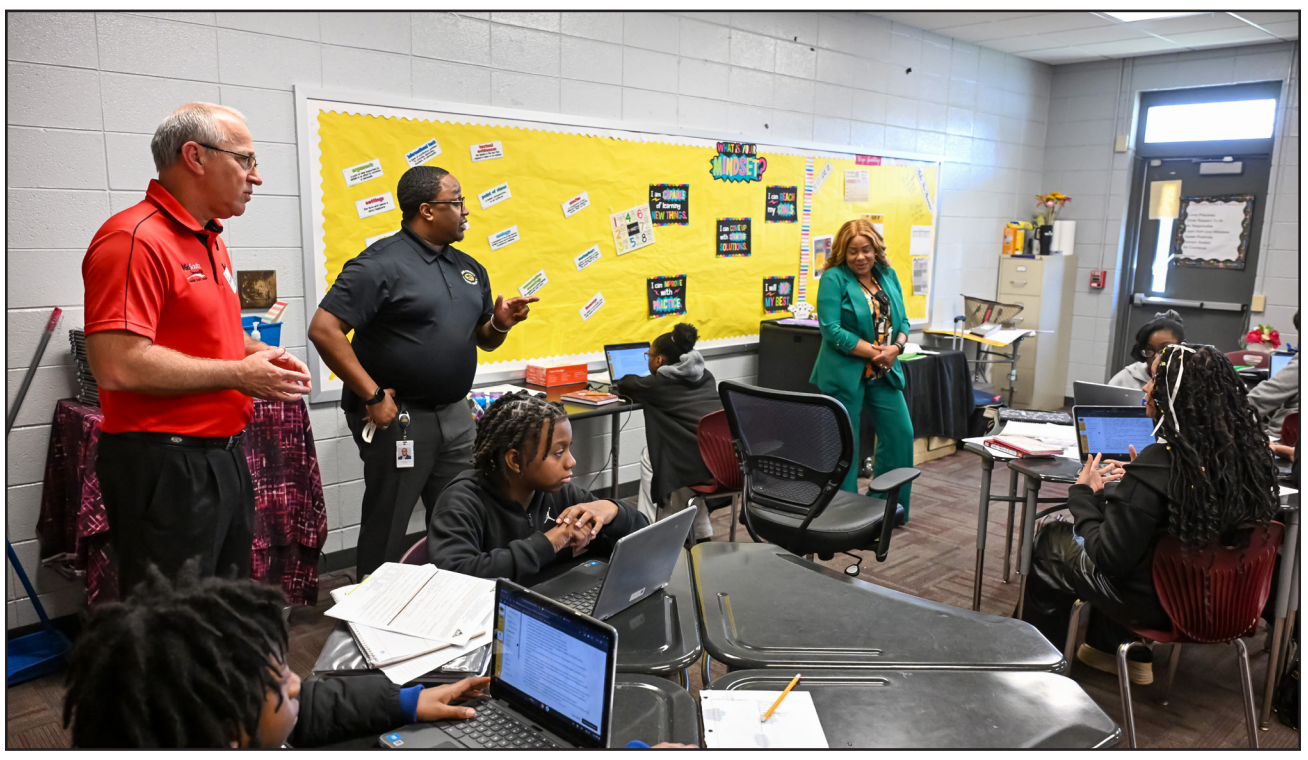


PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Weaver Middle School Principal Dominique Nichols introduces Roy Bibb, left, as "Principal for the Day" to a 7th-grade class on March 10. Bibb is the president and CEO of MidSouth Community Federal Credit Union and served as the Bibb County Schools ESPLOST co-chair.

Bibb schools let locals be principals for a day

BY CASEY CHOUNG
Community Reporter
casey@maconmelody.com

Thirty five Maconites took on the responsibility of being principal for a day at different schools across the county Tuesday, learning about what goes into running the schools.

The Principal for a Day program spanned dozens of schools in the county and was organized by OneMacon, an economic development initiative for Macon, with the Bibb County School District.

Roy Bibb, the president of MidSouth Community Federal Credit Union and a member of the district's ESPLOST advisory committee, followed Weaver Middle Principal Dominique Nichols for the afternoon.

His temporary leadership started with the school's CORE team meeting with the principal, assistant principals, academic coach and other central office staff. Administrators talked about the resources that go into coaching teachers.

The pair then roamed the halls as Nichols introduced Bibb to students, teachers and staff members alike, even peeking into a handful of classes to see what students were learning.

Nichols asked students in Mrs. Gales' 7th grade English class about narrative techniques, to which one student explained the significance of

SEE PRINCIPALS
PAGE 3

INSIDE:



Find The Macon Melody's special on the 2026 Cherry Blossom Festival, featuring stories, event info and more

WEEKEND PLAYLIST

BEARSTOCK
Saturday, 1-7:30 p.m. | Cruz Plaza, Mercer University | Free
Mercer's Bearstock 2026 will be headlined by Hot Chelle Rae, known for their 2011 double platinum single, "Tonight Tonight" and Grammy-nominated rap artist B.o.B, known for songs such as "Nothing on You" and "Airplanes." The music festival will feature three student act openers as well as a variety of food trucks, merchandise and more.

HEATHERS THE MUSICAL AUDITIONS
Saturday, Sunday at 7 p.m. | Macon Little Theatre | Free
Macon Little Theatre will be holding auditions for Heathers, a "bold and edgy" musical that depicts the power struggles and drama between high school students.

MACON PUBLIC SPACES WEEK
March 7-14 at varying times | Various locations | Free
Local organizations across Macon are hosting several gatherings to celebrate Macon's public spaces, including Rosa Parks Square and Bicentennial Park. The Streets for All fest, Macon Pride and Storytellers Macon are hosting events for everyone as well. For a full list of events, visit the Macon-Bibb County Facebook.

CHERRY BLOSSOM CAR PAINTING
Saturday, 11 a.m. - 4 p.m. | Acme Center on Riverside Drive | $10
The longtime car windshield painting setup preludes the Cherry Blossom Festival. Drive in and request whatever you want painted on your car, spend upwards of $50 to support Paint the Town Pink.

The Melody provides "Weekend Playlist" as a service to our readers. Submit events for consideration via email to news@maconmelody.com. Space is not guaranteed.

Periodical — Mail Label

7 32388 05034 5

School closures might be 'inevitable,' consultant hired by school board says

BY CASEY CHOUNG
Community Reporter
casey@maconmelody.com

A year after the Bibb County Board of Education shelved a plan to close several elementary schools, the issue is back on the agenda again as district officials continue to grapple with declining enrollment.

Consultants hired for a rezoning study suggested the Bibb County Board of Education revisit closing elementary schools to maximize state funding.

The school district held several community meetings in 2025 to discuss the possibility of closing either L.H. Williams, Hartley or Porter Elementary School. But, facing strong opposition, board members ultimately decided against it, opting to look into rezoning first.

Rezoning — or changing the schools some students are assigned to — balances enrollment while also preserving the identity and neighborhood significance of the schools in question.

Nine of 19 Bibb County elementary schools fall below the state's enrollment threshold of 450 students and do not receive full funding for teachers and services.

For instance, a school above the minimum requirement might receive state funding for a principal, librarian and art teacher, while schools below that requirement would receive only enough funding for a principal.

The district hired HPM Leadership, an Alabama-based consulting firm, in August to conduct a rezoning and redistricting study as the alternative to closures.

SEE SCHOOLS
PAGE 3

DISTRICT 5 ELECTION: EARLY VOTING BY THE NUMBERS

220	36	0	12,734
IN-PERSON EARLY VOTES CAST THROUGH MARCH 10	ABSENTEE BALLOTS ISSUED BY MAIL	MAIL BALLOTS RETURNED SO FAR	TOTAL NUMBER OF REGISTERED VOTERS IN DISTRICT 5

FRIDAY, 3/13 — LAST DAY TO EARLY VOTE - **TUESDAY, 3/17** — ELECTION DAY (7 A.M.-7 P.M.)

Javors Lucas Lake drops per-person fishing fee, switches to $15 parking charge, MWA says

BY LAURA E. CORLEY
Senior Reporter
laura@maconmelody.com

Javors Lucas Lake, in Jones County, will no longer require a per-person fee for fishing.

The Macon Water Authority Board, which governs the reservoir, has decided to institute a parking fee instead.

The cost for entry now is $15 per car instead of the previous fee structure, which charged $5 for youths, $10 for shore fishing and $20 for boats.

The change in fees was due to liability issues, MWA's lawyer Jay Strickland, explained to the board at its regular monthly meeting on March 3.

"It serves to further protect the water authority," he said.

Board members initially expressed some reservations about the proposal.

"I'm all for a per-car fee. I'm just not sure $15 isn't too high," board member Elaine Lucas said. "I would really like to see us go to $10."

Board member Dwight Jones said the authority has been working for years to make the public fishing hole "an asset for public use but also to have it break even from a cost standpoint." The previous boards had been "trying to find a sweet spot so we don't have to subsidize it."

Interim CEO Michel Wanna said seasonal security costs are about $29,000 and "no matter what you charge, you're never going to break even."

Jones mentioned the board failed last year to pass a rate increase for water and sewer services, adding "I just question should we be subsidizing something like public fishing when we're not meeting our core mission of providing water and sewer services."

The measure ultimately passed 6-1 with Lucas voting against the measure.

The Macon Water Alliance — a nonprofit arm of the water authority that aims to help customers pay their bills — also held its quarterly meeting and discussed its plan to cut checks to the local Department of Family and Children Services office and the Macon-Bibb Economic Opportunity Council Inc. so those entities can assist customers with their water bills.

The EOC is set to receive $20,000, and DFCS is slated to receive $7,000 from the alliance.

The nonprofit's board has discussed since June the possibility of transferring some of its money to the pair of organizations.

Ron Shipman, the authority's late CEO, had planned to personally deliver the checks to both entities. But when he'd tried to reach the CEO of the Macon-Bibb EOC, "nobody would call him back," board member Valerie Wynn said.

Wynn said she and a couple board members would make plans to personally deliver the checks.

Wynn also proposed a provision requiring both DFCS and the EOC to provide a list of names and addresses of people it helped with the money.

Strickland noted the water alliance "didn't put any requirements specifically on that money."

"It's not free money," Wynn said. "Particularly the EOC, they're getting $20,000 and they've never had any money from us. … I want to make sure our money is used properly for the purpose it was intended."

Board member Desmond Brown and Lucas disagreed, saying the board didn't need to be privy to sensitive information that may be embarrassing to individuals. Lucas said the EOC is audited regularly and requesting such information might be

SEE LAKE
PAGE 6

An update on the fate of some Macon-backed bills

BY CASEY CHOUNG
Community Reporter
casey@maconmelody.com

The deadline for legislation to pass one chamber of the General Assembly, otherwise known as Crossover Day, was Friday, leaving behind a handful of Macon-made proposals.

Lawmakers were in the capitol until early Saturday morning hashing out bills concerning everything from property tax reform to campaign finance law.

Bills have until April 2 to pass the other house in order to be sent to the governor and ratified.

Several proposals sponsored by Macon lawmakers did not pass in either chamber Friday, including the property tax exemption for seniors and updated salary schedule for educators.

Representative Anissa Jones, D-Macon, told The Melody earlier this session she wanted to work on historic tax credits, which are made available to builders rehabilitating recognized historic places.

The House passed Bill 376 on March 4, doubling the amount of credits available. Currently, the state's $30 million worth of historic tax credits have been fully claimed through 2029.

Macon has three projects contingent on historic tax credits to move forward, Jones said, including a plot on First and Oglethorpe Street and the old Bibb Theatre.

Jones also submitted a bill to reabsorb unused historic tax credits back into the state's fund, but that proposal never reached the House floor.

"Preferrably as time goes by we can get that historic credit where it doesn't have a cap on it at all," she added.

A bill exempting tiny homes from local zoning laws also passed the House, backed by Jones as well as Reps. Dale Washburn, R-Macon, and Tangie Herring, D-Macon.

