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The Macon Melody

VOLUME II, NUMBER 37 » FRIDAY, MARCH 6, 2026 » REPORTING FOR MACON, FROM MACON » MACONMELODY.COM

Transit authority trims late-night bus service over funding concerns

11 p.m.

THE HOUR FIXED ROUTE SERVICE ENDED BEFORE THE MARCH 16 CUTBACK

9 p.m.

THE NEW END TIME FOR FIXED ROUTES AS THE TRANSIT AUTHORITY TRIMS COSTS

15%

INCREASE IN FIXED ROUTE RIDERSHIP OVER LAST YEAR

DESPITE AN OVERALL INCREASE IN FIXED ROUTE RIDERSHIP, LATE-NIGHT RIDERS NEVER MATERIALIZED — A STUDY FOUND ONLY A FEW PASSENGERS BOARD AFTER 9 P.M. BETWEEN NOVEMBER AND FEBRUARY.

$500K

ANNUAL SAVINGS FROM CUTTING TWO HOURS OF SERVICE

BY LIZ FABIAN
The Macon Newsroom
macon-newsroom.com

More people now have access to Macon-Bibb County Transit Authority's new Rapid Transit on-demand service, but regular bus riders will lose late night service even as overall ridership increases.

As Phase II of the app-driven ride service pilot expands to south Bibb on March 2 and provides a last ride at 11:45 p.m., traditional fixed routes will end at 9 p.m. instead of 11 p.m. as of March 16.

During February's board meeting, MBCTA CEO Craig Ross said Georgia Department of Transportation officials warned them at a December conference to cut the budget because of pending state funding cuts.

The board agreed to cut two hours of service to save about $500,000 per year. Fixed route riders increased overall by nearly 15% over last year, but not many people took advantage of the later hours, which have been in operation since July.

GDOT District Communications Officer Gina Snider told The Macon Newsroom that remaining balances from older grants and unused funds from other cities had allowed them to allocate more money to the transit authority in recent years.

"As more urbanized transit systems have begun utilizing their allocated funding, maintaining support at the current level may not be sustainable long term. GDOT has communicated this outlook in advance to provide transparency and allow partners time to plan for the possibility of future funding adjustments," Snider stated in an email.

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

A Macon-Bibb County Transit Authority bus travels along Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard on Wednesday morning. The transit authority voted to cut two hours of late-night fixed route service beginning March 16 to save an estimated $500,000 annually.

Pie's the Limit



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Assistant Professor Brian Iverson, left, and Professor Ishaq Kundawala take pie to the face Tuesday on the front lawn of Mercer University School of Law during the school's annual Legal Food Frenzy fundraiser. Law schools across Georgia compete in the event, hosted by the attorney general's office, to raise money for local food banks. The competition runs through March 6, and Mercer Law's contributions benefit the Middle Georgia Community Food Bank.

WEEKEND PLAYLIST

HISTORIC ARCHITECTURE PHOTO TOUR
Friday, 6-7:30 p.m. | Third Street Park
Free | Register at bikewalkmacon.com
Historic Macon and DSTO Moore Photography lead a walking tour of Downtown Macon, exploring the history and architectural details of iconic buildings while learning tips for photographing them. The event is part of the weekend-long Streets for All Fest celebration of biking and walking in Macon-Bibb County.

FREE TREE GIVEAWAY
Saturday at 10:30 a.m. | Mellow Mushroom | Free
The Middle Georgia Association of Realtors is giving away free crepe myrtle and bald cypress trees while supplies last.

CLASSICALLY JAZZED
Saturday at 7:30 p.m. | Macon City Auditorium
Ticketed | Buy at maconpops.com
Macon Pops celebrates the 10th anniversary of "Three Shades of Blue" — a concerto blending classical, jazz and Latin influences by Artistic Director Matt Catingub — with a night of inspired music-making at the historic Macon City Auditorium.

OCMULGEE BEHIND-THE-SCENES RIDE & WALK
Saturday, 11 a.m. — 1:30 p.m. | Amerson River Park
Ticketed | Buy at bikewalkmacon.com
Join retired Macon-Bibb County engineer Bill Causey for a guided ride and exclusive off-bike walk through the newest sections of the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail, including 210 acres of newly acquired land north of Amerson River Park. Part of the weekend-long Streets for All Fest, registration is required and space is limited.

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.

GET TO KNOW RAPID TRANSIT

MELODY STAFF REPORT
news@maconmelody.com

Macon-Bibb County Transit Authority's Rapid Transit is an on-demand, app-based service that allows riders to book trips within defined service zones rather than follow fixed routes and stops. Riders can book through the Rides on Demand app or by calling 478-803-2500.

Fares are $5 per person for rides between 5:45 a.m. and 6 p.m., and $8 per person from 6 p.m. until the last ride at 11:45 p.m. The service is cashless — payment is made through the app only.

Zone I pilot

In 2025, Rapid Transit launched its pilot zone, which covers downtown Macon, the Mercer University campus, the Ingleside area and parts of Gray Highway.

Zone II expansion

Beginning March 2, Rapid Transit expanded into south Bibb County along major employment corridors — Frank Amerson Parkway, Hartley Bridge Road, Houston Road, Highway 41 and Highway 247. The expansion connects riders to major employers as well as Middle Georgia Regional Airport and Central Georgia Technical College's airport campus.

Future plans

The transit authority plans to add Zones 3, 4 and 5 later in 2026 and into 2027, with the goal of eventually covering all of Macon-Bibb County.

Periodical — Mail Label

Industrial authority courts, keeps big biz

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

When the pine trees were being felled to make way for Interstate 75 through Macon, local leaders saw their city could prosper from its place on the new nationwide highway network.

But they added another thing, too: a new local agency meant to lure companies to Bibb County's exits.

From 1962 to now, the mission of the Macon-Bibb County Industrial Authority, or MBCIA, has remained the same: Luring "jobs and, of course, growing the tax base," said Stephen Adams, its executive director. "Those are the two fundamental things that we're after."

The idea is that residents pay lower tax bases as the county's tax base grows by adding industries that often have multimillion dollar operations.

The authority — created by a constitutional amendment approved by Bibb County voters on Nov. 6, 1962 — wields special powers to help accomplish its goals. It has the ability to issue revenue bonds to finance the development and construction of industrial sites. The authorities also can offer low-cost loans and deals that exempt industries from property taxes for a set number of years.

Soon after its formation, the MBCIA set its sights on 300 acres near the northern edge of Houston County that had been used in the 1940s to train pilots during World War II.There, it developed an industrial park at Cochran Field, now Middle Georgia Regional Airport.

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Stephen Adams, executive director of the Macon-Bibb Industrial Authority, leads its efforts to bring in and retain business.

DISTRICT 5 ELECTION: EARLY VOTING BY THE NUMBERS

99
IN-PERSON EARLY VOTES CAST THROUGH FEB. 28

34
ABSENTEE BALLOTS ISSUED BY MAIL

0
MAIL BALLOTS RETURNED SO FAR

There are six candidates vying for the seat. Visit maconmelody.com for more.

3/6 — LAST DAY TO REQUEST AN ABSENTEE BALLOT BY MAIL

3/13 — LAST DAY TO EARLY VOTE

3/17 — ELECTION DAY (7A-7P)

What's behind your eye-popping power bill?

The culprit depends on where you live — but it's probably not data centers (yet)

BY NAVEENA SADASIVAM AND CLAYTON ALDERN
Grist | grist.org



PHOTO BY ANDREY METELEV | SPECIAL TO THE MELODY

High-voltage transmission towers stretch to the horizon at sunset. Rising electricity prices — up roughly 30% since 2021 — are driven by a complex mix of factors, including aging infrastructure and weather.

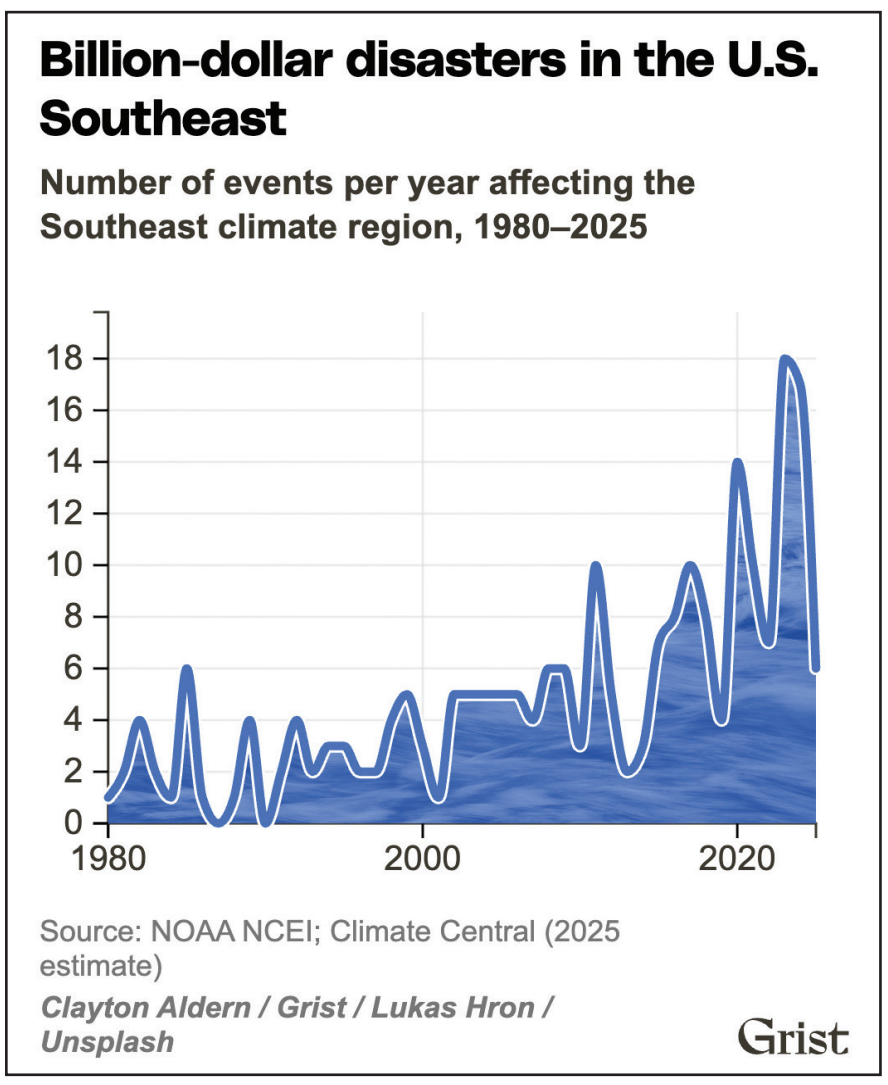
It's no secret that U.S. electricity prices have been rising over the last few years: The average residential energy bill in 2025 was roughly 30% higher than in 2021.

This jump is largely in line with the overall inflation Americans have experienced during this period. As the cost of groceries, gas and housing has increased, so too has the cost of electricity.

But there are big differences from state to state and region to region. Some places — like California and the Northeast — have seen mammoth price increases that outpaced inflation, while costs have held steady in other parts of the country, or even fallen in relative terms.

