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The Macon Melody

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Andrea Cooke



Edward Foster

Race for District 5 seat will go to runoff

BY CASEY CHOUNG
Community Reporter
casey@maconmelody.com

Andrea Cooke and Edward Foster will head to a runoff in April for a seat on the Macon-Bibb County Board of Commissioners after the special election to fill the District 5 seat concluded Tuesday.

Of the 19,210 registered voters in the district, according to the election summary report, a total of 1,058 people cast their vote, yielding a turnout of about 5.5%. A majority of voters cast ballots on Election Day.

Cooke came up short of winning the general election by less than 10 votes, receiving less than the 50% margin — she finished with 523 votes for 49.53% — needed to declare victory and avoid a runoff election. Foster garnered 205 votes (19.41%).

Stephanie Stephens-Lanham earned 154 votes (14.58%). Ulisha Hill, Landon Justice and Chester Gibbs received fewer than 10% of votes each.

The election will be certified Friday, officials said.

The winner of the runoff race will replace former mayor pro-tem Seth Clark, who left the post in January to run for lieutenant governor. Clark suspended his campaign at the end of February.

District 5 includes parts of the Vineville, Ingleside, Pleasant Hill,

SEE RUNOFF
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Periodical — Mail Label

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A PERFECT MATCH

Mercer grads begin journey that may help fill state's critical doctor needs



PHOTO COURTESY JOHN KNIGHT / MERCER UNIVERSITY
Dr. Keisha Callins embraces a medical student after finding out residency results during last year's Match Day at Mercer.

BY ALAYSIA EZZARD
Community Reporter
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It's timed to happen simultaneously, every year, on the third Friday of March across the country.

Today is Match Day. Think of it like the NFL draft for med students.

At noon, Mercer University's graduating medical students and more than 50,000 of their peers nationwide will find out which hospitals have selected them for coveted positions in their residency programs.

Mercer medical students Hannah Cabe and Faith Harris are both excited to see where they, along with their fellow classmates, will go to get more supervised, hands-on training working with patients.

"We've been studying now for almost four years," Harris said. "Getting to see where, exactly, that next step is going to be, it just feels like a long-awaited part of being in medical school that we finally get to experience."

Last year 44% of Mercer's med students matched into Georgia residencies. Right now, more than 60% of graduates from the school practice in the state. They are filling a critical need. Georgia is grappling with a severe shortage of doctors.

SEE MATCH
PAGE 2

BY THE NUMBERS

- 40th, where Georgia ranks in physicians per capita
- 13, Georgia counties with zero physicians
- 63, Georgia counties with no pediatricians
- 82, Georgia counties with no OB/GYN
- 95, Georgia counties with no psychiatrists
- 60%, Mercer med school grads practicing in the state

**Source: Georgia Public Policy Foundation, Mercer*

Incumbents and educators among qualified candidates in school board race

BY CASEY CHOUNG
Community Reporter
casey@maconmelody.com

The qualifying period for the two board of education races ended earlier this month. Six candidates filed the requisite paperwork to be put on the May 16 ballot.

Two candidates are running for the at-large Post 7 seat currently held by Daryl Morton, who is serving his final term and will become ineligible. Four candidates, including the incumbent Lisa Garrett-Boyd, are running for the at-large Post 8 seat.

The May 16 general election will include the board of education races as well as the local races for two Macon Water Authority seats.

Amy Morton, 66, is one of the candidates for the Post 7 seat. Her husband is Daryl Morton, the current president of the school board. Kerry Hatcher, 40, also qualified to run for the seat. He's a software engineer.

Candidates for the Post 8 seat on the school board include incumbent Lisa Garrett-Boyd, 71; retired federal employee Nola McFadden, 61; worship leader Jonathan Fisher, 53; and educator Carlos McCloud, 58.



PHOTO BY LAURA CORLEY
Tremaine Hart and Talenna Brown often use a shopping cart from Mike Supermarket to take their groceries back to their home in Pendleton Homes.

In a neglected area of South Macon, change is underway

BY LAURA E. CORLEY
Senior Accountability Reporter
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Tremaine Hart and Talenna Brown nudged a bright red shopping cart down a sidewalk on Houston Avenue on a recent afternoon. They were bound for their place in Pendleton Homes with a load of groceries.

It's a trek that, until about a year ago, would have been much more difficult. The couple resided in an area the federal government considered a "food desert," that is, a low-income tract with limited access to fresh food. Then, Mike Supermarket opened in February 2025.

"This neighborhood has so many people that don't have transportation," said the store's owner, Manish "Mike" Patel, who saw a need in the community and decided to address it.

Mike Supermarket is one of many improvements that residents and county officials hope to see on Houston Avenue and in abutting neighborhoods.

Macon-Bibb officials say they're making a significant financial investment that they hope will spur a revitalization along the South Macon corridor that has been long plagued by blight and crime.

In 2023, land purchased nearly 20 years earlier by Mayor C. Jack Ellis' administration was redeveloped into the Frankie E. Lewis Park on Lynmore Avenue.

On Cliffview Drive, another park opened in 2024. Money from the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) was used to remove blighted houses, install picnic tables and build a pavilion overlooking a pond. Steps lead to new trails and a fishing pier.

"We need a park because parks are transformational," Mayor Lester Miller said when the latest recreation area opened off Houston Avenue.

In addition, First Choice Primary Care, a health clinic that serves peo-

SEE HOUSTON
PAGE 3

PLAYLIST

THERE'S PLENTY HAPPENING IN MACON THIS WEEKEND. HERE'S YOUR CURATED GUIDE.

INTERNATIONAL CHERRY BLOSSOM FESTIVAL
Macon's signature springtime celebration kicks off this Friday and runs through March 29 at Carolyn Crayton Park and venues across downtown. Find a full list of events inside our newspaper and at maconmelody.com.

BLACK FAMILY WELLNESS EXPO
The Macon chapter of The Links, Incorporated, hosts this free community health event Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Southwest High School, featuring screenings, health resources, speakers and food trucks.

ANNUAL CHERRY BLOSSOM CONCERT
Violinist Robert Mulcrone and harpsichordist Gregory Hamilton perform Saturday at 7 p.m. at St. Joseph Church, 830 Poplar St.

Email events to news@maconmelody.com. Space in the "Playlist" is not guaranteed.

Award-winning, Macon-born playwright and performer brings show to Macon Little Theatre

"The Unpredictable Times" by Macon-born playwright Kevin Ray Johnson opens at Macon Little Theatre Friday, marking the first full-stage production of the piece since its 2021 regional premiere in Florida.

The show, set in the summer of 2007, follows a group of college graduates who reunite in their hometown one last time before going their separate ways.

Pop culture references anchor the show in a specific time, but the theater's executive director JP Haynie said the story of "people who are trying to find their footing in the world" resonates with every generation.

The coming-of-age play previously gained traction through staged readings at venues across the country, from the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts to the Broadway stage and even a small town in Alaska.

Macon Little Theatre's full-scale production offers Johnson — a professional vocalist and two-time Grammy Award-winning Metropolitan Opera performer — the chance to reconnect with his roots.

"Georgia never really left me," said Johnson, who grew up in Minnesota but still has family in Macon.

The performing arts have always been a part of his life, he said. He comes from a family of singers on his dad's side and credits his mom for helping foster his love of writing.

Despite a short-lived dream of becoming a basketball player — maybe he'll play one on stage someday — Johnson not only adopted his family's artistic bent, but hails from a city with a rich musical pulse, so his career in the spotlight comes as no surprise.

"There's a lot of artistry that comes out of Macon, Georgia," he said. "My mom always tells me it was just naturally in my DNA that I probably was going to be an entertainer."

Growing up, Johnson had a front row seat to the performing arts. His mom briefly owned a theater company in Minnesota and he watched her direct a production of the 1970 Broadway musical "Purlie," an experience that Johnson said solidified his desire to perform.

He later developed his writing chops when he moved to Maryland partway through high school, an experience that flipped his entire world on its head. His mother gave him composition notebooks where he began to jot down his thoughts and write stories.

Johnson planted the seeds for "The Unpredictable Times" at age 16 as an homage to his Minnesota upbringing. He said the show's name references the period in a young person's life when they're transitioning into the adult world for the first time



SEE THEATER PAGE 6

PHOTO BY JP HAYNIE / MACON LITTLE THEATRE

The cast of Macon Little Theatre's production of "The Unpredictable Times" rehearse a scene from the show earlier this week.

MATCH

Continued from Page 1

According to the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, an independent, nonpartisan think tank, there are a little over 28,000 practicing physicians serving more than 11 million people in the state. This physician-to-patient ratio is 23% worse than the national average. As current physicians retire and the population continues to grow, the gap likely will widen. It's a problem, especially pronounced in rural Georgia.

Of the Mercer medical school grads who practice in the state, more than 80% choose to do so in rural or medically underserved communities.

Friday's Match Day is a pivotal juncture for med students hoping to fill the gap. Students have been preparing for this moment since starting medical school, but began completing their applications last summer. For a few months after the application deadline, they interviewed with programs that expressed interest. After their interviews concluded, the students had until early March to rank their desired programs. The programs do the same thing, ranking the students that they interview. The results are put into an algorithm that matches each party's preference. This brings us to Match Week.

This past Monday, students found out via email, if they matched, but not where they'll go. That brings us to today.

Both Cabe and Harris were excited and relieved to know that they had been matched. There are no guarantees.

If a student partially matches or didn't match at all, they may be eligible to participate in the Supplemental Offer and Acceptance Program or SOAP. This gives them the opportunity to apply and interview for unfilled programs.

It's during residency that graduates begin to specialize in a type of medicine.

Harris decided on psychiatry, which came as a surprise to her. She hadn't considered what she wanted to specialize in until her third year in medical school. She was helping to treat a patient, and a psychiatrist had to be brought in for a consultation.

