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The Macon Melody

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Judge may review school settlement in Melody open records case in camera

BY CASEY CHOUNG
Community Reporter
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A Bibb County Superior Court judge will consider reviewing a 2024 Bibb County School District settlement himself after a hearing between The Macon Melody and the district took place Wednesday.

Judge Ken Smith presided over the hearing, which was called in response to a motion for partial summary judgment made by The Melody, but both sides agreed to table the motion.

The hearing came after the newsroom filed the lawsuit in August, calling on the court to compel the district to disclose information tied to open records requests made by Melody reporters.

Senior Reporter Laura Corley requested the dollar amount of a settlement approved by the school district at a meeting in July 2024. The district denied the request and others related to the details of the settlement, citing student privacy laws.

The Melody asserts that amounts in the settlement are public records subject to disclosure under the Georgia Open Records Act.

An in camera — or private — review by Smith would help the court determine which items in the settlement are not considered educational records.

An April 23 affidavit from the school district notes how the settlement contains "several dollar figures that are tied to specific aspects of the student's education," which Melody counsel Luke Andrews of Atlanta-based Stanton Law said implies other dollar amounts in the settlement are not considered educational records and therefore subject to public disclosure.

"The only thing that I am considering at this point giving a ruling on is whether or not to start an in camera process," Smith said.

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New legislation leaves fate of school zone cameras unclear

BY CASEY CHOUNG
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Becca Richard walks her son to and from Vineville Academy of the Arts every school day. She's seen plenty of speeding cars zoom past them on Vineville Avenue.

Some Maconites might disagree, but, for Richard, there's little doubt that school zone speed cameras are necessary on the high-traffic road.

"Why not have that extra piece of accountability?" she said.

Bibb County voters could decide as soon as July 2027 whether they agree with her.

At the end of its session, the General Assembly passed House Bill 651, which requires local governments to get the permission of voters in order to keep the controversial school zone speed cameras in their communities.

Existing cameras would continue to operate until contracts with the private vendors that run them come up for renewal.

Opponents of the cameras see them as a money grab and argue that they are getting installed more as a way to generate revenue than as a safety measure.

Tickets are issued to anyone driving more than 10 miles per hour over the posted speed limit, starting

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

A "Photo Enforced" sign and speed cameras stand near the entrance to Vineville Academy of the Arts on Vineville Avenue in Macon. New state legislation would require Macon-Bibb County voters to approve continued use of the school zone speed cameras.

Mechanical heart gives 7-year-old Macon girl a 'new lease on life'

BY ALAYSIA EZZARD
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In many ways, Macon's Myliyah Grace Leitzsey is like any other 7-year-old child. She loves music and painting and coloring.

Sometimes, when she would wake up in the middle of the night in her hospital bed at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, she'd want to paint a heart or flowers.

And that was just fine with her mother, Queenishua Moses. She was happy to see her child happy.

Grace has spent much of the past seven months confined to the hospital because of a rare heart condition. Born with hypoplastic left heart syndrome, she is awaiting a heart transplant. Right now, the left side of her heart is too underdeveloped to pump blood efficiently. According to the Mayo Clinic, hypoplastic left heart syndrome affects about 1,000 newborns in the country yearly, and the cause is unknown.

Grace was diagnosed at 20 weeks and has spent years in and out of hospitals for treatment.

It was in September, shortly after the new school year started, that teachers at Macon's Alexander II Magnet School noticed that something wasn't right with Grace. She seemed to be struggling to breathe, so they called an ambulance.

In early March, Grace went into cardiac arrest, but doctors were able to bring her back. She then had an 11-hour surgery during which she received a mechanical heart known as a VAD, or ventricular assist device.

The mechanical heart has helped her go back to being a kid as she awaits a transplant.

"She hasn't been able to be this normal in a long time, like playing and sometimes running," Moses said. "She just can be a normal kid."

Currently, Grace and her mom are staying at the Ronald McDonald House near the hospital in Atlanta, so her doctors can keep a close eye on her until they feel comfortable sending her back to Macon.

When Moses received the news that her daughter was ready to leave the hospital, she felt nervous.

"I was so used to being in the hospital because for the last seven months, that was our home," Moses said.

One day soon, she hopes, they'll be able to go home to Macon.

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Queenishua Moses and her daughter Myliyah Grace Leitzsey share a laugh on the swings at Tattnall Square Park on April 27. Leitzsey, 7, has spent much of the past seven months hospitalized at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta while awaiting a heart transplant for a rare condition. A mechanical heart has allowed her to enjoy more normal activities in recent weeks.

POWER » OUR ONGOING SERIES ON PUBLIC AUTHORITIES

A disaster shaped Macon's water system — and the work continues decades later

BY LAURA E. CORLEY
Senior Reporter
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An unusually wet June had already saturated the ground in Macon, leaving streams and creeks straining at their banks.

Then came Alberto, a weakening tropical storm that meandered toward the city — and unexpectedly paused.

For days in early July, it just hovered. The relentless downpour that followed is etched in local memory as The Great Flood of '94.

The Ocmulgee River rose to more than 35 feet and breached the city's levee — a 5-mile earthen wall that begins at Central City Park and rambles through farmlands and pastures before ending at the railroad tracks in Bronson Yard.

For the city's engineer at the time, it was a wakeup call.

"We were stunned," Bill Causey said. "Little drainage issues we never knew existed had suddenly become drainage problems that were endangering people's fences and houses and things like that."

The deluge left parts of Macon submerged.

Upstream, the water treatment plant off Riverside Drive — where Amerson River Park is now located — also flooded.

Many residents went for about two weeks without access to water to drink, cook, shower or flush a toilet.

Herbert Dennard, who was serving on the Macon Water Authority board then, looks back at the flood 32 years later and sees it now as a sort of "blessing" in disguise. Some $93.5 million in disaster money

SEE WATER
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Aging stormwater system, growing county have MWA playing catch-up

BY LAURA E. CORLEY
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Water has always drawn people to the banks of the Ocmulgee River — Indigenous settlers thousands of years ago, Europeans who established Macon in 1823 and generations since.

As the local population grew, so did the infrastructure built to manage its water supply. Now a significant portion of it — from brick culverts to terracotta pipes — is failing.

For years, Bill Causey, a former engineer for the city of Macon, worked to map all of the drainage pipes, catch basins, ditches and storm drains so the city could comply with a 1990 federal law requiring towns with populations of 100,000 or more create detailed stormwater management plans to direct and treat rainwater runoff, preventing flooding, reducing erosion and protecting water quality.

"It's a huge undertaking," said Causey, who still does consultant work on behalf of Macon-Bibb County.

When the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency inspected

SEE SYSTEM
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MAY 19 BALLOT INCLUDES SCHOOL, WATER RACES



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

"I Secured My Vote" stickers await voters at a county precinct during the November 2024 general election.

BOARD OF EDUCATION AT-LARGE POST 7
— Kerry Hatcher
— Amy Morton

BOARD OF EDUCATION AT-LARGE POST 8
— Jonathan Fisher
— Lisa Garrett-Boyd*
— Carlos A. McCloud
— Nola McFadden

WATER AUTHORITY AT-LARGE
— Gary Bechtel*
— Desmond D. Brown

WATER AUTHORITY DISTRICT 2
— Ron E. Lemon
— Shariff Robbins-Brinson
— Renoalda Scott
— Marshall Talley

The Macon Water Authority board District 2 seat is vacant after Desmond Brown resigned to seek the at-large seat.