Nearly everywhere, though, rising electricity costs have strained the budgets of low-income households in particular, since they spend a much larger share of their earnings on energy compared to wealthier Americans.

Energy bills have also become a political flashpoint. Over the past year, rising electricity prices have helped push voters to the polls, and politicians have taken note. In Virginia and New Jersey, newly elected governors campaigned heavily on reining in utility bills. In Georgia, incumbent utility regulators were booted out by voters, who elected two Democrats to the positions for the first time in two decades.



A wide range of culprits have been blamed for the surge in electricity prices, with energy-hungry data centers shouldering much of the criticism. Tariffs, aging power plants and renewable energy mandates have also come under fire.

But the reality is far more nuanced, according to recent research from the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and the latest price data from the federal government's Energy Information Administration. Electricity prices are shaped by a complex mix of factors, including how utilities are structured, how regulators oversee them, regional divergences in fuel prices, and how often the grid is stressed by heat waves or cold snaps.

Infrastructure impacts

In many states, including Georgia and its neighbors, the biggest driver is the rising cost of maintaining and upgrading grids to survive more extreme weather — the unglamorous work of replacing old poles and wires.

Southeastern states frequently face hurricanes, flooding and extreme heat. In recent years, the number of billion-dollar disasters in the region has increased, an ominous sign of the havoc that climate change will wreak. Utilities are fronting the costs of both weathering these events and rebuilding in their aftermath — and then they pass them on to their customers.

The cost of distributing electricity — think the power lines that deliver energy to your home — rose significantly in the Southeast over the past few years, driven mostly by capital expenditures to upgrade and build new infrastructure. In Florida, for instance, damage from Hurricanes Debby, Helene and Milton in 2024 resulted in residential price increases from 9 to 25% the following year. Similarly, Entergy Louisiana's plan to harden its grid costs a whopping $1.9 billion, much of which will be borne by customers through rate increases.

Future demand

Some states in the region, such as Virginia, have also seen a major influx of data centers, which consume enormous amounts of electricity. In some areas, utilities are upgrading infrastructure to meet that demand, raising concerns that those costs could push electricity prices higher.

However, a national study by Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory found that an increase in demand in states between 2019 and 2024 actually led to lower electricity prices on average. That's because when there's more demand for power, the fixed costs of running a utility — such as maintaining the poles and wires that deliver electricity to your home — are spread out over a greater number of customers, leading to lower individual bills.

In Virginia, the world's largest data center hub, electricity prices rose only modestly between May 2024 and May 2025, despite a rapid buildout of new facilities.

But that dynamic could shift as hyperscalers construct ever-larger campuses. Ultimately, prices will hinge on how utilities and regulators choose to plan and pay for that demand. For now, however, extreme weather remains one of the region's main drivers of rising costs.

Anita Hofschneider contributed reporting to this piece.



Mini-grants, new amenities rekindle Pleasant Hill park

BY LIZ FABIAN
The Macon Newsroom
macon-newsroom.com



PHOTO BY LIZ FABIAN | THE MACON NEWSROOM
Sod pallets and a new pavilion signal ongoing work at Pleasant Hill's Linear Park, where officials are transforming a once-barren greenspace.

Before Macon-Bibb County leaders focused on the Linear Park that hugs Interstate 75, neighbors didn't really know what to do with the barren landscape split by a concrete path, said Urban Development Authority Executive Director Alex Morrison.

The Georgia Department of Transportation added the greenspace to the ongoing interchange project as a kind of a peace offering to the predominantly Black Pleasant Hill neighborhood divided by interstate construction decades ago.

"It didn't look like one that you would want to use. But now that there's pavilions, there's a cycle track, there's better seating. There's, I believe, a hundred more trees [that] have been planted in that park than were there before. And then the last two pieces will be refreshed, basketball courts and an exercise gym like the one in Amerson," Morrison said.

UDA's board learned its Reimagining the City Commons mission is more than building or renovating parks — it's breathing life into public spaces with activities to draw people out of their homes. UDA wants to make sure no one is left out of the planning process either, and sent its operations manager, Margaret Peth, and Macon-Bibb's Transportation Safety Manager Weston Stroud to meet with the Pleasant Hill Neighborhood Association.

They reached a memorandum of understanding for the proposed Pleasant Hill Pathway that NewTown Macon is working on through a Knight Foundation grant. Plans call for widening to 10 feet the sidewalks along Walnut Street from Fourth Avenue to Madison Street with markings for bicycles and pedestrians.

Engineering designs are nearly complete and construction should begin soon, Peth said.

"We were really fortunate to get to work a lot with the neighborhood to make sure that it addresses resident issues, and that they feel the project reflects their needs. So that was really a good point of collaboration and excellent trust-building endeavor," Peth reported to the board.

Up next is the soon-to-ripen fruit of $600 RCC mini-grants awarded to eight people from a pool of 23 applicants who agreed to host three community engagement events in and around the park.

Proposals were judged on community engagement, equity, environmental sustainability and economic sustainability.

The winners, some who live in the neighborhood, are encouraged to spend the nontaxed funds on products that could be used again, like yoga mats, games and jump ropes.

One grant recipient will have audio recording equipment at a storytelling booth; others will organize board games on porches, host movie nights, or offer health and wellness activities.

"We have like a children's history pop-up where Dr. (Thomas) Duval will be leading children to Pleasant Hill's significant historical sites, and they'll be creating a coloring book at the end of it," Peth said.

Information about upcoming events will be at maconciviccommons.org once schedules are coordinated.

"It kind of shows that when you make these investments that the community asked for, that they do respond. So it's been exciting," said Morrision, who expects to expand this mini-grant pilot program to other county parks.

Sidewalk safety, showcasing parks

Peth also manages the county's parking program and secured board approval for a $44,110 sidewalk repair contract with Piedmont Construction to be half-funded by parking proceeds with UDA funding the rest. Loft construction tore up a portion of the concrete that's been temporarily patched with gravel.

Piedmont already is enhancing sidewalks along Cherry Street and will add the portion of Third to that job, which is planning to be completed before the Cherry Blossom Festival begins

Third Street will be transformed to include a new park, reduced traffic lanes and upgraded sidewalks, but that work could take years and Peth stressed the hazardous conditions before the board approved the spending.

House, Senate advance bills critics say limit protest rights

BY MAYA HOMAN
Georgia Recorder
georgiarecorder.com

A bill creating a new felony charge of obstructing a law enforcement officer with a motor vehicle cleared the House in a contentious vote Tuesday evening.

A separate bill raising the penalties against protesters who block streets or highways passed the Senate hours earlier largely along party lines.

House Bill 1076, sponsored by Powder Springs Republican Rep. Ginny Ehrhart, imposes a $100,000 fine and a prison sentence of up to five years for anyone convicted of obstructing law enforcement "by means of a moving or stationary motor vehicle."

It passed in a 97-64 vote after more than an hour of debate.

Obstructing law enforcement is a misdemeanor offense under state law, but Ehrhart argued that a heightened penalty was needed to deter the behavior.

"These scenarios escalate quickly and the risk is high," she said. "We need to deter this crime before injury or death occurs."

The bill comes in the wake of protests over immigration enforcement efforts in Minneapolis that resulted in two U.S. citizens being shot and killed by federal immigration agents. However, Ehrhart refuted claims that her bill was a reaction to the protests.

"It is not about ICE, it is not about detainees, it is not about immigration," she said. "This bill is about deterring dangerous behavior that puts people at risk, not just our law enforcement officers, but folks that are engaged in

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SNAPSHOTS





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PHOTO NO. 1 — State Superintendent Richard Woods visited Appling Middle School, one of nine schools that were recognized as literacy and math leaders in the 2024-25 academic year. Each school received a banner to commemorate its accomplishment. *Photo courtesy of Bibb County Schools.*

PHOTO NO. 2 — More than 35 volunteers from Mount de Sales help paint two houses and do much needed landscaping at the Macon Area Habitat for Humanity office. *Photo courtesy of Macon Area Habitat for Humanity.*

PHOTO NO. 3 — Officials with Macon-Bibb County Recreation celebrate Women's History Month by honoring the achievements and contributions of women throughout history and continuing to inspire each other every day. *Photo courtesy of Macon-Bibb County Recreation.*

PHOTO NO. 4 — More than 90 community members recently participated in Piedmont Macon's annual Healthy Heart Screening. Services included fasting lipid blood tests, blood pressure checks, ankle-brachial index screenings, stroke assessments and more. Two resident physicians from Piedmont Macon offered their medical expertise and answered healthcare questions, while nursing students from Middle Georgia State University assisted at various stations. *Photo courtesy of Piedmont Macon.*

PHOTOS 5-7 — Wesleyan College students and staff celebrate Holi on the campus quad with vibrant color throws, tie-dye creations, and traditional music and dance. *Photo courtesy of Wesleyan College.*

OPINION



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Six candidates vying for the District 5 seat on the Macon-Bibb County Commission face a packed house Feb. 23 at the Katharine Drexel Center in Macon during a candidate forum hosted by The Macon Melody. Retired Telegraph opinion page editor Charles Richardson moderated the debate.

In District 5, a reminder of what politics can be



Joshua Wilson

Something happened recently in Macon that felt, in the best possible way, a little out of the ordinary.

The Macon Melody hosted a candidate debate for the District 5 special election to the Macon-Bibb County Commission, and the candidates showed up — not just physically, but in every way that matters. They came prepared. They came with ideas. And they came with something increasingly rare in American public life: respect for one another.

The debate was lively. There were disagreements, as there should be in any honest exchange about the future of our community. But those disagreements never curdled into contempt. Candidates challenged each other's positions without attacking each other's character. They listened. They engaged. And more than once, they acknowledged common ground.

I left that room genuinely impressed by every person on that stage.

It would be easy — and maybe even fashionable — to let that pass without comment.

But I think it's worth saying plainly: what those candidates modeled is what civic life is supposed to look like.

It wasn't a performance or a chance to score points. Instead, it was a table of earnest people with different ideas about how to make Macon-Bibb better, willing to be in a room together and make their case.

We don't see enough of that these days.

At the national level, political discourse has become something closer to theater — tribal, performative and more interested in scoring points than solving problems. The volume gets turned up. The nuance gets stripped out. And somewhere in the noise, the actual work of democracy gets harder to find.

What happened in that auditorium was a quiet rebuke to all of that.

To the District 5 candidates: thank you. Thank you for your ideas, your preparation and your willingness to treat this process — and each other — with the seriousness it deserves. The voters of District 5 are better equipped to make their choice because of you.

For The Macon Melody, this debate was not a one-time event. It is a statement of purpose.

One of the things I believe most deeply about the role of a community newsroom is that we exist to connect people — not just to inform them, but to bring them into the same room, around the same table, with a shared stake in what comes next. We are not a bulletin board. We are not a megaphone. We are, at our best, a gathering place.

Throughout this year, The Macon Melody will continue to host events, forums and conversations designed to do exactly that. We will bring candidates and communities together. We will create space for the kind of dialogue that builds trust across difference. We will be a place where Macon shows up for itself.

That is what we owe you. And if our recent debate is any indication, you're ready to meet us there.

Joshua Wilson is our executive editor. He also serves on the leadership team of the Georgia Trust for Local News, which operates 20 newspapers in Middle and South Georgia. Send your feedback or ideas to joshua@gtln.org.

