

The Macon Melody

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Miller points to progress in annual status update

BY ALAYSIA EZZARD
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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Macon-Bibb County Mayor Lester Miller addresses attendees at the Greater Macon Chamber of Commerce's State of the Community event Tuesday.

Resilient. That might be the word of the past year for Macon-Bibb County Mayor Lester Miller, who used his recent State of the Community address to recognize the area's ability to work through challenges — regardless of their size and scope. The mayor, now in the second year of his second term, touted progress on a number of fronts, including violence reduction, the removal of blighted properties and paving pushes on a number of public roads. Last year, Macon-Bibb County saw 39 homicides, the lowest number of killings in almost a decade, according to Miller. He credited this reduction to Macon Violence Prevention — also known as MVP — an initiative that uses evidence-based strategies to better public safety.

Despite there already being some violent deaths in 2026, Miller said he sees a future where Macon-Bibb has zero homicides.

At the Tuesday event organized by the Greater Macon Chamber of Commerce, Miller also high-

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TECH AT THE BAT



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Mercer third baseman Brant Baugheum takes a swing at a ball delivered by the iPitch, a pitching machine capable of simulating real in-game pitch types. Read more about the machine and Mercer baseball's new training facility on Page 11.

Win in hand, Cooke vows open doors

BY CASEY CHOUNG
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Four weeks ago, Andrea Cooke missed out on winning Macon-Bibb's District 5 County Commission seat outright by just a handful of votes and was forced into a runoff.

Her victory over Edward Foster earlier this week was more resounding. She drew slightly more than 70% of the vote in a race marked by low turnout.

Cooke said she plans to work hard to learn more about her district and increase accessibility to information on everything from blight and gentrification to neighborhood watch programs.

As the founder of Macon Mental Health Matters, which worked closely with Macon-Bibb County

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BY EVELYN DAVIDSON
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In Gottwals Books' warehouse in Byron, piles of hardcovers and paperbacks await shipment to online customers. Other used and new books in the inventory are destined to hit the shelves in Macon and the local chain's three other Middle Georgia locations.

Gottwals' thriving operation challenges a common misconception in today's digital era — that demand for physical books is dwindling, and bookstores are dying as more people turn to their e-readers.

National data suggest the business' success isn't an anomaly. More than 70% of bookstores reported increased sales in 2025 compared to the previous year, according to a survey from the American Booksellers Association.

Following the pandemic, people longed for in-person experiences, resulting in a

renaissance of bookstore and cafe culture.

"They want to shop in the store. They want to meet other people who are interested in the same things they are," said Bear's Books owner Margaret Harrington. "That is a post-COVID phenomenon — that people do want to have experiences, and they're willing to pay for an experience more than just buying things."

But make no mistake. While brick-and-mortar stores are "not dying," Shane Gottwals said, running a bookstore in 2026 isn't the same as it once was, when super chains like Waldenbooks, B. Dalton and Barnes & Nobles dotted the landscape in many American cities.

"It's much harder to do it well," said Gottwals, the local chain's founder.

The cost of everything from employee wages, electricity and gas for company vehicles

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

A stack of books featuring titles on film and television sit on a shelf at Bear's Books on Forsyth Street. Owner Margaret Harrington, who opened the shop in 2023, says the store functions as a community hub in downtown Macon.

The return of the page: Macon bookstores thrive in digital age



Periodical — Mail Label

POWER » OUR ONGOING SERIES ON PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

Who runs Macon's biggest hospital? The answer is complicated

BY LAURA E. CORLEY
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Long before it became downtown's sprawling Atrium Health Navicent The Medical Center, the public hospital on Pine Street was owned and operated by the city of Macon.

The Macon Hospital, which opened in 1895 and was taken over by the city council two decades later, remained under the city's auspices until the Macon-Bibb County Hospital Authority board was created on Sept. 1, 1968.

The mayor at the time said the city's tax base was not broad enough to support the growing hospital, which was already becoming

a regional hub for health care. In order for hospitals to be eligible for state money, the Georgia Board of Health had ruled, counties were required to have hospital authorities.

Hospital authorities were Georgia's way of developing a kind of public hospital system.

In Macon, the city appointed three members and the county appointed four to the new joint governmental agency. Since the city and county consolidated in 2014, all appointments are made by the Macon-Bibb County Commission in conjunction with the Atrium Health Navicent nonprofit board.

For decades, the seven-member hospital authority board oversaw

the business and operations of the hospital, according to its original bylaws.

Like many public hospital authorities in Georgia, Macon-Bibb's board restructured its organizational chart in the 1990s amid nationwide challenges in the health care system.

In short, the restructuring meant that the hospital authority set up a nonprofit corporation to run its hospital to avoid the restrictions of the Georgia Hospital Authorities Act.

The 1940s-era law prohibited hospitals owned by hospital authorities from owning for-profit businesses and barred them from operating outside a 12-mile radius. The law also gives hospitals the

power to exercise eminent domain.

A spokesperson for the hospital requested The Melody send questions via email to the hospital authority's lawyer, Michele Madison. The Melody sent questions on March 2 and afforded Madison five business days for a reply, but the hospital did not provide answers until April 8.

"The Authority transitioned from an owner-operator model to a landlord role, leasing the hospital facilities to the newly formed The Medical Center of Central Georgia Inc. That entity assumed responsibility for hospital operations and continues to operate the facility

SEE HOSPITAL
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Special Content furnished to the Macon Melody.

WHY YOUR CRAVINGS SHIFT WITH THE SEASON (AND HOW TO SATISFY THEM)



Sponsored by: Carlyle Place

A Life-Plan Community of Atrium Health Navicent

In a world where many people can access a wide variety of food on a year-round basis, why do our bodies still crave seasonally-appropriate meals?

Humans were once forced to eat local, in-season foods due to limited access. Today, modern technology and infrastructure mean many of us can access a full rainbow of fruits and vegetables year-round, no matter the weather in our area.

Still, summer arrives, and a fat, juicy watermelon calls our names; when winter rolls around, a thick, hearty beef stew naturally makes its way into our meal planning. We can eat anything we want during any time of year — so why do our palates still seem to shift with the seasons?

WHY HUMANS WANT SEASONAL FOOD

If you find yourself questioning your seasonal cravings, it's natural; your culinary desires may not make sense to you. As it turns out, a variety of factors may influence our rotating seasonal preferences.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL FORCES

None of us is immune to nostalgia, marketing, or social influence — even when it comes to our diets.

Some seasonal cravings are based on these manufactured forces, like your desire for a ham at Easter or ice cream on a hot summer day. The wintertime and holiday season are especially rife with these influences, especially considering all the cultural habits and traditions we pack into our holiday menus. After all, what's late November without the turkey?

Being influenced by seasonal cultural cravings isn't weak-minded or negative; it's just human. All of us have food-based memories and expectations based on the season, whether we're thinking about our family's Christmas menu or the burger- and potato salad-loaded summer cookouts of our youth.

Seasonal cravings can also be psychologically-based, especially when

winter rolls around. The winter holidays can be stressful and anxiety-inducing for the best of us, leading us to lean into the seasonal sweets and comfort foods that calm our brains.

CHANGING WEATHER

Seasonal weather is often a huge force in our meal cravings and menu planning, whether we realize it or not.

During the heat of summer, our brains are working overtime to keep us cool, and consuming and processing food takes energy and produces more heat. Naturally, our bodies will crave something cool and easy to digest, like a popsicle. When even the slightest physical exertion or time outdoors makes us sweat, we'll want light foods that tend to help us re-hydrate (like that beautiful, juicy watermelon we talked about earlier). When fall and winter come around, the days become shorter and darker, depriving your body of its natural internal schedule and some of the serotonin and dopamine you rely on. You may crave something carb-rich or sweet, a quick hit that restores some of your energy and mood. People with seasonal affective disorder or who live in colder areas may crave and eat more carbs in the winter for exactly those reasons.

Spring can bring an in-between craving. As days lengthen and the light returns, you may crave lighter produce and dishes that offer a new freshness, while still relying on nourishing and filling dishes to get you through some chilly spring days. Your body might be ready not only for a variety of lighter foods, but for the zest and zing of fresher flavors, like citrus, bright herbs, berries, and seasonal fruits.

HEALTHY INSTINCTS

When it comes to our health, shifting seasonal cravings just makes sense. In-season foods will always be your freshest, most nutritious ingredients.

Because produce can lose antioxidants and vitamins during a prolonged transport process, the most nutrient-packed fruits and veggies are the ones harvested close to

you on a seasonally-appropriate schedule. Seasonal foods, harvested at their peak, are also more flavorful and more aesthetically pleasing, making them more appealing.

Plus, craving and eating on a seasonal schedule helps us consume a rotating variety of nutrients throughout the year, making for a well-balanced diet.

SATISFYING SPRING CRAVINGS

Ready to transition your body into spring eating? Here are some ideas for some seasonally-appropriate dining.

BRIGHT AND HERBY

Bring the springtime zing to your meals by incorporating lots of flavorful herbs and veggies, like these recipes offer.

- Salmon Piccata
- Vietnamese Spring Rolls
- Sugar Snap Pea Salad With Radishes, Mint and Ricotta Salata
- Mint Chimichurri Lamb Chops

LIGHT, BUT SATISFYING

Craving something that incorporates bright spring flavors but delivers the carby satisfaction of a winter meal? Start with these filling dishes that also make the most of the seasonal flavors and ingredients spring brings.

- Pasta Primavera
- Greek Power Bowls
- Lemony Orzo With Asparagus and Garlic Bread Crumbs
- Baked Feta Chickpeas

SPRINGY AND SWEET

Seasonal sweets aren't just winter's domain. With the help of springtime flavors from lemon, lime, and delicious seasonal fruits, you can bring the budding, blooming outdoors straight to your table.

- Lemon Yogurt Cake
- Pavlova
- Thai Mango Sticky Rice
- Key Lime Pie Bars
- Strawberry Shortcake Cake

As spring rolls around, be sure to embrace the beautiful weather, blossoming flowers, and celebratory seasonal eats.

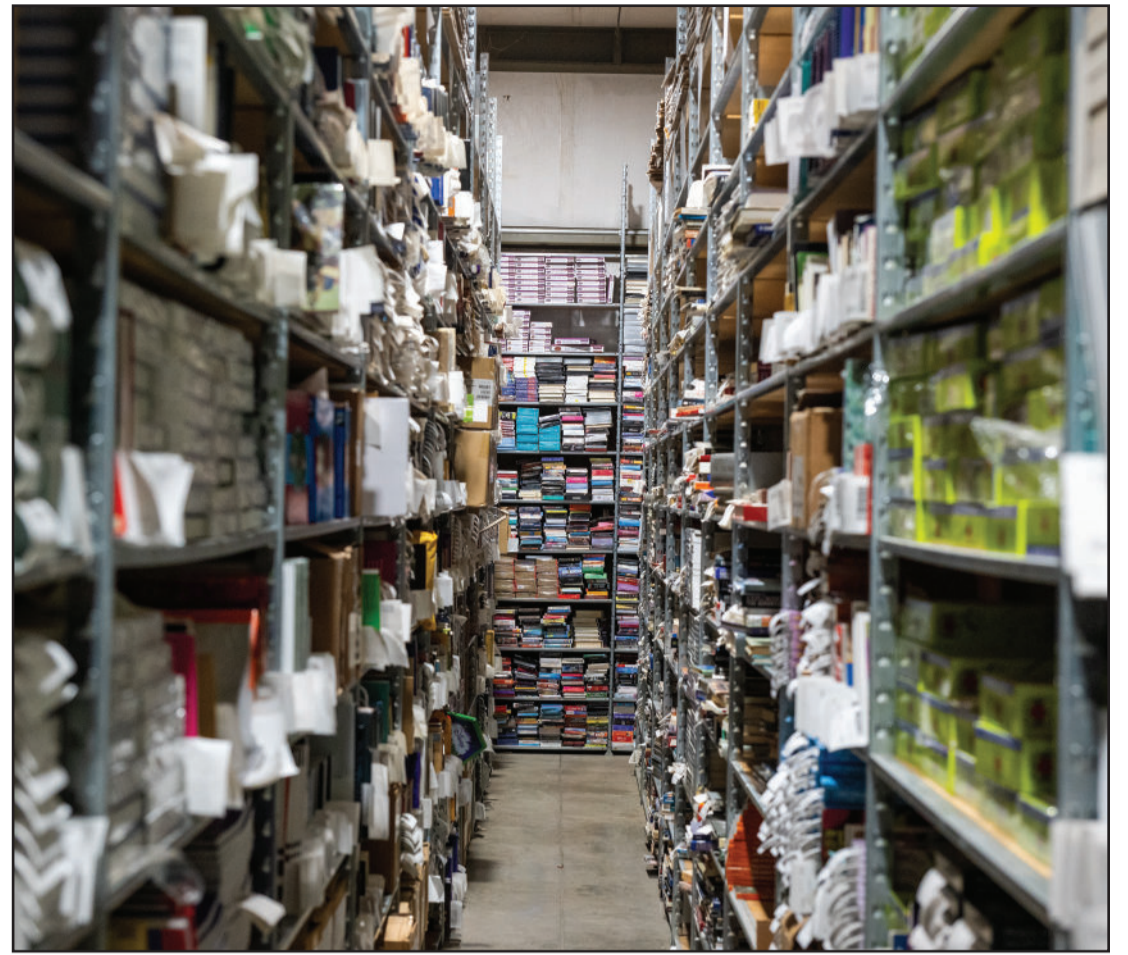


PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Books await processing at the Gottwals Books warehouse in Byron. The facility serves as the distribution hub for the local chain's four Middle Georgia locations and houses the inventory for its growing online sales operation.