WATER AUTHORITY DISTRICT 4
— Michael McKeever
— Frank K. Patterson Jr.*
— De'Ron Rogers

WATER AUTHORITY DISTRICT 1
— Elaine H. Lucas*

** denotes incumbent*

Election Day is 7 a.m. until 7 p.m. on Tuesday, May 19. Early voting runs through Friday, May 15.

The school board and Water Authority races are nonpartisan. In addition to these races, there are a number of nonpartisan judicial contests on the ballot.

Voters will also decide, in partisan races, party nominees for U.S. Senate, U.S. House, governor, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, attorney general, commissioner of agriculture, commissioner of insurance, state school superintendent and commissioner of labor.

There are also two ballot questions — one about election integrity measures and another about judges and felony bail conditions.

Check your voter status, find your polling place and see a complete sample ballot at mvp.sos.ga.gov.

CAMERAS

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an hour before the school day begins and running until an hour after it ends, county spokesperson Chris Floore previously told The Melody.

The cameras record vehicles and automatically issue citations if the speed limit is exceeded. Payment is accepted through an online payment portal.

Macon-Bibb County has a contract with Altumint, a Maryland-based company specializing in traffic enforcement technologies.

The company installs the cameras, issues the speeding tickets and collects payments.

The revenue is then funneled to the county.

Altumint takes a $25 cut from each ticket. In Bibb County, $4.2 million was collected in 2024.

According to the county's agreement with Altumint, the contract renews automatically at the start of every July unless either the camera company or county says otherwise.

The county will review the implications of the law before taking any action, officials said.

The legislation passed would also prohibit the cameras on four-lane roads without crosswalks and require flashing yellow lights, speeding indicators and posted notice of the cameras.

The first cameras in Bibb County were installed in April 2022 and have since grown in number. Now they are located in more than a dozen school zones.

In addition to the cameras close to Vineville Academy, the automated ticketing systems can be found near Appling, Ballard-Hudson and Weaver middle schools; Rutland Middle and High; Springdale, Heard, Hartley, Sonny Carter, Heritage, John R. Lewis, MLK, Porter, Bruce and Ingram-Pye elementary schools; Southwest and Westside high schools; and Northwoods Academy.

Individual public schools cannot opt out of the cameras under the county's agreement with the Bibb County School District, which has complete discretion to have cameras installed.

The Academy for Classical Education, First Presbyterian Day School and Windsor Academy also have cameras nearby.

No pedestrian deaths have been reported in a school zone in Bibb County between 2020 and 2024, according to The Macon Newsroom.

Richard knows that no one likes getting a ticket. She's gotten one herself. But she sees it as "just the price of doing business."

The citations are treated as civil offenses and do not count against a driver's record.

However, if citations go unpaid, the state can suspend a violator's car registration.

The bill would mandate the funds be used exclusively for "public safety or law enforcement initiatives."

Funds from the tickets in Bibb County have been used to pay for a truancy specialist, campus police officers and crossing guards for the Bibb County School District, but also equipment for law enforcement, such as radios and Flock cloud-connected cameras.

Under the new bill, ticket costs would be decreased from $100 to $75 for the first violation and from $150 to $125 for subsequent violations.

The legislation awaits final approval from Gov. Brian Kemp, who has until May 12 to sign them into law.

CASE

Continued from Page 1

Andrews also mentioned the possibility of both parties stipulating to certain facts — such as whether it was reasonable for the district to believe The Melody knew the student's identity — rather than spending additional time and money on further discovery.

The discovery period will end in July.

No trial date has been set.

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Thursday, May 14 | 6:00pm - 9:00pm
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WARNER ROBINS POLICE DEPT. GEORGIA'S CITY OF WARNER ROBINS INTERNATIONAL CITY
WRPD STRONG NIGHT OF BLUE LIGHTS WR
THE WARNER ROBINS POLICE DEPARTMENT, ALONGSIDE NEIGHBORING PUBLIC SAFETY AGENCIES, WILL BE ON SITE WITH VEHICLES, OFFICERS, AND OPPORTUNITIES TO CONNECT WITH THE COMMUNITY.
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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

A homeless encampment along the Ocmulgee River near I-16 and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard reflects a crisis that Macon — like communities across the country — has yet to solve.

Homeless enforcement bill puts Macon-Bibb on notice

BY GRANT BLANKENSHIP
Georgia Public Broadcasting
gpb.org/news

Bibb County resident Andrew Eck is fed up.

Most weekdays, Eck, who makes his living building furniture from salvaged wood and renovating old houses, drives his golf cart down to Macon's Ocmulgee Heritage Trail — the short river walk that's been disrupted for years now as the Georgia Department of Transportation revamps the Interstate 75/16 interchange by the trail.

"My scope is to get the downtown river walk clean and safe and usable for everybody," Eck said one afternoon with a pair of journalists riding with him.

From Eck's perspective, the thing in the way of that are encampments that sprang up on the riverwalk, belonging to unhoused people who moved in while GDOT rendered much of the trail impassable.

"So right here, this is a pretty big camp," Eck said as he pulled up to a notch in a wall of trailside bamboo. "This has one guy right here, if you walk in there, he's got like BB guns and like seven bikes."

This is just one of the spots Eck has been checking on for some time, and up until now he has been pretty frustrated by the Macon-Bibb County government's response to this campground and others like it.

He wants the county to clean these camps out.

"That's not what this was designed for," Eck said. "There's 150,000 people in our community that are entitled to use this park. One individual can't hoard it."

Eck is not alone in his concern about public space and the unhoused.

That feeling inspired a bill that passed the Georgia Legislature this year aimed at pushing cities to enforce laws already on the books related to homelessness.

"And so, as the laws are right now, this is not right," Eck said, looking at the encampment in the bamboo. "It's illegal."

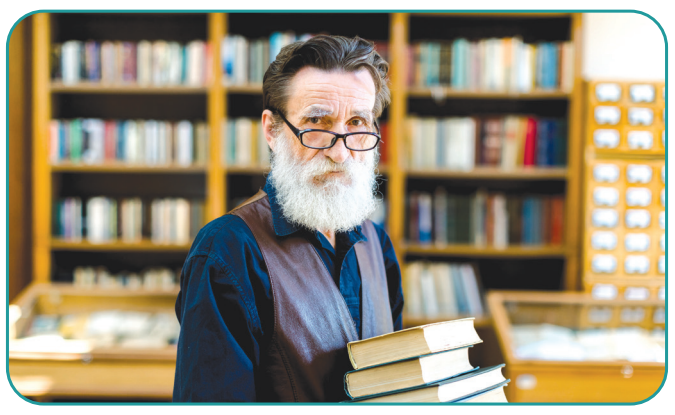
In Macon-Bibb County code, public camping, or at least staying in parks after sundown, is indeed illegal. But camps could be growing here.