Jones and Herring had noted they wanted to address affordable housing.

Herring's bill to provide students with I.D. cards with the phone number of a mental health crisis hotline passed the House, while her bill to require the state to update the minimum salary schedule for educators every year never made it to committee.

Washburn's proposal to sunset school zone speeding cameras remains on the table after the General Assembly adjourned without a decision last year. Because the General

SEE BILLS
PAGE 6



PHOTO BY CASEY CHOUNG
The Georgia State Capitol building in Atlanta. An important legislative deadline passed last week, impacting certain bills.



Local cherry blossom tree tradition continues

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON
Features Editor
evelyn@maconmelody.com

Macon transforms into a slice of cherry blossom paradise each spring when more than 350,000 Yoshinno cherry trees bloom in vibrant shades of pink and white. Locals know the story of how the city became a hub for all things pink.

It began with Macon resident and local realtor William A. Fickling Sr., who discovered a cherry tree in his backyard. Following a trip to Washington D.C. in 1952, he propagated the Yoshino and shared it with others in the community.

Fickling later teamed up with Macon resident Carolyn Crayton in 1973 to organize a community-wide tree donation and planting project by Wesleyan Woods, Guerry Drive and Oxford Road.

What started with a single tree in one Maconite's backyard grew to 500 trees. In 1982, during peak bloom season, Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful Commission launched the first Cherry Blossom Festival and birthday celebration for Fickling.

The Fickling Family Foundation honors his legacy by continuing to donate cherry trees to the Macon community each year.

Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful and Macon-Bibb Parks & Beautification planted more than 200 new trees along the Cherry Blossom Trail in the last year. Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful also keeps the Fickling tradition alive with tree giveaways and sales.

This year's new trees and giveaway event is funded with a $30,000 grant from the Fickling foundation.

Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful will give away more than 120 Helen Taft cherry blossom trees Saturday, March 14 in an event held in honor of late master gardener and Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful volunteer Wayne Woodworth.

The Helen Taft variety is more resistant to heat and disease, making it a resilient choice for Middle Georgia weather, according to executive director Asha Ellen.

Ellen said she anticipates a line of people at the park and that the organization will run out of trees within 30 minutes.

The event is from 10 a.m.-1 p.m. at Spirit of Macon Park on the corner of Fifth and Poplar streets.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY KEEP MACON-BIBB BEAUTIFUL
Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful will be continuing the Macon Cherry Blossom tradition of giving away and selling cherry blossom trees. This year they will be giving away the Helen Taft variety, a more durable type of tree, for the first time.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Scott Leopold addresses board members at a March 4 board of education meeting at Bibb County School District's office on Mulberry Street. Leopold shared initial findings on HPM Leadership's rezoning study.

SCHOOLS

Continued from Page 1

HPM presented its initial findings to the board Wednesday afternoon. Enrollment is expected to decline by roughly a thousand students by 2035, according to HPM's presentation.

HPM Director of Planning Scott Leopold said redrawing boundaries won't impact much. Impacted schools would still hover around the 450 student count, even after pulling students from well-enrolled schools.

"I don't think that juice is worth the squeeze," Leopold told board members. "Let's at least have the conversation: Should we revisit consolidation before we change boundaries?"

MLK Jr., Veterans and Southfield elementary schools were identified as early candidates to have students relocated under rezoning. The rezoning suggestion presented to board members would still leave four schools under the state's enrollment requirement.

"We can temporarily balance the enrollment, but we feel that consolidation may be inevitable just based on kind of what we're seeing in your data and what we're seeing around the region," Leopold said.

Leopold and his team will venture into Macon's communities to talk with residents and figure out specific boundary adjustments before concluding their study.

Board member Barney Hester told fellow board members he doesn't know how the district will keep schools with a lower enrollment above the state's threshold by simply rezoning.

"I personally would like to see us look at consolidation again," he said during Wednesday's meeting. "I think we've got to look down the road further. I'm concerned about our numbers."

While the district's total capacity was 24,460 students in 2025, enrollment came in at 21,337 students.

Enrollment decreased to 20,783 this fall because of a slowdown in population growth and the impact of private school vouchers.

Board President Daryl Morton told The Melody not meeting the state's enrollment requirement is leaving money on the table. However, he later noted the current rezoning process would not involve closing any schools.

"The budget realities are such that we have to look at this process," board member Kristin Hanlon said. "Nobody's going to hand us a pile of money."

Board member Myrtice Johnson said she doesn't think families will "take too kindly" to going through the consolidation process again.

Parents and community members raised concerns about losing community identity, meeting transportation needs and receiving adequate student attention throughout last year's consolidation process.

Leopold, however, said the reality is that schools will not be able to support student demand for certain programs if resources are spread too thin.

Consolidation is a matter of getting more dollars into the classroom, Leopold said.

"They've been funding these additional, required positions at these schools locally," he said. "Just given our current budget situation across the region and across the state, I don't know if that's sustainable."

PRINCIPALS

Continued from Page 1

point of view.

"When you come and visit and you see the engagement and you see the support behind the teachers, it's just a lot of people doing some really good things," Bibb said.

Nichols said the experience is good to not only educate others on what goes on in a school, but for students and teachers to see that there are people outside the building who are interested and want them to succeed.

Bibb said this is his ninth time participating in the principal for a day event. MidSouth originally started as a credit union for teachers in Bibb County.

"This is not just learning about the needs, it's also learning about the successes," Bibb said.

Nichols, a Macon native, is in his first year as principal at Weaver. Balancing proven teaching techniques with 21st century technology along with developing teachers who don't come from a traditional teaching background is the "new reality" of running a school nowadays.

But the Weaver principal said he tries to lean into maintaining connections with students and the community. He said having partnerships with the community is integral to its success.

"It's more than just the numbers and metrics, it's the people," Nichols told Bibb.



SNAPSHOTS



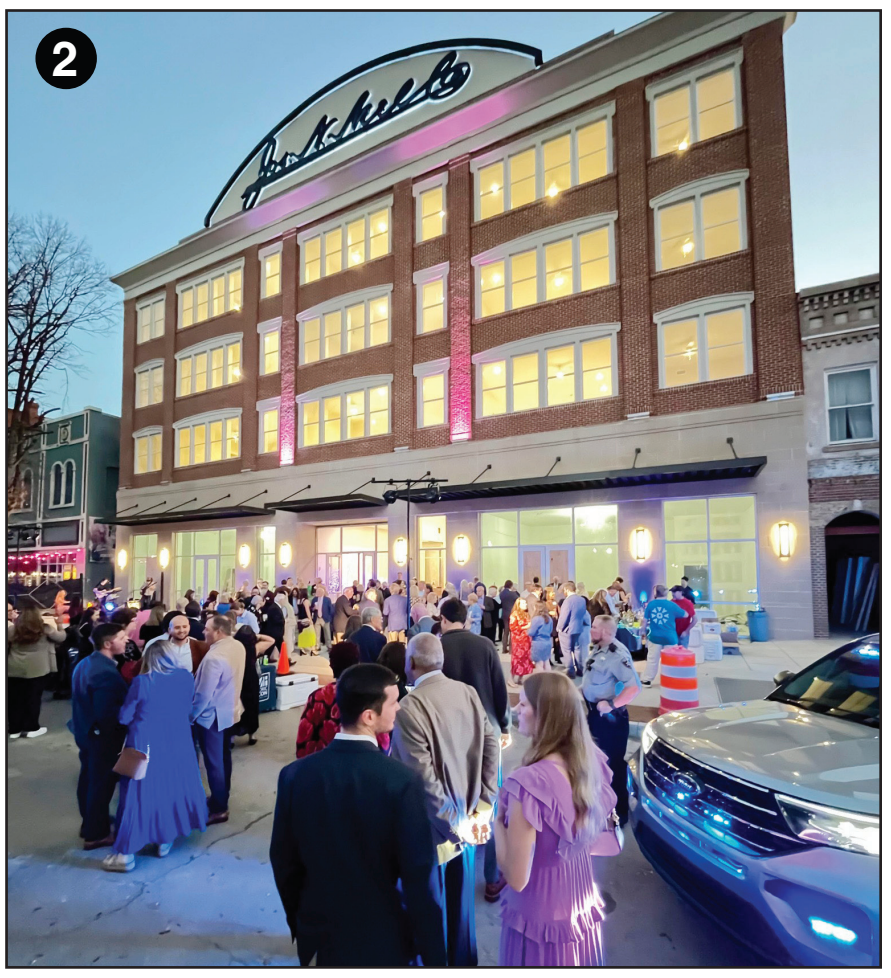












PHOTO NO. 1 — Macon photographer Dsto Moore helps lead a historic architecure photo Tour March 6 during the Streets for All Festival. *Photo by Jason Vorhees.*

PHOTO NO. 2 — More than 300 people attended the Historic Macon Foundation 2026 Patrons Party held at the new Neel's Lofts in downtown Macon on March 5. *Photo provided by Historic Macon Foundation.*

PHOTO NO. 3-4 — Residents participate in a morning coffee and murals walk March 7 as part of the Streets for All Festival. *Photo by Dsto Moore.*

PHOTOS 5-6 — The cast of Theatre Macon's production of "Noises Off" rehearse a scene from the play. The production runs through March 15. *Photo by Richard Frazier-Sostillio.*

PHOTO NO. 7 — Wesleyan College students and staff are taking part in a study abroad trip to Spain. The group has enjoyed dinner in Seville and captured photos outside the Alhambra. *Photo provided by Wesleyan College.*

In Georgia, nonprofits stand between residents and authoritarian rule



We all need help sometimes.

It's the core impetus of society — despite the tropes, we can't go it alone so we come together.

Local organizations are often the first places people turn when times get hard — offering support, connection and a pathway to collective action. If you've relied on a food bank, joined a mutual aid effort or volunteered to register voters, you've benefited from having groups like these close to home.

Yet for many of these organizations, authoritarianism has been knocking at their doors for some time. Our future depends on recognizing attacks on the social sector for what they are and standing in solidarity to protect the institutions that help bridge the gaps.

The number of local support organizations in a given area — known as "nonprofit density" — is a key indicator of a community's resilience. This means that the more organizations in your community, the more likely it is that you and your neighbors can weather national disasters, economic downturns, public health crises or any number of other challenges.

These organizations also bind communities together and strengthen social connection and a sense of caring for our neighbors. Whether we show up to get help or give it, our moral connections are strengthened and so is our democracy.

In the "10 Steps to Autocracy and Authoritarianism," Step 8 is when power dismantles the support systems in our communities. This happens because concentrating authority means convincing folks they are on their own and no one is coming to help. It's psychological warfare combined with real harm.

When direct aid groups like food banks or shelters face the choice between ideological litmus tests or necessary funding, the most vulnerable lose. Worse, the primary voices that will argue for better policies to actually solve issues are then forced to shut up or risk shutting down.

When universities are told what to teach and students and professors are censored, we lose our ability to question authority and argue for better. And when civic participation or advocacy organizations are labeled domestic terrorists by our leaders for daring to criticize real harm to people, more people start to turn away and democracy starts to die.

Our community-based organizations, universities, lawyers and advocacy groups have all recently endured attacks like these — and more. Something as simple as speaking the truth about the effect of a new political policy or encouraging citizens to use their constitutionally-guaranteed rights can get them labeled enemies of the state.

Fake scandals dramatized on social media, scurrilous lawsuits by the current federal regime and funding stripped from our most vital organizations all serve the purpose of breaking our will. We do what so many others who've faced

SEE ABRAMS
PAGE 7



Peach State lawmakers agree on affordability — but not on how to get there



Marc Hyden

Leadership in the Georgia General Assembly has been crystal clear about their top priority: Easing the pain of price inflation.

At first blush, this seems like a bipartisan issue since affordability affects all stripes of voters. But apparently reaching consensus on how to accomplish that goal is no easy feat.

At the top of the list is House Resolution 1114, sponsored by Rep. Shaw Blackmon, R-Bonaire, and co-sponsored by Speaker of the House Jon Burns. At first, it was intended to empower voters to amend the constitution to gradually phase out the homestead property tax entirely. This would have made homeownership and life in general more affordable.