BOOKSTORES

Continued from Page 1

has soared since he and his wife, Abbey, opened their first shop nearly two decades ago.

Yet sales continue to steadily climb year over year in three of their four stores — proof that, despite growing pains, the Gottwals managed to turn a new page, tailoring their business to contemporary book consumers.

A tumultuous time to open up shop

The year was 2007. Amazon had taken over the book-selling industry. An economic recession loomed around the corner. And traditional bookstores like Borders were circling the drain.

Had he seen the writing on the wall, Gottwall said, he probably would not have opened his first store that year in Warner Robins.

“Our total ignorance is the only reason why we ever existed in the first place,” he said.

He and his wife both earned degrees from Mercer University — Shane's in English and Abbey's in business. Opening a bookstore seemed like the perfect use of their combined skillsets, he said.

Offering a curated selection of secondhand books, the couple traveled the Southeast in search of merchandise to add to their growing collection. Some days, Gottwals said, he would spend 5 a.m. to midnight traveling to and from sales out of state.

It wasn't the bookstore's expansive selection, however, that carved the way for their initial success, Shane Gottwals said. It was Abbey's easy rapport with customers.

“Folks will come back to somebody that they love, to ask them for recommendations,” he said. “That's a lot better than the Amazon algorithm.”

Some customers make a point of shopping at Gottwals instead of Amazon, said Macon store manager Miranda English.

“They want the connection with people — real people,” she said. “That's what keeps people coming back.”

At the Macon store on Riverside Drive, English sees mostly women between the ages of 20 and 40. Many visit the shop in search of literary classics, and customers at the Macon branch have shown more interest in local history books than at any other Gottwals location, she noted.

Growth in the age of online shopping

Gottwals opened additional stores in Byron in 2009, then

in Macon six months later and Perry in 2012.

They introduced a trade-in book program and began buying and selling textbooks, new books and toys. Today, 40% of their revenue comes from new books.

In 2011, they began adapting to the modern market by selling books to online customers. Plenty of readers still craved the tactile experience of books, even if the methods of obtaining them had changed.

A few years later, the couple purchased a 50,000-square-foot warehouse, which served as a depot where truckloads of books were processed before being shipped to online customers or transferred to one of their stores.

This meant that a customer visiting any one of the four locations could request a particular book and have it shipped there from the warehouse.

Selling and shipping books online allowed them to reach a larger audience.

An expensive vintage book with limited local interest is more likely to sell online than in stores, Shane Gottwals explained.

As he became increasingly particular about the type of books he collected and sold online, he downsized to the 10,000-square-foot warehouse that they now occupy on Gunn Road in Byron.

Inside this warehouse, books — some with faded spines and tattered covers, others crisp and unopened — are crammed onto rows of metal shelves.

The only books not for sale are tucked away in Gottwals' “Narnia closet,” a private room within the warehouse where he stores his personal collection of C.S. Lewis books, letters and artifacts.

COVID encourages more readers

The world shutting down in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic might have seemed like the last death blow to brick-and-mortar bookshops, but Gottwals Books persevered.

“A lot of people learned how to read again during COVID,” Gottwals said.

With everyone stuck inside their homes, online orders took off. Today, half of the company's revenue comes from online sales.

At the same time, however, book clubs, author talks and storytime events came to a halt, as well as midnight book releases, which had sometimes garnered a line of people outside the Macon shop waiting to purchase a new book.

So Gottwals Books did

what it had done before: It adapted.

The business began selling “survival packs,” a \$35 bundle of books curated by staff at Gottwals using customer-submitted information, such as preferred genre and age range. Customers could pick these bundles up curbside or have them shipped. The store made \$30,000 in “survival pack” sales in one month, which Gottwals said allowed him to pay all his employees on time as they awaited government subsidies.

Post-pandemic bookstore revival

Other bookstores operating in Macon include Golden Bough on Cotton Avenue, Ingleside Books and Cafe on Wimble Road, Friends of the Library Macon-Bibb on Forsyth Road, and Barnes & Noble on Riverside Drive.

Harrington, who has lived in Macon since the early 1980s, opened Bear's Books in October 2023.

Before, she had hosted some book discussions and writing classes at a coworking space in Macon.

She said the last indie bookstore for new books, Ingleside Books on Ingleside Avenue, had closed years before.

She wanted a similar business that could host literary events.

“With the renaissance downtown, I feel like there's a vibrant community of creatives in Macon,” Harrington said. “And I felt like there was enough momentum to support an indie bookstore.”

She hosts five to six events per month, including several book clubs. The anti-banned book club, in particular, garnered a “heartening” number of participants, Harrington said.

Part of Bear's Books success is due to its popularity as not just a store, but a community hub close to the heart of downtown.

Located on Forsyth Street, just down the road from the iconic H&H Soul Food Restaurant, diners often wander into Bear's Books while waiting for their food, Harrington said.

The shop has also served as a venue for events such as baby showers, birthday parties and even engagement photoshoots.

Harrington brings pop-up book events to other local fixtures, too, such as the Historic Macon Foundation, Longleaf Distillery, Douglass Theater, Orangetheory Fitness and Satterfield's Barbecue.

“It's much beyond just selling things,” Harrington said, which is why she said loves what she does.

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MILLER

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lighted local efforts to make neighborhoods safer and more attractive. The Macon-Bibb County government has demolished 800 dangerous structures in the so-called “blight fight.”

Miller said removing blighted properties will build stronger communities, create more green spaces and spin up opportunities for better housing.

Another government project in full swing is the repaving of Macon roads. There have been 100 miles of

road repaved so far this year, the mayor noted.

Miller’s goal, he said, is 160 miles. He said that, prior to 2025, the county government was only repaving up to eight miles a year.

County leaders have confronted difficult situations, he said, but added they’ve “made our work that much more important. We focus on building up people, strengthening them, their families, their organizations and their communities.”

Miller said he is looking to the future, anticipating challenges and remaining optimistic.

“Yes, there’s much more to build,” he said. “There’s more blight to remove, and there [are] more businesses that we have to support. There are more jobs to be created, and there’s a national park to create. Oh, yeah, there’s more roads to pave as well. But more importantly, there are people who need us. There are families to support, and the time to do that has never been any better.”

Before leaving the podium, the mayor pushed one question forward to the crowded venue: “We are Macon, and this is our moment. Are you ready to seize it?”



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Andrea Cooke answers questions during a candidate debate hosted by The Macon Melody on Feb. 23 at St. Peter Claver Catholic Church in Macon. Cooke won the District 5 Macon-Bibb County Commission seat Tuesday, defeating Edward Foster with more than 70% of the vote in an April 15 runoff election.

COOKE

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and its mental health outreach programming, she plans to be an advocate for making such services more available.

March’s general election saw 1,058 voters spread their votes among six candidates. In the runoff, 1,059 voters showed up, about 8.3% of all registered voters in District 5. Cooke received 746 votes (70.4%), while Foster received 313 (29.6%).

The district encompasses parts of the Vineville, Ingleside, Pleasant Hill, Napier Heights, Cherokee Heights and Unionville neighborhoods.

Cooke said that she’s proud of the “positive” campaign she ran.

“I’m just grateful for the people who came out and supported not just me but the other candidate,” Cooke said. “It was great to see so many people who were truly inter-

ested in the political process.”

Tuesday, before the results were in, Foster paced around the board of elections office. The tally came in at 9:06 p.m.

Despite the loss, he promised to be more involved in the community and to raise more awareness around voting specifically.

“I feel good about the campaign but wish turnout was better,” he told The Melody.

Cooke agreed but saw it as “an opportunity for us to engage more people to find out what it will take to get them interested in the political process.”

Mindy Hart, who has lived in the Ingleside neighborhood for 18 years, said she voted for Cooke.

School zone cameras are among the biggest issues Hart hopes will be addressed. She said they’re a “hindrance” and the money should go directly to the school system and not a company.

Hart said Cooke has been

active in the community, involved with mental health efforts and has been accessible.

“I hope maybe she can finish what Seth (Clark) was doing,” she said.

Clark resigned from the District 5 seat to run for lieutenant governor but later withdrew from that election.

Nick Pietrzak, a Vineville resident, voted in the general election for one of the candidates who did not make it to the runoff. He said “there wasn’t a lot to go on” to inform his vote.

He still showed up Tuesday to vote in the runoff. He said he’d like to see the city provide more services rather than paying outside companies to do jobs. Early in the day, before the results came in, he said he didn’t feel strongly about either candidate who made the runoff.

“I’m not gonna be upset about who wins, but I won’t be excited either,” he said.

HOSPITAL

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today as Atrium Health Navicent The Medical Center,” Madison wrote.

The Medical Center of Central Georgia — as the Macon hospital was then known — created a not-for-profit, private holding company called Central Georgia Health Systems Inc., which would own multiple nonprofit and for-profit subsidiaries, divisions and affiliated companies.

The hospital’s organizational chart grew to include a private foundation that holds golf tournament fundraisers, outpatient services and joint ventures with physician groups, among other entities.

The hospital authority maintained ownership of its land, building and physical assets and entered into a 40-year lease with Central Georgia Health Systems, which took over the day-to-day operations at the hospital. The authority went on to open for-profit companies, clinics and other medical offices in surrounding counties. Profits from those subsidiaries flow back to Central Georgia Health Systems.

The 1994 restructuring made business at the hospital more opaque, as it was no longer a solely government body subject to Georgia laws requiring open records and public meetings.

In 2017, the Georgia Supreme Court ruled that nonprofit hospitals operating on behalf of hospital authorities

are subject to open records.

In 2014, The Medical Center rebranded with a new name: The Medical Center, Navicent Health. In 2018, Central Georgia Health Systems merged with Atrium Health, the nonprofit arm of the Charlotte-Mecklenberg Hospital Authority in North Carolina.

In 2022, Atrium Health merged with Advocate Aurora Health in a move that made Macon’s hospital part of one of the largest health care conglomerates in the country.

It is difficult to tell where the hospital authority ends and Atrium Health Navicent The Medical Center begins.

It is also challenging to find details about Atrium Health Navicent’s finances and operations now that the information is lumped in sum reports that include other out-of-state hospitals and nonprofits, collectively referred to in board meetings as “the enterprise.”

The hospital also owns 100 properties which have a combined value of nearly half a billion dollars, according to an annual report on its website.

Those properties are not taxable because they are owned by either the hospital authority or its nonprofits.

“This allows Atrium Health Navicent The Medical Center to use dollars saved to reinvest in the community. In 2024, Atrium Health Navicent reinvested nearly \$222 million, providing additional services and supporting part-

ners in efforts that improve community health,” according to Madison.

Across the Ocmulgee River from Atrium Health Navicent, Macon’s other hospital, Piedmont Macon, also owns land that’s off the tax rolls. Up until 2021, that hospital was called the Coliseum Medical Center and was owned by for-profit HCA Healthcare, which paid property taxes.

Piedmont Macon is part of Piedmont Healthcare, a nonprofit community health system that operates 16 hospitals across the state and leases some of them from hospital authorities in other counties.

A spokesperson for Piedmont declined to comment about its relationships with hospital authorities.

The Macon-Bibb County Hospital Authority Board meets quarterly and its next meetings are slated for June 4, Aug. 13 and Dec. 3. Meetings start at 12:30 p.m. and take place in the Weaver board room on the fourth floor at 877 Hemlock St.

Board members include Milton Appling, Monique Davis-Smith, Myrtle Habersham, Mark Grossnickle, Jacob Patton and Matt Astin.

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.

P&Z roundup: East Macon biz permit revoked, Mercer medical school plan OK’d

BY LIZ FABIAN

The Macon Newsroom
macon-newsroom.com

An East Macon businessman who defied a cease-and-desist order lost his operating permit Monday despite his attorney’s attempt to buy him more time to come into compliance.

Over more than three years, Johnntrell Johnson and his United Hustle Enterprises have applied to the Macon-Bibb County Planning & Zoning Commission to run different businesses at 635 Womack St., which has very little parking to accommodate most commercial uses.

Johnson tried a solar-powered, indoor aquaponics farm that sells live bait and tackle, a U-Haul rental location, a fresh food and fish market, and a hookah lounge serving alcohol.

In November, P&Z denied Johnson’s application for the cigar and hookah lounge that included busing patrons to and from the business to try to circumvent parking regulations.

By the first of the year, P&Z received complaints that Johnson was operating the Skyline Lounge and event center anyway.

Cease-and-desist letters followed in mid-February, but social media ads promoting the business were still appearing in March.