Data for Macon-Bibb County from the annual Point-in-Time count, a national census of the homeless, suggests a 33% increase in the total number of unhoused people in the community since 2020. The same data suggests that a growing number of those people are choosing to stay away from traditional homeless shelters.

SEE BILL
PAGE 4

Special Content furnished to the Macon Melody.

LOW-STAKES LEARNING KEEPS YOUR BRAIN SHARP AS YOU AGE: HERE'S HOW



Sponsored by: Carlyle Place
A Life-Plan Community of **Atrium Health Navicent**

For most of your life, learning new skills or information isn't a choice — it's a necessity. In early life and middle age, school, work, and parenting keep your brain active and limber, forcing you to absorb new knowledge daily.

But one day, when you've reached the age where retirement arrives or work slows, the choice to learn will be yours. Science increasingly recommends taking the opportunity to continue your lifelong learning as you age into your senior years.

Purposefully learning new skills and knowledge isn't just a fun pastime in retirement — it can help you maintain and strengthen your cognitive abilities well into your golden years. Here's why your golden years are the best time to engage in enriching, low-stakes learning.

Why Keep Learning?

You may think that cognitive decline is an inevitability that comes with aging, but studies are showing that continued learning can help you stay sharp in your later years. In 2023, a Scientific American study gave a group of 58- to 86-year-olds access to three months of thrice-weekly classes covering everything from learning a new language to using an iPad.

The long-term impact was significant. Scientific American found that year after year, even after the courses ended, participants had significantly improved cognitive abilities like memory and attention span. (In fact, many of their cognitive scores resembled those of someone 50 years younger.)

Meanwhile, researchers at Harvard Medical School have found that continuing to challenge your brain, when paired with five other key preventive actions, can help your mind stay agile and adaptive when solving problems.

Alongside the potential health benefits, there are the practical factors that make continued learning a no-brainer. Learning on your own time in your senior years is a low-stakes, no-pressure pursuit; there are no grades, no employee evaluations, no accountability beyond your duty to your own health and development.

Those factors are pretty compelling to many senior adults. An AARP study on lifelong learning found that 55% of Americans aged 45 and older say they're actively learning new things to stay mentally sharp and simply gain new knowledge.

The most popular areas of interest for ongoing learners included new technology, history, food and drink, and diet and nutrition, AARP found.

Finding New Learning Opportunities

When you make the choice to continue your lifelong learning journey into your senior years, you're not bound by traditional education options. Of course, if you do want to learn in a more traditional academic atmosphere, there are plenty of options for you, including:

- **Auditing a college class.** Many public universities offer senior adults the opportunity to audit undergraduate courses for free or at reduced cost.

- **Taking a senior-specific university course.** 125 U.S. universities are home to a campus Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. Each institute offers non-credit classes specifically geared toward students aged 50 and up. Check out the Osher site to see if a college near you has a Lifelong Learning Institute.

- **Attending a local vocational or technical school.** Your local vo-tech may offer special tuition discounts or initiatives for senior adults who want to take a course (or a few).

If you'd rather not revisit your school days, there are still plenty of less formal learning options available for you. You might try:

- **Looking into volunteer opportunities near you.** Volunteering is a great way to help others and learn new things, whether you donate your time to a zoo, library, primary school, animal shelter, or other organization.

- Checking out community art centers and art councils near you. Creative institutions like these may offer skill-specific classes or even senior learning programs that can help you learn everything from pottery techniques to embroidery skills.

- **Trying online or digital learning.** It's easy to find everything from professional courses on LinkedIn to hobby and skill education videos on YouTube — and even language practice opportunities on apps like Duolingo.

As you seek out continuing learning opportunities, consider trying some in-person options. The commitment will give you a great way to fight the isolation and loneliness that sometimes comes with aging.

Regardless of how you learn, your choice to keep developing new skills and knowledge into your golden years will pay dividends for your cognitive health.





SNAPSHOTS













PHOTO NO. 1 — Lizella Baptist Church office manager Jen Sandefur, left, and member Vicki Hullet organize a trailer containing supplies to send to those affected by the wildfires in Brantley County. The church sent two full trailers of supplies on April 25 and plan to send more down this week. *Photo by Jason Vorhees.*

PHOTO NO. 2 — Artist Randy Heart paints a mural during the Pan African Festival of Georgia at Henderson Stadium. The four-day long festival featured a prayer walk on Thursday, an Afrocentric Ball on Friday, and an arts and crafts festival over the weekend. *Photo by Matt Odom.*

PHOTO NO. 3 — The Southwest High School band performs during the Pan African Festival of Georgia last weekend. *Photo by Matt Odom.*

PHOTO 4 — An attendee of the Pan African Festival tries on handmade jewelry from a vendor booth at Henderson Stadium last weekend. *Photo by Matt Odom.*

PHOTO 5 — The Macon-Bibb County Fire Department holds a "push-in ceremony" for a new aircraft rescue and fire fighting vehicle Wednesday monring. The Rosenbauer Panther 4X4 will be located at Station 4 on Flightline Avenue. *Photo courtesy of Macon-Bibb County.*

PHOTO 6 — A couple shops in the religious section of the Friends of the Library Annual Book Sale in the Round Building at Carolyn Crayton Park last weekend. The book selections were organized by volunteers into different genres and categories, including self-help, cooking, collectibles and more. *Photo by Jason Vorhees.*

BILL

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Republican state Rep. Houston Gaines said he has seen and heard about something similar in Athens-Clarke County, the heart of his district.

"I hear from people whose families, you know, they don't feel comfortable going to eat downtown because every time they go somewhere they're being harassed by panhandlers," Gaines said. "And so those are the kind of issues that we're trying to address and try to make sure we're cleaning up."

His tool is the bill he sponsored — House Bill 295.

"What this bill does is it puts local governments' feet to the fire," Gaines said.

HB 295 passed both the Georgia House and Senate and now awaits Gov. Brian Kemp's signature.

It would work like this: If your community has not been enforcing laws around homelessness, and if you own real property such as a home or a business and that property loses value, you could sue the local government for the loss. You could go to court and try and win a monetary refund.

Gaines said the bare mechanics of HB 295 obscure its real purpose.

"Our goal here is not actually the refunds," Gaines said. "Our goal is just to get local governments to enforce the law."

But it would be out of fear of getting sued.

During a recent meeting of the Macon-Bibb County Commission, Mayor Lester Miller made it apparent he had heard the message.

"You've got this new House Bill 295, very serious bill, that is going to result in possibly a million dollars' worth of lawsuits to counties and cities," Miller told the commission during debate on whether to extend the contract of a private contractor called Root Analytics to complete the 2026 PIT Count for the county, a step Miller argued was critical if the county wanted to know how best to serve housed and unhoused residents alike.

The Bibb County Code Enforcement Department, which Eck wanted to see more of on the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail and many of whose officers have full arrest powers, ultimately reports to Miller, who told commissioners that just successfully defending lawsuits under HB 295 would not be enough to limit harm to the county.

The day before Miller's warning, Code Enforcement dismantled one of the camps by the river. A few days later, a new camp sprang up on the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail just a little downstream.