"I've always really appreciated mental health, and I always believed in advocating for it," Harris said. "But, it wasn't until I was actually in the position to see how it works in the health care system … that I could really see that's the type of medicine that I really love."

For Cabe, OB-GYN is her chosen specialty. She loves the idea of being able to care for a woman from her first menstrual cycle to pregnancy then menopause. "When you're caring for a woman, you're caring for more than just that patient. You're caring for their whole entire family," she said.

Her interest in the field was also sparked because there's a need in her hometown in Middle Georgia's Washington County. There aren't any OB-GYNs in the area.

According to the Georgia Board of Health Care Workforce, Washington County was among the 82 counties that didn't have a practicing OB-GYN when data was collected in 2023-2024. Thirteen counties in Georgia didn't have any practicing physicians.

At Mercer's Match Day ceremony, med students will be handed envelopes, to open at the same time, with information revealing their matches. As they walk up to receive the envelopes, their chosen music will play. Cabe decided on "You Make My Dreams Come True," by Daryl Hall and John Oates. It's upbeat and fits the theme, she thinks.

Harris decided on "A Good Day," by the Rev. James Cleveland. She picked this song because it's about being grateful for where you are in life. There were some hard moments in the journey, she said. Still, she wants to remember "to be grateful because it really is a privilege and a blessing to be where we are."



HOUSTON

Continued from Page 1

ple in the area, was built with money from the American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds, the Peyton Anderson Foundation and other sources.

ARP funds, matched by the foundation, were also given to Habitat for Humanity to build houses in Lynmore Estates, on land once filled with blighted structures.

The Macon-Bibb County Affordable Housing Fund Inc., a nonprofit organization the mayor created with some $7.5 million in ARP money, is also working to build new houses on Villa Esta Avenue.

The Macon-Bibb County Land Bank has acquired dozens of properties along streets abutting Houston Avenue.

Though millions are being invested in the area, there's much more work to do to make it a more desirable and safe for people looking to live there or operate businesses, Patel said.

He said he is concerned about unsupervised youths who gather and sometimes brawl after dark at Cliffview Park.

"We have so many issues with kids," Patel said, adding the county should enforce a closing time for the park. "If they want the park open, they should have security and a limitation."

Last month, some thieves — wayward teens, Patel suspects — stripped the copper wire out of the air conditioning units at his store.

"The young kids, they don't care," Patel said, adding that the cost to replace several units was about $60,000.

Mainly, Patel said he wants to see more patrols from the Bibb County Sheriff's Office and a faster response time.

"Once we call the cops, the cops don't even show up until 30-40 minutes later," Patel said.

Renado Owens has worked as a crossing guard outside of Bruce Elementary for eight years and lives down the street.

Between the store and the school, at Vista Esta and Houston avenues, a yellow-vested Owens holds a stop sign with one hand and waves children along with the other, smiling and asking each of them if they had a good day. As a pair of women cruises by in a black sedan, she throws up her hand and hollers, "Hey Pookie!"

"I like it over here," she said. "I was born and raised over here."

Asked what she thought about the county investing millions into the neighborhood, Owens wanted to know: "Where is the money going?"

"The best thing that's happened in the last year is this store opening up," Owens said. "We see a lot of police patrolling the streets more than usual. That's a good thing."

One thing Owens said she wants to see is "something for these kids."

"There's a lot of children in this area that ain't got nothing to really do," Owens said.

Hart, father to a 3-year-old and a newborn, echoed those concerns.

"If I had some type of money … I would fix everything up," Hart said. "Make something for the kids they can enjoy [and] not be on the street and want to do negative stuff."

Hart noted high-tech cameras the sheriff's office installed along the road have helped cut down on some of the mischievous and illegal behavior and help make it safer.

Despite lingering problems, there are visible improvements in the area, said First Choice Primary Care CEO Katherine McLeod.

The new $3.2 million health clinic has three medical providers who care for under-insured and uninsured patients. The nonprofit also opened a $1 million school-based health-care clinic at the school.

"Our patients love the new building, and it has attracted more new patients because we're right there in the heart of the neighborhood. There's a bus stop right at our corner," McLeod said. "People are delighted there's this nice, new, well-built, attractive building that, to us, sends a message that everybody deserves a nice place to come get their health care whether you have insurance or not."

McLeod said the clinic also has a mental health counselor in the office and is looking to hire a fourth medical provider.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Lots along Villa Esta Avenue ear Houston Avenue have been recently cleared for new homes. Houston Avenue is the subject of a concentrated revitalization effort, as the portion of South Macon has been neglected for some time but is now getting changes in terms of investment, safety and more.

"South Macon has been so neglected," McLeod said, adding that she is delighted to see investment in the area. "I hope there's momentum there."

Work in the area is ongoing, said Natalie Bouyett, executive director of the Macon-Bibb County Affordable Housing Fund.

"The idea is, after decades of disenfranchisement, we're going to have to have decades of reinvestment in order to bring that area back up," Bouyett said. "I think the county is doing a very good job with infrastructure, education, health and nutrition and addressing all of those issues, which ultimately would hopefully lead to better and improved safety and health in that community. And so, it's literally a coordinated effort of just all these organizations, housing being an important part of that."

The housing fund is beginning construction soon on five homes along Villa Esta Avenue at a cost of $1.3 million.

"The dream is that we can actually coordinate with the Bibb County School District since the elementary school is right there and work on some kind of program for the teachers, to recruit some teachers to come in" and buy the homes, Bouyett said. "But really it'll be open up for the community. … There hasn't been a lot of new construction in residential housing at all really in that area."

The five homes could sell for $180,000 to $240,000 each, she said.

Housing construction in the area is set to take place in stages and will involve at least three construction companies. After Villa Esta Avenue, the nonprofit plans to build five to 10 more homes along nearby Rutherford Avenue.

RUNOFF

Continued from Page 1

Napier Heights and Unionville neighborhoods.

Foster, the vice president of the Pleasant Hill Neighborhood Association, waited inside the elections office at the Macon Mall to find out if he would need to keep campaigning for a runoff.

Foster said throughout his campaign he's found that many people don't even know an election is happening. He plans to continue campaigning across District 5.



SNAPSHOTS









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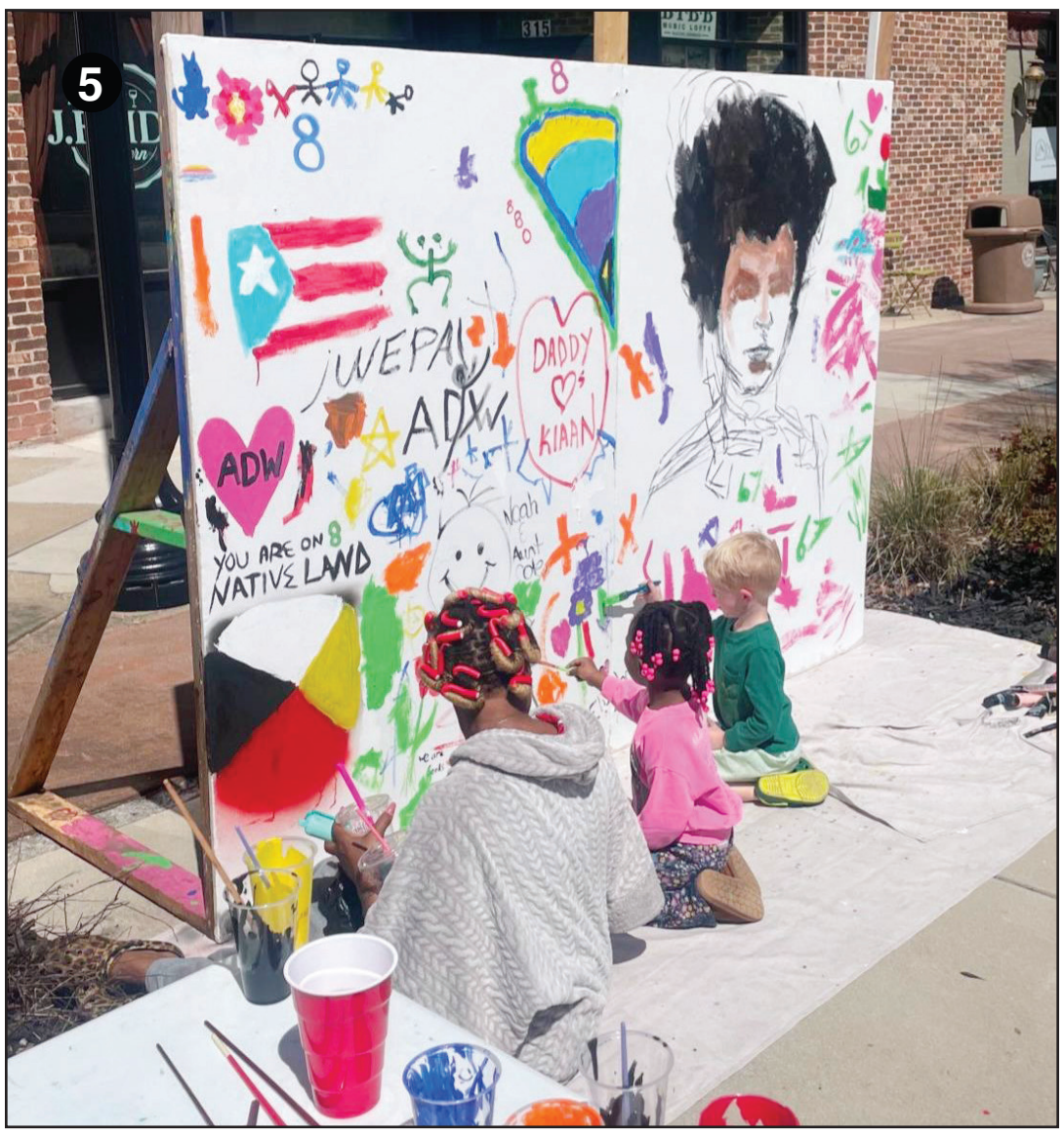


PHOTO NO. 1 — Southwest fans cheer for the Patriots during their GHSA State Championsip game against Rabun County March 13. *Photo by Mark Powell.*

PHOTO NO. 2 — Southwest cheerleaders perform during the Patriots GHSA State Championsip game against Rabun County. The Patriots lost the game 52-43. *Photo by Mark Powell.*

PHOTO NO. 3 —Mercer students fill Cruz Plaza for the annual Bearstock concert Saturday, March 14. B.o.B, Hot Chelle Rae, MothaFunka, Kosher Pickle and Trinity Scales perfromed during the concert. *Photo provided by Mercer University.*

PHOTO NO. 4 — Members of the Macon-Bibb Fire Department welcomed eight new fire engines into service with a traditional Push-In Ceremony Tuesday at the department's Headquarters on Oglethorpe. *Photo by Jason Vorhees.*

PHOTO NO. 5 — A Graffiti Happy Hour put together by Macon Pride, the Ocmulgee Artist Guild and The 567 Center for Renewal took place Saturday March 14 in downtown Macon. *Photo provided by DeMarcus Beckham.*

SUNSHINE® WEEK

OUR RIGHT TO KNOW

Let the sunshine in



Joshua Wilson

Open government isn't optional.