With the business permit revocation on Monday’s agenda, attorney Roy Miller appealed for extra time to allow him to educate Johnson on what is required under P&Z regulations.

Miller cited historical suppression of Black-owned businesses to bolster his argument that Johnson needed education, not revocation of the permit.

Although P&Z Commissioner Kesia Stafford contemplated a deferral for extra time, P&Z Executive Director Jeff Ruggieri reminded the board of Johnson’s history of noncompliance.

“The last time Mr. Jackson was here, we heard the same thing. He doesn’t want to hurt the community. It’s going to be community friendly, he’s going to support his community and we received a string of complaints from his community about the business that he was operating — noise complaints, people

urinating in people’s yards, gunshot holes in adjacent houses,” Ruggieri said.

The board voted to revoke his permit but invited Johnson to determine what business he wants to develop and reapply to P&Z.

New additions, Mercer Med plans

North Macon will be getting a new 128-room, seven-story Hyatt hotel at 1512 Bass Road near Providence Boulevard after P&Z approved the project.

Applicant Mangesh Patel said the 72,000-square-foot building on two acres will be a “simple hotel” without a bar, restaurant or swimming pool.

Commissioners also granted conditional use approval for Riley Windham’s RV park and campground along the Ocmulgee River at 5271 Arkwright Road, just north of the old Georgia Power plant.

Windham, who grew up in Twiggs County, said it was his dream to rent tiny houses and hookups for recreational vehicles to provide places for people to stay along the river.

He plans two tiny homes and four 15-foot by 50-foot RV parking stalls on the three-acre property.

“There’s not a lot of attractions on the river,” Windham said. “I mean, we have an untapped resource there. I don’t know if any of y’all kayak or anything, but it’s an awesome place to be and we have it right here in our backyard.”

The commission also approved rezoning more than 11 acres along Riverside Drive and Willow Street for the future home of the Mercer University School of Medicine and nearby development.

The acreage will include the 42,000-square-foot medical school, a 30,000-square-foot office building, the 195-unit Ocmulgee Lofts apartments and a 52,000-square-foot parking deck.

“The renditions are beautiful,” P&Z Commissioner Mindy Attaway acknowledged at the start of the hearing.

Not all of the building designs are complete, including the parking deck, which will be shielded by other buildings, engineer Don Carter told commissioners.

“It will still have a Mercer look to it. I’m not sure what that means, but it will probably have some red brick in it,” Carter said.

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SNAPSHOTS

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PHOTO NO. 1 — Piedmont Macon celebrated its fourth primary care location in Macon recently. The facility is located inside Piedmont Macon Medical Hospital at 310 Hospital Drive, Suite 205. *Photo courtesy of Piedmont Macon.*

PHOTO NO. 2 — The Team Hendrix car, driven by Brandon Hendrix, finished first in the pro division during the 16th Annual Magnolia Soapbox Derby Saturday, April 11. *Photo by Donn Kester.*

PHOTO NO. 3 — Members of Mercer University's National PanHellenic Council step and stroll through the decades during the annual Yard Show. The show included a collaborative "Unity" performance by members from all the chapters. *Photo courtesy of Mercer University.*

PHOTO NO. 4 — The Freeman Cabinets car, driven by Cameron Gilliland, finished first in the Shadetree division at Macon's 16th Annual Magnolia Soapbox Derby. *Photo by Donn Kester.*

PHOTO 5 — The Macon-Bibb County Fire Department attends a Safety Day event for the Northridge community Saturday, April 11. *Photo courtesy of Macon-Bibb County Fire Department.*

PHOTO 6 — The Freeman Cabinets hold their first place prize for the Shadetree division at Macon's annual soapbox derby. *Photo by Donn Kester.*

PHOTOS 7 — Jennifer Bronner marks 20 years with the Greater Macon Chamber of Commerce last week. Mayor Lester Miller officially declared April 10 as Jennifer Bronner Day in Macon-Bibb County. *Photo courtesy of Greater Macon Chamber of Commerce.*

OPINION

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ON THE RECORD » MUSINGS FROM OUR EDITOR

The work of building trust

Local news is a business.

You may be thinking, “Well, duh,” but I often find myself wondering if people realize that it does indeed cost money to produce credible, responsible journalism.

We have the typical operating expenses, like payroll and insurance, and the ever-expanding costs associated with a print newspaper. Newsprint costs have surged in recent years, and the latest warnings from industry experts forecast an additional 15% increase in the coming months. That’s due to energy costs, tariffs and a host of other factors.

Of course, prices are rising across the board, and the news business isn’t at all insulated from the effects of that.

However, we’re also dealing with a staggering decline in the number of Americans who say they pay attention to local news. According to a new Local News Fact Sheet from the Pew Research Center, only 21% of Americans say they follow local news very closely — down from 37% in 2016.

The report, released Tuesday, also suggests something interesting — that more Americans are understanding that local news is indeed a business that requires healthy finances to not just survive but thrive. In 2018, 24% of surveyed Americans said their local news outlets weren’t doing well. Now, 39% of Americans say that.

Sadly, the report doesn’t note that more Americans made that realization and then started offering more financial support to their local outlets.

In 2018, 14% of U.S. adults said they’d paid for local news in the past year. That number grew to 15% in 2024 but dropped to 12% in 2025. The report tells us why: 50% of U.S. adults said they don’t pay



Joshua Wilson

because they “can find plenty of free local news,” and 29% said they’re (eek!) not interested enough in local news to pay for it. Only 10% said local news was “too expensive,” and the other 9% said the “news provided is not good enough to pay for.”

We can dissect these findings for days and months, but I contend that media outlets aren’t typically good marketers for their own hard work. We need to make the case that, without us, civic engagement suffers, polarization increases and governments perform worse. We need to play up that we’re uniquely qualified to do this work because we’re trained to do it and have ethical obligations to do it well.

We also need to be realistic and smart about our entire industry’s entire design. I’m a huge advocate for the nonprofit model — well-designed operations that treat journalism as a public service and not as a profit center. These models, which have sprouted up around the U.S. in record numbers as the industry has fractured, treat readers as stakeholders. They have diversified revenue sources, often pulling in financial support from philanthropic sources, audience members and advertising.

Our owner, the National Trust for Local News, is one of the nonprofits building out this model across the country. In Macon, as the first startup newsroom of the nation’s largest nonprofit newspaper company, we’re testing our theory that our neighbors are the most reliable foundation a local newsroom can have.

We’re still young, and we still have a lot of work to do. Building

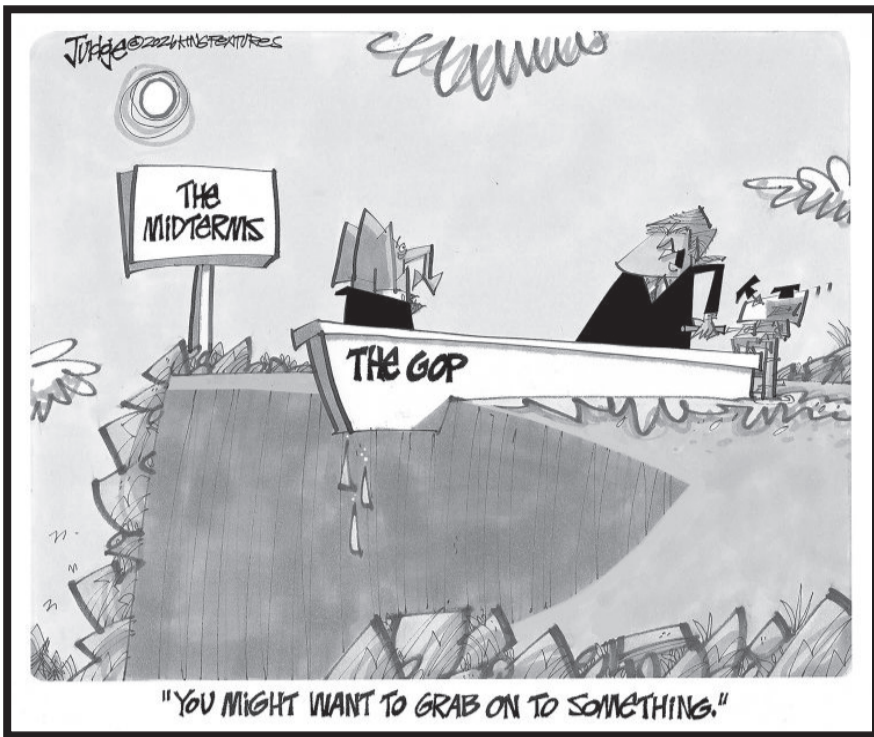
trust takes time. Making this newsroom feel like it truly belongs to this community — because in the most meaningful sense, it does — is the work of years, not months. We’re committed to doing that work.

The Pew report tells us more Americans recognize that local news is struggling. That’s a start. What comes next is the harder ask — turning that awareness into investment. We’ll keep working hard, and we’ll keep growing, learning and earning your trust. In return, we hope you’ll consider financially supporting us.

If you’re reading this column, you probably already know us and support us. Thank you. If you’re totally new to The Melody, I hope you’ll stick around and read us for a while. I hope you’ll send us your suggestions. And I hope you’ll find a place in our community of local news supporters — people who believe, like we do, that Macon deserves a local newsroom.

Joshua Wilson is the executive editor of The Macon Melody, which turns 2 in June. To celebrate the occasion, the newsroom has launched “Keep The Melody Playing,” a campaign designed to sustain and grow its continued operations. Learn about ways to support — from subscribing, donating or advertising — at maconmelody.com/support.

Editor’s note: The Pew Research Center report cited in this column is part of the Pew-Knight Initiative, a research program funded jointly by The Pew Charitable Trusts and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Knight Foundation is also a primary funder of The Macon Melody. The Melody received no compensation for citing this report, and Knight Foundation had no editorial involvement in this column.



The Macon Melody

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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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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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Mixed results from the Gold Dome

Lawmakers often enter legislative session with bold ambitions to pass landmark laws that help their constituents. The 2026 session was no different, but it had a sharper focus: Republican leadership’s top priority was alleviating the high cost of living, followed by updating the code in other critical ways to serve Georgians in the future.

As is always the case, several of these dreams were dashed. Democrats unified and created obstacles to GOP proposals. Policy disagreements between the House and Senate ensured that many bills died on the vine. As the Legislature adjourned around 1 a.m. on April 3 — the last day of regular session — time of death was pronounced on many priorities, although not all hope was lost.

Toward the beginning of the year, it seemed that a major shakeup in Georgia’s tax code could be within reach and benefit Georgians. The House pursued an effort to potentially eliminate property taxes over the course of several years, while the Senate promoted an effort to end the income tax for most taxpayers.



Marc Hyden

Both measures faced stiff political headwinds, despite enjoying broad support in their respective chambers. Supporters found that there was no viable path to enactment this year. Even so, there were some consolation prizes.

The General Assembly approved one proposal, sponsored by Rep. Shaw Blackmon, R-Bonaire, that could reduce the income tax rate to 3.99% by 2027. It also repealed several big-business tax credits — something that took courage.

While legislators inched closer to tax reform, they also mulled how to protect electricity ratepayers from increased costs associated with the deluge of data centers flooding the state. Senate Bill 34, by Sen. Chuck Hufstetler, R-Rome, aimed to prohibit electricity providers from passing the costs of serving data centers on to residential ratepayers.

While Hufstetler’s bill was a commonsense and fair proposal, there were others floating around

the Legislature, but they faced serious opposition. In the end, they all failed to cross the finish line, which represented a surprising conclusion that could leave consumers exposed.

This was a notable setback, but the General Assembly found other ways to help Georgians tackle persistent affordability problems — particularly as they pertain to benefits and healthcare. Rep. Todd Jones, R-Cumming, passed House Bill 987 to institute an innovative voluntary portable benefits system to make it easier for independent contractors to obtain benefits, like retirement and health insurance.

Rep. Beth Camp, R-Concord, championed House Bill 1138 to align Georgia’s code with more than 30 other states that permit women to obtain birth control from a pharmacist without a doctor’s prescription. These two measures may not dominate headlines, but they are huge wins for Georgia.

While not directly related to the high cost-of-living, the Legislature

SEE HYDEN
PAGE 6

THE REFRAIN » OUR EDITORIAL POSITION

County term limits should stand

When Macon-Bibb County voters approved the single county-wide government charter, they made a deliberate choice about how long any one person should hold power in their community. That choice deserves respect.

We understand the argument for extending terms. Good work is worth continuing. But good work is not a credential for indefinite tenure. These seats were never meant to be lifetime appoint-

ments, and the voters who shaped this charter never intended them to be.

Macon-Bibb is not running short on capable, committed people willing to serve. New voices bring new energy, new relationships and new ideas — and that matters, regardless of how good the current officeholders have been. The charter’s term limits aren’t a punishment for good service. They’re a promise to the

public that power will keep moving.

Hold that promise.

We urge local legislators to respect voters’ original intent — and to leave the charter, and its term limits, alone.

The Refrain is The Macon Melody’s editorial voice — the position we return to, the things we believe and the stands we’re willing to put our name on.