‘Power’ paints portrait of Macon-Bibb authorities



Joshua Wilson

When Senior Reporter Laura Corley set out to examine the local authority boards that govern much of daily life in Macon-Bibb County, the scope of what she’d find wasn’t entirely clear. What emerged over the 11 installments of our “Power” series — a primer and 10 in-depth reports — was a portrait of institutions that have quietly grown in size, reach and consequence, often with little public attention to match.

The series opened with the Macon Housing Authority, an agency whose mission has been fundamentally reshaped by decades of federal funding pullbacks and shifting national priorities. It closed with the Macon Water Authority, an organization responsible not just for the rates residents pay on their water and sewer bills but for managing a vast infrastructure system that, in many places, has outlived its useful life.

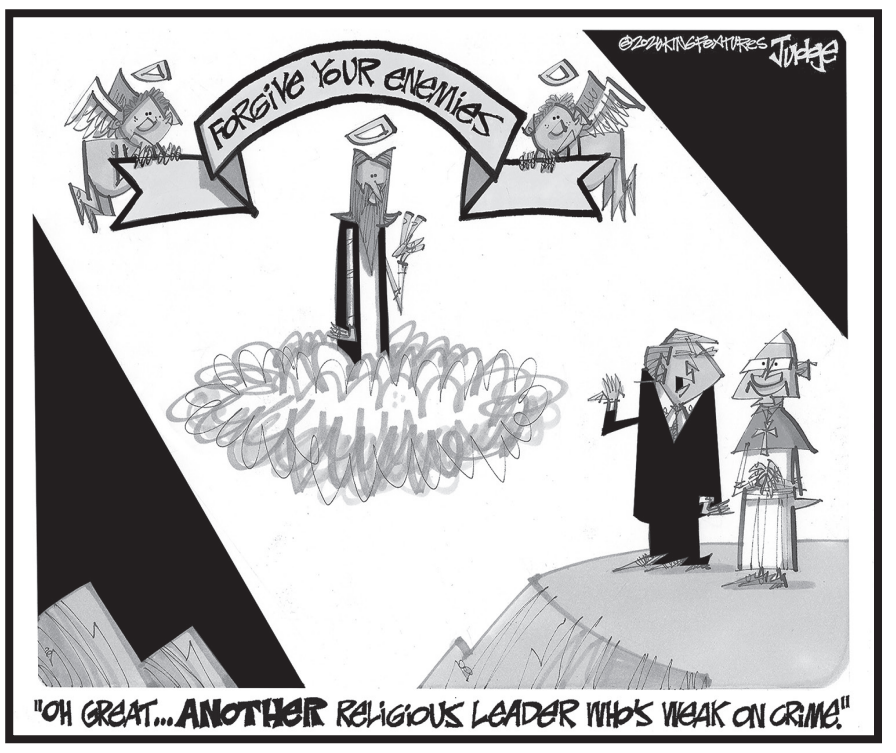
In between, the reporting revealed a consistent pattern: boards with real power over housing, land, economic development, transit, health care and public resources — power that has often expanded over time — operating at the edges of public awareness.

The strong community response reminded us why our work matters. You read these stories, shared them and asked questions. Some of you learned for the first time that these boards existed at all.

That’s our job. Journalism isn’t about telling you what to think — it’s about making sure you have the full picture. We’re excited to continue that work.

The full “Power” series is available at maconmelody.com/power.

Joshua Wilson is the executive editor of The Macon Melody. Send comments and story suggestions to joshua@maconmelody.com.



Redistricting wrongs erode rights



Marc Hyden

Ask any parent of a child who has retaliated against another, and the refrain is often the same: “Two wrongs don’t make a right.” Sure, it is an overused, pithy statement, but it is so universally true and understandable that even a child can grasp it. Yet too frequently it falls on deaf ears among politicians and their most die-hard partisans, and the results can be detrimental.

The ongoing congressional redistricting fight is Exhibit A of this sad reality, and it comes from the top. Beginning last year, President Donald Trump began pressuring Republican-led state legislatures to redraw their congressional maps. Trump’s reasoning seemed clear: to bolster the House of Representatives’ slim Republican majority and/or mitigate losses in the upcoming midterm elections. After all, Republicans worry they are facing a rout in November.

This is a blatant partisan ploy, and while there is nothing necessarily illegal about mid-decade redistricting efforts, they generally occur every 10 years following the census. What Trump urged states to do is akin to changing the rules to benefit one side halfway through a game. But instead of a meaningless contest, the goal is to make congressional maps less representative of the electorate. This has sparked a tit-for-tat race to the bottom.

Deep-red Texas was the first state to answer Trump’s call to action, and after adjusting its maps to favor Republicans, the GOP is expected to pick up anywhere from 2-5 seats. Trump and his supporters applauded the result, while Democrats bemoaned it.

Former Democratic Rep. Collin Allred responded, “I’ve never seen anything this brazen, this broken and this spineless.”

The blue state of California, never happy to be outdone by Texas, decided to retaliate with its own redistricting, which may add five Democratic seats. This could potentially leave the state’s representation heavily skewed with 48 Democrats and only four Republicans in its delegation. Nevertheless, Democrats cheered, Trump and company lashed out, and this added fuel to a chain reaction of further partisan battles.

Missouri, Ohio, Utah and Virginia have redrawn their maps too. The Virginia effort came via a referendum and aims to change the Democrats’ 6-5 edge into a 10-1 edge, but its future is in doubt. Courts have already put a hold on it.

That aside, while Trump has celebrated Republic-led redistricting, he not-so-surprisingly felt different about the Democrat-led Virginia referendum. He called it a “blatant partisan power grab,” as if the Republican initiatives weren’t.

SEE HYDEN
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Rural areas must reckon with the rise of authoritarianism



Stacey Abrams

Authoritarianism is a word used frequently these days. Politicians, academics, podcasters and yours truly have leveled it as an explanation, a warning or a call to action. Like its opponent — democracy — there seems to be a common sentiment: you’ll know it when you see it.

But when the risks are high and the harms are real, actual understanding matters. My thumbnail description is straightforward: authoritarianism attacks personal freedoms, expands concentrated power among the chosen few and avoids accountability for the consequences of its actions. Rather than the History Channel tanks we expect to see, 21st century, American-style authoritarianism is more clever and less dramatic, but no less real in its effects, especially in rural communities.

The harms are more subtle, more insidious, but they are happening. If we can be clear about what authoritarianism looks like in our towns and find ways to work together, we can build a better future that works for everyone, especially rural Georgia.

The images out of Minneapolis showed the most direct version of this scourge — a man gunned down for using his First Amendment right to film a public officer, a woman murdered for reasons that have yet to be explained, immigrants chased through streets by masked, armed gunmen carrying badges and no accountability. Yet, away from dense city centers and television cameras, authoritarianism creeps over our lives like ivy, quietly pulling down our structures. It disrupts and dismantles, while claiming to solve and protect.

Last year, as DOGE was identifying areas of government waste, the current regime honed in on five Georgia Social Security Administration offices for closure, more than in any other state. For elderly Georgians who have irregular access to the internet or who have limited transportation, this decision meant not only losing services but also losing jobs. Currently, the White House is slashing funding for rural development and the farmers who grow our food. Without a congressional vote, America is embroiled in a Middle East war that is spiking the price of gas, diesel and fertilizer, just as spring planting season is underway.