Pizza, potholes and the case for smart local procurement



Marc Hyden

An unlikely hero emerged a handful of years ago to fix a nagging problem that bedevils nearly every American.

Domino's Pizza began filling potholes, including in Georgia, to supposedly safeguard their pizzas' integrity. It was an obvious marketing ploy, which has since ended, but it laid bare our infrastructure's sad reality. The American Society of Civil Engineers gave Georgia a middling C+ for its infrastructure, and some locales are worse than others and need help.

Without the pizza delivery company's aid, Georgia is left to deal with this issue on its own. While Gov. Brian Kemp and the General Assembly have laudably endeavored to fund important infrastructure projects, unmistakable gaps exist. Unfortunately, current Georgia law perpetuates further gaps, cost overruns and risks to Georgians' well-being at the local level.

Some of these troubling matters stem from an outmoded procurement method, which Sen. Ed Setzler, R-Acworth, is attempting to fix via Senate Bill 51. If passed, the measure would require local governments to use a process known as Qualifications-Based Selection — or QBS — in the acquisition of design services from engineers, architects, land surveyors and so forth for public works. This legislation may sound like a snooze, but it could prove to be a lifesaver.

Instead of awarding contracts for bridge, road and sewage design to the lowest bidder, under a QBS system, local governments would request qualifications from engineering and architectural firms. Then local officials would determine who is the most qualified to complete the project and open negotiations with them. If they cannot agree on a price, then the government can move on to the second-most qualified group. In this way, officials prioritize quality as they direct taxpayer money to critical public works.

This isn't some untested model, either. Laws require its use at the federal and state levels, but local governments are not subject to this, which poses problems. The fear is that some locals request proposals for designing public works and award contracts to whoever will do it for the cheapest price — to the detriment of Georgians.

Studies have shown that prioritizing qualifications over the lowest bid can reduce cost overruns and construction delays, and focusing on quality should produce superior designs — meaning safer public works with longer lifespans. In short, quality planning and designing can save taxpayer money in the long run and result in more secure structures.

This is why the overwhelming majority of states require that locals use QBS. It may also be the reason the Association of County Commissioners of Georgia touted the use of QBS and its virtues in its 2020 Policy Platform, although the organization has opposed efforts to make it law. This is curious, given the stakes and that QBS is widely considered the gold standard.

To put this into perspective, consider an entirely different application. There's a bill making its way through the General Assembly that would require every public school to install weapon detection systems. It is heart wrenching that we live in a world in which this is necessary to protect children from violent killers, but something must be done.

So how would voters respond if

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

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

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

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

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

Submissions may be sent to joshua@maconmelody.com.

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LEGALESE

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TRANSIT

Continued from Page 1

Ross and his leadership team have been crunching numbers and gathering data to make some hard decisions about cuts. The route serving north Napier Avenue and Zebulon Road also is in jeopardy due to low ridership, but this will require public notification and a hearing before cancellation.

Ross said he wanted to be proactive in identifying cuts that make the most sense.

Extending bus service back to 11 p.m. was one of Ross' 42 goals when he joined the authority in 2017. The authority accomplished that when they launched Rapid Transit in July.

"We were hoping with all that industry, that we would be able to gain some customers on those extra two hours from 9 to 11. It hadn't happened," Ross explained.

Payroll, alone, for those two extra hours runs $75,000 a month.

"Because of the length of our day, we have two shifts, certainly not enough for three. But these extra hours are fully overtime. It's not enough hours to bring on a new driver, and so every hour is overtime," said MBCTA COO Tony Woodard.

"We can't afford that type of a hit, and we're not going to take it. We tried it, it just didn't work," Ross said. "It's not even breaking even."

Board members agreed this was the best option.

"We are in a position where we don't want to have to reduce our driving force, because it's already difficult to maintain and to get drivers," Chair Louis Tompkins said.

"It's better that we can cut time instead of routes first," board member Weston Stroud said. "I think it needs to be noted we had our hearts in a good place. We tried to provide it."

Board member Dave Dickey concurred, "It was a benevolent attempt to service the public with more hours, but it doesn't carry its own weight."

Vice Chair Lynn Farmer said the board has a responsibility to be efficient with taxpayer dollars.

"I had to call it a 'no-brainer,' but it is. I mean, if you're offering a service that's costing that much and so few people are using it, heaven forbid that we were in a position of having to cut services that people really rely on," Farmer said. "It's hard to justify not putting the brakes on it."

Board member Charles Murphy said most times he sees buses running at night, the driver is the only person on board.

During public comments, paratransit rider Wade Horton criticized the board for rolling back hours without public input, but Ross explained that because the extended hours were operating less than a year, it's the authority's prerogative to make those scheduling changes.

An informal study of current service between November and February showed only a handful of riders were boarding buses after 9 p.m.

The authority has funded a $150,000 ridership study that will help them make better data-driven decisions in the future.

Bylaws change, interstate travel

Transit authority board members also approved changing the bylaws to allow a board member whose term is up to continue serving until Macon-Bibb County names a replacement.

County attorneys alerted Ross there was no existing provision to do that when he inquired about Rachel Umana, whose five-year term expired in July, but she has not yet been replaced.

"I've been trying to get the mayor to reappoint her, and he's made a decision he's not going to. So, we would have liked for her to stay on until a replacement's been appointed," Ross said.

This change will not affect Umana, Ross said, but will be in place when other terms expire.

Ross also clarified that MBCTA buses will not be traveling on the interstates during ongoing construction.

"Until the last yard concrete is poured, until the last orange barrel is picked up off of the interstate, until the last sign that says construction zone ahead, there will not be any paratransit, fixed route or rapid transit buses on the interstate," he said. "We've had accidents on it, and it ain't gonna happen."

GDOT estimates wrapping up interstate construction around the Interstate 75/16 interchange in 2030.

HYDEN

Continued from Page 5

this legislation became law but charged locals with purchasing metal detectors designed at the cheapest rate possible, instead of the best quality? (To be clear, the legislation doesn't do this.) There would be an outcry. Children's lives are invaluable and shouldn't be trusted to equipment, such as this, that might fail.

QBS may also be a life-and-death issue. There have been a number of out-of-state infrastructure failures in which low bid was a factor and resulted in casualties. Faulty bridges, roads and sewage systems pose serious hazards when they are based on subpar designs. In an effort to fortify Georgia against these tragedies and protect taxpayers from wasteful spending, Setzler has made passing a QBS law a multi-year effort. Last year, SB 51 passed the state Senate 54-1, and it awaits approval in the House.

Georgia's legislative session is scheduled to adjourn on April 2, and all bills that do not pass by then will be officially dead. Setzler's legislation seems like an easy win, but getting across the finish line is rarely guaranteed. There are myriad competing proposals and only limited time.

If lawmakers balk at this again, then it may take more than Domino's Pizza to come to Georgia's rescue.

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

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Stephen Adams, executive director of the Macon-Bibb County Industrial Authority, announces more than $1 billion in investments made in Macon-Bibb County during 2024 at an end-of-year celebration Dec. 18, 2024.

BIZ

Continued from Page 1

In 1965, the county broke ground on a manufacturing plant for its first industrial park occupant: Hehr Products Corporation, a nationwide company that made and distributed aluminum windows for mobile homes.

Over the decades that followed, companies like Geico, YKK, Bass Pro Shops, Amazon, Kohl's Irving Consumer Products, Tyson Foods, Nichiha Fiber Cement and Kumho Tires Georgia were escorted to town by the development authority.

How Macon bags business

The MBCIA is running out of available acreage for industry even as it works to recruit more. Now, the authority is looking, more closely than ever, at the companies it's trying to attract.

"There's only so much land left for development," Adams said. "With each success we have, that reduces our land inventory."

That said, the authority remains aggressive.

In addition to acting as land developers for industries, Adams said, the industrial authority recruits new businesses and encourages the county's existing industries to expand.

"We spend a great bit of time, energy, resources, money in identifying and developing industrial sites because, when that recruitment process starts, it starts with a phone call from a company that we have no way of knowing is interested in us until they make that phone call. And if we don't have our product ready to go, we're not going to be able to respond to the inquiry," Adams said.

The Macon Water Authority helps to pave the way by pitching in money each year and entering into contracts with companies that include rates far below residential consumer rates. The water authority makes annual payments of $704,000 to MBCIA. The money is deposited in a no-interest loan fund, which is used to buy more land for prospective industrial development.

"That's really been our difference-maker," Adams said.

The annual payments have allowed the MBCIA to "acquire and develop that land on the front-end and have that in our inventory" before an industry has even expressed an interest.

Once a company decides to locate on that already-developed land, "the deal is, any development costs have to be repaid," he said. "We are constantly trying to identify suitable properties for industrial uses and that suitability is a pretty complex process by itself."

The MBCIA undergoes a state certification process called the Georgia Ready for Accelerated Development, GRAD, to ensure its properties are shovel-ready for fast-track construction.

"If a company comes in and sees that we have that GRAD survey, they know that they're not going to find a threat to the endangered species, a wetland," Adams said of the certification that ensures "no deal-killers."

Buying land for a future use requires money going out without the certainty of money coming in, which "is a very difficult proposition for the majority of people," Adams said.

But, he said, attracting industry is a balancing act, "to give ourselves the best shot at it when the shot comes."

'A lot of dates'

Companies typically hire a consultant to help them find sites, and communities all over the country are clamoring for attention.

Adams said no two projects are alike. Every company has different reasons for relocating or expanding.

"They might have utility requirements that are driving it. They might have a proximity to their customer. That's why there are site-selection consultants," Adams said. "They are experts being able to evaluate not only the community, but the specific piece of land and the overall business climate."

Most of the time, Adams said, the authority doesn't know what business it is courting until much later in the process.

For example, Irving Tissue told its consultant it wanted to remain in the Southeast, where its market was growing. The consultant started with about 70 prospective cities.

"Tissue does not ship very efficiently, so you have to manufacture the product within a proximity of your customer base," Adams said. "They brought in the site-selection consultants and said, 'Hey, this is how much water we use, how much power we use, this is how much land we think we need.'"

The tissue-maker's consultant evaluated the county's graduation rates, cost of living, business climate and more.

"They're looking for a way to make their job easier and looking for reasons that you won't check the boxes that the company wants you to check," Adams said.

Once the consultant whittled the contending cities down to 10, it began taking company officials to visit each of them in person.

"I joke around sometimes and use the metaphor of dating, that we go on a lot of dates," Adams said of courting prospective industries. "A lot of them are first dates. … A lot of companies go through this whole entire process and get to the end and say, 'You know what? The conditions aren't right, the market's not right.' … A majority of the time it has nothing to do with us as a community. It's their business model."

MBCIA does its own homework on the companies, too, sizing them up to see if they are a good fit for the county. The authority examines the wages they pay, utility usage and what the company's current communities have to say about it.

"You can tell a lot by looking in the parking lot," Adams said. "You see what kind of cars there are people are driving and that lets you know what the wages are. … I don't think what people really realize is the amount of due diligence that we do into the companies as well."

Finding a good fit — and keeping it

Finding a stable industry is one thing. Maintaining a good relationship with it — and an open line of communication — is another.

MBCIA learned this the hard way in the early 2000s when one of its largest employers closed, leaving more than 2,000 high-wage earners unemployed.