Georgia lawmakers move to save struggling timber industry

BY EMILY JONES
WABE and Grist
wabe.org | grist.org

Georgia is one of the leading states for forestry, ranking first in annual harvest volume and the export of forest products.

But a recent rash of paper mill closures coming on the heels of Hurricane Helene, which decimated trees across much of Georgia in 2024, has brought the industry to a crisis point.

In the final days of Georgia's legislative session, lawmakers passed several bills to try to help.

Among them is a measure that would allow forest landowners who get the state's conservation tax benefits to also take part in carbon markets. (Researchers and industry groups are working to establish a Georgia-specific carbon credit market.) They also passed a tax credit update aimed at attracting forestry manufacturers to Georgia and a bill to block local governments from banning mobile sawmills on agricultural land.

Another legislative effort, a bill to eliminate sales tax on timber harvesting, cleared the state House but failed to pass the Senate.

The state budget also set aside nearly \$9 million for research into replacing fossil fuel byproducts with wood pulp to make things like textiles and pharmaceuticals.

Gov. Brian Kemp has already signed the budget bill including the research funds. He has until May 12 to sign or veto the other bills.

Most of Georgia's forests — about 92% — are privately owned, and most owners are individuals or families, not large corporations, according to the Georgia Forestry Association.

That means decisions about how to manage the land, including whether to replant trees after harvesting or after a hurricane, come down to what makes financial sense for individuals who are often counting on their trees to fund college tuition or retirement.

Paper mill closures diminished a key source of revenue for those landowners, and if they can't make money from the trees themselves, industry experts warn, they may sell the land to developers.

"Forest owners have a tremendous amount of pressure on them to give in to urban growth or to turn over their land to maybe an annual crop," said Chris Luetggen, who works in

the Renewable Bioproducts Institute at Georgia Tech. "But some of this land is perfect for trees and not really too easy to grow a crop on. And so they're kind of stuck."

The struggles of the industry are also a climate problem: The state's forests that are managed for commercial products offset about a third of Georgia's greenhouse gas emissions, according to research from Drawdown Georgia.

The research money approved in the state budget will fund the initiative that Luetggen is working on at Georgia Tech. He and his team will take the material that's used to make paper and cardboard — sawdust, bark and chips left over from cutting trees down into neat pieces of lumber — and develop uses that can be scaled up.

One such product is acetaminophen, the drug better known as Tylenol, which is derived from petrochemicals that are separated from crude oil as it's processed into gasoline.

Researchers have demonstrated in the lab that the necessary fossil fuel molecule can be replaced with one derived from wood, Luetggen said. They're also working on a replacement for nylon, which also comes



PHOTO BY MATTHEW PEARSON FOR WABE
A working forest stands in Pickens County.

from fossil fuels.

"Things that typically have come from fossil fuels and the cracking of crude oil we believe we can instead make out of wood-based products," Luetggen said.

But all of this research is happening in small quantities. The next step

is to figure out if it works at a larger scale, which the influx of state funding will help pay for.

"It means that we can take it out of the lab and put it into real, not quite commercial, but a real upscaled operation and demonstrate its capabilities," Luetggen said.

MORE OPINION

GUEST OPINION

State 'surplus' a myth

BY DEBBIE BUCKNER
Special to the Georgia Trust
for Local News

Georgia needs a reality check.

Our state's leaders crow about our state's finances, but a close examination shows concerning trends and years of underinvestment. I would argue that we do not have a surplus in the truest sense. Instead, we have unspent cash.

Our foster care system is in crisis with an \$84 million shortfall, meaning our state's most vulnerable children are being served by a system that's structurally underfunded. When a key agency must rely on emergency patches or outside grants to keep the lights on, it means the core funding model is broken.

Public education has experienced a dramatic shift of the financial burden from the state to local districts. Specifically, local school districts now cover \$2.4 billion in expenses that the state used to fund. This increases local property taxes, widens inequities between wealthy and rural districts, and undermines the constitutional promise of an adequate public education.

Many Georgians are one illness away from financial ruin. Georgia's high uninsured rate is more than a statistic. This has a major impact on hospitals which are required to treat patients regardless of

whether the person is insured or not. Medical costs for the uninsured is the number one driver of bankruptcies and is a hidden tax on insured families who absorb the cost of uncompensated care. This is what happens when coverage policy doesn't keep pace with economic reality.

While the state has increased mental health funding, the need exceeds the resources. And public health investments, which help to keep our state's citizens healthy, have not been a priority until there is a crisis.

Infrastructure, which is critical to economic growth, is aging faster than we repair it. Roads, bridges and transit systems cost more every year — materials, labor, compliance, everything. Meanwhile, much of Georgia's infrastructure was built decades ago and is now hitting the end of its lifecycle — or is well past it. Deferred maintenance is the most expensive kind of maintenance.

And our Department of Corrections has massive challenges. The commissioner testified at an appropriations committee hearing that if money were not an issue (and of course it is), it would take five years just to get all of the locks in our prisons to work. That's unacceptable.

We also have a "punishment for creativity" problem. When agencies secure outside grants or philanthropic support to meet urgent needs, they sometimes see their state

funding cut in response. That discourages innovation and leaves programs vulnerable when those outside dollars inevitably expire.

Additionally, wars are always inflationary, resulting in dramatic increases in energy costs, which ultimately affect the entire supply chain. True stewardship means knowing not only when to save, but when to invest in the people and infrastructure that keep our state strong.

Now is the time for Georgia to take a fresh look at its priorities and its fiscal health. Our communities, our workforce and our infrastructure is straining under the weight of growth due to shifting cost-sharing, rising inflation and lack of needed reinvestment.

This is a moment for courage, not complacency. It calls for leadership that recognizes that our reserves are a tool, not a trophy.

Debbie Buckner represents District 137 in the Georgia House of Representatives. Her district includes all of Talbot County and parts of Meriwether, Muscogee and Troup counties. A Democrat, she is the ranking member of the chamber's Ways and Means Committee. This column was authored with assistance from other members of the Georgia General Assembly and staff from the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute.

HYDEN

Continued from Page 5

punted on two other notable proposals.

Sen. Ed Setzler's Senate Bill 51 was an under-the-radar niche measure that would have extended the federal and state gold-standard procurement method (known as Qualifications-Based Selection or QBS) to locals.

It simply places a priority on qualifications, so that governments acquire the best designs for bridges and roads that they can afford instead of the cheapest possible designs. If you aren't a fan of bridge collapses, then QBS might be for you. Unfortunately, Setzler's bill fell just short of reaching the governor's desk. The last legislative misstep

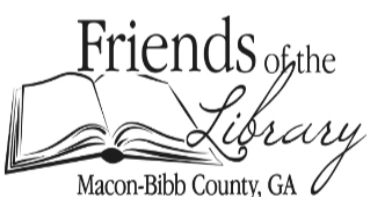
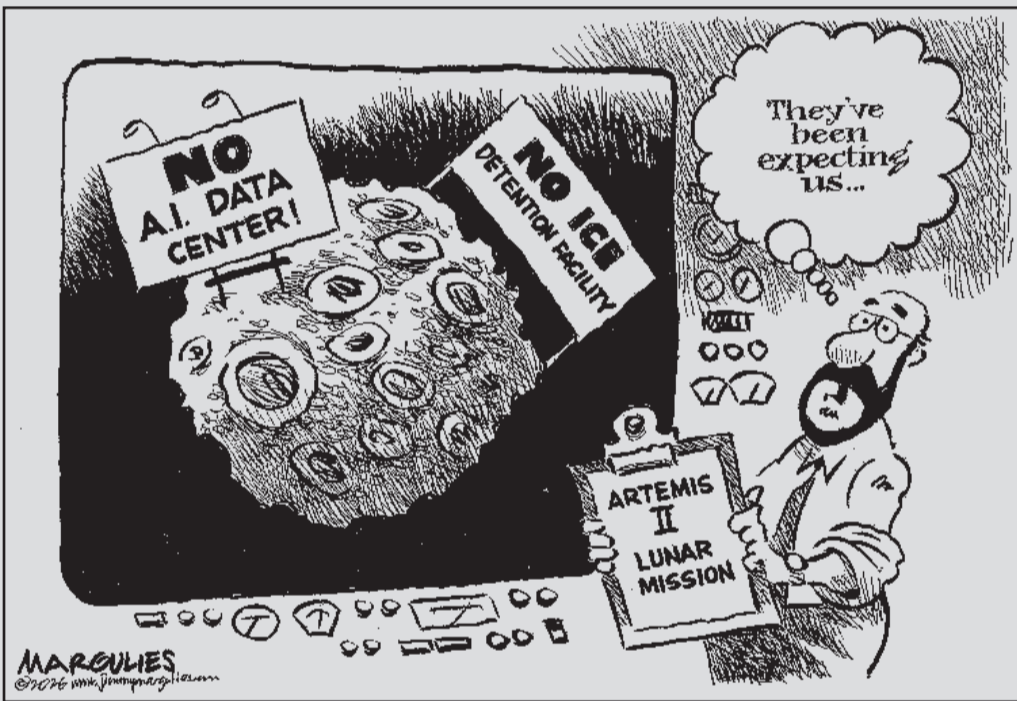
might be the most serious. In 2024, the Legislature passed a bill that outlawed the use of QR codes in our voting systems but failed to provide a replacement. Lawmakers rushed to address this oversight because if they didn't, then after July, Georgia may have to revert to hand-counting ballots. That could cost millions of dollars, take an inordinate amount of time and lead to miscounts.

After adjourning on April 3, officials failed to institute a fix, and now Gov. Brian Kemp has a choice: Allow Georgia to return to a bygone era of hand-counting ballots, let the courts sort it out or call a special session to force lawmakers to update the code. I imagine Kemp will not keep us in suspense for long.

All told, the 2026 session was a mixed bag — as sessions always are. Legislators should celebrate some of their banner wins that will help Georgians, even though there were some major missed opportunities.

While legislative realities often crush lawmakers' dream priorities, redemption is often close at hand. There is always another legislative session on the horizon, and with the prospect of a special session coming long before the November elections, redemption could be closer than many realize.

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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New Georgia map tool offers local climate change insights

BY EMILY JONES

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SCAN THE QR CODE TO SEE THE MAPS OR VISIT OUR WEBSITE.

Local leaders across Georgia can now see a more detailed picture of what impacts to expect from climate change with a new map tool released by Drawdown Georgia.

The group, which aims to reduce the state's greenhouse gas emissions, unveiled the maps at the recent Super South Summit in Atlanta.

Scientists warn that Georgia can expect hotter, longer summers, more extreme weather, more rainfall overall and also longer droughts. But those impacts will vary across the state.

Now, researchers have found ways to scale down the big picture data so they can project not just how climate change is affecting Georgia or the Southeast broadly, but how it's changing conditions in specific locations.

"Historically, [climate models are] locked into these huge global data sets," said Georgia Tech professor Bill Drummond, who developed the maps and studies local and regional planning. "But we're getting more and more tools to bring them out and bring them down to the local level, so that we can start to understand what it means at the county level or the city level."

That could be key for local planning, which typically relies on past data to predict future conditions. But that approach assumes that it

will rain about as much in a given location as it has in the past, or that temperatures will fall into the same general range — but because of climate change, Drummond said, those assumptions no longer hold up.

"We have to rethink the way that we have traditionally done planning for infrastructure to take into account the fact that the future will not be like the past," he said.

More detailed forecasts of future rainfall can help local governments plan to build stormwater management systems that can better handle extreme storms brought on by climate change or help ensure hospitals aren't built in places that will be cut off by flooding.

"In the United States, a lot of our planning is done at the local level," Drummond said, pointing to decisions like land use and zoning. "And so a lot of adaptation planning is done at the local level."

The maps compare current conditions with projections under three different climate change scenarios, with impacts varying based on whether and how much greenhouse gas emissions are reduced in the future, so local leaders can see and plan for different potential risks.

Lights, camera, Macon: Two major films coming to town this summer

BY LIZ FABIAN

The Macon Newsroom
macon-newsroom.com

Macon and hundreds of extras will appear on the big screen as two major motion pictures shoot scenes here over the summer.

DC Studios will again turn Terminal Station into The Daily Planet newsroom for the next Superman movie, and Mercer University will host Universal Pictures next month as crews film a major motion picture starring Glen Powell.

A year ago, The Hollywood Reporter reported Powell and director Judd Apatow were writing a comedy about a country music star in decline.

Visit Macon's Aaron Buzza recently briefed the Downtown Macon Community Association about the upcoming films less than 24 hours after Powell announced "The Comeback King" will be in theaters Feb. 5, 2027.

A production crew of at least 100 people will arrive in late April to prepare to film between May 3-15 on Mercer's campus, Robins Financial Capitol Theatre, Capricorn Studios and The Grand Opera House. During some scenes, extras will hang out at McEachern Art Center on Second Street.

At this time, street closings are expected to be restricted to a small portion of Cotton Avenue from May 12-14 to make room for catering trucks, but Buzza said more infor-



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Terminal Station will again serve as the set for The Daily Planet newsroom when crews arrive in mid-June to film scenes for DC Studios' "Man of Tomorrow."

mation would be released closer to filming dates.

The location manager for "Comeback King" worked in Macon during filming of "The Color Purple."