There is also a deeper philosophical argument against such property taxes. Do you even truly own your property if you must pay the government for that privilege each year? Speaker Burns made his opinion known, stating, "Georgia House Republicans believe no one should ever face the loss of their home because they can't afford to pay rent to the government."

That aside, there was plenty of opposition to the tax plan. Property taxes levied at the local level help fund a host of works and services, like schools, which we all find important. However, the plan was to slowly eliminate property taxes to give locals time to implement new ways of funding government services.

This was a bridge too far for some lawmakers and lobbyists who raised the alarm and formed an imposing wall of opposition. So, Blackmon pivoted and reworked the proposal to hopefully appease naysayers while still benefiting Georgians. The most recent iteration would have left property taxes in place but reduced them moderately over time.

It would have done so "by reducing the taxable assessed value of residential properties from 40 percent of appraised value to 10 percent of appraised value at the rate of 3 percent each year," reads the legislation. While this was a retreat of sorts, it would have still represented a victory for homeowners.

"We've all received emails from constituents worried their property tax bills will force them from their homes," Blackmon explained, but this was not enough.

After the House vote on the resolution concluded, the clerk reported 99 yeas to 73 nays. Despite garnering a simple majority, this was a failure. Measures to amend the constitution require a House supermajority or 120 yeas.

Fresh off the heels of this vote, the rebukes came flying, including one from the Speaker's Chief of Staff Chris Riley. He tweeted a screenshot of a local tax relief bill sponsored by some representatives who opposed HR 1114. In that tweet, he remarked, "This is a new tactic; dropping legislation to provide tax relief for homeowners in your district the same day you vote against it statewide."

Ouch.

All hope is not lost. The House managed to pass a bill to gradually reduce the income tax rate from 4.99% to 3.99% and a pared down measure that may reduce the property tax burden. The Senate, meanwhile, has been busy with one of its own proposals. Instead of addressing property taxes via a constitutional amendment, Sen. Blake Tillery, R-Vidalia, introduced legislation to eliminate the state income tax for all Georgians earning $50,000 or less and for households making $100,000 or less.

In support of his bill, Tillery said, "Let's use the fact that we've been the most attractive state, use that as an ability to reduce the income tax rate for those Georgians, hardworking Georgians who are filling those jobs. They're calling on us. They're telling us that they're having a hard time paying for gas, groceries and child care. And if we don't listen to them, why are we here?"

Despite his persuasive presentation, the debate over his bill was heated. Some members understandably questioned how they could replace revenue lost from the income tax, which represents about half of the state's income. Others tried to say that this would destroy Georgia's economy because within the bill were provisions to eliminate sweetheart tax credits on various industries, including out-of-state film companies.

It's a bit rich for legislators to fight for non-Georgian companies to enjoy massive tax discounts and then refuse to extend those benefits to Georgians, but never mind that. Eventually, Tillery's legislation received a highly contested vote and passed the Senate 32 yeas to 18 nays, but its ratification is not a foregone conclusion. The House still must consider it, and its path forward appears dubious.

Georgia's legislative session will adjourn in less than a month, but that can be an eternity under the Gold Dome where dead bills are sometimes resurrected at the 11th hour.

For the time being, Georgians should be pleased that lawmakers clearly recognize that affordability matters, but without consensus, the solutions are uncertain, especially when many do not consider eliminating certain taxes an option.

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

The Macon Melody

1675 Montpelier Avenue » Macon, GA 31201
Customer Service and General Questions: 478-200-7403
Subscribe online and read more news: maconmelody.com
Sign up for our free newsletter: maconmelody.com/newsletter
Follow us on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn

OUR STAFF (WE LIVE, WORK AND PLAY IN MACON)

Joshua Wilson » Executive Editor
Janisha Rozier » Operations and Special Projects Associate
Lizzie Bacik » Partnerships and Sales Specialist
Micah Johnston » Sports and Newsletter Editor
Evelyn Davidson » Features Editor
Laura E. Corley » Senior Reporter
Casey Choung » Community Reporter
Alaysia Ezzard » Community Reporter
Jason Vorhees » Photographer

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

ABOUT THE MACON MELODY

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

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

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AND GUEST EDITORIALS POLICY

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

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

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

Submissions may be sent to joshua@maconmelody.com.

EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE NOTE

The Macon Melody maintains a strict separation between news coverage and funding sources. Advertisers, donors and partners do not influence editorial content.

CORRECTIONS POLICY

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

SUPPORTING OUR WORK

Quality journalism costs money to produce, and we are grateful to the readers who purchase subscriptions to help us recruit and retain quality talent. These funds enable us to also meet readers where they are — and in fresh, innovative ways.

To subscribe, visit maconmelody.com/membership or call our office at 478-200-7403. You can also mail us a check. Subscription tiers — with annual pricing — include:

» Digital-Only Access: $69.99
» Just the Print Newspaper: $99.99
» Digital Access + Print Newspaper: $149.99

We also offer a GOOD NEIGHBOR option for those who may not be able to afford the full price of a subscription. To learn more about this pay-what-you-can model, contact our office.

If you would like to make one-time or recurring donations to support our work, those gifts are tax deductible. To do so, visit georgiatrustforlocalnews.fundjournalism.org.

ADVERTISE WITH US

Connect with engaged local readers through The Macon Melody. Learn more at maconmelody.com/advertise-with-us/.

ABOUT THE GEORGIA TRUST FOR LOCAL NEWS

We are proud to be one of 20 newsrooms in the Georgia Trust for Local News, the local subsidiary of the National Trust. Our group covers Middle and South Georgia, protecting local news and building it up for a bright future. We serve 1 in 10 Georgians.

DuBose Porter » Publisher Emeritus » dubose@ntln.org

LEGALESE

Periodicals postage is paid at Macon, GA 31201.

All content is the copyright of The Macon Melody, 2026.

LAKE

Continued from Page 2

burdensome for the agency.

"We are responsible for this money," board member Frank Patterson said. "I don't think it's wrong to ask for a little bit more detailed information."

Ultimately, it was agreed the board would just request the total of individuals helped and amounts spent on at least a quarterly basis.

The meetings on March 3 marked the first since Shipman's unexpected death on Feb. 6. Board members praised his character and mourned his death.

Board member Bill Howell said he didn't know if it was the appropriate time to ask but wanted to know, "What are the next steps to replace Mr. Shipman?"

Board Chair Gary Bechtel said he could not answer but would let everyone know when that process begins.

At the end of the meeting, Lucas announced she is in remission from Leukemia. Lightheartedly, she asked that anyone with knowledge on ways to boost the production of red and white blood cells to reach out to her.

In jest, Bechtel, who has butted heads with Lucas in past meetings, said he heard silence helps with that. The room erupted with laughter and the meeting adjourned.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Students from Mercer and local schools work on a project at Javors Lucas Lake. The MWA changed fees for fishing and parking at the lake during a recent meeting.

BILLS

Continued from Page 1

Assembly runs a two-year cycle, bills from last year's session can be revisited without restarting the process.

The Republican legislator said he is working to bring back his school zone speeding camera legislation by revising the bill to require a local referendum and send it back to the Senate.

"We are not giving up on this," he said.

Washburn's senior tax exemption and two of his bills related to property taxes were unable to crossover. Washburn said he has not given up and is trying to attach some of his property tax reforms, like one to use the most recent sale price to assess property taxes, onto a bill that has passed one chamber.

After considering a slew of property tax reforms all session, the House ultimately passed a limit on property tax increases to 3% or the rate of inflation.

Representative Miriam Paris, D-Macon, voted against the measure and said after speaking with several appraisers that she believes smaller cities won't be able to sustain a higher sales tax in place of those losses in property taxes.

Paris' bill to provide a homestead exemption to public employees making below a certain figure failed to make it out of committee.

Her bill requiring financial literacy classes for fourth and fifth graders merged with another proposal to implement classes in Georgia high schools.

House Bill 1114, which has been revised to add financial literacy standards for all grades, passed the House on Crossover Day behind the support of Paris and other House education committee members.

"It was a big win," Paris said. "I was elated we were able to get it across the line before crossover day ended."

Senator David Lucas, D-Macon, focused on addressing the needs of the Macon Water Authority this year along with giving Mayor Lester Miller and Bibb County's commissioners a third term.

Because the mayor's term bill and his water authority bill are only locally applicable, Lucas said he was not worried about them crossing over before Friday's deadline.

Lucas said he's waiting for the Macon Water Authority to send a resolution in order to file a bill allowing them to enact a Municipal Option Sales Tax.

He said he plans on meeting with the Macon delegation to discuss moving forward with these local bills.

Reps. Herring and Washburn did not immediately respond to requests for comment. This story may be updated with further information.

Laura Corley contributed to the reporting of this story.





P&Z denies Napier lounge and makes multiple lots residential

BY LIZ FABIAN
The Macon Newsroom
macon-newsroom.com

A Napier Avenue Hookah Lounge won't be able to upgrade to an alcohol-serving bar with amplified music after Monday's ruling of the Macon-Bibb County Planning & Zoning Commission.

Verna Wilcox needed a P&Z permit to obtain a county alcohol license for Hi Frequency Events, Retail & More at 3430 Napier Ave., but learned at the hearing that she does not qualify.

P&Z staff determined the 2,754-square-foot space in a circa 1920 commercial building near Log Cabin Drive was too close to homes and a church to meet distance requirements for an alcohol license.

"Even if we approved it, I don't know that the city would," P&Z Chair Jeane Easom said.

"I don't think they can," P&Z Executive Director Jeff Ruggieri responded.

Since the Hookah Lounge was permitted in 2022, Wilcox said the business has been using shared parking around the building, but she has no formal agreement with property owners.

"It does not have adequate parking, and it's really close to the others. They cannot meet the distance requirements as far as the barrier, the buffers that need to be installed," P&Z Asst. Executive Director Randi Doveton said.

Licensed nightclubs that serve alcohol and play amplified music have stricter standards that the current lounge does not meet.

P&Z Commissioner Tim Jones worried the lack of designated parking on the property would have patrons parking in the adjacent convenience store.

"She doesn't have any land legally to put parking on," P&Z Chair Jeane Easom said.

By a unanimous vote, P&Z denied the conditional use of the building as a club with entertainment.



PHOTO BY LIZ FABIAN

The Hi Frequency space sits near the intersection of Napier Ave. and Log Cabin Dr. Macon-Bibb County Planning & Zoning denied the bar serving alcohol with amplified music at 3430 Napier Ave. in a recent meeting.

More homes for Moseley Dixon, old industry sites

A planned subdivision at 5986, 5898 Moseley Dixon Road can reduce lot size and add more houses under Rowland Engineering's third plan for the subdivision that leaves the overall infrastructure mainly intact.

Three Oaks Construction and Development's Villas at Moseley Dixon will now consist of 60 home sites, up from an original 39 lots in 2022 that was expanded to 45 home sites in 2024.

"The change from the previously approved site plan is we've reduced the lot width," Stephen Rowland told P&Z. "There seems to be a demand for a smaller product from builders that are coming into the area and starting to build. So we've gone from a 60-foot-wide residential lot down to a 40-foot-wide residential lot."

A builder for the new development has not been identified, so home designs were not included in the application.

P&Z staff presented their own application before the commission to rezone multiple parcels from M-1 wholesale or light industrial to single-family residential at 522 Rutherford Ave. 3075, 3091 Antioch Road, and 3125, 3137, 3157, 3161, 3175, 3185 Antioch Road.

In the 1950s, a light industrial use was thought to be optimal for these areas, but they remained primarily residential with "little to no viability for M-1 uses," the application stated.

The late 2024 revision of the zoning code now prohibits residential uses in M-1, so P&Z is identifying these existing parcels and initiating rezoning themselves.

"Original M-1 zoning districts that are now not usable as residential and they're so small and are next to residential that they really have no practical use for M-1 uses either," Doveton said.