Brown & Williamson built a $150 million plant on 204 acres in 1974, a year before the Macon Mall opened on Eisenhower Parkway.

The Kentucky cigarette manufacturer operated in Macon for 32 years before closing in 2006 following a merger with R.J. Reynolds.

"That sent shockwaves through the community," Adams said. "It was a very noticeable blip in our economic data when they closed, just by nature of the sponsorships and the places they're involved, the nonprofits. Their wages were significantly higher than the prevailing wage."

The closure of Brown & Williamson was not something the industrial authority could have prevented, Adams said, but is working hard not to be "caught off guard" in similar situations.

'Our biggest carrot'

Authorities across the state offer property tax discounts to companies they're courting that can amount to millions of dollars over years. The companies typically get discounts for 10 or 15 years.

BrightFarms, Irving Tissue and several other companies are part of the authority's PILOT program, which stands for Payment In Lieu of Taxes. In short, the authority owns the land and leases it to those companies for a set number of years.

The authority's property cannot be taxed because it is a government agency, so it collects the lease payments and returns that money to the coffers of the county and school board at the end of each fiscal year.

"That's definitely our biggest carrot," Adams said of the incentive. "That is what allows us to show we want to partner with you. … We do put clawbacks in these agreements that if you don't meet those jobs and investment thresholds, we can take the money back. The good part is like the tax abatement does not happen without the investment. So you don't get the tax abatement without having made the money, put the money in."

Ultimately, it's an arrangement that allows everyone to benefit, he said.

"We want them to have every ability when the market conditions allow for them to grow and create more jobs and more taxable investments here," Adams said. "There's a lot of bread crumbs that come from these larger industries. … In theory, we're bringing in companies that everybody wins off of it. So, the 'high tide floats all boats' mindset comes to mind.'"

MBCIA believes the best industry matches for Bibb County are in manufacturing, aerospace, logistics, back office operations and food processing.

Recently, the MBCIA partnered with the school district and the Greater Macon Chamber of Commerce to create a program to prepare students for high-demand, technology-driven careers, according to the authority's description on its website.

Most companies collect detailed information about the communities in which they are considering doing business.

Educational attainment is a key detail. The success of students in the Bibb County School District has a sizable impact on how prospective industries view Macon as a potential location for their businesses. In the end, site-selection consultants have an obligation to get the best deal for their clients, Adams said, adding "you will get asked for everything." And the MBCIA has an obligation to get the best deal for Macon residents.

"It is a very competitive business," he said. "We have lost out the projects that were heavily incentivized by other communities and other states, and that's OK. We don't want to incentivize a project in a way that hurts us down the road."

Fast facts

Board members include Chair Robert E. Fountain Jr., Vice Chair Dwight Jones, Ember Bishop Bentley, Lester Miller and Cassandra Washington. One seat is vacant.

Public meetings for 2026 are set to take place at 12:30 p.m. at MBCIA headquarters, 439 Mulberry St., on April 6, May 4, June 1 July 13, Aug. 3, Sept. 14, Oct. 5, Nov. 2 and Dec. 7.

This story is part of "Power," a series by The Melody examining local authorities — quasi-governmental bodies that make consequential decisions about housing, water, transit, development, health care and public spending — that shape life in Macon-Bibb County. Read the series at maconmelody.com/power.

As ICE detention center plans loom, Warnock tours Social Circle's aged water infrastructure

BY GRANT BLANKENSHIP
Georgia Public Broadcasting
gpb.org/news

When Democratic U.S. Sen. Raphael Warnock toured the water infrastructure of the city of Social Circle on Monday, he heard about how the water works can only replace the filtration system in its half-a-century-old plant about half as often as it should and how the wastewater plant is already at its limit.

It's part of the city of 5,000's struggle to figure out how it can accommodate up to 10,000 Immigration and Customs Enforcement detainees in a warehouse in town recently bought by the federal government.

Warnock placed the blame for the struggle on President Trump's shifting priorities amid the ongoing immigration crackdown.

"If this president focused on removing violent criminals — as he promised — Social Circle wouldn't be suffering the consequences of this administration's out-of-control immigration policy," Warnock said.

Social Circle has been trying to get answers from the Department of Homeland Security about that plan since the news of it broke near the end of 2025. Since then, city leaders have had one conversation with DHS, during which they say all their objections and concerns went unheard — concerns they were now eager to explain to Warnock.

Warnock's tour started at the Social Circle water treatment plant on the Alcovy River. There he was led past the white block pumphouse at the river's edge, where escaping water could be seen dripping from rusting pipes that run to the filtration system up the hill.

There, Social Circle City Manager Eric Taylor explained the simple math: Georgia's Environmental Protection Division only lets the city pull 1 million gallons from the river a day. And even if the city could pull what ICE says it wants — four times that — this facility couldn't make it all safe to drink.

"That's what's shocking for me, is that Homeland Security engineers would come to some kind of conclusion that we have enough," Taylor told Warnock. "That this works. And we've never met any of them."

At the wastewater treatment plant, the situation was similar.

"The treatability is the issue, you know," said wastewater superintendent Jay Link. "You got several different issues that you're concerned with. The amount of flow is the biggest issue."

Link said he didn't know anything about a DHS plan to build an onsite cistern for sewage, which would hold the sewage back to essentially dose it out to the city system so as not to overwhelm it, as described in document shared with the city manager.



PHOTO BY GRANT BLANKENSHIP | GPB NEWS

Social Circle City Manager Eric Taylor (left) and U.S. Sen. Raphael Warnock (right) walk during a tour of the city's water infrastructure on Monday, March 2, 2026. City leaders say they cannot accommodate an ICE detention center slated for a 1-million-square-foot warehouse in the city.

Warnock called it bad management that DHS is moving ahead with their plans for the Social Circle detention center over the feedback from locals.

"And so far, the administration has decided that it can somehow figure that out without talking to the people who actually live in the town itself," Warnock said. "That doesn't make any sense to me."

Warnock said that the current pause in DHS funding presents an opportunity to back off the infusion of cash ICE received with the passage last year of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

"ICE received some $75 billion," Warnock said. "That's a huge slush fund. To bring it into clear focus, with that kind of funding, it's larger than the Marines."

Warnock said he introduced an amendment this week that would defund the Social Circle detention center.

He said the amendment should be part of the debate on DHS funding when it resumes.

BILLS

Continued from Page 3

the activity and innocent bystanders as well."

But House Democrats largely opposed the measure, arguing that the bill's language would extend to parked or motionless vehicles, and that it could infringe on Georgia residents' right to exercise their First Amendment rights.

"While everyone agrees that violence against law enforcement is unacceptable, the officers must be able to do their jobs safely, this bill is the wrong tool," said Rep. El-Mahdi Holly, a Stockbridge Democrat who spoke against the bill. He added that adding a felony charge could be used by law enforcement "to threaten, to coerce or to retaliate in situations that should be resolved with de-escalation."

Across the hall, Senate Bill 443, introduced by Cordele Republican Sen. Carden Summers, would make obstructing a road or highway a high and aggravated misdemeanor punishable by a fine.

Those who are found to violate the law could also be subject to a civil suit.

The bill passed the Senate in a 35-17 vote, with four Democrats joining with the Republicans to support the bill.

Summers, who introduced the bill on the floor, said it was not aimed at curbing protestors, but would prevent drivers, including ambulances and other emergency responders, from being held up in traffic caused by unsanctioned demonstrations.

"If you want to protest, I'm all for it," he said. "I'll sit there and protest with some folks, just don't do it in the middle of the roads."

Sen. Derek Mallow, a Savannah Democrat, drew comparisons to Bloody Sunday, a march held in Selma, Alabama during the Civil Rights Movement in 1965.

"If that type of civil rights demonstration were to take place here in Georgia, would it be illegal, under this bill, of a high and aggravated misdemeanor?" he asked Summers.

"They can do that if they receive the permit," Summers replied.

This and other bills have until Friday, March 6 to clear at least one chamber in order to have a smooth path to the governor's desk. The Legislature adjourns April 2.