"He very much likes Macon, very much appreciates Macon. Judd Apatow has said multiple times how much he likes Macon," Buzza said. "They want to do right by the businesses, and they want to do right by the community, so they're trying their best to minimize the impacts on businesses and your customers, as well."

Anyone interested in applying to be a Comeback King extra should visit submit.catretecasting.com.

Dozens of crew members working on Superman's "Man of Tomorrow" will arrive in mid-June to transform Terminal Station into the fictional newspaper as they did for the 2025 blockbuster film.

THE GLINT OF GOLD IN THE GEORGIA ECONOMY

As inflation persists, the Peach State joins a long list of states pondering 'transactional gold' laws

BY KEVIN HARDY

Stateline
stateline.org

More states are piling up gold bars or encouraging residents to use gold-backed debit cards to hedge against inflation.

Several states, including Western ones with rich mining histories, have been stockpiling gold as part of their broader state savings. And more states are looking to follow the lead of Texas and Florida by passing so-called transactional gold laws that would invite consumers to save and spend gold through their own accounts.

Critics question the need for these bills, and some have panned them as potentially market-disrupting measures that could ultimately provide tax havens for the wealthy. But proponents say they can help bring gold to the masses and provide ordinary consumers an important protection against the creep of inflation, since gold has generally increased in value over time.

"Inflation is the carbon monoxide that you can't see, taste or smell," said Georgia state Sen. Marty Harbin, a Republican who sponsored bipartisan legislation this year that would have established gold and silver as legal tender and created an electronic payment system.

The state Senate approved that bill, but it didn't advance beyond a House committee. Harbin said he expects to reintroduce it next session.

Oklahoma lawmakers are considering a similar measure that would create an electronic payment system backed by gold. Lawmakers in several states, including Arizona, Iowa and Mississippi, considered such legislation this year.

After vetoing a similar bill last year, Utah Republican Gov. Spencer Cox allowed a gold measure to become law this year without his signature.

As part of transactional gold legislation, proponents are pushing for tax exemptions for precious metals, namely gold and silver. While interest on savings accounts or earnings on stock investments can be subject to state and federal taxes, gold proponents say precious metals should be free of tax because of their history as legal currency.

Matthew Gardner, a senior fellow at the left-leaning Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, said there's no reason gold should be taxed differently from other investment holdings. Governments generally provide capital gains tax breaks in hopes of spurring activities that grow the economy or create jobs. But Gardner said holding gold or other collectibles does no such thing.

If rising costs are the main concern, Gardner said, lawmakers should tackle inflation directly.

Gold for the masses

The more Georgia Democratic state Sen. Sonya Halpern learned

about transactional gold systems, the more appealing the idea became. While anyone can buy, hold or sell gold objects, she said emerging technology platforms allow consumers to own smaller shares of gold and spend it easily by swiping a card.

"It really does give you that instant liquidity of whatever gold holdings that you have," she said.

A cosponsor of Harbin's legislation, Halpern said she hoped gold could buffer Georgians against the shrinking buying power of the dollar. But she said she doesn't see it as replacing traditional savings and spending methods.

"I personally think that most people would see it as a complement to whatever they've already got going for their savings," she said, "and so it's just a piece of their overall ability to save and protect the dollars that they're working so hard to earn."

In Georgia, proponents cited Glint, a British firm that has been pushing legislation across several states in recent years. The company makes gold spendable for consumers by issuing prepaid debit cards that are backed by physical holdings in Swiss vaults.

Customers use currency to fund their accounts in advance, and Glint says they then outright own the physical gold in their account. When they use their Glint card for a purchase, the equivalent amount of gold is sold on their behalf and converted to U.S. dollars, or another currency, that go to the merchant.

Harbin, the Republican sponsor in Georgia, held up his Glint card and described the ease of purchasing his lunch at Chick-fil-A.

The Sound Money Defense League, a group that advocates for restoring gold and silver as America's currency, has fought Harbin's proposal and similar measures.

Jp Cortez, the group's executive director, said the existing debit card system was actually evidence that the legislation was unnecessary.

"It's not enabling anything that isn't already legal," said Cortez, whose organization is owned by Money Metals Exchange, an online broker for precious metals. "On top of that, the way these bills are written, frankly, read to me to be self-serving or written by self-interested vendors."

Aside from boosting particular firms, Cortez said, legislation proposed in several states would create a new government program that would put off many gold owners, who tend to be suspicious of government. He said there's also little demand to spend gold, which owners often view as a long-term asset that will gain value over time.

In an email to Stateline, Glint COO Jason Ollivier said legislation is not necessary for consumers to use the platform, which has been operating in the United States for more than six years. But new state laws do help legitimize and scale the technology, he said.

"These laws aim to remove friction, particularly around legal tender status and regulatory clarity, and make gold more usable for everyday transactions across a broader population," Ollivier wrote.

Inflation is driving the current wave of legislator interest, he said. And products such as Glint can provide consumers access to small amounts of gold, which currently trades for nearly \$5,000 per ounce.

"Transactional gold allows consumers to accumulate small amounts over time, helping preserve purchasing power," Ollivier wrote. "Gold is a hedge and a store of value, not a high-yield investment; its role is stability, not speculation."

States boosting gold

In Utah, the law enacted this year without the governor's signature requires the state to create a precious metals-backed electronic payment system to pay state vendors.

In 1971, President Richard Nixon effectively ended the gold standard, which tied the value of the U.S. dollar to physical gold. After, the IRS began treating gold holdings like other collectibles, subject to income taxes upon sale.

"That's an important element, because suddenly if you're using (gold) like it used to be used, then we need to think about the treatment of taxes differently," Utah State Treasurer Marlo Oaks said.

He led a 2024 workgroup of Utah officials studying how precious metals could "bolster long-term fiscal stability." In addition to inflation, the group examined how the ballooning federal debt consumes more tax revenues and could threaten state coffers.

A 2024 law allowed the treasurer to invest up to 10% of the state's reserve funds at the time in gold. Oaks said Utah currently has about \$1.4 billion in reserves, including about \$178 million worth of gold held in a privately operated vault.

It's among several states that are stockpiling gold. Created by 2015 legislation, the Texas Bullion Depository is the nation's first state-administered precious metals depository, the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts says. In Wyoming, a private firm is now storing state-owned gold worth millions of dollars, following enactment of a law last year.

Chris Colson, who researches payments trends at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, said it's too early to tell how lasting the current gold rush will prove. He noted that new transactional gold laws do not require customers or merchants to use gold. But he said many details surrounding taxes, fees and oversight remain to be determined.

"With any good innovation, you don't necessarily want to clamp it down at the beginning, because then nothing happens, right?" he said. "So I think as people use it and things happen — positive and negative — it'll start to tighten up a little bit."

Industrial authority: Macon-Bibb turns \$1 in public investment into \$75 in private growth

BY LIZ FABIAN

The Macon Newsroom
macon-newsroom.com

At its recent annual meeting, the Macon-Bibb County Industrial Authority reflected on recent successes and benchmarks.

"And one of the numbers we've generated — since 2017 ... every dollar of public investment is generating \$75 in private investment," said Executive Director Stephen Adams. "That's strong. Those are big numbers. We feel good about the taxpayer dollars that are invested into this organization, and what we're able to return from that."

The board also discussed how the

recent groundbreaking for a Bob's Discount Furniture distribution center in the 4000 block of Cavalier Drive reinforces the authority's vision for Bibb County as a logistics hub.

A targeted industry study in the early 2000s grew its first fruit with the Kohl's distribution center on Hawkinsville Road that opened in 2005.

"The industrial portion of our tax digest is growing significantly, and that goes back to that decades-long strategy about trying to offset some of the tax burden on the average ratepayer and the average taxpayer by having these industrial uses that pay for more than enough and more than their costs," Adams said.

To further incentivize new industry,

the authority offers tax incentives such as the Payment in Lieu of Taxes — also known as PILOT — program. The program offers companies discounted property taxes in exchange for moving into the county.

There are 14 PILOT industries in Macon-Bibb, and combined, they have more than \$320 million in annual payroll.

Robby Fountain, chair of the industrial authority board, noted the industrial tax base in Macon-Bibb County has grown about 295% since 2010.

"About 19% of the (tax) digest right now is occupied by the industrial tax base, which I think that is extremely just unheard of," Fountain said.

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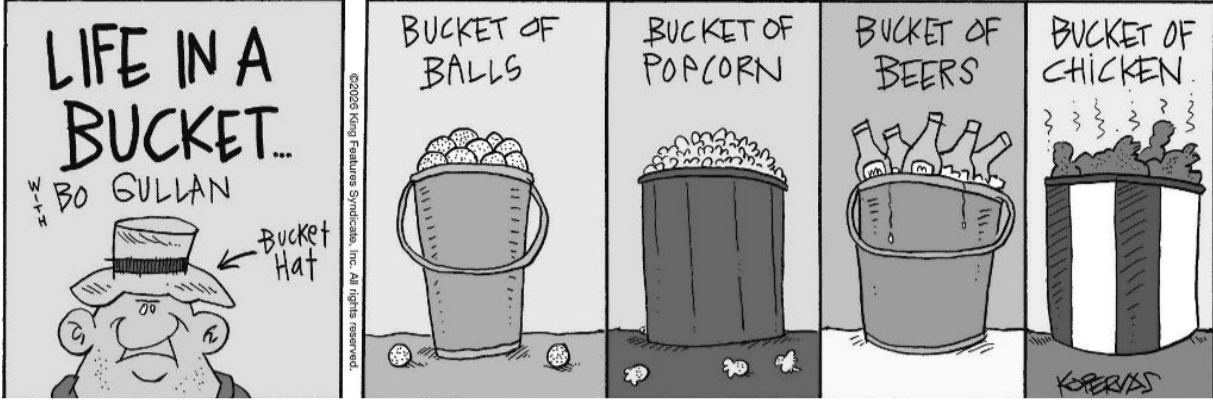
Amber Waves