Public information should flow freely — but it often doesn't, and that's why groups across the country are coming together for the so-called Sunshine Week.

The annual event is an acknowledgment that an effective democracy requires an informed citizenry and that an informed citizenry requires access to the workings of its government.

It sounds like a no-brainer to me — but then again, I've been a working journalist for 20 years. Unfortunately, some of our elected officials and other bureaucrats often fail to understand their roles in providing that access. As a result, journalists spend a lot of time — and money — fighting with them over items that don't belong to them in the first place.

The vicious cycle never fails to amaze or frustrate me.

Throughout my career, I've had more than my fair share of public records spats. In 2020, I successfully sued the Mississippi State Department of Health over certain COVID-19 records, and, right before moving to Georgia in 2025, had filed a complaint against the Mississippi Department of Transportation over its refusal to provide bridge inspection records.

The latter case is particularly peculiar. Without boring you with all of the details, the state suddenly closed a heavily trafficked bridge in one of the coastal cities. I filed a public records request for several years' worth of inspection records, thinking I'd have them in a few days.

Boy, was I wrong. The state denied the request, citing a federal exemption that, to this day, makes no sense to me. We appealed and were again denied — this time through a letter from the state attorney general's office.

The next step was to file a complaint with the Mississippi Ethics Commission, a well-meaning but toothless agency charged with, among other things, enforcing public records laws. That was in April 2025. The overworked commission finally ruled on the matter this January, finding that the state violated the Mississippi Public Records Act and ordering the Transportation Department to comply with the law. (By the way, the state still hasn't done so, but that's another matter.)

Interestingly enough, around this same time, a Mississippi state representative introduced a bill that would have prevented access to some roadway safety documents — including inspection reports.

The bill didn't make it through the state Legislature, but it still left me wondering what in the world was going on — and what state transportation officials, and this certain state representative, were trying to hide. It might be much ado about nothing, but why go through all this trouble just to hide inspection records for a piece of public infrastructure?

The journalist in me suspects some monkey business. Sunlight, as the saying goes, is the best disinfectant — but it's also a spotlight. It can expose wrongdoing, but it can also show that the machinery of government is humming along just fine. Either way, the public deserves to see for itself.

I'd love to write that Macon-Bibb County's various public entities are more transparent than my home state's, but my reporters often experience the same amount of stonewalling. It manifests as delays, denials and bureaucratic runarounds that serve no one except those hoping a journalist gives up and moves on.

We don't.

If local officials are conducting the public's business with integrity, they should welcome transparency — not resist it. Open records aren't a trap; they're a mirror. A government with nothing to hide has nothing to fear from the public it serves.

But whether officials embrace that philosophy or not, providing access to public information isn't a courtesy. It's a legal obligation. We'll continue to fight for records when we have to, and we'll gladly remind any official of their responsibilities under the Georgia Open Records Act when they seem to have forgotten.

Our goal has never been to embarrass anyone. It's to ensure that the people of Macon-Bibb County have the information they need to make sense of the government that serves them. That's what Sunshine Week is about. That's what local journalism is about.

We believe in a Macon-Bibb where transparency isn't a fight. We're working toward it — one records request at a time.

Joshua Wilson is our executive editor. He wants to hear from you. Email joshua@maconmelody.com.

Weighing insurance bills



Marc Hyden

Property and casualty insurance regulation is unlikely to capture voters' undivided attention on any given day.

Most people find it about as interesting as long division, or as Mike Fotis of Smart Money People put it: "The insurance industry is the boring uncle of the financial services family — a little drab and likely to be found in a basement…"

Even though just about every American has insurance of some kind, there may be some truth to Fotis' lighthearted characterization, and perhaps as a result, auto and homeowners' insurance doesn't tend to be top of mind for lawmakers or voters.

However, that sentiment can suddenly change when premiums begin to rise.

This has been the case in Georgia over the past several years, thanks to insurance fraud, lawsuit abuse, natural disasters, and increasingly complex and expensive auto components.

Now suddenly this supposedly dull topic is at the forefront in the Legislature, and lawmakers have since introduced a flurry of insurance bills — some reasonable, others dangerously misguided. Depending on the General Assembly's mood, it could transform the insurance market, and this should matter to every person with auto or homeowners' insurance.

For those of you who aren't unabashed insurance nerds, consumers are best served when there is ample competition within the insurance market and when it isn't overburdened by excessive red tape. This helps drive down rates and encourages new products that are tailored to various customer needs.

On the bright side, the Peach State's insurance market shows signs of ample competition.

"Georgia has over 400 personal home and automobile insurers," reports Insurance News Net, but that doesn't tell the whole story. The report continues: "While Georgia is the tenth-largest state for Property and Casualty premiums, it ranks 50th out of 51 among the states and D.C. for insurance company profitability."

A host of factors, like lawsuit abuse, have made it difficult for insurers to make money in Georgia. This has led some to leave the state entirely or raise their rates to stay in business. While commonsense tort reform has since passed and provided insurers and insureds some relief, pressures remain — and officials want to act.

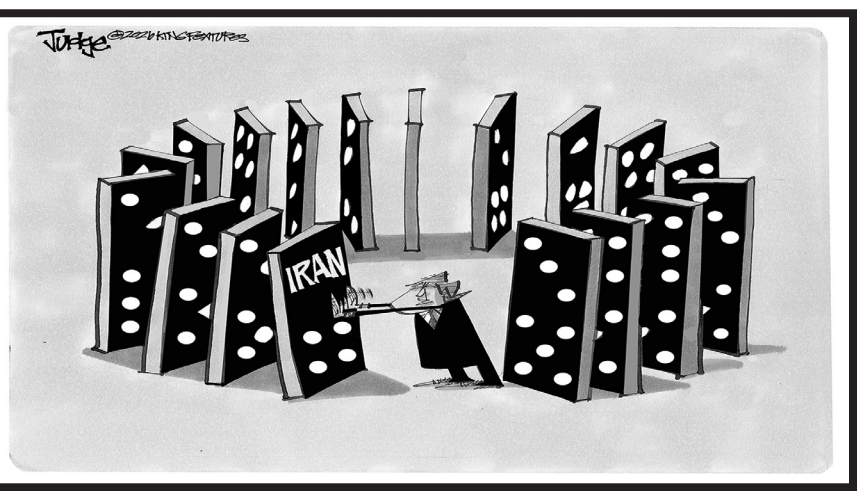
Instead of looking at market reforms, some lawmakers would rather bind insurance companies' hands.

Two pieces of Senate legislation aim to prevent insurers from using geography or credit information when setting rates.

These are incredibly problematic ideas. Insurance rates need to be determined based on risk and the likelihood of paying out claims. If insurance companies can't adequately predict these outcomes, then they can't make money, and geography and credit information are actuarially credible factors.

If someone lives in a neighborhood where 50% of cars are stolen, then their auto rates should reflect this. Similarly, the use of cred-

SEE HYDEN
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ABOUT THE MACON MELODY

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

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

We follow the Code of Ethics published by the Society of Professional Journalists (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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Transportation planners seek public input

BY LIZ FABIAN
The Macon Newsroom
macon-newsroom.com

What would it take for Macon-Bibb County to be an easier community to travel by car, foot, bicycle, train or airplane?

That's what the Macon-Bibb County Planning & Zoning Commission and its hired consultants want to know as they draft the latest Comprehensive Plan that lays out the vision for the next 20 to 30 years.

Thursday, from 6-8 p.m., the public is invited to a Community Transportation Meeting at Middle Georgia Regional Airport where light refreshments will be served.

The State of Georgia requires a plan update every five years to be eligible for state funding, loans and permits.

The public portion of the nearly two-year process of the "Macon It Happen" plan development began in January with a kick-off at Macon Mall and will end with a final plan summit early next year before the plan is drafted, finalized and adopted by fall of 2027.

"This is our community's big-picture plan for the future — how we want to grow, get around, and keep Macon-Bibb County a great place to live, work, and visit," Gregory Brown, P&Z's planning director said in a news release about the first meeting. "The Comprehensive Plan process is a chance for everyone to share ideas and help shape what comes next. Public participation is essential to creating a plan that truly reflects the community's needs and aspirations."

In addition to the transportation meeting, people are invited to attend other gatherings that will be scheduled throughout the year on economic development, quality of life, housing and land use which will be covered in multiple gatherings.

A steering committee of local stakeholders will work with consultants from TSW who are working on pedestrian and bicycle planning, and land use and development; RS&H will lead discussions on roadway and freight transportation planning; and Arnett Muldrow & Associates will conduct market analysis and economic development recommendations.

Beginning last September, the consultants took inventory of Macon-Bibb's evolution since 2022 and will help create the specific strategy for the county's land development.