Republicans with authoritarian aspirations are also pushing new voting rules that would mandate in-person registration — no more church drives or online signups — which are bipartisan activities that have worked in our state for decades. Instead, the state legislature would require some folks to drive hours to reach the right government office — assuming it was open.

In the first rule of authoritarianism, curtailing your liberties is the goal. Translation: If our county governments can’t pick up the slack, access to services from your retirement check to affordable food to the right to vote is made even harder. The right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness runs into the buzzsaw of their pursuit of power. This isn’t politics as usual — it is the attack on democracy through political means.

In small towns and rural areas, authoritarianism looks more like broken promises than frontal assault. By leaving farmers behind, treating access to your taxpayer-funded agencies as an unreasonable waste of money and making it harder for you to vote, they’re breaking the contract the government has with its citizens. An autocrat knows they can get you to give up, turn away and tune out once you’ve become disillusioned by how hard everything has become. They think once you see the government as beyond repair, you won’t see democracy as worth fighting for any longer.

Democracy is definitely flawed, but it works when we let it — because democracy’s objectives are the opposite of authoritarianism: to protect and expand civil liberty, to share decision-making across communities and to hold power accountable and punish corruption. Far away from the action, rural communities often pay the price for the difference.

In Hungary, the power-mad prime minister, Viktor Orban, lost his bid for reelection after 16 years in office. He was an authoritarian of the new order — duly elected, he proceeded to weaken the courts, overwhelm the legislature, dismantle the free press and attack universities. For 16 years, Hungarians who had survived communism were crushed beneath his misuse of democratic elections.

SEE ABRAMS
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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.

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DuBose Porter » Publisher Emeritus » dubose@ntln.org

LEGALESE

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HYDEN

Continued from Page 5

Florida is the next state poised to fiddle with its maps to benefit the GOP, and this has sparked an awkward public spat between Gov. Ron DeSantis and House of Representatives Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, a Democrat from New York.

Jeffries retorted, "Our message to Florida Republicans is F around and find out." Meanwhile, DeSantis offered to take Jeffries fishing and let him stay in the governor's mansion. Something tells me if Jeffries and DeSantis switched places, they would adopt the opposing positions without question.

While there is often a partisan element to our country's once-a-decade redistricting, it has been weaponized conspicuously for partisan purposes, which is not the original intent.

"Some districts gain residents, others lose them," the Brennan Center explained. "Districts also may change demographically. That's why district boundaries are redrawn every 10 years to ensure each district has about the same number of people and that districts are reflective and representative of the electorate."

Some states even put redistricting decisions in the hands of nonpartisan redistricting commissions. Clearly this is not what is driving the irregular mid-decade redistricting fad. So when will the madness end? Presumably before the elections, but my fear is that Pandora's box has been opened. Unless the courts or Congress intervenes, redistricting will now become a semiannual tool to score cheap political wins — at the expense of precedent and representation.

There is plenty of finger-pointing as each side attempts to exculpate itself, but there is ample blame to go around. Yes, Trump ignited this spat, although horribly gerrymandered maps existed before him. Illinois' map is an obvious example of this.

Regardless, Republicans didn't have to answer his call, and many didn't. Georgia lawmakers refused to meekly obey and deserve plaudits for their principled stand.

As other Republican states took a different approach, Democratic states responded in kind, as each side upped the ante further. In the end, neither side is entirely innocent.

Remember, two wrongs don't make a right. There are guilty parties among Republicans and Democrats, but unfortunately, it is voters who will pay the price.

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

ABRAMS

Continued from Page 5

Attention focused heavily on the cities, on the urban areas where the graft, corruption and immorality were constantly on display. But it was in the forgotten rural areas where resistance truly took hold. They organized themselves around how Orban's regime had lied to them, gutted their resources and pretended to respect their contributions. It worked.

Whether in Hungary or the U.S., too many people in power disregard rural communities. The broadband gap is real, and less dependable internet access means information is slower to reach beyond the cities. This disparity can make disinformation harder to combat. Lower population density means protestors don't readily fill the streets and our frustration level isn't acutely felt by those that represent us.

But if we want to stem the tide of authoritarianism and demand the government keep its promises, we don't have to look very far into the past to find the roadmap to success. Last November, voters in Georgia's Public Service Commission race spoke loud and clear: they are tired of struggling with soaring energy costs and tired of officials more aligned with energy companies than communities. Rural voters, animated by rising prices and the indignity of being ignored, showed up and forced change. Rural communities can shape the future in Georgia and beyond.

To defend and demand the democracy we deserve, our job is to leave no patriot behind. Below the Gnat Line, Georgia has no shortage of organizers who can invite their neighbors to find agreement on the issues that matter most. By coming together in spaces like community centers, churches and parks, we can take some of the key steps to fight authoritarianism: sharing, organizing and mobilizing.

Taking back our power begins when we ask each other, "What do you need?" and then pitch in to help one another. What we need in this moment is our freedom. We need to protect the right to vote and be heard. We need accountability for what has already been stolen.

Hungary saw authoritarianism take hold in every community, large and small. Here in Georgia, we can't pretend that we don't see what is happening. And in rural Georgia, the obligation is to call it what it is. But what comes next is the decision to do something about it.

Georgians — like our fellow Americans — have the power to stop the destruction of our country from the inside out, the right to choose something different. We must remember we deserve more than broken promises and gutted government. Instead, when we work together to fight for what's right — to fight for each other — we can win.

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

FROM THE CANDIDATES

Why I'm running for school board

Editor's note: The Macon Melody invited all candidates seeking seats on the Bibb County Board of Education to submit columns sharing their qualifications and vision for office. Submissions were subject to a 400-word limit and standard content guidelines, including a prohibition on personal attacks and a requirement that all factual claims be accurate and verifiable.

Of the candidates running, only the two seeking the at-large Post 7 seat responded by the deadline. Their columns appear here, lightly edited to conform to our house style.

BY KERRY HATCHER
Special to The Melody


Hatcher

Public education isn't abstract to me.

I'm a parent of three kids in Bibb County Schools, a former special education student with an IEP and now the parent of children who receive special ed services. When families can't get a straight answer, can't find basic information or feel like decisions are happening behind closed doors, that's not a small problem.

It's a trust problem. And it's the central problem facing this district.

My perspective comes from lived experience and professional experience. I work as a lead software engineer, building reliable systems and making complex information usable. I've also served through emergency management volunteer work and the Georgia State Defense Force.

Those roles taught me that when people are counting on you, clear communication and follow-through aren't optional. I've attended budget hearings and published my own analysis of district finances. I've been paying close attention to how this district makes its decisions. That's the work I want to bring to the board.

The board doesn't lack politicians. What it lacks is someone who won't let word salad pass for an answer — an engineer with the skills to press past talking points and ask what the numbers actually say.

Families and taxpayers shouldn't have to guess what's happening in their schools.

When a local newsroom has to sue to learn the amount of a taxpayer-funded settlement, even after Georgia's attorney general warned the district's legal rationale didn't appear to support withholding it, that's a transparency problem.