by Dave T. Phipps



Out on a Limb

by Gary Kopervas



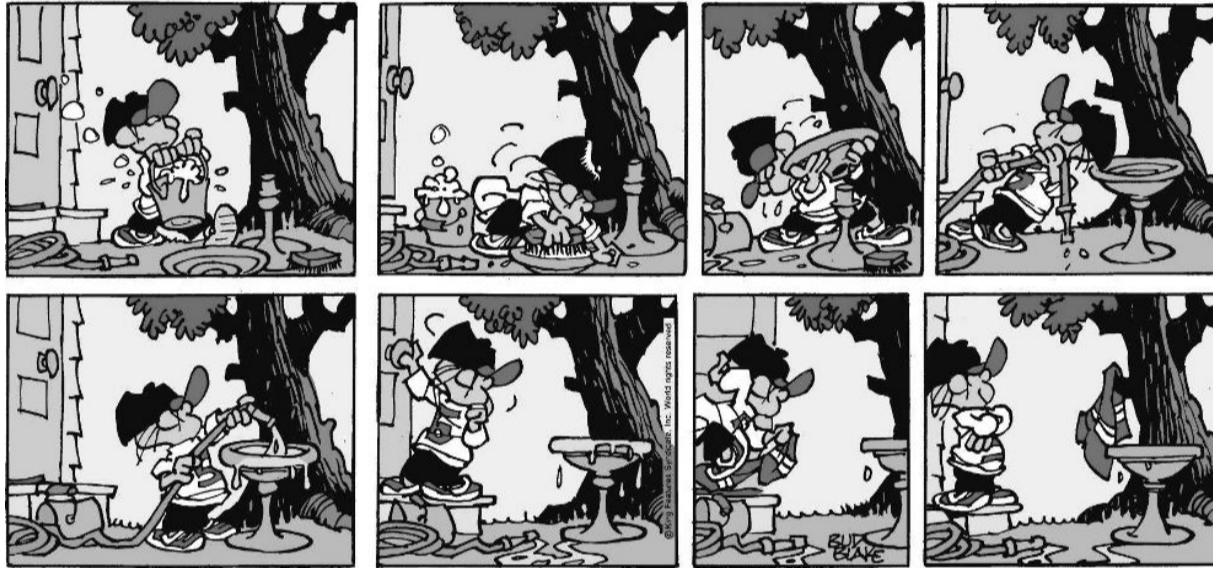
The Spats

by Jeff Pickering



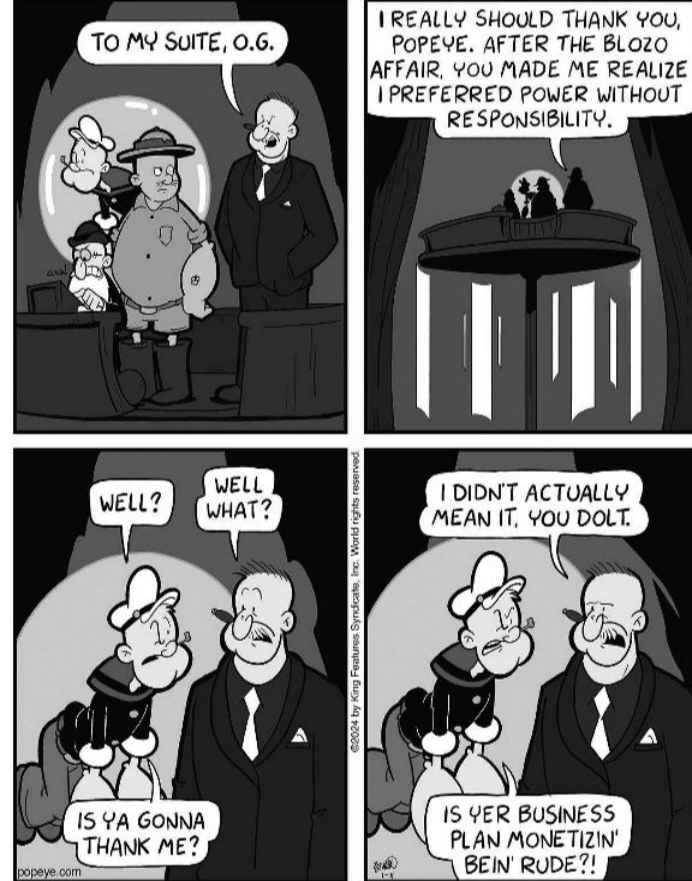
TIGER

by BUD BLAKE



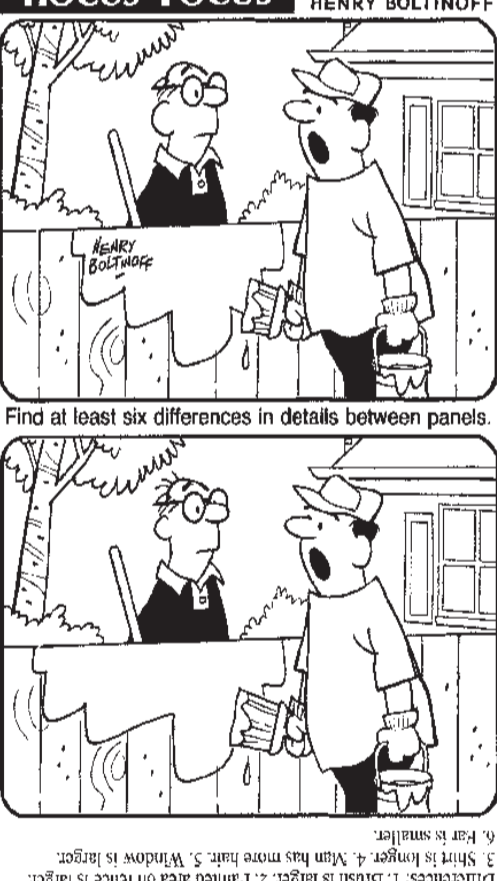
OLIVE & POPEYE

By Randy Milholland



HOCUS-FOCUS

BY HENRY BOLTINGHOFF



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: Y equals S

MOX MT TVFX EMCVXY MT
 JZHXI HGZH PZOR HRSXY
 LMWDC GZFX DXZIOXC ZEMWH
 ER JZHLGVON "YXYZPX YHIXXH":
 DZSX XIOVX.

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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!

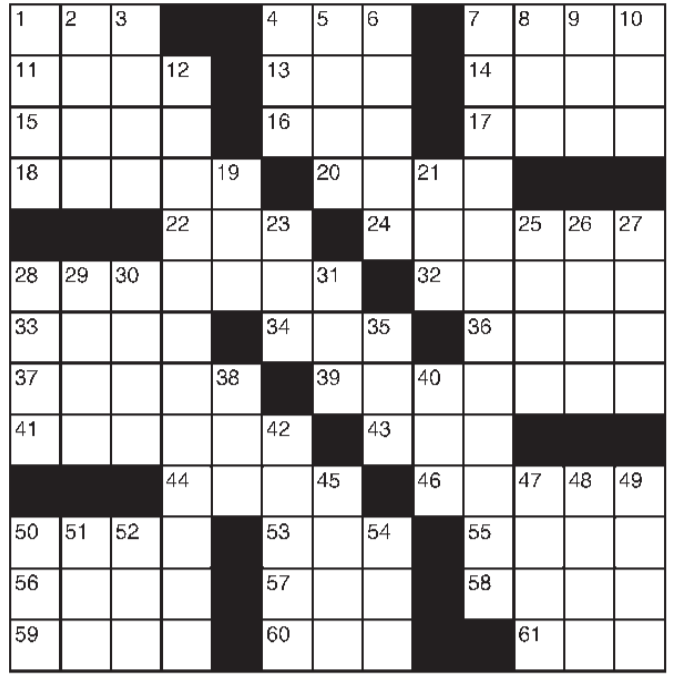
Mug
CAPUTE _____
 Flat
NOPER _____
 Grand
REGAL _____
 Bubble
DEMO _____

TODAY'S WORD _____

King Crossword

ACROSS

- 1 Soak (up)
- 4 "Nova" channel
- 7 South Pacific nation
- 11 Grouch
- 13 Ump's call
- 14 Tehran's country
- 15 Rights org.
- 16 Peyton's brother
- 17 Dweeb
- 18 Spars
- 20 Boast
- 22 Prom outfit
- 24 TV detective Remington
- 28 Shirt parts
- 32 Flynn of film
- 33 Frankfurt fellow



- 34 Cleaning cloth
- 36 Fine cotton
- 37 "Shake —" (Taylor Swift hit)
- 39 "Be serious!"
- 41 More of a snoop
- 43 Hosp. scan
- 44 Inert gas
- 46 Accord
- 50 Pizzazz
- 53 Bro, maybe
- 55 Half a sextet
- 56 Actress Falco
- 57 — tizzy (worked up)

- 9 Pickle holder
- 10 Hoosier st.
- 12 Crunchy candy bar
- 19 Minivan alternative
- 21 Consumed
- 23 Gen- — (baby boomer's kid)
- 25 One of HOMES — Linda, Calif.
- 26 — Linda, Calif. writer
- 27 Mideast airline
- 28 Tibia's place
- 29 Jared of "Panic Room"
- 30 Cupid's alias
- 31 Droop
- 35 Tiara jewel
- 38 Service charge
- 40 Capote nickname
- 42 Wartime riveter
- 45 Boy, in Barcelona
- 47 Showy flower piece
- 48 Scrabble
- 49 Singer Ono
- 50 Last letter in London
- 51 Chemical suffix
- 52 Actress Long
- 54 Prohibit

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Weekly SUDOKU

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

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™

Fairy tale

C	H	I	L	D

- Lowest cost movie ticket
- Roadside excavation
- Bronze metal winner
- Top
- Not quite there
- Building floor

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

FiveSpot is a trademark of Michael McI linden. See more at www.spiritspotting.com

©2026



Solution time: 22 mins.

King Crossword — Answers

Trivia test by Fifi Rodriguez

1. GEOGRAPHY: Which country is also known to residents as Hellas?
2. U.S. STATES: Which state is the least populated?
3. ENTERTAINERS: Which show launched the career of comedian/actor Jim Carrey?
4. MOVIES: What museum is featured in the movie "Night at the Museum"?
5. HISTORY: When was Earth Day first celebrated?
6. MUSIC: Which song begins with the lines, "Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy"?
7. TELEVISION: Who starred in the title role of the TV drama "Designated Survivor"?
8. GENERAL KNOWLEDGE: What is the only sport that has been played on the moon?
9. LITERATURE: What is the name of the language used in the novel "1984"?
10. ANIMAL KINGDOM: What is a group of giraffes called?

GOLDEN Today's Word

3. Large; 4. Dome
 solution
SCRAMBLERS

V	R	O	S
T	O	S	
T	R	I	S
D	R	I	T
H	T	C	D
L	I	L	C

Solution

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

Answer
 Weekly SUDOKU
 Lake Erie.
 by watching "Sesame Street", could have learned about water that many lakes One of five bodies of answer
CryptoQuip

- 10. A tower
- 9. Newspeak
- 8. Golf
- 7. Kiefer Sutherland
- 6. "Bohemian Rhapsody" by Queen
- 5. April 22, 1970
- 4. The American Museum of Natural History in New York City
- 3. "In Living Color"
- 2. Wyoming
- 1. Greece

Trivia Answers

Macon-born musician to release debut album at Grant's Lounge concert



PHOTO BY MICHAEL W. PANNELL

It's a big weekend for Macon-native Rachel Forehand who releases her first full-length album at a concert Saturday at Grant's Lounge. A regular for years on the Macon music scene and across Georgia, the singer-songwriter's album is titled "Blackwater."

Macon's Rachel Forehand is releasing "Blackwater," her latest single, on streaming services Friday. Forehand has recorded and released a handful of singles in the past several years, most recently one called "RV."

But this weekend marks something special: She's releasing her first-ever full-length album, also titled "Blackwater," at a concert Saturday at the historic Grant's Lounge in downtown Macon.

"I wrote most all the songs and recorded them at Capricorn Studios, which was like a dream come true," Forehand said. "That's like a sacred space. You just walk in the door and it's awesome. To be in there recording is magical and I wanted to honor the music and people who've been there."

Forehand said Capricorn regular Charlie Gilbert produced the album and helped fine-tune some of the songs. One Forehand didn't write was a version of the Allman Brothers Band-Gregg Allman classic "Midnight Rider."

Other musicians — Chris Hicks, Dustin McCook and Phil Palma, a family friend who played in a band with her uncle — contributed to Forehand's album.

"Gosh, so many people helped out with the album and gave it real Macon roots," she said.

Growing up, Forehand's father, Dwayne Forehand, played guitar in bands for decades, and her drummer uncle, Keith Forehand, played in an outfit called The Lifters.

Between family and friends, music was always on the turntable when Forehand was little, with the Allman Brothers Band and similar groups on heavy rotation.

Even so, her dad's attempts to get her to learn guitar as a youngster failed. It wasn't until she went off to college that she picked up a guitar and started singing and writing songs. Though music had filled her young life, she said she never pictured herself as a musician.

Now it's just part of her life.

Forehand said she loves making music and performing, but by day, she is a full-time first grade teacher. That cuts down somewhat on her ability to perform, but she's hard at it on weekends.



Michael W. Pannell

Odds are you've seen her playing at most of Macon's top spots, such as Society Garden, The Hummingbird and Parish on Cherry Street, as well as Bragg Jam in past years. She's also been a regular at local charitable functions and the odd First Friday gig out on the street in front of places like Fresh Produce Records.

Forehand also travels beyond the "City of Soul" to places such as Thomaston, Jasper, Woodstock and other communities.

As I've talked to Forehand through the years, her joy has always been the music and bringing it to people rather than climbing to the top of the charts and courting stratospheric success. She said she's just doing what she loves and is satisfied with giving it all she's got.

If it gets any bigger, well, she says that's in God's hands.

"In my heart, I feel like God blessed me with music, I really believe that," she said. "I was a terrible singer as a child — awful — and now I can sing. The opportunities and how they've come have been so amazing. You hear that if you don't use something you lose it, and I know I'd be a fool not to use what God's given me."

"What I get out of it is I feel satisfied using my gift, and if it gives something to others, then I'm satisfied knowing I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing."

Forehand maintains it would be a thrill to open for someone at the Atrium Health Amphitheater one day.

I asked her about influences other than the obvious Southern rock bands and country artists reflected in her voice. Her wide-ranging list includes Janis Joplin, Johnny Cash, JJ Grey & Mofro and more.

"I like rock and roll," she said. "I grew up listening to 106.3. It's kind of hard to put an exact name on what I do. I think I'll just let people classify it however they want. To me, it's a hodgepodge of everything."

"I guess you could call it Americana, but it doesn't have much folk in it. I did just recently hear there's

a new genre called Outlaw Gospel; maybe there's a little bit of that in there. Genres are a bit of a problem, really. I'd say Southern rock and rock and roll are the majority of what inspires me, but there's a little bit of country to it."

Forehand said being an artist is first and foremost in her mind as a songwriter and performer.

After that, it's a matter of the artistry leading her where it will. She said it's her job to be prepared and then to take her audience with her on a musical journey.

Forehand painted the cover of the new album, which she said is reflective not only of Macon being home but of her upbringing in Lower Bibb County.

She said growing up, it was a place where things might get scary but people "held their Bibles tight."

The other song on the album that she didn't write is her own rendition of the classic gospel tune "I Saw the Light." She called it not so much a cover but her take on the song.

Though Macon is "home," Forehand said she and her husband — they're newlyweds — now live in the country somewhere around Hawkinsville.

Saturday's show at Grant's will also feature Hannah Murphy opening for Forehand. The show starts at 9 p.m. at Grant's on 576 Poplar St.

Discover more about Forehand and her music at rachelforehand.com, where you can purchase tickets and find out where she will be performing this summer.

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

"It's kind of hard to put an exact name on what I do. I think I'll just let people classify it however they want. To me, it's a hodgepodge of everything."

NONPROFIT SPOTLIGHT

Loaves & Fishes offers a sanctuary of support, healing

BY CASEY CHOUNG
Community Reporter
casey@maconmelody.com

The Loaves & Fishes Ministry of Macon has been offering support to Middle Georgia's underserved communities and at-risk residents for nearly 60 years. The organization opens its doors to anyone in need, offering a wide variety of services — including hot meals, birth certificate and ID retrieval, showers and laundry care, prescription assistance and more.