Public meetings include hands-on interactivity to gather input on the topic, such as Thursday's transportation network and policy discussion.

"We want to make sure they hear as many voices as possible," TSW's Allison Sinyard said at the January launch.

Additional goals of the process are to diversify outreach especially to underrepresented groups and develop accessible engagement activities.

Meetings include a Junior Planning Academy for ages 5 to 17 to get involved in the process that plots their future.

"We think the youth opinion is just as important as the adults in the room," Sinyard said.

The family-friendly meetings will have kids' passports available for young people to earn stamps as they complete "missions" at each event with an opportunity to win a prize at the end of year.

A pad of "MadLibs" asks Junior Planners to fill in the blanks about what they would like to see in the future as a means to gather their suggestions.

At the kickoff, 13-year-old Alonah Glenn took advantage of the drawing table to sketch "what my future community looks like" as adults flagged a large map of Bibb County with suggestions and concerns, such as "dilapidated houses," or "need increased bus route and sidewalks."

While the date and times for the rest of the community meetings will be announced later this spring, summer and fall, an online survey is available at www.maconithappen-plan.com/engage.

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

THEATER

Continued from Page 1

and each character reflects a part of himself.

Coming of age stories can often feel like an inside joke that no one else understands, he said.

The Unpredictable Times, however, transcends generational barriers, because everyone can relate to that time of life when they don't know what the future holds, according to Johnson.

The Macon playwright said he is grateful for Macon Little Theatre taking a chance on new works like his.

"Every few years, we try to find these special projects to come along and elevate into part of our full-scale season," Haynie said.

Working with original material is an "underused skill" for non-professional actors, the local theater director noted.

"That sort of developmental skill as an actor to be able to create it totally on your own — it's an exciting opportunity," he said. "It was an exciting process for me to get to work on material where, really, all you have to go on is the script in front of you."

The greatest creative challenge was figuring out how to visually portray flashbacks in live scenes, according to Haynie. Similarly, the cast had to learn how to embody their characters at all ages.

"On stage, there are these seamless moments where an actor starts telling the story and everything just sort of shifts," he said. "All of a sudden, we are back with them when they're 10 years old and building this tree house together with their friends."

A playwright's "greatest blessing and curse," Haynie noted, is putting their vision down on paper and letting other artists bring it to life.

Johnson lives in Philadelphia and is rehearsing for EPIC Players' off-Broadway 30th anniversary revival of RENT, but he will return to Macon for opening night of the show.

The Unpredictable Times runs March 20-29 at Macon Little Theatre, 4220 Forsyth Road. Purchase tickets online.

HYDEN

Continued from Page 5

it-based information is a proven method of predicting whether someone will submit an insurance claim, and it does so without being unfairly discriminatory.

A third piece of Senate legislation would fundamentally alter how insurance is regulated by moving to a prior approval system, like the one that helped decimate California's insurance market and continues to be a source of its insurance woes. It would essentially forbid insurers from introducing new rates and forms of insurance without first obtaining the elected insurance commissioner's approval.

This creates the incentive to keep rates so low that lines of insurance are not profitable and places important private business decisions in the commissioner's hands.

Thankfully, these three pieces of legislation failed to meet the crossover deadline, which effectively means they are dead, but Georgia bills are a lot like zombies. They are rarely truly dead and tend to rear their ugly heads when you least expect it.

The House of Representatives, meanwhile, has promoted several proposals that have a more plausible path to enactment. One bill "would require rate decreases by insurance companies that notch profits exceeding 5% of projections for three straight years," according to Capitol Beat.

This may receive plaudits from voters, but during the hearing, lawmakers struggled to recall the last time a Georgia auto insurer enjoyed three years of "excessive profits."

Another House proposal may hold the most promise for Georgians. If passed, the bill would help combat insurance fraud and crack down on uninsured motorists. The hope is these proposals will keep insurance premiums lower without constraining insurers to the point of exiting Georgia.

In most years, insurance regulation might not dominate headlines, but after years of premium increases and broader affordability issues hindering Georgians, it has become top of mind for many elected officials.

They have two paths before them — institute smart market reforms or over-regulate insurers out of existence.

If legislators choose wisely, then insurance can go back to being the drab basement-dwelling topic it once was.

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

The Macon Melody

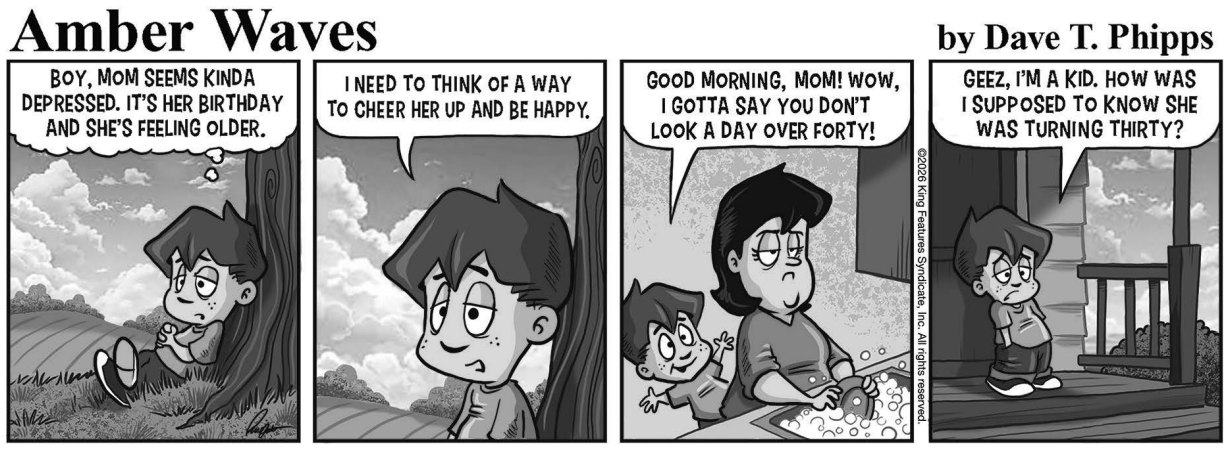
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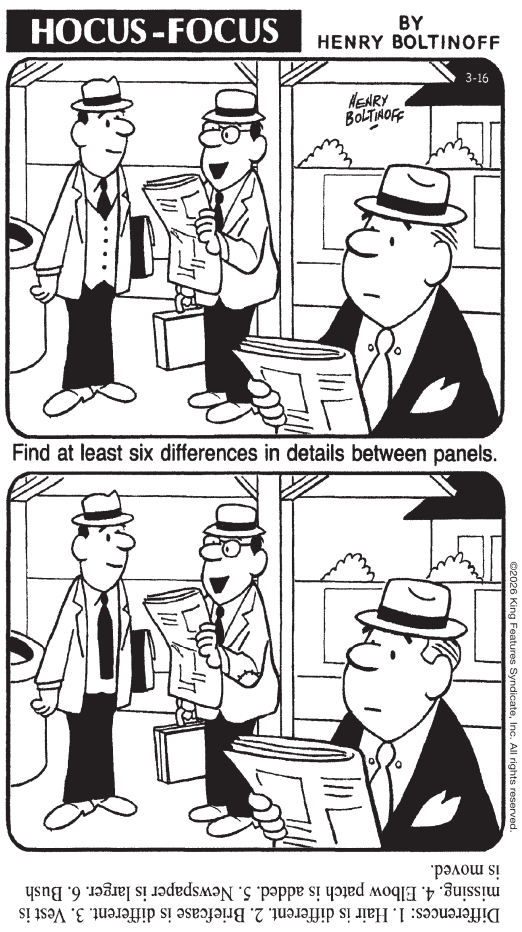
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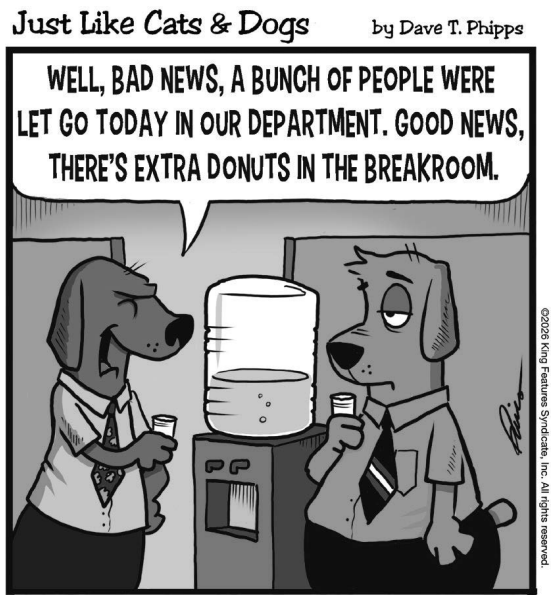


Find at least six differences in details between panels.

Differences: 1. Hair is different. 2. Briefcase is different. 3. Vest is missing. 4. Elbow patch is added. 5. Newspaper is larger. 6. Bush is moved.

Just Like Cats & Dogs

by Dave T. Phipps



CryptoQuip

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

Clue: **C** equals **E**

JDCE G LUPCUADCK OW IPOL USJIPK UDC ADZPAD LGEHCPL, WSZ OGHDU LIW G JIL PCIADGEH US UDC ADSGP.