Katherine Robinson grew up in the house she inherited at 3125 Antioch Road and attended Monday's hearing to find out why the zoning was being changed.

Robinson remembers her father having to come to P&Z for permission to add on to the house, but now understands that this rezoning could actually save her money.

Before the change, if the house burned down and she wanted to rebuild, she would have had to apply for rezoning herself, at a minimum cost of $1,875.

"So, I'm glad you're changing it to residential so that if I wanted to do something to the property, I won't have to come down like my father had to do every time you want to do something," Robinson said.

"Well, you still have to get permits," Ruggieri quickly noted.

P&Z unanimously approved the rezoning.

Other agenda items

331 Orange St. — P&Z approved modifications to Lurline Newton's front porch after she acquired the appropriate five-inch crown molding to replicate the original materials on the historic home.

1025 Bond St. — Certificate of appropriateness granted for a four-foot-tall wrought iron fence with a gate in the front yard of the 1897 home.

895, 891 Elm St. — P&Z granted Matthew Moroz permission to replace the stucco foundation with a Cherokee brick veneer and use mitered corners instead of corner boards on a new house in Beall's Hill.

277 Pierce Ave. — Exterior improvements to the driveway and garage were approved, but the Design Review Board suggested Hunter Godsey use a mixture of concrete and pea gravel or crushed slate for the driveway. They also recommended applying a pattern to the concrete parking pad and using board-and-batten style cementitious siding on the front of the garage.

2000 Northside Crossing — Mayur Patel was granted conditional use approval for an outpatient orthopedic physical therapy clinic in the existing commercial building. The clinic will operate weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and employ five people.

3726 Overlook Ave. — P&Z approved the construction of a new accessory dwelling in a detached garage on the McNeills' property.

4800, 4815 Holley Road — Commissioners granted a variance to permit a lot not fronting a public right-of-way, but the Macon-Bibb County Fire Department must sign off on the plan to ensure there is access to emergency services.

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.

VIOLENCE

Continued from Page 1

derstands commissioners' urge to take some action that might keep citizens safe.

But, when it comes to a curfew, "if you're going to use it, it needs to be time limited," said Johnson. "You need to make sure that with juveniles who come in contact with the system, they would do so in a way that does not ruin them and their family's trajectory." And officials need to make sure that the curfew is enforced "in a just and fair way that won't impact how these communities feel about the police and the system already."

Macon-Bibb Sheriff's Office Col. Henderson Carswell said the department has an outreach unit that works with juveniles, and most of its patrol and specialized units are trained in how to deal with underaged residents.

Last year, two juveniles were among the 24 killed in Macon. Eighty juveniles were charged with committing violent offenses. He said curfews can be helpful as part of a broader strategy.

"It can help because it does give us another mechanism to approach juveniles or folks underage when they're in those areas at those restricted times," Carswell said. "It gives us a tool to approach them with."

If the curfew adjustment is passed, it will immediately go into effect. Right now, juveniles who are caught breaking the curfew are reunited with their parents or guardians if they weren't involved in criminal activity. Under Stewart's proposal, if minors are caught out between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m., their parents could face penalties such as a $1,000 fine or six months in jail, the commissioner said.

For Johnson, imposing fines on parents as a punishment for youth being caught out during a curfew could be problematic. Many of them come from marginalized or underserved communities who need support.

"Fines only further push people away from being willing to come forward to call public service when they are having issues with their children," he said. Also, he added, it could impact affected families' "views of legitimacy of the system or put folks in debt when they actually need help and support."

Looking at the broader issue of gun violence involving juveniles, Johnson understands that the public is concerned about the next generation coming up. But people are shot more often by family members, he said.

According to Col. Carswell, most young people out past curfew are just hanging out. Some are engaged in behavior that could lead to them committing felonies. But, many times, juveniles who commit violent crimes tend to do so in the home against family members.

Johnson said that it's important to think about where youth are developmentally. Programs like Roca, which has locations in three states, or Advance Peace in California connect at-risk young people with services that provide "cognitive behavioral therapies to impact their thinking, to control the impulse control," he said.

Juvenile violence reduction plans work best when they are tailored specifically for that age group, he said.

Macon-Bibb county has Macon Violence Prevention, an initiative that uses evidence-based strategies to better public safety. The sheriff's department also has a mentorship program for juveniles and Consider the Consequences, an intervention program that exposes youth to consequences that could come from some of their choices.

The next Macon-Bibb Board of Commissioners meeting will be Wednesday, March 18.

Hurricane Helene relief effort launches for farmers

BY EMILY JONES
WABE/Grist

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

Georgia farmers can soon apply for more than $500 million in federal funding to help recover from Hurricane Helene. Applications open next week.

Many farmers are still rebuilding after Hurricane Helene devastated the state in 2024. One obstacle: disaster loss programs typically don't cover some key expenses, including replanting multi-year crops like pecan trees and blueberry bushes or replacing flocks lost after the storm destroyed a poultry barn.

Those gaps have been particularly stark in Georgia in the wake of Helene, which did significant damage to the state's pecan, poultry and timber farms.

"When you think of pecans, poultry, timber – we're the number one producer in those commodity areas," said Georgia Agriculture Commissioner Tyler Harper. "They are a significantly important part of our agricultural industry."

Other disaster relief funding also doesn't pay for some critical infrastructure projects, like replacing irrigation systems that got torn up as the storm uprooted trees.

US Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins visited the state capitol Tuesday to announce the funding and discuss other agriculture issues.

"President Trump understands that farmers were so negatively impacted, and of course we have to continue to stand by them," she told the state House of Representatives. "The only fault now would be us not doing our part to help Georgia's great agricultural and forestry communities."

Senators Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff both applauded the new program. They've been pushing for these funds to be released to farmers since Congress passed a $21 billion agricultural disaster relief package in late 2024.

"This announcement is welcome news for the Georgia producers and farmers that have been forced to wait far too long for this desperately needed relief," Warnock wrote in a statement.

Rollins addressed the delay in her appearance at the state capitol, stressing that much of the funding went out within six months but that the block grants were "more complicated because you have to work state by state by state."

USDA funded a similar program to help Georgia farmers recover after Hurricane Michael hit Southwest Georgia hard in 2018.

War, tariffs and farms

Rollins discussed several other issues facing farmers, including the impact of tariffs and the war with Iran.

The conflict has effectively shut down the Strait of Hormuz, a key shipping route for lots of commodities, including fertilizer. That's driven up prices and jeopardized supplies as many farmers plant for the spring.

Rollins said the administration is "looking at every potential opportunity to support our farmers and our ranchers" in the face of rising fertilizer prices.

"We understand, again, this is an existential issue for the future of America and keeping America safe," she said. "We want American farmers farming and American ranchers ranching, and they can't do that with the cost of inputs as they continue to skyrocket."

Rollins highlighted the administration's other efforts to lower the costs of agricultural inputs, like removing tariffs on fertilizer and lowering the wage rate for a key visa program used by farm workers. But solutions to the fertilizer issue, she said, "won't happen overnight."

Rahul Bali contributed to this report.



PHOTO COURTESY MATTHEW PEARSON/WABE
Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins speaks at the Georgia Capitol tolaunch a grant program for Hurricane Helene recovery.

ABRAMS

Continued from Page 5

authoritarianism have done before us: we start to comply by going silent and giving up.

In Georgia, we are fortunate to have over 14,000 nonprofits with nearly every county being home to at least one. According to IRS filings, we have 94 organizations focused on civil rights, social action and advocacy across the state. We have 529 organizations focused on health care.

Imagine where Georgians would be without these organizations working for justice and policy change or for the good of our health. Our state would lose homeless shelters and support systems for farmers, and more children would lose hope for the future. Georgians built these organizations to stand up to injustice, to fill the gaps in access to health care exacerbated by our refusal to expand Medicaid and to construct the Georgia we deserve, regardless of what politicians would have us believe.

Without these organizations propping up progress across our state, we would be in even more trouble. Remember, the billionaire tax cut bill that every Georgia Republican voted for in Congress is now cutting funding for food benefits, stripping cash from health care and gutting child care support for millions of Georgians. Veterans are in need and young people are struggling to afford basic necessities.

This is exactly how authoritarianism happens: slash services for the people and then make it harder for others to make up the difference. Who wins in that scenario? The answer is autocratic leaders bent on consolidating power by making sure no one believes help is on the way.

The good news is that we are not powerless. We can do much more to support the organizations that support our communities. Speak up for the nonprofit in your community that gives kids a place to play or helps seniors with their light bills.

Give your time and resources to those impacted by federal changes — tithe beyond the church and into the neighborhoods where your friends and families live. Show up and offer words of support — we all need to hear that we matter.

Also, despite the dismal news and the sense of doom, stay informed about the attacks on the social sector, and publicly call it what it is. Don't let the cynics be the loudest voices anywhere. Democracy only survives if we demand it, if we fight for it and if we believe in it.

We keep waiting for the cinematic moment when we lose everything. But like a leak in a house or a small spark in the backyard, the disaster doesn't announce itself. It begins by eroding what we have, so that when we really require help — there's none to be found.

Now is the time for courage, Georgia. Protect the organizations doing the work our communities desperately need right now. We can't afford to wait.

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

The Macon Melody

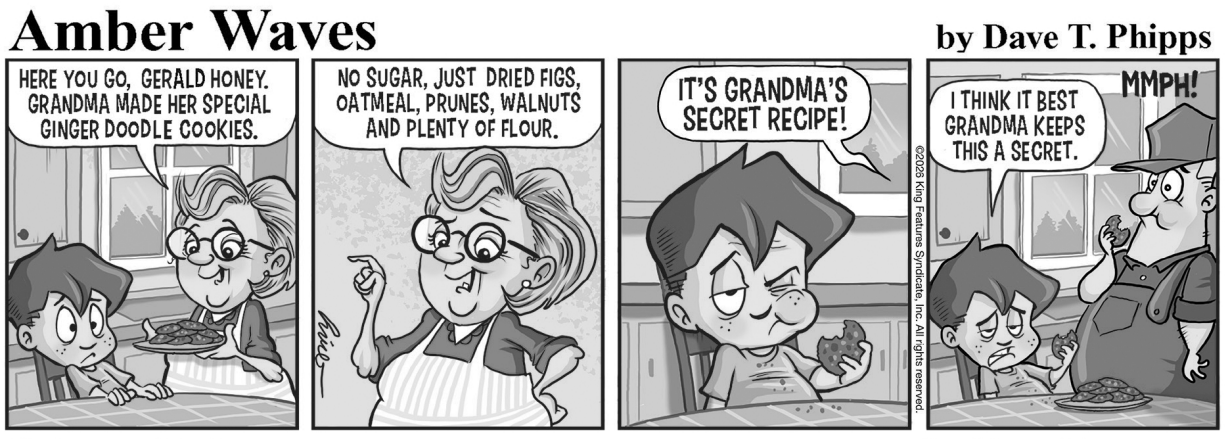
REPORTING *FOR* MACON, *FROM* MACON.

Local journalism does not happen by accident. It happens because readers choose to support it. The Macon Melody delivers independent, in-depth reporting on the issues, people and decisions shaping our community. When you subscribe, you are investing in journalism *rooted right here*.