The Macon Melody

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Amber Waves

by Dave T. Phipps



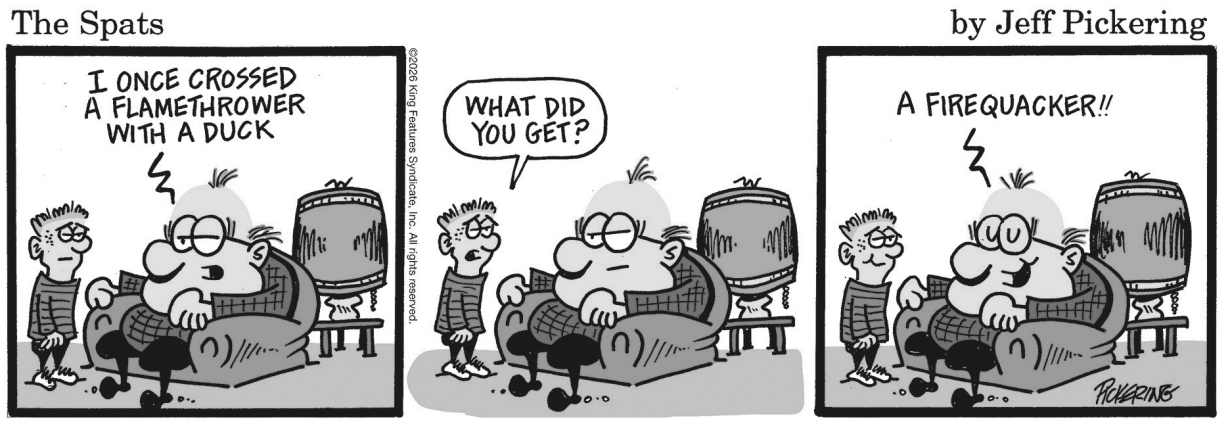
Out on a Limb

by Gary Kopervas



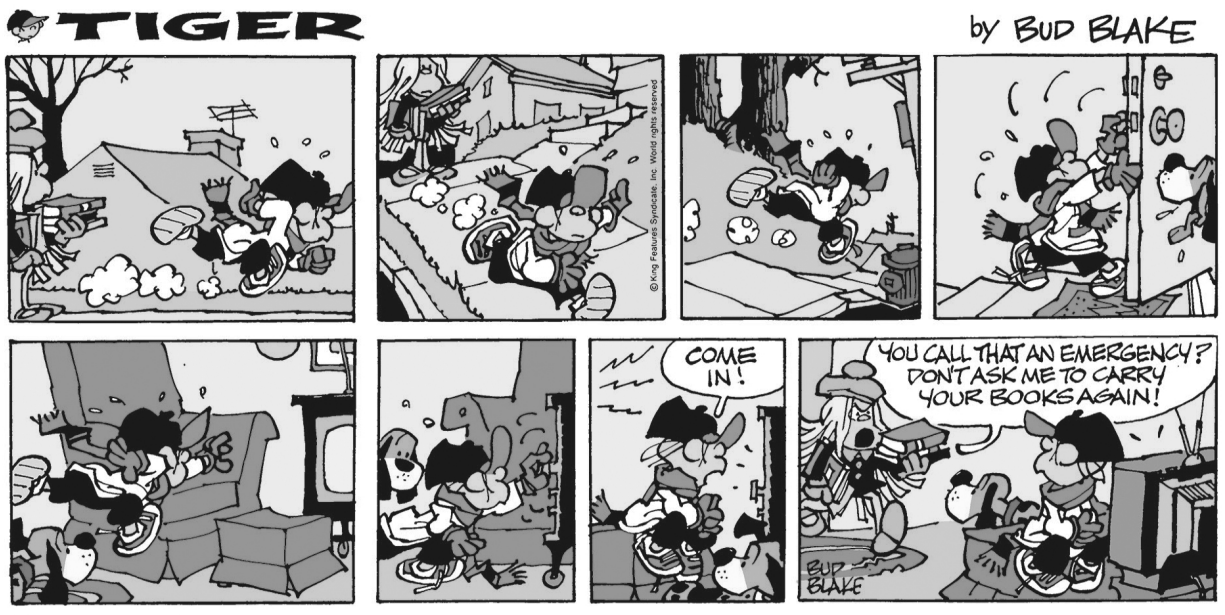
The Spats

by Jeff Pickering



TIGER

by BUD BLAKE



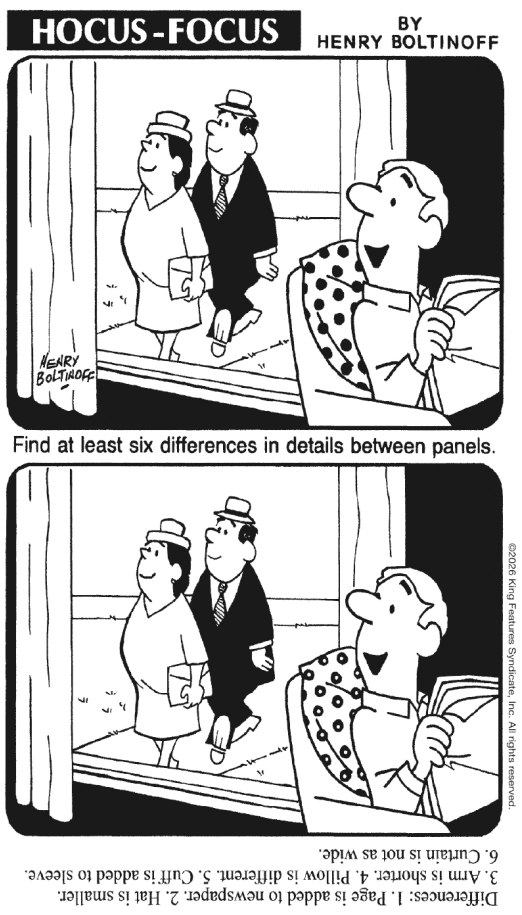
OLIVE & POPEYE

By Randy Milholland



HOCUS-FOCUS

BY HENRY BOLTINOFF

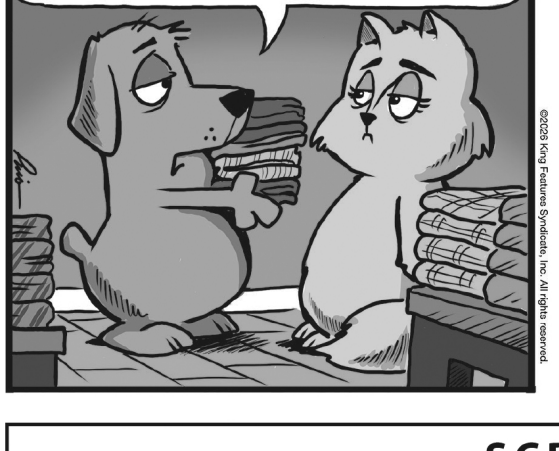


Find at least six differences in details between panels.

Differences: 1. Page is added to newspaper. 2. Hat is smaller. 3. Arm is shorter. 4. Pillow is different. 5. Cuff is added to sleeve. 6. Curtain is not as wide.

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: **R** equals **H**

IONYGBM YFPNYC CNQT GT

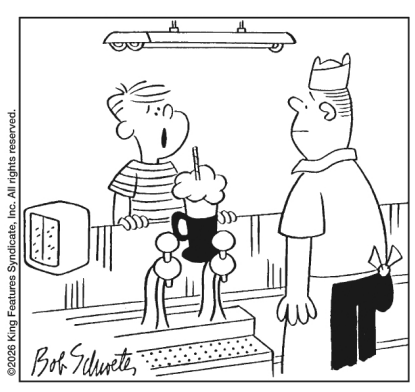
QRGWR FJFYXENBX ONJFP

PGTZGTZ PMWYFB RXLTP NI

DYMGPF: DPMOL EFMWR.

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SCRAMBLERS



"I'm not used to eating lunch like this — what's for _ _ _ _ _ _ _?"

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!

Bane — **RESCU** _ _ _ _ _

Melody — **DOHRC** _ _ _ _ _

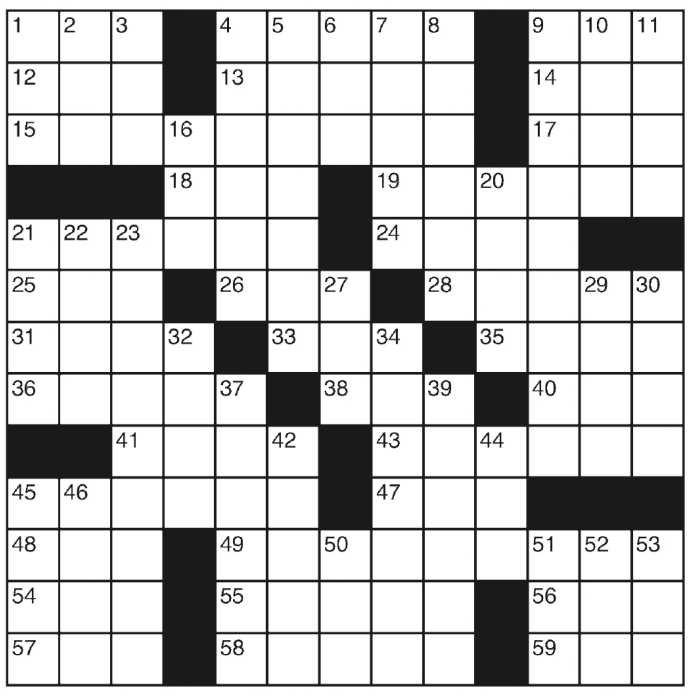
Coach — **ETCHA** _ _ _ _ _

Smell — **THENCS** _ _ _ _ _

TODAY'S WORD

_ _ _ _ _ _ _

King Crossword



ACROSS

1 Lawn coating
4 Daring deeds
9 Droid
12 "That feels so good!"
13 Host
14 Ruckus
15 Type of cable
17 Sine qua —
18 Feathery wrap
19 Garish
21 Mellow yellows
24 Winter blanket
25 Mauna —
26 Fire sign?
28 Emulate Scott Hamilton
31 Grecian vessels
33 Evergreen tree
35 "Zounds!"
36 Army doc
38 Karaoke prop, for short
40 Assoc.
41 Friendly
43 Crude dwelling
45 Brit's word of surprise
47 Where Ger. is
48 Help
49 Timepiece attachment
54 Blasting stick
55 Follow
56 Luau dish
57 Sneaky chuckle
58 Reading lights
59 Bradley and Asner

DOWN

1 Apply cream
2 Listener
3 "— goes there?"
4 Soft felt hat
5 Diplomat's post
6 Fed. health law
7 Camping shelters
8 Family cars
9 Something to jump on
10 Skunk's defense
11 Theater award
16 Jurist Fortas
20 Stirred
21 Grad
22 "Encore!"
23 Range of radio frequencies
27 Skirt edge
29 Like lemons
30 Jittery
32 Thailand, once
34 Gets smart
37 Embroidery yarn
39 Waterpark slides
42 Actress Loy
44 Wall St. whiz
45 Tub session
46 Queue
50 Doctrine
51 Mimic
52 Silent assent
53 Insult

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Weekly SUDOKU

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

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

DIFFICULTY THIS WEEK: ◆

◆ Moderate ◆◆ Challenging ◆◆◆ HOO BOY!

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Olympic success

S	P	O	R	T	Golf or sailing, for instance
					Commedian's salute
					Type of power
					Food grinder
					Domain
					Finish 1st, 2nd, or 3rd

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

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Trivia test

by Fifi Rodriguez

1. U.S. STATES: Which state is home to the Acadia National Park?
2. U.S. PRESIDENTS: Which president was an avid dog breeder who gave his hunting hounds funny names like "Sweet Lips" and "Madam Moose"?
3. MOVIES: Who is the antagonist of "Shrek" in the first animated movie?
4. LITERATURE: What is the pseudonym of the 20th-century author who was born Adeline Virginia Stephen?
5. TELEVISION: What's the family's last name in the TV sitcom "The Middle"?
6. HISTORY: Which famous nurse was known as the Lady with the Lamp?
7. GEOGRAPHY: Ringgit is the common currency in which Southeast Asian country?
8. ANATOMY: Which human organ stores bile?
9. LANGUAGE: What does the Latin phrase "Cogito, ergo sum" mean in English?
10. MATH: What is the next prime number after 7?

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Trivia Answers

1. Maine
2. George Washington
3. Lord Maximus Farquaad
4. Virginia Woolf
5. Heck
6. Florence Nightingale
7. Malaysia
8. The gallbladder
9. "I think, therefore I am"
10. Eleven (11)

— King Crossword —

Answers

Solution time: 22 mins.

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

Weekly SUDOKU

Answer

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

CryptoQuip

answer

Florida resort town in which everybody loves singing sacred hymns of praise: Psalm Beach.

SCRAMBLERS

solution

1. Curse; 2. Chord
3. Teach; 4. Stench

Today's Word

DESSERT

Five Spot™ *Solution*

S	P	O	R	T
T	O	R	A	R
R	O	A	S	T
S	O	L	A	R
M	O	L	A	R
R	E	A	L	M
M	E	D	A	L

BILLY'S LET'S EAT REVIEW

Vida Latin Kitchen: a new restaurant serves authentic Cuban and Latin food



Billy Hennessey

The doors hadn't even officially opened yet, and the room was already buzzing. Glasses clinked, the smell of slow-roasted pork and citrus mojo drifted out from the kitchen, and guests leaned across their tables whispering the same thing to one another: "Macon needed this."

Vida Latin Kitchen hasn't even celebrated its grand opening yet, but if the soft opening was any indication, Vineville Avenue may have just become home to one of Macon's most exciting new dining destinations. I had front row seats at an exclusive "invitation only" training event! And when they said "Let's Eat" - you already know, I showed up hungry!

Vida Latin Kitchen, located at 3267 Vineville Ave., is the dream of owners Paula and Ernesto Aguirre, a husband-and-wife team whose story is deeply rooted in family, tradition and a lifelong love of food.

The restaurant hosted a soft opening Monday, offering invited guests a preview of the menu before the official grand opening on March 9, when Vida will begin serving dinner with plans to add lunch service in the future.