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SCRAMBLERS

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

Decay — SNOWER

Layer — RITE

Remove — SEARE

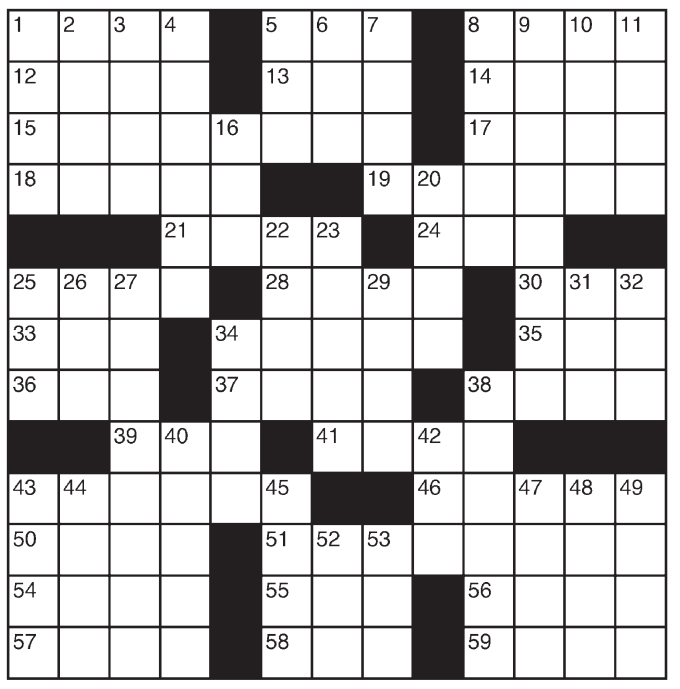
Banish — LEXIE



"Can anybody beat a pair of _ _ _ _ _ ?"

TODAY'S WORD

King Crossword



ACROSS

1 Banner
5 Invoice fig.
8 Experts
12 Earring site
13 Brit's restroom
14 Carry on
15 Capital of Paraguay
17 Slender weapon
18 Rationed (out)
19 Urges forward
21 "La Dolce —"
24 Granola morsel
25 Luke's teacher
28 Folklore monster
30 Mel of Cooperstown
33 "Caught ya!"
34 Welcome
35 Bankroll
36 "Tasty!"
37 Give temporarily
38 Burden
39 Navarro on "The View"
41 Mausoleum
43 Continue
46 Skiers' mecca
50 Bank statement no.
51 Capital of India
54 Close
55 Crime lab evidence
56 Motown genre
57 Bouquet
58 Tofu source
59 Norms (Abbr.)

DOWN

1 Two-stroke drumbeat
2 Misplace
3 Border on
4 Swiss metropolis
5 Foreman foe
6 Cattle call
7 Author Morrison
8 Venezuelan corn patty
9 Capital of South Africa
10 Daring Knievel
11 Beholds
16 Roman 401
20 Champagne brand
22 Ripped
23 Rep
25 Candied veggie
26 Resistance unit
27 Capital of Syria
29 Make over
31 Sigma follower
32 QBs' goals
34 Glitzy rock genre
38 Fixate
40 Peculiar
42 Irate
43 Grate
44 Canyon comeback
45 Concludes
47 Conspiracy
48 Barak of Israel
49 Guitarist Lofgren
52 Rock producer Brian
53 Method

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Weekly SUDOKU

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

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

DIFFICULTY THIS WEEK: ◆◆◆

◆ Moderate ◆◆ Challenging ◆◆◆ HOO BOY!

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FiveSpot™

Turbo mode

P	O	W	E	R	A gamer's advantage
					Tall structure
					Last option on some surveys
					Belonging to them
					Robber
					Go from second to third

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. MOVIES: Who is the director of the Oscar-winning movie "Parasite"?
2. FOOD & DRINK: What is miso?
3. LITERATURE: What are the names of the romantic couple in "Wuthering Heights"?
4. GENERAL KNOWLEDGE: Which city's nickname is "Pearl of the Orient"?
5. HISTORY: In what year were the first modern Olympic Games held?
6. U.S. PRESIDENTS: Before becoming president, Barack Obama served as a senator from which state?
7. GEOGRAPHY: Which peninsula is the largest in the world?
8. MYTHOLOGY: Who is the Greek god of war?
9. MUSIC: Who composed the opera "The Ring of Nibelung"?
10. ACRONYMS: In computer emails, what does the acronym "CC" stand for?

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SCRAMBLERS
Today's Word
SIXES
1. Worsen; 2. Tier
3. Erase; 4. Exile

FiveSpot™ Solution

S	H	I	F	T
T	H	I	E	F
T	H	E	I	R
O	T	H	E	R
T	O	W	E	R
P	O	W	E	R

Weekly SUDOKU Answer

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

CryptoQuip answer

When I stretched my arms toward the church singers, you might say I was reaching to the choir.

Trivia Answers

1. Bong Joon Ho
2. Fermented soybean paste
3. Heathcliff and Catherine
4. Manila, Philippines
5. 1896 in Greece
6. Illinois
7. Arabian Peninsula
8. Ares
9. Richard Wagner
10. Carbon Copy (once used in typewriters)

King Crossword — Answers

Solution time: 24 mins.

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

BILLY COOKS

Billy Eats... but did you know he also cooks?



Billy Hennessey

Here's the twist. As much as I love sliding into a booth somewhere and letting someone else wow me, there's something equally satisfying about tying on an apron, turning up the music and making a mess in my own kitchen.

I may not have any formal culinary training — much like I had zero background in writing before I became a food columnist — but that hasn't stopped me yet.

By day (and night, and holiday and every weather delay in between), I'm a flight attendant in my 38th year of flying.

But on my days off? I'm grounded in the best way possible: at home, cooking. While I never drop things during turbulence, for some reason, in my kitchen, I constantly have butter fingers.

After coming back from a trip, nothing resets my soul quite like stepping into my kitchen. Last night, I hosted a dinner for friends I met at a wine pairing dinner at Brasserie Circa. Because apparently I don't just make friends at 35,000 feet — I collect them over Bordeaux, too. And when it's my turn to host, I don't play around.

On the menu? shepherd's pie, an Irish staple and my all-time go-to.

I'm Irish, and this dish lives deep in my culinary muscle memory. I can make it blindfolded. The aroma that fills the house takes me right back to the Emerald Isle.

Traditionally, shepherd's pie is made with ground beef and ground lamb. But this is Middle Georgia in 2026, and ground pork is far more affordable, accessible and quite frankly delicious.

So in my version, the lamb takes a polite step aside and pork steps in. It's "Billy's Shepherd's Pie… but not really Shepherd's Pie." When it's your own kitchen, you get to make the rules — and break them once in a while.

Here's how it goes down in my kitchen: one pound ground beef, one pound ground pork, one chopped red onion, two stalks of celery, garlic powder, onion powder, fennel seed, coriander, salt, pepper, minced garlic, a cup of dry red wine and about half a bottle (or can) of Guinness.

Brown the meat first with salt and pepper, then layer in everything else and let it simmer until the flavors marry properly.

The mixed vegetables — yes, the frozen bag kind — go in last. Traditionally, it's just peas and carrots, but I believe in flexibility. This is comfort food, not a citizenship test.

Because pork carries more fat than lamb, you'll notice more liquid in the pan. Let it cook down. Patience is flavor. If it's still loose, a little flour or cornstarch will tighten things up.

You absolutely do not want this mixture soupy. Shepherd's Pie should hold its shape, not slide across the plate like it's trying to escape.

Now let's address the elephant in the room: the leftover Guinness and the open bottle of red wine. We listen and we don't judge. It was my day off. It was National Drink Wine Day.

The Guinness? Finished. The wine? Also finished. For recipe integrity, of course.

To deepen the gravy, I add two tablespoons of Bisto, a classic British gravy powder that thickens and enriches the filling. If you can't find Bisto, no need to panic. A simple roux — equal parts butter and flour cooked together — does the trick beautifully. Cornstarch mixed with cold liquid works too. The goal is rich, glossy and thick enough to support the crown of this dish: the potatoes. And not just any potatoes. Gold potatoes. Read that again. Gold potatoes.

Their starch and texture create a naturally buttery, velvety mash that forms the perfect topping. I use six to seven medium gold potatoes, mashed with half a stick of butter, three-quarters of a package of cream cheese and three-quarters of a cup of heavy cream. This isn't diet food. This is heritage.

Helpful Hint: To avoid destroying your hands during peeling potatoes, use a fork at the top of the potato! You'll thank me for this!

The mash should be thicker than your average Sunday side dish because it's acting as the structural roof of this masterpiece. I run mine through a potato ricer for the smoothest texture — it's about twelve bucks online and worth every penny — but a hand mixer or masher works just fine. Spread it generously over the meat mixture, seal the edges, and bake until golden and slightly crisp on top.

So yes, Billy Eats. But Billy also sautés, simmers, thickens, seasons, improvises and hosts with the occasional drink or four.

I may not have a culinary degree, but I've got instinct, a well-worn wooden spoon and 38 years of knowing how to keep people comfortable. Turns out that skill transfers pretty well from the aisle of an aircraft to the warmth of a dining table.

Fasten your seatbelts, bring your tray table and seat back to their full upright and locked position. Dinner is served.

Billy wants to give your recipes a try! To submit a recipe for Billy to make in his own kitchen, email news@maconmelody.com.

SEE RECIPE CUTOUT
PAGE 9

Artists with Macon ties and upcoming music



PHOTO PROVIDED BY THE MUSEUM OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
Macon artist Beverly Buchanan works on her land art project, the "Unity Stones" installation, in 1983 at the Booker T. Washington Center.

Here are some Macon-centric and Macon-connected items from my writer's notebook. From honors bestowed upon artists with Macon ties to upcoming concerts — this is evidence that there's always something to do in Macon.

New inductee at Georgia Women of Achievement Hall of Fame

Beverly Buchanan was inducted into the Georgia Women of Achievement Hall of Fame during a ceremony at Wesleyan College March 11. Buchanan (1940–2015) was a Black artist who, though born in North Carolina, spent the majority of her creative life in Georgia — much of it in Macon, where she first came to teach art at Stratford Academy in 1977.

Known for her work as a painter, sculptor, photographer and creator of land art installations made of rock and concrete, she enjoyed critical acclaim during her lifetime.