SUBSCRIBE AT MACONMELODY.COM/MEMBERSHIP

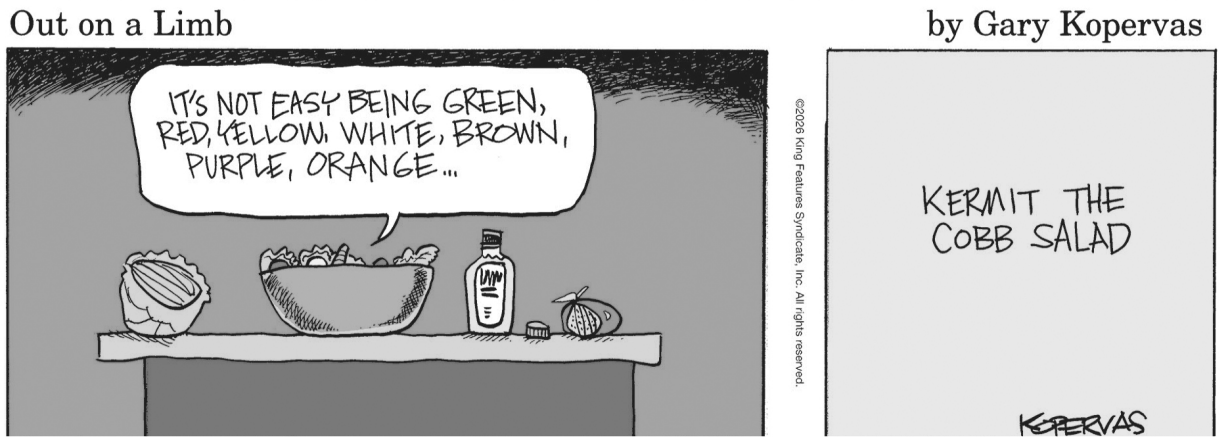
Amber Waves

by Dave T. Phipps



Out on a Limb

by Gary Kopervas



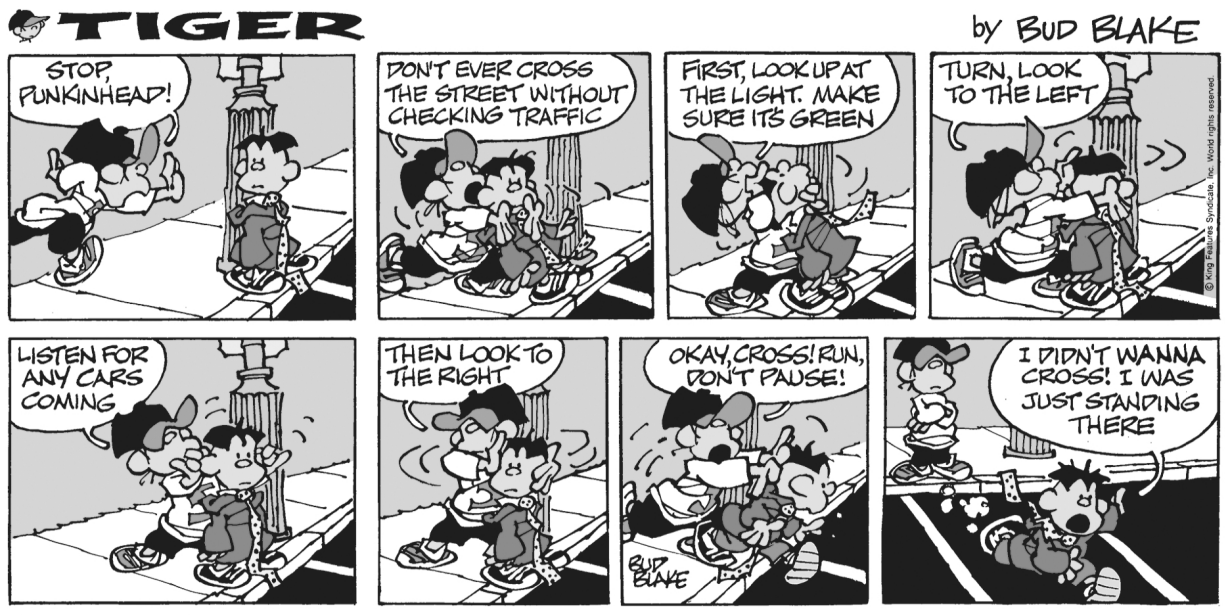
The Spats

by Jeff Pickering



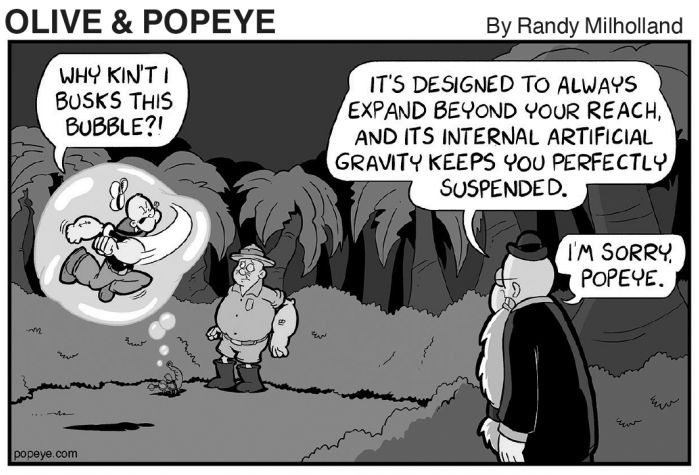
TIGER

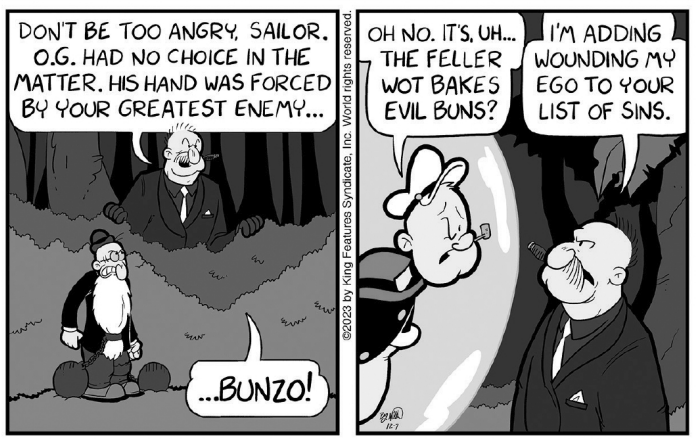
by BUD BLAKE



OLIVE & POPEYE

By Randy Milholland





HOCUS-FOCUS

BY HENRY BOLTINOFF

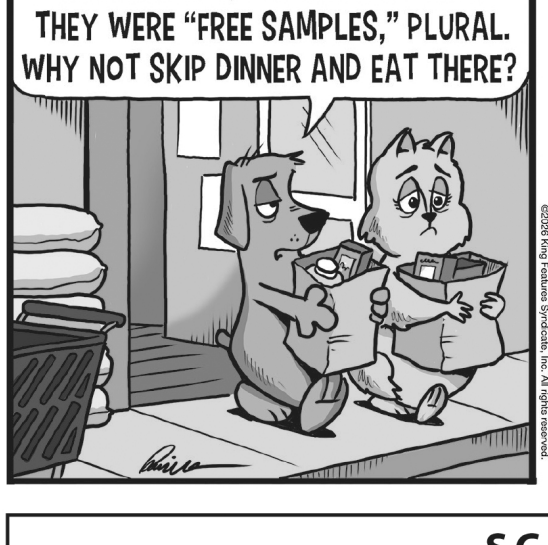


Find at least six differences in details between panels.

Differences: 1. Hat is larger. 2. Bottom of lamp is not showing. 3. Ear is different. 4. Book cover is different. 5. Glasses are missing. 6. Ribbon is moved.

Just Like Cats & Dogs

by Dave T. Phipps



CryptoQuip

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

Clue: **S** equals **O**

H ZQ RSSCNE SU JVPEWHUK VRN RHJVSLW ST STTHBHZD CHUKDW ENBLNNJ. H KPNJJ H'Q ZU NEHBV ZEEHBV.

©2026 King Features Synd., Inc.

SCRAMBLERS

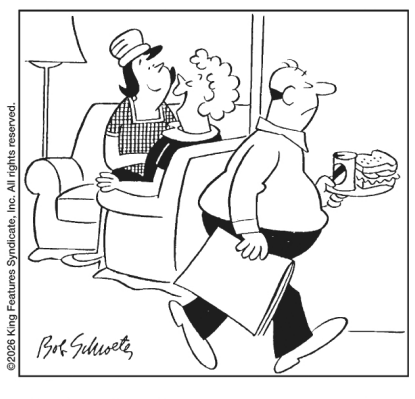
Unscramble the letters within each rectangle to form four ordinary words. Then rearrange the boxed letters to form the mystery word, which will complete the gag!

Trap — **NEARS**

Mature — **PRINE**

Smear — **DUGEMS**

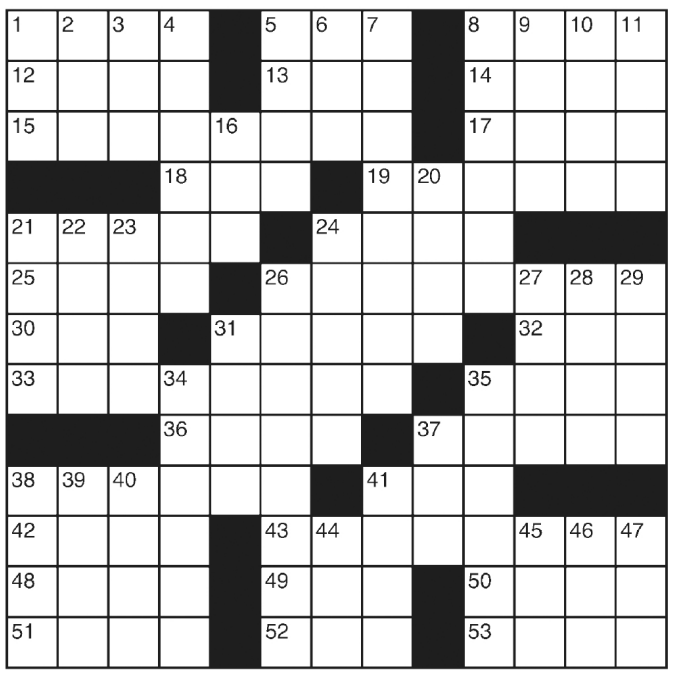
Tend — **RUNES**



"He hasn't spoken to me since I gave him _ _ _ _ _ _ _ shoes for his birthday!"

TODAY'S WORD

King Crossword



ACROSS

1 Makes a choice
5 Pear-shaped fruit
8 "The Black Prince" author Murdoch
12 High point
13 Hostel
14 Central point
15 "Citadel" actress Chopra
17 Only
18 Brooch
19 Rappers' improvisations
21 Signaled "Hi!"
24 — Bator
25 Battery fluid
26 Female royal
30 Roulette bet
31 Carried on, as war
32 Pickles on "Rugrats"
33 Inmate
35 Chorus syllables
36 "I dropped the fruitcake!"
37 How distant stars shine
38 Politico Nancy
41 Parcel of land
42 Latin 101 word
43 Archbishops, e.g.
48 Get overemotional
49 Slithery fish
50 Prime-time hour
51 Villa d'—
52 Tofu source
53 Bigfoot's cousin

DOWN

1 Antonym (Abbr.)
2 Capita lead-in
3 — chi
4 Used a Zoom alternative
5 Twain hero
6 Squid squirt
7 More knotted, as a tree
8 Harmonious
9 Leeway
10 Between jobs
11 Beholds
16 Help
20 Royal flush, e.g.
21 Get bent out of shape
22 Computer brand
23 Caesar's "I saw"
24 Implores
26 Primitive flutes
27 Wax-coated cheese
28 Ledge
29 Do in
31 Courts
34 Mollify
35 Lengthy list
37 — Perignon
38 Leaf
39 Flightless birds
40 Endure
41 Easter bloom
44 Classic car
45 Dead heat
46 Sinusitis doc
47 Six, in Sicily

© 2026 King Features Synd., Inc.

Weekly SUDOKU

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

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!

© 2026 King Features Synd., Inc.

FiveSpot™

In the library

G	L	O	B	E	Shakespeare's theater
					Skier's refuge
					Ski trail through trees
					eBay offering
					Done, foodwise
					Rise from your seat

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

FiveSpot is a trademark of Michael McLinden
See more at www.sproutspuzzle.com 02630

Trivia test

by Fifi Rodriguez

1. MUSIC: Who composed the opera "The Magic Flute"?
2. LITERATURE: Who wrote the novel "Wuthering Heights"?
3. GENERAL KNOWLEDGE: Which sport uses a shuttlecock?
4. MATH: What is the next prime number after 11?
5. GEOGRAPHY: Where is Pearl Harbor located?
6. INVENTIONS: Who is credited with inventing the World Wide Web?
7. SCIENCE: What is the name for plants that live for two years?
8. MOVIES: What is Jack-Jack's real name in "The Incredibles"?
9. ACRONYMS: What does VPN stand for?
10. ASTRONOMY: Which moon is the largest in our solar system?