For Ernesto, opening Vida is the realization of a dream that began years ago. Growing up Mexican, food was always at the center of life, and he spent much of his time in restaurants learning the craft and imagining a day when he would have a place of his own. His vision was simple: cook food he is passionate about for people who love food just as much. Paula's connection to the menu is just as personal. She grew up beside her Cuban grandmother — her abuela, though Paula often called her "Mami" — who rarely left the kitchen and made sure Paula was right there learning every recipe, technique and tradition. Many of those same recipes now appear on Vida's menu, bringing a taste of authentic Cuban cooking to Macon. Vida's kitchen also features flare from other Latin cultures, including Tostones, a quintessential Puerto Rican cuisine.

Walking into Vida, the dining room immediately feels welcoming. The space is newly remodeled, clean, comfortable, and designed with warm lighting and a fireplace that makes the room feel relaxed rather than formal. One wall is dedicated to Paula's family photos, a detail that quietly tells the story behind the restaurant. This isn't a corporate concept or a chain restaurant trying to replicate a culture. Vida is grounded in family and legacy.

Paula says the goal for Vida has always been to create a place where people could walk in and instantly feel comfortable.

"We wanted somewhere where you can forget about the stress of the day," she said. "Somewhere you can enjoy a meal, have a good cocktail and not feel rushed to dine and dash."

It's a philosophy that reflects the way many Latin cultures approach food — meals are meant to be enjoyed slowly, surrounded by conversation and community.

The Aguirres also recognize that authentic Cuban and Latin cuisine may be new for many diners in Macon. As someone who loves exploring food from different cultures, I know that people can sometimes hesitate to try something unfamiliar. During my visit, I suggested the idea of eventually introducing a sampler platter — something that would give guests a small "food tour of Cuba." Because once people try these flavors, it's hard not to fall in love with them.

Paula believes Macon is ready.

"We are past due for more cultural restaurants," she said.

Paula acknowledged it may take time for guests to become familiar with authentic Cuban dishes, but she and Ernesto are excited to introduce those traditions to the city.

My experience at the soft opening quickly confirmed that Vida's authenticity is the real



PHOTO BY BILLY HENNESSEY

Food reviewer Billy Hennessey tried a Yucatan shrimp appetizer at Vida Latin Kitchen, a new restaurant on Vineville Avenue.

thing. Our server, Andy, greeted us with warmth, confidence and clear knowledge of the menu. She also happened to be Puerto Rican — just like my partner — which meant we were able to order our entire meal in Spanish. If you know, you know. That moment alone immediately told us this place understands the culture it represents.

The evening began with cocktails, starting with the margarita verde, made with jugo verde mix, blanco tequila, lime and agave nectar. It was bright, refreshing and dangerously smooth — the kind of cocktail that sneaks up on you.

The appetizers set the tone for the entire meal. The croquetas de jamon were golden fried fritters filled with creamy béchamel and savory ham. Crisp on the outside and velvety inside, they practically melted in your mouth. The loaded tostones followed — crispy flattened plantains topped with cheese, ropa vieja, chimichurri and pickled red onions. The balance of crunchy, savory, tangy and herbaceous flavors made it one of the standout bites of the night.

Another highlight was the Yucatan shrimp, served in a vibrant red chili sauce that was citrus-rich with just the right amount of heat. The sauce alone was so good that our table ended up taking the leftovers home. Sweet, spicy, bright and layered with flavor, it was easily one of the most memorable dishes of the evening.

For entrees, the ropa vieja and lechon asado showcased exactly why Cuban cuisine has such a devoted following. Ropa vieja, which translates to "old clothes," features shredded flank steak slow-cooked in a tomato-based sauce with onions, peppers, garlic, cumin and oregano. Served with rice, black beans and sweet plantains, it delivered a deep, comforting flavor in every bite. The lechon asado, a slow-roasted pork marinated in garlic and citrus mojo, was equally impressive. Tender, juicy and packed with flavor, it felt like the kind of

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Macon designer featured in Barnesville exhibit

BY ANN MANN
Special to The Melody

At its best, art invites us to look again — to slow down and notice intention, beauty and meaning where we might otherwise rush past.

That is exactly what visitors will experience at Lamar Arts' new exhibition where clothing steps fully into its role as creative expression.

The Barnesville "Art in Fashion" exhibit highlights several artists working at the intersection of fashion and fine art, including one Macon-based designer who brings a particularly striking voice to the show.

Monique Nicole Pitts Taylor's work speaks softly and powerfully about confidence, femininity and intention.

Taylor describes her brand as an exploration of "the quiet strength of femininity."

Her designs favor refined tailoring, intentional silhouettes, and a thoughtful balance between structure and softness.

Rather than chasing trends, her work is grounded in timeless design, pieces meant to live well beyond a single season.

Every seam, proportion and detail is purposeful, creating garments that honor the body while allowing space for movement, presence and self-expression.

A graduate of Clark Atlanta University, Taylor holds dual bachelor's degrees in business and fashion design and merchandising.

Her education also took her abroad to London and Paris, experiences that she said continue to inform her aesthetic. Still, Taylor's heart remains close to home.

Through her work, she seeks to empower women to feel confident and authentically themselves, whether walking into a room, stepping onto a stage or simply moving through daily life.

In a past interview for Macon Fashion Week, Taylor shared that designing is more than a profession, it is her voice and her therapy.

Balancing life as a mother, wife and entrepreneur, she has learned that creativity cannot be set aside without cost.

Her clothing carries those lived stories: moments overcome, memories held and confidence reclaimed. That depth of experience is evident in every piece she creates.

While the overall exhibition "Art in Fashion" was curated by Alvin Stephens, Taylor's work was brought into the exhibition by Pamela Marshall, a founding member of Lamar Arts.

Throughout her 35-year career Marshall's passion has remained the same: giving back to the community and helping young creative artists navigate their paths.

That spirit of generosity and mentorship is woven throughout this exhibition.

"Fashion as Art" is not simply about what we wear; it is about identity, craftsmanship and the stories stitched into every garment.

Whether you come for the fashion, the art or the conversation it sparks, you are invited to witness creativity in motion and experience fashion as a living, breathing art form.

The exhibit officially opened March 6 and will run through April 25.

It is located at 101 Plaza Way in the Historic Barnesville Depot.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY MONIQUE NICOLE PITTS TAYLOR

Monique Nicole Pitts Taylor is a Macon-based fashion designer who previously participated in Macon Fashion Week. Her work is featured in a new exhibit at Lamar Arts in Barnesville.

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‘Layers of Becoming’ rectifies historic absence of representation and reimagines Black culture



Michael W. Pannell

Internationally acclaimed painter and photographer Cedric Smith’s exhibit, “Layers of Becoming,” opens Friday and runs through March at the Wesleyan College Leadership Lab gallery, 522 Cherry St.

A self-taught, multidisciplinary, mixed-media artist, Smith works in acrylics, oils, gouache and other media. His reframing of the Black experience — placing Black subjects at the center of historically white-only advertisements, product labels and magazine covers, as well as depicting Black individuals as cowboys, jockeys and in other traditional settings — has gained him recognition as a significant and sought-after Southern artistic voice.

In many pieces, Smith incorporates photographic collage using both his own photography and historical images he has spent years collecting.

The goal, he said, is to create representation and “make normal people appear famous.”

“Layers of Becoming” will also feature a selection of Smith’s purely photographic work. The free, public opening is part of First Friday events, with hours from 5-8 p.m. and an artist talk scheduled for 6 p.m.

Smith’s family is from Thomaston, but he was born in Philadelphia, where his immediate family lived briefly before moving to Atlanta. He grew up there and lived in the city until moving to Savannah, then relocating to Macon six years ago with his partner, Autumn VanGunten.

In addition to his studio work, Smith and VanGunten opened The Rabbit Hole in Macon, described as a creative lifestyle boutique blending art, home goods, plants and unique products with an eye toward being an inclusive community space.

As an artist, Smith sees himself as a creative adventurer who resists being bound or stereotyped. Along the way, he has shown both thoughtfulness and purpose.

Early days

Smith said he drew and painted as a child, even being asked to create mural-style backdrops for elementary school dramas. Still, he never saw art as a career path.

“I did an apprenticeship in a barbershop in Atlanta and was cutting hair,” Smith said. “I got tired of seeing the blank walls, so I put up some paintings.

“I didn’t know who he was at the time, but one of the people who came to the shop was well-known Atlanta artist William Toliver. I overheard him talking about his studio. I asked what kind of music he did, and he said he didn’t do music, he was a painter, an artist.”

One thing led to another, and Toliver invited Smith to visit his studio, which turned out to be a three-story facility housing creative endeavors, from painting and printing to photography.

“It blew my mind that he, a Black man, could be a professional artist — and a successful one. Also, he was self-taught. We spent time together. He didn’t teach me anything technical but we talked about being an artist, and I was taking in everything I saw. It was then I decided that’s what I wanted to do. I gave two weeks’ notice at the barbershop and started painting.”

Smith found success in showing his work. His résumé grew with exhibits in Atlanta, then throughout the Southeast and internationally, including in Paris. His work was also selected for display in U.S. embassies worldwide.

Just as Smith had never considered becoming an artist because he had never seen anyone like himself in that role, the idea of Black representation — or lack thereof — began to take hold and would become central to much of his work.

Smith was 22 when he met Toliver. He’s now 55.

Redressing the absence of Black representation

“A lot of my work stemmed from summers spent in Thomaston at my grandmother’s, where her sister had a store,” Smith said. “I love labels, I love signs and I used to see all this stuff around. I’d see these old RC Cola signs and things, but didn’t see Blacks in them.

“It didn’t dawn on me at the time, but it affected me and would affect my art, creating a thread of redressing that lack of representation in culture. I’m showing the contributions of Blacks in America.”



PHOTO BY MICHAEL W. PANNELL

“Layers of Becoming,” an exhibit featuring the work of Macon-based artist Cedric Smith, opens Friday and runs through March at the Wesleyan College Leadership Lab gallery. A theme of Smith’s work is the reframing of traditional advertising, product labels and other cultural touchstones to include Black individuals. Smith stands in The Rabbit Hole — a lifestyle boutique he co-owns with partner Autumn VanGunten — with a self-portrait he created in the role of a cowboy.

His first series along these lines placed Black people on giant postage stamps. Then came U.S. currency, magazine covers and other formats — all intended, he said, “to stir up a conversation.”

More series followed, including Black people being represented in historic product labels and portrayed as jockeys and cowboys. Smith said he loves horses and cowboys and recalled a child seeing one of his paintings and remarking that he didn’t know Black men rode horses.

“At first I was like, what do you mean?” he said. “Then I thought about it and was like, ‘how would he know?’ There’s not enough being taught about it, and it wasn’t in the movies.”

On being an artist, the exhibit and the future

While this thread runs through Smith’s work, he said it can be subtle and, at times, even an impediment to him as a creative.

“I’m a little different than a lot of artists because I don’t believe artists should have just one style,” he said. “People get to know it, and you get pigeonholed.”

Smith said he believes artists should welcome growth and change by being true to their art and doing what inspires them, instead of sticking to one style and creating what sells.

“This exhibition shows what I’ve done and the thread that puts it all together,” he said.

It includes older works alongside his most recent pieces — and possibly hints at where he wants to go next.

“It’s called ‘Layers of Becoming’ because it’s showing the multi-layers of me,” he said. “At the beginning of my work, it was about things I didn’t see; now I’m moving into things I do see, especially in the current conditions we’re in.”