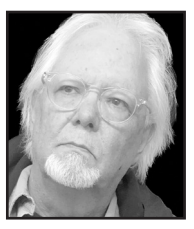
Buchanan's work is now, more than ever, sought after by collectors and museums. Her pieces are in the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, Atlanta's High Museum of Art and the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Her art is also featured in Macon's Museum of Arts and Sciences and the Tubman African American Museum. Her land art pieces remain in Macon: "Ruins and Rituals" at the Museum of Arts and Sciences and "Unity Stones" at the Booker T. Washington Center. These reflect themes often present in Buchanan's art — resilience and decay, being weather-worn yet still standing. With universal appeal, her work highlights the Southern Black experience.

This theme is clear in Buchanan's well-known series of "shack paintings" and sculptures, where vivid, childlike colors and a folk-art style portray shacks from throughout the region in a blend of representational and abstract imagery.

Though not technically a folk artist due to her extensive training and ability to work in many styles, Buchanan chose this approach as the language that best communicated her artistic vision. But she might never have made art her career: At Columbia University, she earned two master's degrees — one in parasitology and one in public health — and was set to begin medical school. Instead, she devoted herself to art, working as a technician in health care and in education until she could create full time.

The Georgia Women of Achievement cited Buchanan's work as one that "strengthens Georgia's cultural assets immeasurably" and noted that throughout her career she "created enduring and insightful work that was intimately linked to her natural surroundings and folk art."



Michael W. Pannell

Buchanan once said, "A lot of my pieces have the word 'ruins' in their titles because I think that tells you this object has been through a lot and survived — that's the idea behind the sculptures. It's like, 'Here I am; I'm still here!'"

Buchanan was nominated to the Hall of Fame by former Museum of Arts and Sciences Executive Director Susan Welsh. Wesleyan President Meaghan Blight and Mercer University President Penny Elkins, who also served as past president of Georgia Women of Achievement, attended the event. The organization was founded to honor Georgia women, inspire young women and promote education. Among its first inductees in 1992 were Martha Berry and Flannery O'Connor.

Muscogee (Creek) artist Johnnie Diacon: Emory artist-in-residence

Muscogee (Creek) artist Johnnie Diacon of Tulsa has made many friends in Macon — you may be one if you've met him at the Indigenous Celebrations at Ocmulgee Mounds National Historical Park or a gallery show here.

Talented and personable, Diacon is a 2025–26 Indigenous artist-in-residence at Emory University's Center for Native American and Indigenous Studies, with exhibits at Emory's Michael C. Carlos Museum and now on Emory's Oxford, Georgia campus.

On March 30, Diacon will present an art workshop at Emory and a talk called "A Creativity Conversation" on the following day.

"It's quite an honor to be invited to Emory, and always an honor to be invited to show my work highlighting the Muscogee people," Diacon said. "It's nice being recognized and invited back into our ancestral homelands. I've got quite a relationship with Macon and a great partnership with Emory. It's a joy discussing my art with students and how meaningful it is historically and spiritually."

Being in Georgia is something he never thought would happen.

"Growing up, I never imagined I would ever be able to visit and see our homeland in Georgia, much less build relationships there," Diacon said.

Demand for Diacon's work is growing, with opportunities like those in Macon and Emory, as well as exhibitions at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, in Tennessee and Alabama, and across the nation. He is currently at work on a group of large-scale commissioned pieces for the Museum of Alabama and a new comic book series, adding to several he has already produced.

This weekend's concerts

Increasingly, national music acts are coming to Macon alongside local ones — this weekend proves it with not one superstar concert but two. Macon is attracting musicians of all backgrounds, representing a broad spectrum from Baroque to country rock and blues.

Annual Cherry Blossom Concert

The concert at St. Joseph Catholic church will feature Robert Mulcrone, a student at the Robert McDuffie Center for Strings at Mercer, on violin, and Gregory Hamilton, director of music at St. Joseph, on harpsichord.

"It's a concert of Baroque music using my beautiful Flemish harpsichord modeled after a 1680 instrument, and Robert, who is a magnificent musician, will be playing a violin that I believe is from 1686," Hamilton said. "St. Joseph is a stunning place for the concert in both its décor and acoustics. The concert is free and everyone is invited. Afterward, kids are welcome to have a look and play the harpsichord."

The free concert is Saturday, March 21 at 7 p.m.

Joe Bonamassa performs at the Atrium Health Amphitheater

At time of publication, tickets were still available. The legendary blues guitar master is a musical force to be reckoned with. A couple of fun facts: Bonamassa took lessons as a kid from larger-than-life Telecaster virtuoso Danny Gatton and, at 12 years old, opened for and played with B.B. King.

The concert is on Friday, March 20 at 8 p.m.

Emmylou Harris performs at the Piedmont Grand Opera House

By all indications, it's sold out — as well it should be. Harris's longstanding career as a singer-songwriter-musician and musical stateswoman is incomparable and has garnered her 13 Grammy Awards. Fun fact: Harris was more of a folk singer until she met country-rock innovator Gram Parsons, with whom she teamed up early in her career. Though unnamed as such, she and Parsons were briefly portrayed singing together in a crowded rock-and-roll hotel room in the movie "Almost Famous."

The concert is on Saturday, March 21 at 7:30 p.m.

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





International Cherry Blossom Festival Events

The Festival at Carolyn Crayton Park
Friday, March 20 -Sunday, March 29

Carolyn Crayton Park
Friday, March 20 -Sunday, March 29
Celebrate the Cherry Blossom Festival at Macon's City Auditorium with this year's theme, "Cirque de Sakura:' Enjoy incredible decor by Mary Pinson, a fabulous dining experience by Classic Flare Catering at Mercer University, a special performance by Sara Twister, and epic entertainment by the one and only Atlanta Groove Factory. Presented by Georgia Form Bureau, Dillard's, Blue Bird, James Bates Brannan Groover LLP, Nichiha, and Graphic Pachaging, Supported by Hotel 45, Renasant Banh, R.A. Bowen Trust, and VisionQuest Technology.

Ultimate Air Dogs
Saturday, March 21 I 1 lam-5pm
Sunday, March 22 I 12-4pm
Watch talented dogs compete in dock jumping with daily shows on Second Street featuring outdoor equipment vendors, and more.
Presented by Macon Outdoor Power, Layson Advisory Group, and Publix Supermarket Charities.

Race Day
Saturday, March 21 I Cherry St. & 3rd St.
— Wiener Dog Race
12-1pm
Dachshunds race down Cherry Street for the title of"Fastest Wiener Dog in Middle Georgia!" Presented by Paulk Landscaping.
— Musical Chairs
1-1:30pm
Prepare to laugh out loud as local celebrities compete In musical chairs wearing inflatable animal costumes. Presented by Evergreen Waste Services.
— Bed Race
1:30-2:30pm
Cheer on teams as they race their creatively crafted beds down Cherry St.
Presented by KaMin and Kumho Tire.

Cherry Blossom Parade
Sunday, March 221 Starts at 3pm
Celebrate the community at the award-winning Parade as participants showcase the best of Central Georgia with local marching bands, specialty floats, and more. Presented by Georgia Power.
Supported by Capital City Banh and Atrium Health Navicent.

Third Street Park Festivities
March 23-27 | 11:30am-1pm
Experience Macon in the birthplace of the
Cherry Blossom Festival with special music, free Coca-Cola and pink sweet treats!
Presented by Carlyle Place and Kroger.

Food Truck Frenzy & Cherry Market
Saturday, March 28 I l0am-7pm
Sunday, March 29 I l0am-7pm
Experience a lively mix of flavors. shopping, and entertainment at this legendary event. Enjoy regional food and unique gifts, music by DJ Laura Starling on Third Street, I live music on Cherry Street presented by Parish on Cherry, and an all-new Kids Zone on Second Street featuring Peachy Playtown and Gelly Ball. I Presented by Irving Tissue, Robins Financial Credit Union, and Revitalize Aesthetics and Wellness.
Supported by Ashley's Business Solutions, Acres and Oak, River Edge Behavioral Health, and Apparel Authority.

Last Blast At CCP
Sunday, March 29 I 12-9pm
Send off the 44th Cherry Blossom Festival in full bloom at Carolyn Crayton Park! Dance it out with AJ the DJ, enjoy discounted unlimited rides for just $20, and soar with $10 tethered hot air balloon rides (weather permitting). Presented by Cox Communications, Atlanta Gas Light, Burgess Pigment, and Hilton Garden Inn.

Community Events

— Pink Pancake Breakfast
SATURDAY, March 21 and 28 I 7-10:30 AM
Luther Williams Field
Macon-Bibb County Fire Department

—CBF Isekai Esports And Anime Convention
Cherry St Plaza/GA Sports Hall of Fame. Tubman Museum Sat., March 28 | 11 am-6 pm /
Sun., March 29 | 11 am-5 pm

— Mulberry Street Arts & Crafts Festival
Mulberry Street
Sat, March 28 | 10 am - 6 pm/Sun, March 29 | 10 am - 5 pm

Visit cherryblossom.com for the full list of events.



SHEPHERD'S PIE

Filling Ingredients
— 1 pound ground beef
— 1 pound ground pork
— 1 chopped red onion
— 2 chopped stalks celery
— 2 tablespoons of garlic powder
— 2 tablespoons of onion powder
— 2 tablespoons of fennel seed
— 1 teaspoon of coriander
— 2 tablespoons of pepper
— 2 tablespoons of minced garlic
— 1 teaspoon of salt
— 1 cup of dry red wine
— ½ a bottle or can of Guinness
— 1 pound bag of mixed veggies

Mashed Potato Topping
— 6 to 7 medium gold potatoes
— ½ stick of butter
— ¾ package of cream cheese
— ¾ cup of heavy cream
— shredded cheese (optional)

Directions
Brown the meat with salt and pepper, then layer in the rest of the filling ingredients, adding the mixed vegetables last.
Let it simmer until the flavors marry properly.
To deepen the gravy, add two tablespoons of Bisto or your homemade roux.
For the mashed potatoes, use six to seven medium gold potatoes with half a stick of butter, three-quarters of a package of cream cheese and three-quarters of a cup of heavy cream.
Use a potato ricer, hand mixer or masher for a smooth texture.
Spread it generously over the meat mixture, seal the edges and bake at 400 degrees for 30 minutes or until golden and slightly crisp on top.