© 2026 King Features Synd., Inc.

SCRAMBLERS
solution
1. Snare; 2. Ripen
3. Smudge; 4. Nurse
Today's Word
RUNNING

S	T	A	N	D
S	A	T	E	D
D	E	A	L	S
G	L	A	D	E
L	O	D	G	E
G	L	O	B	E

FiveSpot™ Solution

Weekly SUDOKU
Answer

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

CryptoQuip
answer
I am hooked on studying the history of official kingly decrees. I guess I'm an edict addict.

King Crossword
Answers

Solution time: 23 mins.

O	P	T	S		F	I	G		I	R	I	S		
P	E	A	K		I	N	N		N	O	D	E		
P	R	I	Y	A	N	K	A		S	O	L	E		
W	A	V	E	D		U	L	A	N					
A	C	I	D		P	R	I	N	C	E	S	S		
R	E	D		W	A	G	E	D		D	I	L		
P	R	I	S	O	N	E	R		L	A	L	A		
		O	O	P	S		D	I	M	L	Y			
			T	O	L		I	S	O	L	E	P		
A	M	A	T		P	R	I	M	A	T	E	S		
G	U	S	H		E	E	L		N	I	N	E		
E	S	T	E		S	O	Y		Y	E	T	I		

Trivia Answers
1. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
2. Emily Bronte
3. Badminton
4. 13
5. Oahu, Hawaii
6. Tim Berners-Lee
7. Biennials
8. John Jackson Parr
9. Virtual Private Network
10. Ganymede of Jupiter

Douglass Theatre to present women of impact awards, Fannie Lou Hamer play



Michael W. Pannell

The Douglass Theatre steps into Women's History Month this weekend by presenting an award-winning, live stage play and the annual Central Georgia Women of Impact Awards.

On Saturday at 2:30 p.m. and 6:30 p.m., the Douglass presents "The Fannie Lou Hamer Story," a one-woman production written and performed by Mzuri Moyo Aimbaye, which weaves together music and storytelling to portray and honor the life of civil rights activist and voting rights champion Fannie Lou Hamer.

Born in 1917 in the Mississippi Delta, Hamer became a powerful, influential voice in the Civil Rights and voting rights movements and a leader in efforts to secure economic opportunities for Black people.

Growing up in poverty, she joined her sharecropper family picking cotton at age 6 and left school to work exclusively by age 12. Though in later years many looked down on her because of her limited education, at the time, her ability to read and write allowed her to serve as the plantation timekeeper.

Hamer's accomplishments as a leader included:

— Co-founding the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to challenge the all-white political power structure in Mississippi.

— Delivering historic 1964 Democratic National Convention testimony, exposing racial terror and voter suppression to a national audience.

— Leading voter-registration efforts across Mississippi to become one of the most influential grassroots organizers of the Civil Rights era.

— Helping to launch and organize the 1964 Freedom Summer efforts, bringing national attention and volunteers to Mississippi's voting rights fight.

— Co-founding the Freedom Farm Cooperative, a pioneering anti-poverty and land-ownership initiative for Black families.

— Playing a key role in advancing the Voting Rights Act of 1965, using her activism and national platform to push for federal protections.

Hamer's suffering as a Black woman spurred much of her advocacy and her accomplishments as an activist came with great cost. For example:

— She endured Southern Jim Crow racism, exploitation and lack of access to basic rights and education.

— While young, she was denied knowledge of her own voting rights, only learning at age 44 that she had the right to register.

— She survived an involuntary hysterectomy — a common abuse at the time known as a "Mississippi appendectomy" — performed without her consent while undergoing surgery for another condition.

— She was once fired from her job, evicted and economically punished for attempting to register to vote, losing her home and livelihood overnight.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY DOUGLASS THEATRE

Mzuri Moyo Aimbaye brings her one one-woman production of "The Fannie Lou Hamer Story" to the Douglass Theatre this Saturday. The play is part of a weekend honoring women at the historic theater.

— She endured physical violence, suffering arrest and beatings in a Mississippi jail in 1963, sustaining lifelong injury.

— She was frequently surveilled, threatened, harassed and in danger, such as when her home was riddled with bullets due to her voter-registration and Civil Rights leadership.

"This is a truly powerful play, remembering and honoring Fannie Lou Hamer, who was such a powerful woman and crusader for civil rights," said Shelton Land, executive director of Douglass Theatre. "As a one-woman show featuring stories and song, Mzuri Moyo Aimbaye has created an entertaining and educational tribute worthy of Mrs. Hamer."

Land said the presentation is the last of three in the Douglass's Signature Playwright Series and that Mzuri Moyo Aimbaye — whose name in Swahili means "beautiful heart who sings" — is an AUDELCO Award winner, which recognizes excellence in African American theater.

The production's Macon performances coincide with the anniversary of Hamer's death, March 14, 1977. Admission is $25.

Central Georgia Women of Impact Awards

On Sunday at 3 p.m. is the Central Georgia Women of Impact Awards, a collaborative awards ceremony by the Douglass, the Tubman African American Museum and the Ruth Hartley Mosley Women's Center. Attending the ceremony is free with an RSVP.

"The goal is to show our unified recognition of women — heroes

SEE THEATRE PAGE 10

The hardest step is the decision to start: Macon trainer offers simple fitness advice



Joy L. King

March is Women's History Month, a time to celebrate the leadership and influence of women across many fields, including health and fitness.

In Macon, women are helping people build strength not only physically, but mentally and emotionally as well. As a nurse practitioner, I often remind patients that movement is one of the most powerful tools we have to support long-term health.

This month, I reached out to several women in the fitness community to share advice that anyone can apply to live healthier lives.

This week's spotlight features Anna Verdu Cobo, a personal trainer at D1 Training Macon, a gym known for its structured coaching and strong sense of community.

At D1 Training Macon, she works with individuals of all fitness levels, helping members build strength through structured training and a supportive coaching environment.

Verdu Cobo believes one of the most important habits people can incorporate into their routine for long-term health is consistent strength training. "Strength training two to three days per week supports long-term health," she said. "The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends adults perform muscle-strengthening activities at least two days per week."

Beyond building muscle, resistance training also supports bone density, metabolic health and physical function.

Research also suggests it may improve mental health and sleep quality. This makes it an important component of overall wellness. Verdu Cobo said one of the most common misconceptions she hears, especially from women, is a fear that lifting weights will cause excessive muscle growth.

"Many women avoid lifting weights because they worry about becoming bulky," she said. "Scientific evidence does not support this concern for most women. Strength training increases strength and lean muscle while helping reduce body fat."

Instead of avoiding weights, she encourages people to view strength training as a tool that supports posture, injury prevention and long-term health.

Starting small

For those who feel intimidated about starting a fitness journey, Verdu Cobo emphasized that the first step doesn't have to be complicated.

"Start with ten minutes of movement," she said. "Take a walk outside, try a few bodyweight exercises or consider joining a structured training environment where coaching and support are available."

Even small increases in activity can make a meaningful difference. Health organizations around the world continue to emphasize that any movement is better than none, and small steps often lead to lasting habits. For Anna, however, strength goes far beyond physical fitness.

"Strength means discipline and self-respect," she said. "Many women enter the gym unsure of their ability, but over time they develop confidence through repeated effort."

Regular exercise has also been linked to improved self-esteem and reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression, reinforcing the powerful connection between physical and mental health.

Reflecting on her own journey, Verdu Cobo said one lesson stands out above the rest.

"Progress depends on consistency. Motivation changes day to day, but discipline builds results," she said.

Her message to anyone thinking about starting a fitness routine is simple but powerful: "The hardest step in fitness is the decision to start." Sometimes the path to better health begins with something small. It might be a short walk, a new habit or simply the decision to invest in yourself. As Anna puts it, "from the couch to the gym begins with one decision, one new habit." During Women's History Month, it is inspiring to see women like Anna helping others discover their strength. And as she reminds us, the most important step is simply the decision to start.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY D1 TRAINING MACON

Anna Verdu Cobo coaches people at D1 Training Macon. The local personal trainer focuses on strength training.

Joy King, DNP, MBA, APRN, NP-C, FAIHM, serves as president of the Georgia Nurses Association.

FUEL OUR FEATURES COVERAGE.
Our advertising works for real local budgets.
Reach readers who value culture and community.
Learn more by emailing lizzie@maconmelody.com.

BILLY'S LET'S EAT REVIEW

When the dish doesn't meet the hype: hot takes from an honest local foodie



Billy Hennessey

Macon's restaurant scene is one of the most passionate and supportive communities I've encountered since moving here. Many of the chefs, servers and owners I've met genuinely care about the experience they create for their guests, and that passion is what makes the city's dining culture so exciting.

Restaurants evolve, menus change and kitchens find their rhythm again. I truly hope that the places mentioned here find that rhythm, because Macon thrives when its restaurants succeed. Let's face it, we all work way too hard for our money to pay for something anything less than wonderful when we visit a restaurant.

This article was not easy for me to write. Since writing food reviews, I've spent most of my time celebrating the restaurants that make this city special.

I have had some of the most amazing meals of my life right here in Middle Georgia. Considering the amount of time I spend traveling as a flight attendant around the world, that speaks volumes. I really do know and love good food!

But being honest about meals also means acknowledging when something doesn't meet expectations. A fair review means sharing both the good and the bad. I'm a food reviewer who doesn't put much weight into online reviews until I experience a place myself, and I usually visit a restaurant several times before deciding whether a disappointing meal was just an off day.

So far in Macon, there are a few restaurants where my experiences have consistently fallen short. I know this may stir some strong feelings among fellow Maconites, but the goal of sharing my experiences is simple: honest feedback that hopefully leads to improvement.

Toasted Kitchen

My experience at Toasted Kitchen left me genuinely frustrated. I ordered something incredibly simple: avocado toast. When the dish arrived, the bread was barely toasted and had the texture of stale, soft bread rather than the crisp bite most people expect from toast — especially at a place called "Toasted." For nearly $13, the portion felt surprisingly small, with very little avocado spread across a single slice of bread. The dish missed the mark in both texture and value, and it was disappointing enough that I ultimately sent it back to the kitchen without eating it. After sharing my experience online, several followers chimed in saying they had similar frustrations with high prices, inconsistent food quality and service issues.

I didn't take writing this lightly. When I began my research, I was surprised that I wasn't the only one who felt this way and shocked by the number of other dissatisfied foodies. My Facebook page, "Billy's Let's Eat Review" was quite vocal on the one post I made about my "avocado bread instead of toast."

Google and Yelp reviews seemed to agree, similar themes appeared among some of the one- and two-star feedback. A number of reviewers mentioned feeling that the menu items are overpriced for the portion sizes served, while others described inconsistent preparation of simple dishes like toast or breakfast plates. Some reviews also referenced slow service or uncomfortable interactions between staff members during busy times.

While Toasted Kitchen still receives many positive reviews overall, the recurring concerns in lower ratings tend to center on value for money, service consistency and basic execution of menu items.

The Rookery

When I first moved to Macon, I asked locals where I could find a meal that felt quintessentially Macon. The answer I heard more than any other was The Rookery. Because of that reputation, I visited many times over the past year hoping to experience what so many people had described.

Unfortunately, my experiences gradually became more disappointing with each visit. On one visit the onion rings arrived limp, cold and soggy instead of crispy, which was the first time in my life I ever sent a dish back to the kitchen.