Founded from the merger of two groups in 1967, the ministry doesn't "turn anybody away," Executive Director Janet Wright said.

As part of a new series on nonprofit organizations making major contributions to the quality of life in Macon-Bibb County, The Macon Melody spoke with Wright about Loaves & Fishes — and what keeps the organization serving its neighbors. Her comments have been lightly edited for pacing and clarity.

Who does the ministry help?

We care for a lot of people ... a lot of people know us by our name, we know a lot of people by name. We get to know the people who we serve on a first-name basis so that they are comfortable with coming to us and seeking that help they need and calling if they can't physically be here.

What services does the ministry provide?

We do birth certificates and ID from this office ... whether they're homeless, unsheltered, low-income, you'd be surprised how many people don't have a birth certificate or an ID.

Breakfast is served here, lunch as well [on Tuesday] ... we'll do laundry on Thursday, so we'll take small bags of clothes people could drop off. The ministry also puts together grocery bags for families that need it.

What are some ways you are looking to expand?

We would really like to hire a

full-time case manager. A lot of people need additional help — they need help with housing, they need help or assistance with jobs or education, but we don't have the funds to bring on a full-time case manager.

The front area, [we want] to put as a workshop area, more workstations so people can come in, they can look for jobs, they can do their [state support services] paperwork online, order their Social Security cards online. There's so many things now that's digital that they, on the outside, don't have access to.

What keeps you doing this kind of work?

The people need it. We don't get rich doing this, but we show up every day with that in our hearts — that somebody needs help — and we just show up to make sure that people are fed, they can get the services they need, they can get a smile, a hug, sometimes a conversation.

You never know what someone's going through in life, and just that moment, that eight minutes, can change their projection of how they came to us. It will redirect their thought patterns, we may have saved someone's life.

Getting up each morning, sometimes I sit at the edge of the bed and ask myself, but I just hear the Lord saying, "somebody needs you today."

How can people get involved?

We do get volunteers that come in and help us. I think we got doctors that come here and volunteer and bag up groceries. We just have a ball here, like people come and they just enjoy themselves. It's about helping others.

The Loaves & Fishes Ministry of Macon is sponsoring a series of fundraisers, all based around pickleball, throughout the rest of April as well as an April 30 event celebrating supporters and friends. That event is from 5:30-7:30 p.m. at the Douglass Theatre. Learn more about the organization at loavesandfishesministry.org or on their Facebook page.



PHOTO BY CASEY CHOUNG

Sheila Luby unpacks a sleeve of styrofoam containers inside the Loaves & Fishes Ministry of Macon stockroom. The ministry has been serving Middle Georgians for nearly 60 years.

From planting to panic: Springtime has arrived — what's next for your garden?

BY SUSAN FISHER
Brookdale Gardens

It's spring! Finally! Planting your vegetable garden is the exciting beginning — but what comes next really determines your success. A thriving garden doesn't happen by accident; it comes from consistent TLC, patience, and some trial and error.

Once your seedlings or seeds are in the ground, your role shifts from planter to caretaker. Here are some essential post-planting tasks to help create a healthy, productive garden.

Watering

Proper watering is the most critical step after planting. Young plants and newly sown seeds need consistent moisture to establish strong roots. The goal is to keep the soil evenly moist — not soggy, but never completely dry.

Early morning is the best time to water, as it allows plants to absorb moisture before the heat of the day and reduces the risk of fungal diseases.

Deep watering a few times a week is better than frequent, shallow watering, as it encourages roots to grow deeper into the soil. Pay attention to weather conditions — hot, dry days will require more frequent watering, while rainy periods may allow you to skip it a day or so. Check your soil; stick your finger down into the soil about 2 inches. If it's moist, you can wait. If it's dry, water deeply.

Fertilizing

After the initial planting, your vegetables will soon begin to exhaust the nutrients in



PHOTO PROVIDED BY BROOKDALE GARDENS

Thousands of pounds of fresh food are harvested from the Gardens at Brookdale Resource Center in Macon. After the seeds are in the ground, gardeners become plant caretakers, said Brookdale garden manager Susan Fisher.

the soil and get hungry. Fertilizing helps replenish those nutrients and supports strong growth.

Start with a balanced fertilizer once your plants are established, typically a couple of weeks after planting. Leafy greens benefit from nitrogen-rich fertilizers, while fruiting plants like tomatoes and peppers need more phosphorus and potassium as they mature.

Always read your directions on the fertilizer. Too much is NOT a good thing. Be careful not to over-fertilize, as this can lead to excessive leaf growth at the expense of

fruits or even damage your plants. No one wants a big, lush tomato plant with two tomatoes.

Weeding

Weeds are more than just an annoyance — they compete for water, nutrients and sunlight. Removing weeds early and often is key to keeping your garden productive.

Small weeds are much easier to pull than large, established ones, so make weeding a regular habit. Mulching around your plants can reduce weed growth while also helping

the soil retain moisture.

Pruning

Pruning helps with airflow, prevents disease and encourages better production but it also requires a leap of faith. Remove too little, and your plant becomes an overcrowded mess. Remove too much, and you'll apologize to it for the next week or so.

Never remove more than 25% growth, paying particular attention to leaves laying on or touching the soil.

Harvesting at the right time

Knowing when to harvest is just as important as growing the plants themselves. Picking vegetables at their peak ensures the best flavor, texture and nutritional value.

Harvesting regularly also encourages many plants to continue producing. For example, picking beans, zucchini and peppers frequently will signal the plant to keep flowering and setting fruit.

On the other hand, leaving produce on the plant too long can lead to tough textures or reduced productivity. Keep an eye on size, color and firmness, and don't be afraid to harvest a little early — many vegetables are at their sweetest when young.

Taking care of your vegetable garden after planting is an ongoing process, but it's also one of the most rewarding parts of gardening.

With consistent watering, proper feeding, regular weeding, adding compost and timely harvesting, your garden will flourish — and so will your yield.

Susan Fisher is the garden manager at the Brookdale Gardens.

BILLY'S LET'S EAT REVIEW

Downtown pub taps into Macon's social scene

Open since 2014, Just Tap'd has become a cornerstone of downtown Macon's social scene. It operates as both a craft beer taproom and a gastro pub, offering a carefully curated selection of beers that go far beyond the expected. This is not a place that leans only on local labels. Instead, the focus is on bringing in selections that you cannot easily find elsewhere, giving customers the opportunity to explore something new with every visit.

Before we dive further into the beer, the food or the stories, there's something coming up at Just Tap'd that perfectly captures what this place is all about. On April 25, Just Tap'd is bringing together locals for an evening that is just as much about connection as it is about craft beverages. While beer may be the headline, the real draw is the atmosphere. It is a reflection of what Just Tap'd has built over the years: not just a taproom, but a gathering place. And I won't deny it - I already got my tickets and would love to meet up with my Macon Melody Foodies!

The heart of Just Tap'd is found in the people behind it. General Manager Janice has been a fixture in downtown Macon for years, with nearly a decade of experience at Just Tap'd alone. Her connection to the space is more than professional. She met her husband there during Cherry Blossom season, and what started as a first date turned into a life rooted in the very place where she now helps build community for others.

The staff does not come across as people just doing a job. They feel like part of the experience, and that starts the moment you sit down.

Bartenders like Addison are a perfect example of that. During my numerous visits, he took the time to ask what I did for a living and showed real interest in the conversation, something that is becoming increasingly rare. I even ran into him again during St. Paddy's Day, where we shared a drink and picked right back up like old friends.

Today, it is not uncommon to see familiar faces returning again and



Billy Hennessey

again, some of whom now bring their children along. That sense of community extends into everything they do. Trivia nights — held on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 7-11 p.m. — are less about competition and more about camaraderie. The same groups return week after week, checking in on each other, celebrating birthdays and creating a space where people feel known. As Janice put it, relationships are built through food and beverages, and at Just Tap'd, that philosophy is lived out daily.

Ownership also reflects deep ties to Macon. Nate and Kaitlenn Kreslin, who are also behind Fall Line Brewing Co., have helped shape Just Tap'd into what it is today. Kaitlenn, a Macon native and Mercer University graduate, brings a strong connection to the local community, while Nate's background in business and time spent working behind the bar at Just Tap'd gives him a unique understanding of both the industry and the customer experience. Together, they have created a space that balances quality, approachability and a strong sense of place.

And then there is the beer.

With more than 60 taps rotating regularly, Just Tap'd offers a selection that requires a certain level of commitment. It is the kind of place where you quickly realize that trying everything is less of a suggestion and more of a challenge. During the holidays, that challenge becomes official with events like the "12 Beers of Christmas," where participants work their way through a curated list for a prize T-shirt. Some might take weeks to complete it. Others, apparently, manage it in just a few days.

Beyond the taps, about 75% of the beers offered are also available for retail purchase, allowing customers to sample before committing to a can or even a keg. Under Georgia law, those keg purchases are facili-



PHOTO PROVIDED BY BILLY HENNESSEY

In addition to its extensive craft beer offerings, Just Tap'd in downtown Macon offers diners a rotating pizza of the month, such as a buffalo chicken pizza.

tated through distributors, meaning customers can access products from local breweries like Fall Line or Ocmulgee Brewpub through Just Tap'd as a retail partner. The experience is not just about drinking beer. It is about learning, exploring, and finding what you like.

If beer is not your thing, there are plenty of other options. Wine flights are available, along with quarterly tastings and creative events like wine and candy pairings. The addition of a full liquor bar has only expanded those options further.

The food menu follows the same philosophy. It is approachable, creative and constantly evolving. One standout feature is the rotating pizza of the month, which encourages customers to try something new, even if it falls outside their usual comfort

zone.

I'll be honest. The first time I ate at Just Tap'd, I ordered one of those featured pizzas, and it just did not quite hit the mark for me. I loved the energy of the place so much that I knew it deserved another shot. And I am glad I gave it one.

On my return visit, I tried the buffalo chicken pizza, and it completely changed my perspective. It was bold, flavorful and exactly what I had been hoping for the first time around. It also served as a reminder that not every experience is going to be perfect on the first try, but sometimes it is absolutely worth going back.

At its core, Just Tap'd is about more than beer. In a downtown that continues to grow and evolve, it remains a place that feels grounded,

familiar and consistently welcoming.

And if you find yourself at the Just Tap'd Beer Event on April 25, keep an eye out for me. I'll be the one proudly wearing my red "12 Beers of Christmas" T-shirt like I trained for it, because, quite frankly, I did. Come say hello, grab a beer and don't be shy. Let's take a selfie and toast to Macon's growing food and beer scene the proper way. Being Irish, I fully believe every good conversation deserves a great "Sláinte," so consider this your official invitation to raise a glass with me.

Until next time, Macon... let's eat and drink some beer!

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

SPORTS

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THE FUTURE OF BASEBALL

How Mercer's new training facility embraces MLB-level tech and analytics



BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
micah@maconmelody.com

If you listen carefully to a Mercer baseball practice inside the team's newly-built training facility — if you tune your ear past the pings of metal bats, the shouts of players and the whirs and clanks of pitching machines — you can hear the future of baseball.

The sounds come from behind Mercer's newest technology, a pitching machine called an iPitch. As a player begins batting practice, a trainer working behind the machine hollers to the hitter at the other end of the netted batting cage.

"Slider." "Fastball, split." "Offspeed." He's shouting out pitch types, telling the Mercer player what to look for as he places balls into the machine. The trainer does this because the pitches spit out by this iPitch are much different from regular batting practice lobs.

There's noticeable drop and movement on the balls the machine hurls toward players. Offspeed pitches dip past one batter's knees. A slider peels off with surprising break just as it crosses the plate.

The iPitch is the crown jewel of Mercer's new Cantrell Family Baseball Performance Center, a two-story building that opened last month next to the left field line of the Bears' baseball stadium.

The facility is packed with new technology and top-of-the-line amenities and gives Mercer an edge in training and recruiting that, according to coaches, rivals the luxuries boasted by the best teams in college baseball.

"When I say it's as good as anyone's (facilities) in the country, it's on the same level as a Power 4 program," head coach Craig Gibson said. "What we're able to do is incredible. We can really pinpoint and target certain areas of efficiency. It's one thing to tell (players what to change). When they have the ability to see it, it takes learning forward."

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PHOTOS BY JASON VORHEES
TOP: Mercer pitcher Garrett Lambert prepares to sling a pitch during a practice session as a high-speed camera tracks his hand while he throws. Mercer baseball analytics director Garrett Kemp (far left) said the cameras can pinpoint the exact moment the ball leaves a pitcher's last finger, tracking spin and pitch movement.

LEFT: Mannueqins sport Mercer's uniforms in the lobby of the performance center. While the bottom floor houses the batting cages featuring state-of-the-art machines, the top floor has a spacious team room and a patio area for guests to watch games down the left field line.

Documentary on MLB legend from GA set to air in Macon

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
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Maconites can catch a glimpse of baseball and American history next week when the Douglass Theatre screens a new documentary that sheds light on the career of a legendary Georgia baseball player.