Invasive insects from Asia cause damage to crape myrtles: How to protect your trees



Kathy Hensley

Crape myrtle trees are a beloved staple across Middle Georgia, known for their vibrant blooms that thrive in our hot, humid summers. When properly pruned, they even add a touch of beauty to the winter landscape.

But lately, something's been off…

Recently the extension office has received several calls from homeowners wondering why their crape myrtle trees are turning black. Many are hoping for a quick, "one-and-done" fix for what looks like a fungal problem.

What they're seeing is called sooty mold. While it may look alarming, it's not actually a disease harming the tree. Instead, it's the result of a relatively recent invasive insect from Asia: the Crape Myrtle Bark Scale.

These tiny pests feed by inserting straw-like mouthparts into the plant and drawing out sugars. Since they consume more than they need, they release the excess as a sticky substance known as honeydew.

This coating creates an ideal surface for black sooty mold. The heavier the infestation, the more noticeable the dark coating on the trunk and branches — and sometimes even on mulch or plants below the tree.

While sooty mold is superficial and can be scrubbed away using a soft-bristled brush, water and a small amount of dish soap, this unsightly coating is not the only effect of this pest.

Their feeding may also result in delayed leafing in the spring, fewer and smaller flower clusters, and stunted growth. Severe infestations may also cause dieback of tree branches and can even result in total tree loss.

Crape Myrtle Bark Scale appears as small white or gray bumps along branches and twigs, and they tend to congregate around pruning cuts and in the protection of bark crevices and loose bark. The "bumps" are older nymphs and adults.

They tend to favor susceptible trees growing in shady locations and those weakened by over-pruning, though any crape myrtle variety can be vulnerable.

Currently, no crape myrtle variety is known to be resistant to this scale.

This insect has three stages: eggs, nymphs and adults. Each female can lay as many as 300 eggs in a sac. Eggs hatch in the spring, and in our area, a second-generation hatches in late summer.

The tiny "crawlers" are the only mobile stage; after their first molt, they lose their legs and remain in place.

If you have one or more crape myrtle trees in your landscape, you will want to monitor them for Crape Myrtle Bark Scale. Small problems are much easier to control than big ones!

Lady beetles do help by feeding on these pests, but unfortunately, scale populations can grow faster than their natural predators can keep up.

For long-term control, insecticides are necessary. Because most life stages are protected by a waxy coating, sprays are usually ineffective except against the crawler stage.

The most effective approach is applying a systemic soil drench between late March and May. Look for active ingredients such as imidacloprid, dinotefuran or clothianidin.

However, since these insecticides, especially imidacloprid — can be harmful to foraging pollinators, it is imperative to heed the warnings on the package label and carefully follow dosing recommendations.

Other insecticide options are available by contacting a licensed commercial pesticide applicator, especially when treating larger trees.

Because this pest spreads easily, it's wise to treat nearby crape myrtles if one tree is infested, even if they appear to be free from attack. Plant entomologists recommend carefully monitoring infested trees and treating to control this insect for at least one additional season.

Kathy Hensley works for the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service in Bibb County. The county office provides resources for gardeners as well as educational services and community support. Visit their office at 715 Oglethorpe Street, call them at 748-310-5350 or email their staff at bibb.extension@uga.edu.



PHOTO BY KATHY HENSLEY

Crape Myrtle Bark Scale are tiny pests originally from Asia. These insects feed on crape myrtle trees and leave behind sticky residue that attracts black sooty mold. They can also cause dieback of tree branches, delayed leafing and fewer blooms.



Coaching changes: Grube out at WHS, Mount de Sales gets Slocum

BY MICHAEL A. LOUGH
Melody Contributor

The carousel is spinning at Westside at a record pace, as the school will now search for another new coach.

Josh Grube, one of the winningest active Bibb County public school head coaches of a team sport, is stepping down from the job he's had for nearly 85%of his adult life.

"I'm done at Westside," said the Seminoles' longtime head boys basketball coach. "It's time for me to explore some other opportunities.

"Hopefully explore some opportunities."

He joins head girls basketball coach Candice Roberson, who spent much of the season on the fence pondering if it would be her last as the Seminoles head coach.

She confirmed to The Macon Melody after a season-ending playoff loss that it was, in fact, her finale as a coach.

Both jobs were posted this week on, among other locations, the Georgia Athletic Coaches Association jobs page.

Head football coach Spoon Risper announced last May that the 2025 season would be his last one leading the Seminoles, and he was finally replaced in mid-January by assistant coach James Harris. Risper accepted the head football job and athletics director post at Macon County a month ago.

"It's kinda weird how it worked out where everybody's going at one time," said Grube of a trio that combined for more than 50 years connected to Westside.

Long before the 2025-26 season developed into the worst of Grube's career, he knew this was pretty much it.

"It's something that honestly I've been thinking about the last two or three years," the 46-year-old said. "I don't even remember when it was. I

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PHOTO BY MARK POWELL
LEFT: Jameson Fanning dribbles past a defender during Central's game against ACE, where faced off against his brother in goal.
RIGHT: DJ Fanning holds the ball while goaltending for ACE. The two brothers met on the field for the first and last time last week.

BROTHERS FACE OFF

For the first and last time, DJ and Jameson Fanning met on the pitch

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
micah@maconmelody.com

In a crosstown match last week between the ACE Gryphons and Central Chargers, two brothers got the chance to play a game of soccer together.

It seems simple on paper. DJ, a senior goalkeeper, and Jameson, a freshman defender, took to the pitch and played in a competitive game that ACE eventually won thanks to a strong performance in the second half.

It was fun for parents Danielle and Bernie Fanning to watch their sons play together, as the age gap between them often meant they could not play rec league soccer together despite the fact that they've both played the sport since they were about 3 years old.

There was just one problem — DJ and Jameson were not on the same team.

Indeed, the older brother was in goal for the Gryphons while Jameson played center back for the Chargers, pitting two family members against each other and creating quite the conundrum for their dedicated parents.

"The whole game I was either just yelling 'Go players!' or cheering whenever one of the two of them touched the ball," Danielle said. "Both teams know us because we help out. We're pretty involved, so they knew what was happening."

As is often the case, the older brother got the last laugh when his ACE Gryphons eventually pulled away for a 3-0 win. The shutout in goal felt even better for DJ with his brother playing on the other side, he said. It meant no goals from Jameson, which was the older sibling's main priority (other than ACE winning, of course).

"I was just hoping (Jameson) didn't score, that was my big thing," DJ said. "I said before the game that if Jameson scored a goal on me, I'd just never play soccer again."

Though it would have been fun to watch, Jameson didn't get much of a chance to score because he was playing at center back for Central — not a particularly offensive position, but one the freshman has played well for a Chargers team that has improved greatly this year. He played solid defense against a talented striker for ACE.

"It was definitely a lot of pressure on me, I felt like maybe more than DJ because he's in goal," Jameson said. "I know a lot of people on the ACE team. Their striker likes to talk about how good he is, so it was kind of funny to shut him down."

While the two teams are region opponents, the game would not ordinarily be a particularly intense one in terms of fanfare. But with folks aware of the two brothers facing off, there was quite the crowd for the showdown between the two Macon schools.

"There were a lot of people there. It was really special to have my family there — not just my family but, like, my whole family. Everyone was there," DJ said. "It was a whole different atmosphere."

The family even had shirts made especially for the game that read "House Divided" and featured both schools. DJ said he might have to hang onto one of the shirts for sentimental reasons.

The experience had another layer of excitement when the game turned out to be closer than many expected.

"We're trying to build a strong program here at Central, and we've made a lot of improvements. I think (ACE) beat us 8-0 last year? So we played really well and actually shut them out in the first half," Central head coach Eric McDonald said. "And of course Jameson was really excited to play against his brother. I joked with him about scoring a goal.

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Sluggish offense sinks Southwest in championship

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
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It takes a Herculean effort to quiet a Southwest crowd in the Macon Coliseum, but that's exactly what point guard Huey Blalock and the Rabun County Wildcats did in Friday afternoon's championship game.

The Patriots and the packed house in downtown Macon had their hearts broken in the title game for the second straight year, as Blalock exploded for 29 points and five assists in an effort that was too much for Southwest in a 52-43 loss in the GHSA Class A-Division I State Championship.

Though the Southwest crowd was formidable, a 6-point deficit with less than a minute left led to the deflated Patriots fans — many of them wearing shirts that read "Redemption time" in reference to last year's championship loss against B.E.S.T. Academy — flocking for the exits.

The supporters spent much of the game shell-shocked and silenced by one simple fact: Southwest simply could not shoot.

The Patriots had one of their worst offensive performances of the season in their final showdown, shooting 13-of-46 from the field and 4-of-24 from beyond the arc while only hitting 13-of-26 free throws.

Aside from a 27-point effort against a stacked Florida prep team early in the season, it was the lowest scoring performance by Southwest all year.

"We didn't shoot it well at all, outside of maybe Chase (Dupree) who shot it okay," head coach Monquencio Hardnett. "We went (13)-of-26 from the free throw line. You won't beat a middle school team doing that.

"I don't think it was nerves. All week I've been pointing those things out, we gotta do the small things to win. We didn't do that. Rabun did, and we didn't."

The loss ends an era for the Patriots, as a senior class led by top scorers Dupree and CJ Howard as well as key contributors like Montese Green will graduate.

"I had to just keep reminding them that, like I said last year, they didn't lose the game of life. That's the way

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Southwest senior CJ Howard puts his head in his hands as the Rabun County team celebrates behind him after the Patriots lost to the Wildcats in the GHSA Class A-Division I State Championship on March 13.

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I even joked with DJ a little."

All in all, it felt like a unique experience — both sides wanted to win, of course, but there is a special camaraderie between teams with a connection.