I initially assumed it was just a bad day, but similar issues continued on later visits — burgers arrived undercooked, lettuce appeared brown or wilted and sides felt rushed or poorly prepared. For a restaurant widely known for its burgers and comfort food, those experiences were disappointing. Let's face it, if you're ordering something fried that is breaded, it just HAS to be crispy. Otherwise, it tastes like soggy oiled bread.

Looking at more recent one- and two-star reviews on Google and Yelp, several reviewers echoed similar frustrations. Some guests noted declining food quality compared to previous years, particularly with burgers and fried sides that arrived undercooked or lacking freshness. Others pointed to inconsistent service during busy hours and long waits for food. While The Rookery still maintains strong overall ratings and a long-standing reputation in Macon, the lower-rated reviews increasingly referenced concerns about consistency and whether the restaurant still lives up to the reputation it built decades ago.

Parish on Cherry

I have visited Parish on Cherry three different times — once for Sunday brunch and twice for dinner — because I truly wanted to give the restaurant a fair chance. Each time I went, I brought friends with me who offered additional perspectives. Despite the restaurant's recent remodel and the strong buzz surrounding it, we consistently left feeling underwhelmed.

The space itself is attractive and lively, but the meals we experienced never quite matched the expectations set by the atmosphere. I generally don't expect a menu to be revolutionary; good food and solid service can make even a simple menu enjoyable. Unfortunately, our experiences never quite reached that point, and after three visits I still left wondering why the hype didn't match the plate. Despite multiple visits, I never enjoyed a single dish there.

Apparently I'm not the only one who feels this way. Facebook, Google and Yelp revealed several recurring complaints that mirror parts of my own experience. Some reviewers described inconsistent food preparation, such as dishes arriving unevenly heated or lacking flavor, while others mentioned slow service during busy hours.

A number of reviewers also noted frustration with management's response, which attributed problems to the restaurant being busy. Several diners argued that being busy should be expected in a successful restaurant and shouldn't result in declining food quality or service. Overall, the lower-rated reviews often focused on consistency issues and the gap between expectations created by the restaurant's reputation and the experience diners received.

Yollah Social Kitchen & Garden

I visited Yollah for brunch with a group of friends, and while the restaurant itself has a stylish atmosphere and a concept that seems promising, the overall experience felt mediocre at best.

There were four of us dining together and we intentionally ordered four different menu items so we could gain a good sense of the kitchen's range. Unfortunately, none of the dishes really stood out. Nothing was particularly bad, but nothing was memorable either. When you walk into a place that markets itself as a social kitchen with creative cuisine, you expect at least one dish to make you say "wow." In this case, that moment never arrived.

The food felt average, and when you combine that with the expectations created by the restaurant's branding and décor, it left us underwhelmed. I also found it to be expensive which led me to believe we would be getting elevated food. That elevator never left the ground floor.

My research shows many diners expressed similar concerns. A number of reviewers mentioned that while the space itself is attractive and the concept appealing, the food can feel inconsistent or not quite as flavorful as expected. Others mentioned brunch dishes that felt average for the price point or menu items that didn't live up to the hype created by the restaurant's atmosphere and social media presence.

Some reviewers also referenced slow service during busy hours. At the same time, many guests noted that the environment is lively and enjoyable for gatherings, suggesting that while the restaurant has strong potential, diners are hoping the food eventually rises to match the energy and promise of the space.

Writing a negative review isn't something I take lightly. Restaurants are built by hardworking people, and the last thing I want to do is tear down a local business. But honest feedback is part of any healthy food culture.

Macon has an incredibly passionate dining community, and the excitement residents show for their favorite restaurants is one of the reasons I enjoy writing about food here. My hope in sharing these experiences isn't to discourage anyone from visiting these restaurants, but to encourage improvement.

Restaurants can't survive forever on reputation alone. They survive by delivering great food and service every single day. Macon deserves the best dining experiences possible, and with the incredible talent and opportunity this city has, there's no reason we can't achieve exactly that.

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

Mole patrol: What happens beneath our feet?



Morgan Durden

If your lawn suddenly feels soft and uneven underfoot, or you notice winding ridges weaving across the yard like hidden pathways just beneath the surface, moles may be at work. These changes often seem to appear overnight, especially after soaking rain, leaving homeowners puzzled about what could have moved in so quickly.

Moles are insectivores, not rodents, and they spend nearly their entire lives underground. Most homeowners will never actually see a mole.

In Macon-Bibb County, our local soil plays a significant role in mole activity. Much of our area lies within the Upper Coastal Plain and along the Fall Line, where sandy loam and clay-loam soils are common. These soils retain moisture after rainfall while remaining loose enough for tunneling.

When those damp conditions combine with abundant earthworms, white grubs and other invertebrates, they create highly favorable conditions for moles. In many ways, a lawn with moles is a lawn with active soil life.

One of the most common misconceptions is that moles eat grass roots. They do not. Moles feed on earthworms, insect larvae, white grubs and other soil-dwelling invertebrates. Lawn damage occurs indirectly. As moles tunnel, they can separate turf roots from surrounding soil. During dry conditions, those disconnected roots may dry out more quickly, leading to thinning or browning.

It is also important to note that the number of tunnels does not equal the number of moles.

A single mole can construct an extensive network of runways, using only some of them regularly.

Mole activity often increases during the spring when rainfall softens soil, and invertebrates move closer to the surface.

Warmer soil temperatures and renewed lawn growth also make tunnels more noticeable. Activity may spike at other times of the year when favorite food sources, such as white grubs, are active.

Moles or voles?
Spot the culprit

Homeowners often confuse moles with voles, but their damage differs significantly. Moles create continuously raised ridges and do not chew plants.

Voles are small rodents that feed on roots, stems and bulbs. They often leave golf-ball-sized openings and may use abandoned mole tunnels.

If plants appear healthy one day and suddenly collapse from chewed roots, voles are more likely responsible.

Raised ridges and lifted turf? Think mole.

Chewed roots, missing bulbs or gnawed stems? Think vole.

Practical solutions

Research shows that many widely shared home remedies are either ineffective or unlawful, including the use of mothballs, ultrasonic devices, castor oil repellents and other folklore-based solutions.

Effective management begins with identifying active tunnels. Flatten a short section of runway and check it 24 hours later. If it is raised again, that tunnel is active. Trapping remains the most effective and practical control method. Traps should be placed in straight, active runways with minimal disturbance.

Reducing excessive irrigation and managing heavy grub populations may also help as part of a broader plan, though these approaches alone will not eliminate moles. While raised ridges can be frustrating, moles are simply insect hunters responding to favorable soil conditions.

If you are unsure whether you are dealing with moles or voles, contact your local UGA Extension office for assistance tailored to Macon-Bibb County conditions.

Morgan Durden works for the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service in Bibb County. The county office provides resources for gardeners as well as educational services and community support.

Visit their office at 715 Oglethorpe Street, call them at 748-310-5350 or email their staff at bibb.extension@uga.edu.

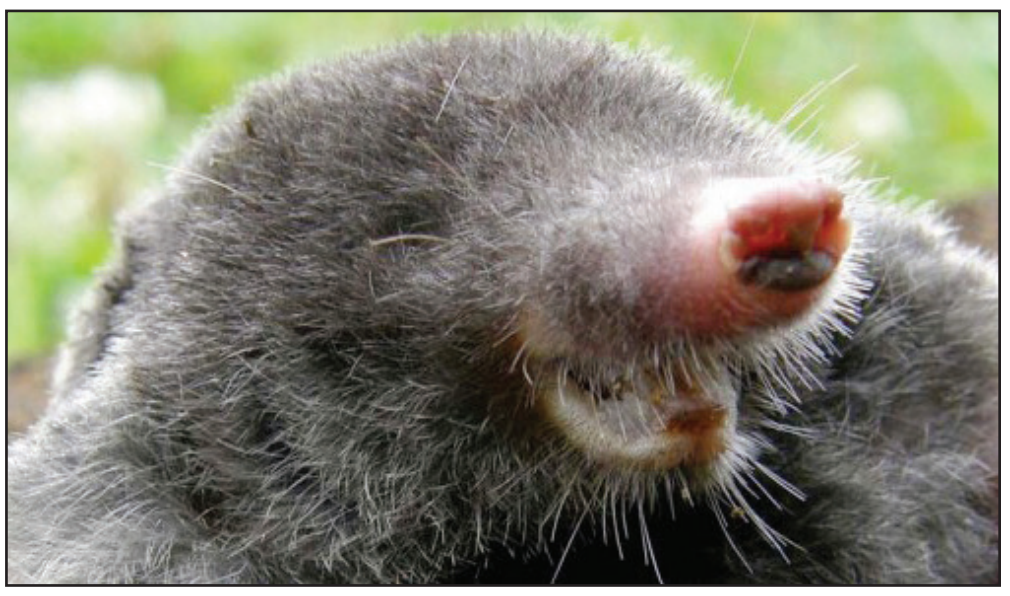


PHOTO PROVIDED BY UGA VOLUNTEER EXTENSION

Moles are known for tunneling underground, leaving lawns uneven and soft.

THEATRE

Continued from Page 9

doing work at the grassroots level whose names are not always lifted up," Land said. "Each award annually honors women who've made an impact through their actions and attainments, and each award is a namesake award that not only honors the winners but also the women whose names they bear, someone significant to each of our organizations."

This year's honorees include:

— The Harriet Tubman Acts of Courage Award Honorees:

Barrie Miller Howard and Tatrabian Jackson

— The Fannie Appling Douglass Cornerstone of Culture Award Honoree:

Betty Slater

— The Ruth Hartley Mosley Beacon of Good Award Honorees:

Hattie O'Bryant and Phyllis Kitchens Thurmond

The award ceremony will be at the Douglass, with a reception following at the Tubman at 4:30 p.m. At the Douglass, there will also be an exhibit featuring Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and its local Middle Georgia chapter, Epsilon Omega Omega.

Visit douglasstheatre.com for more information on these events.

The Douglass is celebrating its 105th anniversary and is in a fundraising drive, the "187 Days of Giving Campaign," which began Feb. 17 in honor of founder Charles Henry Douglass, who was born in 1870. The theater is seeking 1,870 people who will give $18.70 in honor of Douglass. The Douglass also offers theater memberships.

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

A SHOT AT REDEMPTION



PHOTO BY MARK POWELL
The Macon Coliseum was packed with Southwest fans during last year's state championship. The Patriots will try to avenge last season's loss to B.E.S.T. Academy in this year's title game against Rabun County this Friday at 3 p.m.

Back in the title game again, the Southwest Patriots want to finish the job

Defense, routines key for Patriots

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
micah@maconmelody.com

As the Southwest Patriots get ready to take on the Rabun County Wildcats in the GHSA Class A-Division I State Championship, their preparations look much different than the work that came before to last year's title game.

The Patriots prepped for the 2024-25 championship matchup — which they ended up losing against Atlanta's B.E.S.T. Academy in heartbreaking fashion — with a significantly different schedule than their normal routines. Head coach Monquencio Hardnett held practice in a different gym, had players stay in hotels and more to try and impress the importance of the game on his squad.

This year, he said it's a different beast altogether.

"I think we learned a little bit from the first trip to keep it more normal. We want it to be as normal as possible," Hardnett said. "The first couple days are mental, we'll do a lot about us, then we'll work on Rabun County the last two days before (the championship). … The excitement is there. They're ready to play, and I'm excited for them."

As he discussed his team's habits ahead of their final contest, Hardnett finished sweeping the court in Southwest's gym Tuesday ahead of the Patriots' after-school practice. The Southwest team emerged from the side hallway and began shooting soon after, jawing back and forth and staying loose.

The warm-ups reflected a more relaxed attitude and a readiness that Hardnett said came with experience in the title game.

"They seem to be a little bit more eager to win this time. I think they feel the experience part of it as well. You could see some jitters last year, particularly at the beginning of the game and at the end of it as well," the head coach said. "I don't expect to see that this time. Like I told them, it's two teams playing, and only one of them was here last time."

Chase Dupree and CJ Howard will lead a senior class — one that has carried Southwest to its best stretch in decades — into its final game. Dupree said it felt a little weird to know it would be his last time on the floor as a Patriot, but he and Howard both mentioned the close bond the seniors have with one another.