Smith said he is concerned that being pigeonholed in any way sets boundaries he doesn’t want, even when the pigeonhole is a good one.

“Galleries would often not want my new work because it wasn’t exactly like what was already selling,” he said. “But they’d take a couple, sell them, then they’d want more. As an artist, I won’t be tied to that. Sometimes I may want to just paint a flower without it being like, ‘Oh, is it a Black flower?’ I feel (non-Black) artists have a luxury that they can just paint something for the beauty of it. I think Black artists have this weight that everything has to be deep. But I’m like, everything doesn’t have to be deep.”

Without ever forgetting his “Blackness,” Smith said he wants to evolve toward a human universal.

“Like food,” he said. “Everybody can relate to food, right?”

For more on Smith, follow him on Instagram @cedricsmithstudio or visit The Rabbit Hole, 811 Forsyth St.

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

The need for pollinators in Middle Ga.

BY SHAELIN CALDER-DENNY
Bibb County 4-H
bibb.extension@uga.edu

As color fills Middle Georgia and gardeners begin preparing for spring crops, there is an important step that is essential to healthy gardens.

Native flowers are not just decorative additions to our landscapes; they play a vital role in supporting biodiversity.

Pollinators are responsible for fertilizing many flowering plants. In fact, one out of every three bites of food we eat depends on pollinators. Without them, many fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds and wild plants would not bloom or produce.

When planting crops in the ground, it is important to consider adding pollinator-friendly plants to your garden to attract these beneficial species.

What’s the buzz about?

Why are pollinator gardens important? Planting a diverse selection of flowering plants provides the nectar, pollen and shelter that bees, butterflies, hummingbirds, beetles and moths need to survive. Pollinators move pollen between plants and fertilize crops, which leads to higher crop production and improved quality.

Additionally, planting a variety of species supports biodiversity, which increases resilience in gardens and landscapes. Diverse plantings can help crops better withstand temperature changes, heavy rain and pest pressure.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY UGA EXTENSION SERVICES

Pollinators, like bees, benefit from pollinator-friendly plants that flower and provide nectar, pollen or shelter.

Native and necessary

Planting native species is important because they are adapted to the local climate, soils and wildlife of Georgia. Native plants support pollinators and other beneficial organisms that rely on them for food and habitat. By choosing plants that are already suited to the environment, gardeners help maintain the balance of local ecosystems.

Here are some recommended pollinator-friendly plants for Middle Georgia during the spring:

— Eastern Red Columbine (Aquilegia canadensis)

— Blue Wild Indigo (Baptisia australis)

— Golden Alexander (Zizia aurea)

— Milkweeds (Asclepias incarnata)

— Spiderwort (Tradescantia virginiana)

— Purple Coneflower (Echinacea purpurea)

— Herbs such as basil, lavender, and rosemary

Pollinator gardens are not only beautiful but also serve an important role in supporting healthy ecosystems.

Unfortunately, pollinator habitats are declining due to development and habitat loss. Gardeners can play an important role in helping protect the species that benefit our food systems and natural environments.

If you have questions about pollinator-friendly plants or creating a pollinator garden, contact your local UGA Extension office.

For more information about supporting pollinators in Georgia landscapes, read the University of Georgia Extension publication.

If you have other gardening or landscape questions, call Bibb County Extension at 478-310-5350 or email us at bibb.extension@uga.edu.

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dish meant to be shared around a family table.

When asked about their personal favorites, Paula immediately mentioned the fricassee de pollo, a comforting chicken stew that reminds her of the meals her grandmother used to make.

Ernesto proudly stands by the ropa vieja — a choice I completely agree with after tasting it myself. And I’m not afraid to admit, it’s probably what I will order with each return visit.

Beyond the food, what stood out most during the soft opening was the genuine pride and excitement behind Vida Latin Kitchen.

Paula and Ernesto spent the evening moving from table to table, checking on guests and making sure everyone felt welcome. It was clear they weren’t just opening a restaurant — they were sharing a piece of their culture and family with the city.

If the soft opening was any indication, Vida Latin Kitchen is poised to quickly become a new favorite in Macon’s dining scene.

The food is rooted in tradition, the hospitality feels genuine and the atmosphere encourages guests to slow down, connect and enjoy something different.

Vida means “life” in Spanish. And after spending an evening there, it’s clear that Paula and Ernesto have created a restaurant that lives up to its name — full of flavor, family and the kind of warmth that turns a meal into an experience.

Until next time Macon… let’s eat.

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



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Middle Georgia State women's basketball coach Steven Rhodes breaks things down for his team in the huddle during a game against Clayton State earlier this season. Rhodes has led the Knights to a major program turnaround in his first season with the team.

Taking it to the next level

Led by women's hoops, Middle Georgia State tackles Division II

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
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It was the beginning of May, and Steven Rhodes was nervous.

It was only natural. He had been coaching women's basketball for more than a decade as an assistant, but he was about to take on his first head coaching job at Middle Georgia State.

Rhodes knew Middle Georgia State had gone 3-17 the year before he arrived. He knew the school had only been a university since 2014. And, perhaps most importantly, he knew that the school's athletics had just announced they would be moving up to Division II from NAIA for the 2025-26 year, a large jump in athletic difficulty.

So yes, Rhodes knew things might be difficult when he was hired to lead the Knights into a new era. But he also knew that if his team could be different in its execution and connection — not the best, just different — then they would have a shot at making some strides.

Perhaps the one thing he did not know was just how different this team would be.

Under Rhodes' leadership, the Middle Georgia State women's team finished the regular season 17-10 with a 10-10 record against the Peach Belt Conference, defying expectations that came with the leap in competition. Two players were selected to the all-conference team. Rhodes' assembly of talent features athletes hailing from as near as Rabun County and as far as Spain.

The excellent debut of the women's basketball program at the Division II level is more than just a tale of coaching success, however — it is a reflection of a change more than a decade in the making, and the impending challenge that comes with it for the university.

A longtime goal

Middle Georgia State has a unique history that stems back to 1884 and includes the consolidation of Macon State College and Middle Georgia College in 2012, the latter of which had a solid track record in junior college athletics. It's been an accredited university since 2014 and has campuses in Macon, Cochran, Warner Robins, Dublin and Eastman, though Cochran is where the majority of their athletics programs are based.

Athletic director Michael Brown, who arrived at Middle Georgia in 2023, said rumblings about moving up to Division II started more than a decade ago. With benefits like generating regional rivalries and eliminating distant travel — the sports teams had to go to Mississippi, Louisiana and beyond for games on a fairly regular basis in the NAIA — the move seemed like a natural one.

"The actual momentum started in 2022, when the institution went before the university system and made a presentation to move (to Division II). They got approval then," Brown said. "I was hired in November 2023, then a couple weeks after that we had a visit with the Peach Belt on-site."

The visit went well, and the Peach Belt invited the Knights to join in

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Mercer hoops set for SoCon tourneys

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
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The Mercer men's and women's basketball teams are set for the Southern Conference tournament in Asheville this weekend after getting key wins Saturday to build momentum at the end of the regular season.

The men are the No. 4 team in the bracket and will take on No. 5 Western Carolina on Saturday at 8:30 p.m. The women are the No. 5 team and are set to face No. 4 Furman in the first round Thursday at 5:45 p.m.

The men finished 19-12 overall with an 11-7 mark in the SoCon, good for a tie for second place, though they earned the No. 4 seed after tiebreakers with Samford and Wofford.

That record included a win over No. 1 East Tennessee State in Saturday's regular season finale, a nice momentum boost for head coach Ryan Ridder and the team going into the conference tournament.

"To beat the best team in the league, they had a tremendous regular season … we know how good we are, but maybe everyone else can say, 'Okay, this is a team that beat No. 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 in the conference.' It's a good end on our home court, going 14-1 at home this season," Ridder said.

Zaire Williams netted 23 points for the Bears, while star point guard Baraka Okojie scored 14. Armani Mighty, Mercer's skilled post player who has often been a difference maker on both ends of the floor, recorded his 16th double-double of the season with 13 rebounds and 10 points.

The Bears have had up-and-down stretches this season, at one point boasting perhaps the most electric offense in the Southern Conference — Mercer averaged 88.7 points per game over its first 10 conference tilts, even breaking the 100-point threshold three times in one stretch of four games — before adopting a more defensive identity as SoCon play wrapped up.

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NOTEPAD

Southwest is last Bibb playoff team; MU baseball on a roll

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
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Only one Macon high school is still alive in the 2026 basketball playoffs after two local teams lost in the GIAA state championships Saturday and another school lost in the second round of the GHSA playoffs.

The Southwest boys are the last Macon team standing, as the No. 4-seeded Patriots advanced to the Elite Eight of the GHSA Class A-Division I state tournament with a victory over region rival East Laurens on Saturday.

The 70-58 victory came thanks to 28 points from Chase Dupree and 27 points from CJ Howard and a teamwide commitment to consistency. The Patriots had been slightly unsteady in their first-round game against Woodville-Tompkins despite a 20-point win, but head coach Monquencio Hardnett said the team seemed more composed in the second-round win.

Southwest played No. 5 Model at home Wednesday, after The Melody went to print. A win would place the Patriots in the state semifinals for the second year in a row. That game would be at Fort Valley State on Saturday against the winner of another quarterfinal game Wednesday, No. 1 Vidalia vs. No. 9 Commerce.

The Westside girls, who were the other Bibb County School District team still alive in the postseason, lost in the second round against the Hart County Bulldogs on Friday.

Two Macon schools also made the GIAA state championship last week but lost by double digits. The No. 2 Stratford Eaglettes lost the Class 4A girls championship 47-27 to Athens Christian, while Central Fellowship lost the Class 2A boys championship 81-59 to Brentwood.

Mercer's Kamaka wins POTW honors

Mercer infielder Titan Kamaka was named the Southern Conference Player of the Week on Monday after a torrid streak of hitting during the Bears' games against Florida A&M and Penn.

Hitting in the fifth slot in the order, Kamaka fueled a 5-0 week for Mercer with a .615/.727/.846 slash line that included three doubles and five RBIs. The senior shortstop is batting .514 on the year with 19 hits and 28 total bases.