Teachers deserve to know where they stand. I've heard from too many who feel micromanaged, judged by inconsistent standards, stripped of planning time and left without real support when discipline problems derail their classroom. Good teachers need trust, consistency and the time to actually teach. Parents deserve the same respect — to know who owns a problem and when to expect an answer, not silence.

Extracurriculars, mentors and community partnerships aren't extras. They build confidence, fill gaps and connect students to real life. We need that investment, especially now.

Bibb County doesn't need more noise from its school board. It needs steady leadership, open government and a district families can trust.

I want to earn your vote on May 19.

Call or text me at 478-276-3463. I want to hear from you.

Kerry Hatcher is a candidate for the at-large Post 7 seat on the Bibb County Board of Education.

BY AMY MORTON
Special to The Melody


Morton

I'm running for the Bibb County Board of Education because I believe something simple but important: Every child in every school deserves the opportunity for an excellent education.

For more than 30 years, I've worked with children and teens in Macon as a family therapist. I've sat with families in their hardest moments, and I've seen how much a strong school and a committed teacher can change the trajectory of a child's life. That work has shaped who I am and why I'm running.

I'm also a small business owner. I understand budgets, payroll and the reality of making tough financial decisions. Our school system needs that balance right now. We need leaders who have a heart for students and a clear, disciplined approach to managing taxpayer dollars.

We don't have to choose between supporting our schools and protecting taxpayers. We can do both. That means spending smarter, cutting inefficiencies and focusing resources where they matter most: the classroom. I oppose property tax increases and support the senior exemption so longtime residents aren't pushed out of their homes. At the same time, we can generate new revenue and improve our neighborhoods by holding owners of blighted properties accountable.

As a public school graduate, a parent and a grandparent, this is personal for me. I want our schools to be places where families feel confident, teachers feel supported and students are prepared for the future.

Strong schools are not just about education. They are the foundation of a strong community. They attract businesses, create jobs and help neighborhoods thrive. As a Chamber of Commerce member, I understand how to build partnerships among schools, businesses and community leaders that will move Bibb County forward.

We have real challenges, but Macon has never been a community that backs down. We've made progress on downtown redevelopment, public safety and economic growth. Now it's time to bring that same focus and collaboration to our schools.

This is a pivotal moment for our schools and our community. We need leadership that brings people together, makes thoughtful decisions and stays focused on results.

If you believe in stronger schools, responsible spending and a community that works together, I'd be honored to earn your vote.

Amy Morton is a candidate for the at-large Post 7 seat on the Bibb County Board of Education.

Mayor talks mall voting site, convention center, blight in Q&A

BY LIZ FABIAN
The Macon Newsroom
macon-newsroom.com

Mayor Lester Miller addressed a range of Macon-Bibb County priorities during the latest edition of "Ask Mayor Miller," a monthly interview with The Macon Newsroom.

New early voting site at Macon Mall

A curbside storefront at Macon Mall — the former Sears tuxedo rental shop — is being renovated to serve as a satellite early voting location, Miller said. The site is not expected to be ready for the current early voting cycle but could open in time for a potential June runoff and is expected to be completed by November.

The project follows concerns raised by elderly and disabled voters about the walking distance from the mall parking lot to the Macon-Bibb County Board of Elections office. Golf carts were rented during the recent District 5 County Commission runoff as a temporary measure.

"So seniors will have a place to go right at the curbside … in that building that's right there," Miller said. "We've already begun to work on that."

Blight fight moves toward eminent domain

The county's next phase in addressing dilapidated properties involves attorneys working to condemn nuisance houses whose owners have not responded to repeated compliance notices.

Those properties could be seized under eminent domain powers and eventually sold through the Land Bank Authority.

Convention center and hotel plans move forward

County commissioners have approved moving forward with architectural drawings for a new convention center and hotel projected to cost $165.5 million.

"We don't ever put anything on paper if we don't think we can pay for it," Miller said. "Nothing starts without planning, and we've got to have the architectural drawings. Those numbers go up and down."

Miller also said the Urban Development Authority will proceed with purchasing the Marriott City Center Hotel so the county can control the land surrounding the new arena project. The Wilson Convention Center, adjacent to the hotel, is likely to be demolished once a new civic center is built.

Other items

— Miller said he remains hopeful the Ocmulgee Mounds National Historic Park will be redesignated as a national park and preserve and that revitalization along Clinton Street could create a new park entrance, though that decision rests with the National Park Service.

— The mayor is also eyeing an expansion of the Ocmulgee Heritage Trail. The county purchased land north of Amerson River Park to do so, and Miller said he envisions adding horses and an equestrian trail there. Other possibilities, he noted, are more biking and walking trails.

Residents can send questions for the next "Ask Mayor Miller" Q&A to mercerccj@gmail.com.


PHOTO BY LIZ FABIAN FOR THE MACON NEWSROOM

The curbside storefront at Macon Mall slated to become a satellite early voting location sits steps from parking lot access. Macon-Bibb County Mayor Lester Miller says the site will make casting a ballot easier for elderly and disabled voters who struggled with the walk to the main Board of Elections office.

WATER

Continued from Page 1

from the federal government helped the MWA build a new reservoir at Town Creek across the river in Jones County.

"It opened up so many things for us," Dennard said. "We still spent more money, but we spent a lot less than we would have had to."

Javors Lucas Lake, which opened in 2003, holds about 5.8 billion gallons of water that is siphoned from the river. Water from the lake is then pumped into a treatment facility, where it is cleaned with chemicals and stored in clear wells, tanks and water towers. The authority has about 40 million gallons of clean water in storage just in case the river dries up — or another flood of similar magnitude occurs.

"We take pride in what we do," interim MWA Executive Director Michel Wanna said.

The MWA is not only responsible for stewarding water and sewer services. It is also tasked with street sweeping, catching up on hundreds of millions in deferred maintenance, upkeep of the levee and, as of 2021, dealing with the county's stormwater issue.

One authority, many responsibilities

Before the MWA was formed in 1974, the city of Macon and the Bibb County government each had a governing board that controlled water and sewage services in their respective territories.

As the new, combined authority board was being formed, development was booming outside city limits and annexations expanded on all sides. The city and county governments struggled to coordinate the expansion of water and sewer services.

In 1972, a county attorney made a proposal to the city and its water board: have one agency to oversee it all. Two years later, the legislature did just that.

The MWA — which was called the Macon-Bibb County Water and Sewerage Authority up until 1992 — is composed of four district-elected members, an elected chair, and two appointees decided by the Macon-Bibb County mayor and commission.

Each of its four elected members represent about 29,000 people — more than double the roughly 12,000 residents represented by each county commissioner.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Michel Wanna, interim executive director of the Macon Water Authority, gestures while leading a tour of the Frank C. Amerson Jr. Water Treatment Plant on April 23.

Day-to-day operations are handled by a CEO, who reports to the board. It's responsible for setting policies and developing the rules by which the authority operates.

The board sets rates for water, sewer and stormwater services; issues bonds; applies for grants; and has power to exercise eminent domain.