"I feel great, because not only am I playing my last game, I'm playing it with my guys that I've been with since middle school," Howard said. "Win or lose, those will always be my brothers."

Of course, both athletes also showed the eagerness to win that their head coach mentioned.

"I've been so focused on winning," Dupree said.

The Patriots will have a tough task, of course. Rabun County is in the midst of a storybook season much like Southwest's trek to the title game last year, though the school has never made the championship in its history.

The Wildcats have lots of talent, but two players stand out. Post player Hayes Free (18.8 points per game) is 6-foot-8 and could do damage in the paint, while shifty point guard Huey Blalock (19.1 points per game) is committed to play ball at Navy and is a scoring engine for Rabun County.

"We want to make sure we're still as physical as we can be. (The size) will be another hole that Rinaldo Callaway leaves not being here. We just want to be as fast as we can and be as smart as we can with the basketball. They're a talented team and they shoot the ball well," Hardnett

SEE SOUTHWEST
PAGE 12



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Southwest head coach Monquencio Hardnett celebrates during the Patriots' win over Vidalia last week that sent them to the title game.

To tell Southwest's tale, where to begin?



Micah Johnston

If you wanted to tell the story of the Southwest Patriots team that finds itself in the state championship game once more this Friday, it feels like there are dozens of questions that need to be asked.

Like how, for example, they accumulated their oodles of talent. The team is led by scorers like Chase Dupree and CJ Howard, a duo that has become a staple of Southwest's smoothness and shooting, but also anchored by steady contributor Jonathan Hurley, longtime morale man Montese Green and Westside transfer Alex Butts.

One also might wonder how head coach Monquencio Hardnett coached this group up year after year, going from 11-16 in his second season to last year's monolithic 27-3 finish and this season's 29-6 campaign. That question would open the door, though, to others — ones about this year's six losses, last year's third and final loss and how the Patriots are going to approach Friday's title game differently.

These are all important quandaries when it comes to Southwest. They pale in comparison, though, to a single question that is difficult to answer: where to begin?

The endings of stories are often the top priority, making or breaking the entire narrative — like a fine sheet of glass in its final stages of creation, there is either a finish with a brilliant sheen or an irreparable shattering. A movie with a good twist at its peak is lauded, but an ending unearned is justifiably maligned.

But beginnings are just as im-

SEE JOHNSTON
PAGE 12

NOTEPAD

Mercer hoops seasons cut short

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
micah@maconmelody.com

Both Mercer basketball teams were bounced in the first round of their respective Southern Conference tournaments last week, ending seasons that brought better results than prior campaigns but still left room for improvements.

Fourth quarter slump sinks women's team

The women's tournament began first on March 5 with the No. 5-seeded Bears taking on the No. 4 Furman Paladins. Mercer had just scored 80 points against Furman in a late February showdown, but the tournament matchup would not go the same way.

The Bears played well in the first half, including a great shooting effort in the second quarter that netted them 18 points and left things tied at 29-29 going into the third quarter. Defense and turnovers also kept Mercer afloat in the first half.

But it was the Bears' offense, which was vastly improved this year in head coach Michelle Clark-Heard's second season, that sput-

SEE NOTEPAD
PAGE 12

POWER OUR SPORTS COVERAGE.
Our advertising is designed for real local budgets.
Connect with fans of local teams and businesses.
Learn more by emailing lizzie@maconmelody.com.

JOHNSTON

Continued from Page 11

portant. They set the stage for everything, giving us context and introducing us to key figures who will shape the story to come.

In telling Southwest's story, then, it is tempting to hop in a time machine to 1989 and begin there.

That is when the Patriots last stood atop the state of Georgia and its basketball hierarchy, when Southwest won its sixth and most recent state championship. Chase Dupree's father and outgoing Southwest athletic director Joe Dupree Jr. was on the team. So were future NBA players like Sharone Wright. Legendary head coach Duck Richardson was still at the helm.

That '89 team was the last brick laid in a sturdy Southwest hoops legacy, an informative chunk of lore that Coach Hardnett and all his players nowadays are well aware of. The trophies won by earlier Patriots teams are crucial pieces of the team's image, too, including the "national championship" honor touted by the 1979 Southwest team.

Or maybe the story begins in 1996, when a young Monquencio Hardnett transferred from Middle Georgia State — though at the time it was Middle Georgia College, a small but mighty JUCO program — to the University of Connecticut.

For two seasons, Hardnett played with some of the greatest college players the country had to offer as athletes like Rip Hamilton, Khalid El-Amin and others led the UConn Huskies to great heights. He won a Big East championship under the tutelage of all-time great NCAA coach Jim Calhoun and reached the Elite 8 of the NCAA Tournament.

Perhaps the man now sometimes called "Coach Q" learned how to be a championship-caliber leader up north. Hardnett's time as a Huskie seems to have shaped him, and he's said as much. The NCAA tournament run, too, might have prepared Southwest's head coach for the GHSA state tournament — it's not quite as intense as March Madness, but high school basketball's February iteration of basketball battle royale is a gauntlet nonetheless.

These are not the right starting points, however. These vignettes of the past are important, but they don't make the tale. You need only go back to last year's championship game — Southwest's first trip to the Macon Coliseum in decades — to find the beginning.

The Macon Coliseum is where dreams come true and champions are crowned, but it is also where hearts are broken.

A sold-out crowd — yes, sold-out; in fact, Macon fire marshals had to close the arena's doors after Southwest fans crowded the venue and overflowed into the aisles — watched the Patriots take a double-digit lead into the fourth quarter. History was in their grasp. The trophy was theirs to lose.

And then the Patriots lost it.

That solid lead evaporated, and B.E.S.T. Academy came back and defeated Southwest in the title game. The dream was shattered. The packed house sat crestfallen while Hardnett hugged his players, tears rolling down their faces.

That is where this all began. As Chase Dupree and CJ Howard and the rest of the team hit their lowest point, something changed.

Right from the start of this 2025-26 season, they've talked about it. At media day before the campaign tipped off, Dupree talked about how hard he took the loss. Howard was eerily silent at the event but clearly laser-focused on the coming season.

Now, looking back from the other side of the 35-game chasm that this season has been, it's clear the Patriots needed that loss.

Hardnett espoused the belief that his team has benefited greatly from the experience. This roster now has championship history, and they want to finish the job, the head coach said. They further boosted their resume with games against the best of the best after facing Florida prep teams earlier this year, often losing unceremoniously but learning a lot along the way.

But last year's championship loss is what forged this team's mentality. That's where this all began. Now it's time for the finale.

Southwest will write the final chapter of this story at 3 p.m. on Friday. They will, funnily enough, face a Rabun County team that has never appeared in a championship game in school history.

A win would be cathartic, perhaps even more so than a win last year might have been. A loss would be a gut punch, a sliced throat, the despicable unhappy ending. Even if the Patriots were to regroup next season under Hardnett and win, make no mistake: this current story, the one with Dupree and Howard and so many others as key players, would end. That group graduates this year.

This is their last shot. This is a redemption arc, and Macon will certainly pack the house to witness its conclusion. Fans can only hope it's a storybook ending.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Southwest head coach Monquencio Hardnett consoles players after the Patriots lost a gut-wrenching state championship game against B.E.S.T. Academy last year. Now Southwest is trying to reedeem itself.



SOUTHWEST

Continued from Page 11

said.

Southwest's defense and rebounding have stood out during the playoff run and helped the team overcome some slightly off-kilter shooting efforts, although the Patriots have never looked entirely out of sync shooting. Dupree said he was proud of the defense he's played all season. It will take a similar effort from him and his teammates — with an emphasis on the perimeter — to win the trophy.

"Running 'em off the 3-point line, that's gonna be the number-one thing. We have to make sure because they're a little bit bigger. We have to be very physical and block them out. We have to play fast but be smart, because they like to score points as well. We saw a couple times down in Fort Valley (in the other semifinal) that they'll pull up in transition sometimes for threes."

The Patriots are set to take on the Wildcats at 3 p.m. on Friday.

PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Southwest's Jonathan Hurley slams the ball home for a dunk during the Patriots' win against the Vidalia Indians in the semifinals at Fort Valley State University. The Patriots rode solid defense and timely shooting to the win, which puts them in the GHSA Class A-Division I State Championship for the second consecutive season after losing last year to B.E.S.T. Academy.

NOTEPAD

Continued from Page 11

tered in the second half. The Paladins outscored Mercer by 6 points in the third before fully dominating in the final quarter with a 21-6 scoring advantage.

The turnaround for Furman produced a 27-3 run across parts of the third and fourth quarters and gave the Paladins a 66-45 win. Nahawa Diarra, one of the Bears' best players all year and their leading scorer this season, had 12 points. Micah O'Dell finished with 14 to lead Mercer. The team finished 17-13 to end the season.

Men lose two leads in tough loss

The men's team had higher expectations in their conference tournament, as they finished the regular season tied for second place, though they were stuck with the No. 4 seed due to tiebreakers. They took on the Western Carolina Catamounts at 8:30 p.m. on Saturday in the opening round.

From the start, it looked like Mercer was playing the best it had all year. The Bears were red-hot shooting and leapt out to a 17-point lead in the first half. But things got shaky in the final eight minutes of the first, and Mercer struggled on the boards at both ends to allow Western Carolina to creep back into it.

Thanks to rebounding and multiple scoring runs — one of which happened while leading Mercer scorer Baraka Okojie was checked out of the game, which dried up the Bears' offense completely — the Catamounts had roared all the way back to take a 36-35 lead at the half.

Mercer regrouped after the break and came out shooting well again to start the second half, this time building up a 9-point lead and again looking like they could close it up. Once more, though, the offense stalled and allowed Western Carolina to take the lead back.

Things were tight entering the final stretch, with the game tied at 71-71 with about 1:30 left to play. Zaire Williams hit 1-of-2 free throws for the Bears to make it 72-71, but the rest of the stretch run was all Catamounts, as they held Mercer in check and scored the next several buckets in a row to win 77-73 and end Mercer's season.

The Bears finished 19-13 with the loss. Okojie led Mercer with 26 points, ending his stellar season with another solid scoring effort. Williams followed with 18. Tidjiane Dioumassi scored 21 points for Western Carolina.

Howard ends Rutland's streak

The Howard Huskies baseball team ended the Rutland Hurricanes' seven-game winning streak, defeating their cross-town rival 9-7 on Monday thanks to a four-run effort in the fifth inning.

The win ended a four-game skid for the Huskies and improved them to 4-7 on the season ahead of some more region games. Rutland took a 4-3 lead into the fifth, but Howard plated four to go up 7-4 before scoring twice more to fend off a rally by the Hurricanes.

It was the first loss of the season for Rutland, who started the year 7-0 prior to Monday's loss, a stretch that included a previous 12-6 win over Howard.

The hot start to the season has been fueled by seven Rutland players hitting over .300 with at least 15 plate appearances, according to MaxPreps stats. Freshman Grayson Newberry has torn the cover off the ball in seven games, racking up 12 hits and 15 RBIs.

Mercer baseball bounces back

The Bears got back on track on the diamond last weekend, rocking visiting Alcorn State for a three-game sweep thanks to an incredible offensive effort before getting another blowout on the road over Georgia State.

Mercer won 16-5, 10-5 and 25-2 in the sweep, saving its best effort for the final game Sunday. The 25-run tally marked the most runs the Bears scored in a game since scoring 33 in a 2018 contest. Braydon Kersey drove in five runs with two hits in the final game of the series, while Eli Stephens knocked in four.

Mercer followed that effort up with a 16-6 midweek victory over Georgia State. While the Bears jumped out to an early lead with a four-run first inning, it was the fifth that made the difference. The Panthers had come back to take a 5-4 lead, but Mercer plated a whopping eight runs in the frame to take control of things for good.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MERCER ATHLETICS

Mercer's Baraka Okojie puts up a shot over a Western Carolina defender during the SoCon tournament.