The Bears as a whole have been red-hot, starting the year 11-9 with a nine-game winning streak going into the month of March. Mercer's

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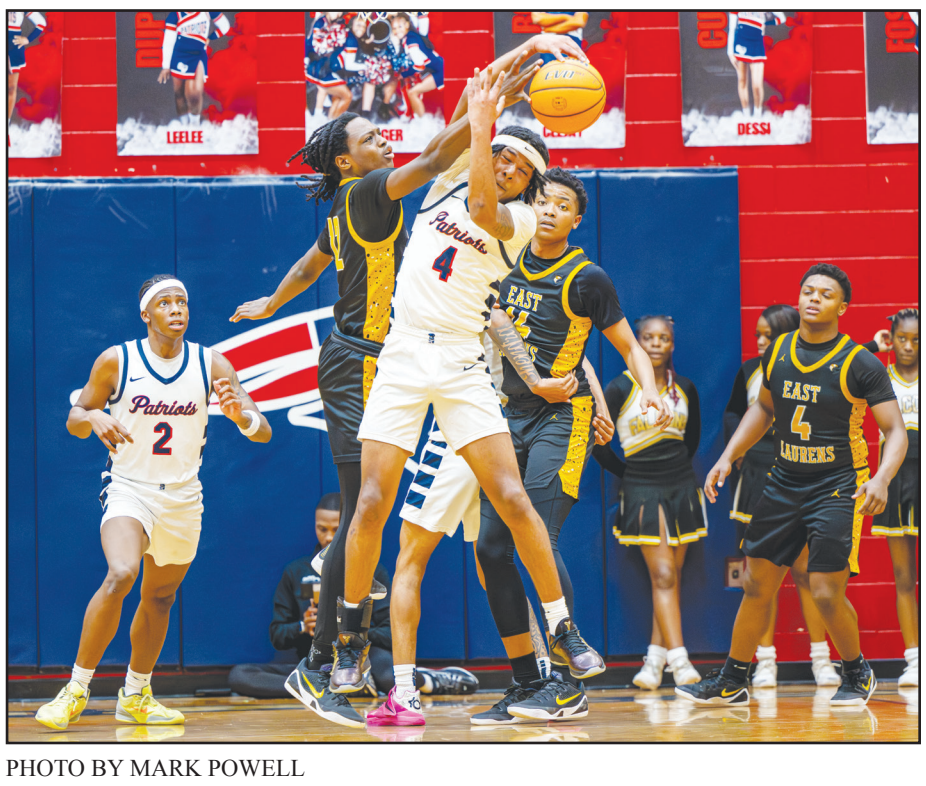


PHOTO BY MARK POWELL

Southwest's Montese Green (4) absorbs a hard foul in the final minutes as Southwest defeats region rival East Laurens 70-59 in the Sweet 16.

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MGA

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January 2024. After some other logistics, Middle Georgia State applied to move to Division II in January 2025 and got approval in July.

Brown said the university's strategic plan was laid out before he arrived, which made working with Middle Georgia State an easy choice. The entire university was invested in helping athletics advance. President Christopher Blake, who has led the university since 2014, was a key proponent of Middle Georgia State better aligning itself with the University System of Georgia and the subsequent improvement of athletics, Brown said.

The athletic director also mentioned how Division II is, in some respects, a place where college athletics feels a bit more old-school.

"I'm biased having worked in Division II, but I think it's the best division. I think it's the most pure type of collegiate athletics we have nowadays with the way Division I is moving," Brown said.

Such a jump comes with plenty of challenges, though. Teams have a much more difficult field to play against. The Knights are also provisional members of Division II for the first three years, meaning they can't play in NCAA postseason tournaments or games for the next few seasons.

"There's been some significant challenges with stepping up in competition, but (the coaches) have embraced it," Brown said. "It's hard knowing that this was going to be a long runway to getting where we want to be, which is (to be) a full member and be supported resources-wise, but they've bought in."

Middle Georgia State also has a luxury Brown said many new Division II schools are not afforded: they are full members of their new conference, the Peach Belt, meaning they can compete in the conference tournament in many sports.

That is the juncture one of the university's teams found itself at this week as it attempts to set a new standard for what Middle Georgia State's student athletes can accomplish.

A new beginning

The women's basketball team was probably not the Knights team that was expected to rise to meet the challenge, but Rhodes described himself as "very competitive" — he wasn't going to just roll over with a new team at a new level.

"I always grew up and loved rooting for underdogs. It's fun to be one. I knew we could do things differently. We didn't have to be the best team, and I knew that would be unlikely, but we could do things differently," Rhodes said of his thoughts when he arrived at Middle Georgia State.

That included creating a group that Rhodes said was more connected interpersonally this season than any team he's worked with. That's a high honor, as Rhodes' career history includes assistant coaching gigs at various programs in Division II and Division I, most notably a season with North Carolina A&T when it made the NCAA Division I tournament.

As if the jump to Division II and subsequent postseason ban was not enough, Rhodes joined the Knights in May, after the transfer portal closed. The new head coach got to work building a team.

Rhodes evaluated some of the returning players, choosing which of them would return based on their character and academic track records with less emphasis on playing ability. He did the same thing when scouting new players.

"That was my mindset going into recruiting. I was going to find the best people. … My past experience really helped me. At most of my past jobs, I was the recruiting coordinator. I've recruited all over the place," Rhodes said. "I asked coaches for the best character people because I wanted to shift the whole mindset."

Rhodes' coaching history allowed him to make recruiting calls in Georgia but also back to his previous school at USC Upstate. The Knights pulled players from Virginia, Minnesota and Spain. A team materialized over the summer — then it was time to get to work.

While his nerves remained, Rhodes started to believe in the team's potential when practices started up. He ran a program called S.H.I.F.T., where each week featured practices and tasks based around a different word dictated by the acronym.

The final segment was themed around the word toughness.

"When we got to that last toughness practice, it was like 'Alright, we're in this,'" Rhodes said. "This is happening. Then the other moment that stands out was our first game against Converse (University)."

That first game, all the way back on Nov. 14, was where Rhodes' anxieties about being a head coach more or less evaporated. While he was nervous before the game, the leader of the Knights found himself falling into routines and enjoying the place he knows best: the basketball court.

Middle Georgia State got its first win, 66-61, that night in November. The team has skyrocketed since, going 17-10 and finishing fifth in the conference despite being voted as the worst team in the Peach Belt preseason polls. Leading scorers Mauryah Jones and Kennedi Hawkins were named third team all-conference.

They played in the conference tournament for the first time Wednesday, after The Melody went to print. It seemed Rhodes' worries had completely vanished by then.

"Honestly, my wife was asking me, 'Aren't you excited? It's your first conference tournament game as a head coach.' I think I'm just so competitive, I haven't even thought about excitement. I'm just focused on the next thing," Rhodes said.

That next thing is building up talent and experience across Middle Georgia State's sports. With his players and coaches behind him — Rhodes is quick to give credit to all of his athletes and assistants before he takes any for himself — the head coach feels like the Knights are on the right trajectory.

"That's where there is some pride. I do feel like we've become the standard in year one," Rhodes said. "(Assistant Madison Lowery) is a huge part of that. She brought experience from top basketball programs. She puts pressure on everybody to improve with the little details. Other coaches ask how we do things like pregame meals, and she helps take that to the next level."

As other sports try to match the women's basketball team's meteoric rise, it feels like Rhodes may have ushered in a new era at Middle Georgia State.

"It's a healthy pressure, whether it be on the other coaches or student athletes, to say, 'Hey, this program was picked to finish last in the conference but finished fifth.' That's a huge jump in expectations," Brown said.

"It just shows the other programs that with the right people and the right players, good things can happen quickly."

MERCER

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Now the Bears feel they've found their balance with a consistent rotation and a versatile shooting attack to match with solid defense.

Mighty and Okojie have been a crucial part of Mercer's meshing on the court. Both star players hail from Canada and even played some AAU games together at a young age.

"This past summer, we pretty much spent the majority of the summer before we even signed with Mercer playing with each other," Mighty said. "I feel like just knowing what type of player he was previously, it was kind of a no-brainer to come here when we got the same opportunity. … I personally have (Okojie) as the SoCon Player of the Year."

While Okojie is the one with the refined jump shot — he's averaging the second-most points in the conference with 19.5 per game — Mighty quipped that he'd let it fly if he ever got the chance, referencing a social media highlight where he almost hit a halfcourt shot in practice.

"If I'm open, I'll shoot it," he said, getting some laughs.

The first round of the conference tournament will be a challenge, though, as Mercer must take on perhaps the hottest team in the league.

Western Carolina's 10-8 conference record belies its current form, as the Catamounts won their last six consecutive games of the regular season, including a 78-74 win against Mercer barely a week ago that hinged on a stomach-twisting traveling call against Okojie inside the final minute of what was then a one-possession game.

Ridder said there was no unique prep for Western Carolina again after just facing the Catamounts on Feb. 25.

"I don't really care who we play. The bracket comes out and it's human nature to say, 'Hey, what do you think?' It doesn't matter who we play. I'm fired up to play Western again, obviously pretty familiar with them just playing them a week ago," Ridder said. "I think they're hitting their groove at the right time as well, but I think there's a lot of teams in March that can go to Asheville and have success.

"We'll dig into them a little bit later this week, but the reality is we've gotta focus on us being the best version of us."

The men will face Western Carolina on Saturday at 8:30 p.m.

Second-year improvements

The Mercer women finished 17-12 overall with a 7-7 conference record after defeating Chattanooga, who tied for first in the conference, at home on Saturday.

The Bears finished fifth in the conference with the win, a major improvement in head coach Michelle Clark-Heard's second season after they tied for last place in the 2024-25 campaign.

Heard said the conference tournament from that season, which saw Mercer lose by 21 points in the first round, is out of sight and out of mind.

"I'm not trying to remember nothing from last year," Heard said, evoking laughter. "Last year we were one-and-done, and that's not our plan this year."

The win over Chattanooga was perhaps even more impressive than the men's victory, as the Mocs had yet to fully lock up the conference championship; Mercer's win was part of the reason Chattanooga had to settle for a share of the trophy instead of an outright regular season title.

Mercer used a 15-3 run in the second quarter to take an advantage it would not relinquish, shooting steadily to stay in front despite some Chattanooga comeback attempts. Sophomore Talia Kemp stepped up with a career-high 19 points.

"When Talia Kemp goes, we go. That's what happened in the second quarter," Heard said. "That's what's great about this team, different people can step up at different moments. Micah O'Dell can make a three, you have Abby (Holtman) who will make a three, Arianna (Bennett) will get an and-one."

That versatility has been much appreciated by Heard and her staff in their second season at Mercer following last year's campaign, which saw the offense struggle. Two players who chose to return despite last season's difficulties, Bennett and Nahawa Diarra, now lead the charge, both averaging double digits.

The Bears will need all of their contributors to pitch in during their first-round game against Furman. The Paladins went 17-12 overall, the same record as Mercer, but notched a 9-7 record in SoCon play.

Mercer struggled in the teams' first meeting, a 60-49 loss, but went on to explode offensively for an impressive 80-63 victory on the road Feb. 21. If the Bears can replicate that effort, a tournament run could be looming.

As one of the returners, Bennett said the team has grown a lot since last season — and echoed some of her head coach's thoughts on this year's tournament run.

"I don't want to remember anything about last year except how it felt afterward," Bennett said. "We've completely adjusted and we follow scouting more. As coach says, she's a defensive coach, and we've learned to follow that more."

The Mercer women played Furman at 5:45 p.m. on Thursday in the first round, after The Melody went to print.



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lineup boasts six qualified hitters with an OPS over 1.000 early on, including Tacoma Community College transfer Logan Shepherd, who has hit five home runs already through 12 games.

Mercer played Florida State on Wednesday, after The Melody went to print. The Bears have a three-game home set against Alcorn State set for Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

Mercer softball goes 2-2 in MUSB Invitational II

The invitational saw Colgate, Tennessee Tech and Presbyterian College visit Mercer to play several games over the weekend.

Mercer moved to 10-8 overall after the invitational in coach Chris Kuhlmeyer's first season at the helm. Olivia Lenzen leads the team with an impressive .389 batting average. Other key hitters include Meredith Wayland and Avery Barton.