Since the MWA's inception, its meetings have featured fiery debates among longtime leaders with strong personalities and lasting impacts. Many of the board's legacy members have their names on MWA facilities: the Frank C. Amerson Jr. Water Treatment Plant, the Albert Billingslea Building on Second Street, Javors Lucas Lake and the Herbert Dennard Support Services building on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

Still, said Dennard, who was a member of the board for 17 years, "No one person has all the answers. All of us wanted what's best for the authority."

Leadership at the authority is in flux as the MWA has been without a permanent CEO since February, when CEO Ron Shipman died. In May, voters will decide who will sit in three of the board's seven seats.

Arms of the authority

As of 2014, the MWA has a nonprofit subsidiary called Macon Water Alliance, formerly known as Macon Water Environmental Education.

It was established to help customers in need pay their water bills. Employees and board members can opt to donate a portion of their paychecks to the charity. There is also an option on customers' bills to make donations.

The alliance recently voted to approve sending some of its money to other entities that are better positioned to help MWA customers. It donated $7,000 to the state Department of Family and Children Services in Bibb County and $20,000 to a nonprofit called the Macon-Bibb County Economic Opportunity Council.

MWA also has another nonprofit subsidiary — Macon Soils, established in 1998 — to handle the sludge from its sewage treatment plants.

"Macon Soils works for us very well because, if we have to take the sludge to a landfill, it's going to take a lot of money," Wanna said, adding disposal fees would add up quickly. "What we do is, we take it and they spread it on farmers' land."

Macon Soils applies around 23,000 tons of biosolids to farmland in Bibb and Cobb counties. The nutrient-dense material can be used as a fertilizer or lime supplement.

Fast facts

— Meetings: MWA committees and subsidiaries meet on the first Thursday of each month at 2 p.m. in the board room at 790 Second St. The MWA's regular board meetings follow at 4 p.m.

— Board members are Chair Gary Bechtel, Elaine Lucas (District 1), Dwight Jones (District 3), Frank Patterson (District 4), and Macon-Bibb County appointees Bill Howell and Valerie Wynn. The District 2 seat is vacant.

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

SYSTEM

Continued from Page 1

the county's compliance with its stormwater permit in 2017, it found numerous violations, including that "approximately 30% of the city of Macon's geographic area had not been inventoried or mapped."

In a 2019 consent order, the county agreed to pay $145,000 for the violations.

In 2021, the county transferred ownership of and maintenance responsibilities associated with stormwater infrastructure to the Macon Water Authority, which, among other duties, stewards local water and sewer services.

The work to map all of the city's drainage pipes and stormwater infrastructure is still ongoing, interim MWA Executive Director Michel Wanna said.

The authority hired an engineering company to assess the conditions of the infrastructure and complete the inventory.

"When we took the system over, we needed to understand what the system looked like," Wanna said. "And really, it's a challenge. It is 200 years old."

MWA's Director of Stormwater Marvin Land has a team of 33 people who are responsible for all things stormwater.

"We've got 26,000 catch basins … 14 public detention ponds …. 1,200 miles of ditches … 800 miles of pipe," Land said. "We sweep the (rights of ways). We got 1,088 curb miles that we sweep and 48 bridges. It's a lot."

Land said the biggest challenge his department faces is "just overwhelming system failure."

"We've got brick culverts downtown that are almost 200 years old, and they've lived their lifespan," Land said. "You've got terracotta pipe that has been there about as long and it's got a 75-year lifespan."

In an effort to cover some of the costs that come with maintaining stormwater infrastructure, the authority began tacking on a $4.99 stormwater fee to residential customers' bills in 2022.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

An aging terracotta pipe opens into a storm drain along Mulberry Street Lane. The Macon Water Authority's stormwater director says much of the county's drainage infrastructure has far outlived its intended lifespan, with some pipes dating back nearly 200 years.

In meetings late last year, MWA board members voiced concerns about the untold number of large customers that owe hefty sums to the authority for outstanding stormwater fees. Industrial and commercial customers — such as hospitals, manufacturers and universities — are supposed to pay $4.99 per every 2,200 square feet of impervious surface on their properties.

The MWA relies on tax assessors to get information on square footage of impervious surfaces for those customers, Wanna said.

"We're getting them, and we're looking into them," he said.

The stormwater issue is far from a quick fix, especially as Macon grows and the authority works to catch up on some long-deferred and expensive maintenance projects while also planning for future growth.

"Macon used to be smaller — less people, less concrete, less asphalt," Wanna said. "Now [there is] more concrete, more asphalt and more buildings to accommodate people. This is also the challenge of the system."

The geography of Macon straddles an ancient shoreline where the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains meet the coastal plains. The Fall Line, as it is called, also presents a unique challenge: lots of silt.

"When the river levels go up, it pushes water backwards, up creeks and up drainage systems, and it pushes all that silt," Causey said. "And then when the river goes down, it leaves that silt behind. A constant cleanup usually follows a flooding event."

The engineer said he believes stormwater problems in Bibb County will persist indefinitely.

"We'll always have them because we're an old city and there's only so much you can do," Causey said, adding that maintenance is key.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Myliyah Grace Leitzsey paints a picture while passing time during her long wait for a heart transplant. The 7-year-old Macon girl loves music, painting and coloring.

HEART

Continued from Page 1

When the perfect heart becomes available, Grace will have two hours to make it to the hospital, then she'll go right into surgery. Moses said she's already seen the unknowns and what ifs. It's scary.

"I'm praying and hoping that she could get one by the end of the year," Moses said. "June would be four years we've been waiting."

During her journey, Grace has received much support. A GoFundMe account was set up. Her school, Alexander II Magnet, has "Do it for Grace Fridays," and she has received help from her grandmother's church, Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church, and their church in Atlanta, Renaissance Church of Christ.

She also receives support from her godparents — Bibb County schools Superintendent Dan Sims and his wife, Traci.

Sims met Grace last August. He went to check in with the family at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, which sparked ongoing check-ins and support throughout the week.

Then, Grace asked the couple to become her godparents. They agreed.

Hospital life hasn't always been pleasant. But during her time there, Grace recorded two songs at Seacrest Studio, a broadcast studio at the hospital for patients. Sims was featured on the second song, "Grace's Heart Hunt," which meant a lot to him.

"The message of the song is what we're all wishing and praying for, all the time, and that is for her to receive a heart and to get back to a normal life," Sims said. "Being a part of that song and having the opportunity for the release and to be present for that, as well, is just adding more value to our relationship."

This is actually the second time that Sims had the opportunity to sing with Grace. Back in September, they sang one of her favorite songs, 'Trust in God," by Elevation Worship.

Grace asks that people continue to pray for her.

"I'm grateful that she's out of the hospital and at least her VAD procedure has given her what I consider to be a new lease on life, for now, as she continues to wait on that heart," Sims said. "She was in that hospital for a very long time, day in and day out, and I think she's really enjoying what feels more like a regular life right now. ... That's what we've been praying for."

This summer, Moses had hoped to take her daughter to the beach, her favorite place, but the VAD can't be submerged in water.

Instead, she hopes to take Grace somewhere closer to Atlanta.

When Grace receives her miracle heart, Moses will be able to take her where she wants to. At the moment, that's on a cruise, specifically one that's Hello Kitty-themed because she loves the character.