"Stalking the Big Cat of Georgia" will air at the Douglass on Tuesday, April 21 at 7:30 p.m. The film tells the story of Johnny Mize, an MLB Hall of Fame first baseman who hails from the small North Georgia community of Demorest.

Director Hal Jacobs was turned onto Mize's story when he read the biography of the player written by historian and Demorest native Jerry Grillo.

"I had read some of Jerry's work. I didn't know him personally, but he had written about an Atlanta musician previously. When I heard about the baseball book coming out, I thought, 'This could be fun,'" Jacobs said.

When he got his hands on Grillo's biography about Mize, the film director knew he had something great. Jacobs specializes in highlighting Georgians with important stories that get overlooked, and Mize's intriguing career arc seemed to fit the bill.

The film explores how Mize took a long route to MLB but slugged with the best of them once he got

there. The first baseman played for the St. Louis Cardinals, New York Giants and New York Yankees across a 15-year career and hit 359 home runs while batting .312.

Despite his incredible performance, Mize had to wait 28 years before he was inducted into the Hall of Fame, another key point in the documentary.

Grillo acts as the lynchpin for the journey, talking at the baseball field where Mize played when he was young and guiding the film crew through the roads of Demorest.

"One of the first people we met was a third cousin of Mize's. It turns out she was an artist who had done some beautiful portraits of Johnny," Jacobs said. "She also had a great memorabilia collection with autographs and things like that."

Mize's career accolades weren't only limited to his time on MLB fields. Grillo was surprised to learn, for instance, that Mize played some games in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. He also played with some of the country's best Negro League players.

This reminded Jacobs of an interview he'd conducted long ago — and would lead to one of the "Big Cat" documentary's most unique aspects.

"I realized I had met with a player who played for the Atlanta Black Crackers, James 'Red' Moore, and interviewed him about

20 years ago," Jacobs said.

He noticed parallels between Mize and Moore's career. Both left baseball to serve in the military, for instance, though Mize was able to return to the game after World War II while Moore was not. Both players were beloved by teammates and fans, with Moore having a particularly passionate group of followers in Atlanta.

Though Moore had sadly passed away when the documentary was being made, Jacobs held onto the interviews and still knew one of Moore's acquaintances. The director decided to include him in the documentary, with Moore's friend Greg White acting as the guide for that portion of the film.

"We really just wanted to tell a human story. We do not geek out on statistics. We wanted to not only show the humanity of the players, but also the men who are telling the stories and carrying them forward," Jacobs said. "We thought it would also be important to add that — if we're going to tell the story of this white first baseman who was an All-Star, we need to talk about this Black baseball player who was beloved by his community."

Moore even played at Macon's historic Luther Williams Field when he appeared for the Macon

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Russell Henley watches his shot at a golf event last August. The Macon native and Stratford grad got the best finish of his career at the Masters.

Stratford grad Henley places third at Masters

BY MICHAEL A. LOUGH
Melody Contributor

It wasn't the birthday of a lifetime, but it was a mighty good one.

Macon native and Stratford grad Russell Henley won't soon forget his 37th birthday, even if it failed to be as epic and unforgettable as it could have been.

It was close.

Henley turned in another clutch performance, but couldn't get over the birdie hump late to gain ground and finished tied for third in his 10th Masters appearance. After struggling to break 70 with any regularity in Augusta, Henley finished with a 68 on Sunday after hitting 66 on Saturday.

He headed to the clubhouse three shots behind then-leader Rory McIlroy, who responded impressively from Saturday's huge stumble and won the Masters for the second consecutive year.

Scottie Scheffler made a late run and battled Justin Rose just behind McIlroy.

Henley finished tied for third at 10 under, his 278 just two shots back of winner McIlroy and one behind Scheffler. Also at 278 were Justin Rose, Cameron Young and Tyrell Hatton.

The 278 is Henley's best in

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The technology puts Mercer at the forefront of the college game — and replicates the science that now shapes America's national pastime all the way up to the major league level.

On the cutting edge

Gibson compared the iPitch machine to a video game. It allows players to simulate the things they might see from a specific pitcher on the field.

The machine accomplishes this by adjusting the speed of the pitch, the direction and other factors. It can even change the spin rate — how fast the ball spins, measured in revolutions per minute — to get a pitch to move more. Unlike another machine in Mercer's facility that is controlled only by a trio of knobs on the body of the machine, the iPitch is programmed with a tablet that has a variety of adjustable settings.

While the trainer does sometimes tell a player what's coming so they can get a better feel for different paths a ball takes, the machine can also have several different pitches loaded at once and throw them at random, approximating an actual on-field at-bat.

"Any pitcher you can think of, it can pitch like them. Even pro guys, you can put in that data," said Garrett Kemp, Mercer baseball's director of analytics. "If you want to dial it up to see a nasty slider, like one a real pitcher would throw, you can do that. ... If a guy comes in and says, 'I'm struggling with (right-handed pitchers throwing) changeups,' he can come in here and hit 100 of them."

Kemp was a key decision maker who helped choose what equipment would furnish the new facility. Many of the players call him "Moneyball" — the name of the 2011 film about baseball analytics starring Brad Pitt — because of his penchant for advanced statistics and high-tech baseball knowledge. He even helped install Trackman, a system used by MLB and college teams to track advanced statistics during games, when he first arrived at Mercer.

The iPitch is used by 23 Major League Baseball teams, according to its website. Kemp said the key difference between Mercer's sparkling new digs and an MLB team's space is that they have less equipment than an MLB organization would have — the gear itself is pro-level stuff.

Kemp said the equipment is more important than ever now that college athletes are developing to near-

MLB levels of precision.

The new machine proved particularly useful ahead of a recent series against Oregon State, a top-10 team in the country and a perennial powerhouse. Mercer had to go up against Dax Whitney, one of the best players in the country.

"When you're going up against him and he's throwing 98-100 mph, it's hard to prepare for that. It's a short arm slot, it's fast," Kemp said. "The ability to tune guys up (to that) in the batting cage is huge."

Mercer hit two home runs off Whitney. They scored three runs, the most any team has notched against Whitney so far this season.

Kemp also got the team extremely high-speed cameras to help pitchers. The cameras can track a pitcher's hand before he throws in vivid slow motion, showing the exact moment the player lets go of the ball.

"You can see the very last finger that touches the ball," Gibson said. "One of our pitchers was having difficulty with his breaking ball, and it basically came down to where he was releasing the ball. ... You can see the spin rate and how the ball moves."

The team also uses Uplift, a motion-tracking program that allows players to study their own movements using animations.

"If you've seen the dots they use in CGI for movies, that's how they used to have to do it. Uplift is great because you don't have any markers. No dots," Kemp said. "We can look at shoulder rotation, hip rotation and a lot of things our strength team wants to see."

In addition to these big-league improvements came dozens of smaller upgrades, Kemp said. There are more TVs where players can watch film or study their own movements tracked by the high-speed cameras or Uplift program. The batting cages on the bottom floor are even big enough to field ground balls in.

The top floor has a large team room that Gibson said is a major luxury for players. Gibson himself also got a sizable office overlooking the field. An outdoor patio offers space for guests — perhaps recruits or donors — to watch games.

The plush facility and its various features represent Mercer baseball embracing a new era.

'New baseball'

The performance center and its high-tech equipment have been in development for close to three years, Gibson said. He and longtime Mercer donor Charlie Cantrell came up with the idea for the facility, and Mercer announced the project in 2024.

The head coach said the facility



PHOTOS BY JASON VORHEES

TOP: The jerseys of Mercer major leaguers Kyle Lewis, Colby Thomas and Cory Gearrin adorn the walls of the top floor of Mercer's new Cantrell Family Baseball Performance Center.

BOTTOM: The iPitch machine can simulate the spin rates used by pitchers Mercer has to face in games.

and its new-age tools are important because they help the team focus on one of its main goals.

"When we talk to recruits, we talk about development. That's a huge piece of what we do — the ability to make guys better," Gibson said.

Player development has set Mercer apart from other programs at the mid-major level of college baseball. Gibson referenced former Bears outfielder Kyle Lewis, who blossomed once he arrived at Mercer. He then became the highest MLB draft pick in Southern Conference history and won the American League Rookie of the Year award in 2020.

Jerseys from Lewis and other Mercer players who made the majors are framed and displayed on the top floor of the facility. Several players from the school have been drafted in recent years, including four players that were all selected

in 2022.

To keep that pro development going as baseball evolves, you have to dive head-on into the latest advancements, Gibson said.

"I call it 'new baseball.' It's different, but it's proven. It works. The best players use it," he said. "It's a tool in our toolbox. If it can help us, we'll embrace it."

That development helps the team improve as a whole. Mercer has been one of the most consistent programs in the nation for more than two decades. Since Gibson took over as head coach in 2004, the team is 728-504.

Kemp emphasized the importance of the tech in today's college athletics world, which revolves around the transfer portal and getting athletes in from other schools.

"We're able to look at all this information and say to a guy, 'Hey,

this is what you looked like at (your last school), this is where we can take you,'" Kemp said. "It helps us with freshmen recruits, too. They've never seen stuff like this, most of the time."

Even former players who return to the facility are impressed with the tech, Kemp said. Players now working their way through the minors can come back to Mercer and have access to professional-grade equipment.

As Mercer baseball tries to remain consistent, coaches think the facility will keep them on the cutting edge.

"Some teams have so much equipment that they don't know what to do with it, but we use everything," Gibson said. "I don't think there's anything I would do differently. We've maximized the space. Now all we have to do is use it."

HENLEY

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Augusta, topping the 281 when he tied for fourth in 2023. It was quite the turnaround from missing last year's Masters after a 7-over 295 in 2024.

His share of the \$22.5 million purse is \$1.1 million.

"I hit it amazing (Sunday)," Henley told reporters, according to transcripts from ASAP Sports. "I gave myself a bunch of looks. Unfortunately, I didn't capitalize on those looks on the back like I would have liked to."

"I felt like I handled the pressure well, handled the conditions well. It was tricky out there."

Henley resumed his steady play from Saturday, when a bogey-free round after two off-kilter efforts put him in the middle of contention as McIlroy lost control of the lead.

"I was feeling pretty good," Henley said of his mindset entering Thursday. "The first day, I think I made six bogeys. A lot of mistakes from the fairway, and I feel like I cleaned up the ball-striking on the weekend."

Henley birdied his first hole on Sunday, and had three more through the first eight holes.

Before long, Henley was breathing down the neck of new leader Rose, who had passed McIlroy and Young, the leaders to start the day.

The birdie on No. 8 put him in a tie for second, a shot behind Rose.

Rose went up two shots with a birdie on No. 9 — his third straight and fifth on the front nine — leaving McIlroy, Young, Henley and Hatton all tied for second.

Hatton was five holes ahead of Henley, who was two holes ahead of Rose and four ahead of Young and McIlroy.

As Henley's tee shot on par-3 No. 11 found the left side flowers just off the green, he dropped into a tie for fourth with Hatton as McIlroy and Young jumped up to share second, one back of Rose.

A subpar and very makeable 6-foot putt followed a nice chip, and the first bogey of the day dropped Henley into a tie for fifth with Scheffler, three shots back.

Not for long.

Henley birdied the par-5 13 while Rose bogeyed No. 11 and McIlroy followed two straight birdies with two straight pars.

Meanwhile, Hatton headed to the clubhouse tied for third with a 66, and 10 under for the tournament. Scheffler dropped to sixth.

Henley just missed a birdie putt, right by about two inches, for a share of the lead on 14, but stayed put with par.

His tee shot on 15 found some mild rough, which he easily escaped. His 16-footer for birdie was too strong and left, settling for par as Rose, Young and McIlroy came up with some big shots.

McIlroy's birdie on 12 put him up two.

Henley barely missed a birdie try

on 16, all but closing the door on his chances to pull off the big birthday bonanza.

He parred the final holes — saved by a sweet chip on 18 to set up a par — and headed to the clubhouse tied for fourth with Young and Hatton, behind leader McIlroy, and then Scheffler and Rose.

There was plenty of golf left, but those above him on the leaderboard stayed there, and he picked up a spot and some extra money, as well as the confidence of his best overall performance in a major.

"Yeah, I feel like I handled it well, kind of like, 'I can do this,'" Henley said. "I feel like I handled the nerves well. I just felt like my reads weren't very good. Really happy with how I competed."

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Peaches, adding a nice local touch to Tuesday's screenings in Macon.

Jacobs said the screenings give him and the others involved with the documentary the chance to speak with people in the community about the film and what parts of it resonate with them.

"Baseball fans love it, but we've also been told that people who aren't as passionate about baseball come out of it understanding a

little more about why their husband or son might love baseball so much," Jacobs said. "It's really about how we value history in our communities and how we keep these memories alive."

The screening at the Douglas begins with a happy hour at 6:30 p.m. before the film starts at 7:30 p.m. Jacobs and Grillo will discuss the film with the audience. Tickets are \$5.

If guests can't be there Tuesday, the documentary will also air on Georgia Public Broadcasting on Monday, May 4 at 10 p.m.

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