"I have a unique feel about that match because I was the coach of Central's varsity program and played there for four years," ACE head coach Robby Jones said. "I always want us to win, but I don't mind seeing Central do well."

Jones has brought tremendous success to ACE's soccer program — he's also the coach of the girls team, which reached the Final Four last season — and wants to see that success spread to other schools in Macon, especially his alma mater.

"Any time there's a human interest thing, people love to read and hear about it. People like to get connected, and this is a unique one," Jones said. "Central should be excited by the way they're playing, too. They've got a great future and a coach that wants to invest in them. They've got a chance to make the playoffs this year still."

The matchup between a perennial playoff team and a young, rising squad — combined with the crowd — made it one of the season's more memorable games, according to the Fannings.

"Even on the sidelines, there were Central parents sitting with ACE parents. Robby's connection with Central made it really great," Danielle said.

The action on the field was fun for the brothers for a different reason, too.

"It was my first time seeing him actually play in a long time. He's just gotten so much better as a player," DJ said of his younger sibling.

DJ was always busy with his own games and unable to watch as his brother blossomed. That work has paid its dividends, as the elder Fanning has become a stout keeper for the Gryphons.

"It's very hard to score on DJ. He's been our goalie since last year, and he has not allowed a single goal to a region opponent in that time," Jones said. "John Mendoza is his goalkeeper coach. He's done a lot of work with DJ as far as more specifically being a goalkeeper."

With their duel out of the way, the Fanning brothers — and the Gryphons and Chargers — will go their separate ways. Impressed with his team's halftime adjustments, particularly in the passing game, Jones thought ACE was in good position. Central is still very much in contention in region play as well.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

DJ (left) and Jameson Fanning take a picture together at the ACE-Central game last week in which the two brothers played each other.

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just knew that it was (time). If I had to pinpoint it, I'd probably say like about halfway through the season.

"It ain't just all because of basketball. A combination of stuff."

That includes ending a daily commute from Bonaire, as well as eventually entertaining the chance to coach his son Hayes, a fourth-grader at Bonaire Elementary.

"That's my goal, to coach him at the high school level," Grube said. "I know there's a little time."

Grube played quarterback at Warner Robins, then played baseball at Gordon College and Valdosta State.

"You know what's crazy about it?" he said. "I didn't grow up saying I wanted to be a head basketball coach."

He was the assistant to then-head coach Joe Dupree, who was eventually named offensive coordinator by then-head coach Robert Davis. Dupree pushed Grube for the job, and he got it, while still teaching at Weaver Middle School.

As was Risper years earlier before making a varsity and head coaching move.

Grube departs with a 312-191 record, having won 62% of the time. The Seminoles won two region titles, having played in several classifications along the way, and played for 10 more.

Westside must also replace its only flag football head coach, and a wildly successful one.

Grube went 59-8 leading the team, with two Elite Eight trips and two Sweet 16 trips. This year's team was undefeated, and then stunned in the first round of the playoffs, a loss that left Grube emotional in postgame interviews.

"I did, I did," Grube said, admitting that it surprised him. "Maybe I knew then. Maybe deep down inside knew that I was (leaving)."

Grube's successor inherits an experienced team, with only three seniors on this year's roster. One tug at Grube was possibly staying to finish the career of junior point guard Jalen Whitley, who he has coached for three years, among others.

But adding everything up, Grube's mind was set, and has stayed set, even without anything lined up employment-wise..

"I'm sure that I'm doing the right thing," he said. "I hope all that's going to work itself out, but this is time."

Just down the hall, the office of Roberson will be vacant as well.

"I'm just looking forward into getting started in leadership," Roberson told The Melody after Westside's 63-48 loss to Hart County in the first round of the playoffs. "The coaching is done, I think, after 20 years of it. Yeah, this is my last ride at Westside. Been here for 14 years. What better than a group of young girls like this to go out with."

Westside sent out Roberson with a 23-6 final-season mark, and the first time the Seminoles have been the top seed entering the region tournament.

Roberson succeeded Deb Baber after the 2011-12 season and has reached three Sweet 16s while missing the state postseason three times.

After an early February win over Pike County, Roberson wasn't set yet, but was seriously leaning.

"I feel it," she said then. "I just don't feel like I'm straddling right now. I'm tired. And that's not fair to (the team)."

Back to the future for Mount de Sales

For the second time in a year or so, a Macon private school is reaching into its past.

Mount de Sales announced Thursday morning that longtime head coach Robert Slocum was coming out of retirement to lead the Cavaliers again.

He succeeds Gray Yates, who left Mount de Sales in January for a job in Memphis. Promoted from assistant, Yates went 2-9, 1-9, 3-8, and 2-8 in four seasons.

Keith Hatcher, now at ACE Charter, was 46-39 in eight seasons.

Slocum retired after going 3-8 in 2013, putting his 23-year record at exactly .500, 134-134-2, with two region titles and a state championship.

He took over for legendary Mike Garvin (161-80-5, 10 region and three state titles) to start the 1991 season, and went 4-8.

Two more losing seasons followed before his best run at Mount de Sales, four straight 10-win seasons and a 46-7 run that included a GISA Class 3A title in 1996.

After a stretch of seasons a win or two above or below .500, the Cavs broke out for a 10-2 mark in 2010, the season ending in their second playoff game.

He had nine winning and 13 losing seasons, and one right at .500.

The 1974 Mount de Sales graduate was part of state title teams in 1970, 1971, and 1973, moving on to a football scholarship at Savannah State.

He returned to his alma mater and coached track, tennis, baseball, and basketball as well as football.

Slocum was named athletics director in 1993, seven years before induction into the Macon Sports Hall of Fame.

Upon retirement two years after giving up football, he was named the school's athletics director emeritus.

He joined the expanded staff of the GIAA in July of 2022 as athletic coordinator and commissioner of the Southeastern Commission of Independent schools, a collection of associations similar to the GIAA.

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they feel right now. It's just a game. They're gonna play plenty more games," Hardnett said of his seniors. "They'll be fine. It's just tough when you lose this way … I just want to love on these guys. I'm so thankful for them and everything they've done for me and this region, the city of Macon."

Even with its lackluster offensive performance, Southwest managed to stay in the game with solid defense and rebounding. The Patriots did meet in some of the goals they set ahead of the game — limiting the Wildcats' 3-point shooting, for instance, as Rabun County only managed three shots from distance — but could not counter Blalock's lethal scoring and motion.

Dupree led the Patriots with 20 points on 7-of-18 shooting and 2-of-7 at the charity stripe. Howard had 13 points, while no other Southwest player had more than 4 points.

Rabun County was clearly led by Blalock, a Navy commit who provided offense at all the right times for the Wildcats. The offensive gap was not as wide as the score sometimes made it seem — Rabun county only shot 19-of-46, just six shots better than Southwest's effort. Hayes Free followed with 12 points, though he fouled out in the fourth quarter.

The first quarter was a disastrous one for Southwest, as the Patriots struggled from the floor — an effort not helped by a woeful streak of missed 3-pointers — and fell down by 17-5 by the time the buzzer sounded.

Dupree and Howard missed shot after shot from beyond the arc and struggled to establish an offensive pace. Rabun County took advantage thanks to stellar dribbling and shooting from Huey Blalock, though the Wildcats did turn it over a few times to keep the lead from getting truly out of hand.

"We were taking some shots where I was kind of shaking my head," Hardnett said of some long-range shots heaved up by his players.

The second quarter brought a slight improvement, particularly on the defensive end, as Southwest managed to force more mistakes and hold Rabun County's long-distance and midrange shooting in check.

Even after getting more contributions from Dupree and cutting the deficit to only 3 points at one time, though, the Patriots still entered halftime down 25-19 and in need of a serious adjustment. Southwest went a dreadful 6-of-25 from the field in the opening half, including a 3-of-16 mark from beyond the arc. Howard in particular was cold, missing all six of his 3-point attempts and going 1-of-9 from the field.

Blalock led the floor with 14 of Rabun County's 25 points in the first half.

It looked like the third quarter would bring more of the same when Southwest went down by 9 points. The Patriots crowd seemed out of it — after one timeout, the fans tried to start a chant, but the rest of the Southwest faithful never joined in.

But with about two minutes left in the third quarter, the atmosphere changed, and the Patriots seemed to come to life.

Down 37-28, Dupree hit a midrange shot to break a scoring drought, then hit a free throw one play later. When Montese Green missed two free throws one possession later, Butts leapt up and snatched the rebound and hit a shot that awakened the fans in the crowd.

Southwest trapped Rabun County and stole the ball at halfcourt on the ensuing inbounds play, allowing Butts to get into the paint and draw the foul. He sank both free throws, capping the run and turning a 9-point game into a 37-35 Rabun County lead going to the fourth quarter.

Aside from the beginning of the game, it was the loudest the large Southwest crowd had been all afternoon.

"I felt like we played pretty good defense in the second half. We weren't very good in the beginning," Hardnett said. "But (Rabun County) did everything they were supposed to do to win a championship."

The Wildcats snatched the momentum right back to start the fourth. First came a key block by Free against Southwest's Octavius Raglin that led to an easy basket. Then Free got another layup after some shifty passing to give the Wildcats a 42-37 lead with 3:30 left to play.

The Patriots attempted to bounce back and got some momentum to make it 45-43, but the Wildcats got a 7-0 run over the game's final 1:30 to seal the deal.

It felt like Southwest missed some chances to take control of the contest down the stretch. One such moment, when Alex Butts was called for a foul despite appearing to get his teammates a steal after going to the floor, drew Hardnett's attention.

"One kid dives on the floor like he's taught to do every single day, taps the ball to his teammate and (the ref) calls a foul. That was an atrocious call when we were down by 1 point," Hardnett said. "I don't care what anybody feels about it, they can do whatever they want to me. They can scream human error. We're human too. … It turned the game today and took a state championship from these young men."

The Patriots finished the season 29-7, while Rabun County finished with a 30-2 record.