For now, Grace is looking forward to playing with her parents, four siblings, cousins and friends.





Amber Waves

by Dave T. Phipps



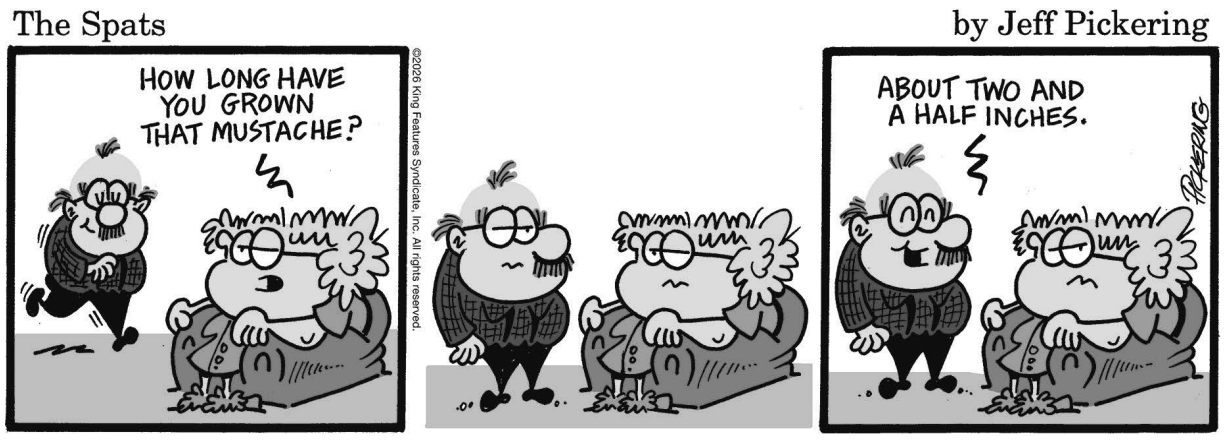
Out on a Limb

by Gary Kopervas



The Spats

by Jeff Pickering



TIGER

by BUD BLAKE



OLIVE & POPEYE

By Randy Milholland



HOCUS-FOCUS

BY HENRY BOLTINOFF



Find at least six differences in details between panels.

Differences: 1. Leg is moved. 2. Design on lampshade is different. 3. Club is shorter. 4. Curtain is shorter. 5. Doorway is wider. 6. Streaks on windowpane are reversed.

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: **L** equals **U**

MWDG NZLGBOP FTGYTGY

NDEDCOTBP OZP KBBDGHDH

CEKNS-BTD KVVKTOF, HTH WD

MDKO KNLVV-ETGSF?

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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!

Stay
MARINE ___ ___ ___ ___ ☐ ☐

Chance
MODARN ___ ___ ☐ ___ ☐ ___

Fake
SOUPED ☐ ___ ___ ___ ___ ☐

Values
SCITHE ___ ___ ___ ☐ ___ ___



"That one is in case you want another _ _ _ _ _ _ _ !"

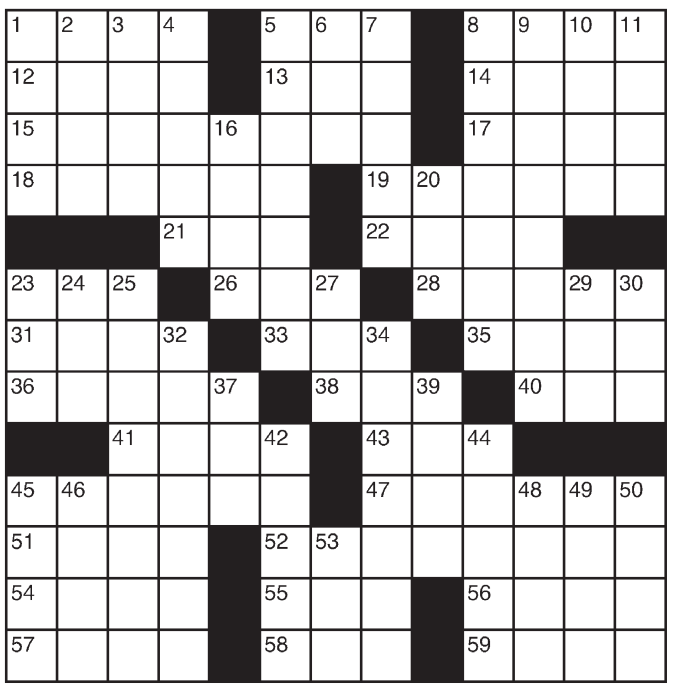
TODAY'S WORD

___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___

King Crossword

ACROSS
1 Lopsided win
5 Have bills
8 Wan
12 Golden Fleece ship
13 Fix illegally
14 Final Four gp.
15 Speed
17 Teri of "Tootsie"
18 Actor Estevez
19 Looked closely (at)
21 Pitcher Maglie
22 Bath powder
23 Speed (up)
26 Poetic contraction
28 Period of rule
31 El-Masry of "Star Wars"
33 Bro, maybe
35 Stair part
36 Deeply touched
38 Its cap. is Brussels
40 "— outta here!"
41 "Dream on!"
43 Actor Holbrook
45 Locust
47 Talisman
51 Seethe
52 Maximum contents
54 Diminutive suffix
55 Hirohito's title
56 One-named supermodel
57 Sun beams
58 Verbalize
59 Church section

DOWN
1 Gushing review
2 Utah city
3 Wrinkled fruit
4 Workshop array
5 Baltimore baseballers
6 Humorist
7 Pharaoh's land
8 The "A" of UCLA
9 Shortage
10 Fast runner
11 Lawn party site
16 Pisa farewell
20 Jug handle
23 Zodiac animal
24 Comic Philips
25 Liveliness
27 Tease
29 "My word!"
30 "Science Friday" network
32 Secondhand deals
34 "Cheer up!"
37 Carried out
39 Tibetan monk
42 Confronts
44 "— di Lammermoor"
45 Driver with a handle
46 Tiny bit
48 Walk unevenly
49 LAX guesses
50 Broadway actress Daly
53 Docs' org.



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Weekly SUDOKU

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

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™

Weather watching

C	L	O	U	D	Computer data storage option
					Type of peerage
					Prepared new running shoes
					Increase proportionally
					Type of printer
					Views with dread

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

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Trivia test

by Fifi Rodriguez

1. MOVIES: What is Indiana Jones' real first name in "Raiders of the Lost Ark"?
2. LITERATURE: What is Charlie's last name in the children's book "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory"?
3. GEOGRAPHY: What isthmus connects the Asian and African continents?
4. MATH: What is the first prime number to follow 19?
5. GEOLOGY: What type of rock is formed by cooled lava?
6. TELEVISION: What is the title character's famous line in the TV detective show "Columbo"?
7. BUSINESS: What company's stock ticker symbol is LUV?
8. ASTRONOMY: Which four planets in our solar system have rings?
9. HISTORY: About how many people worldwide were infected by the Spanish flu in the early part of the 20th century?
10. ANIMAL KINGDOM: If an animal eats only plants, what is it called?

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OPINION

Today's Word

1. Remain; 2. Random
3. Pseudo; 4. Ethics

SCRAMBLERS *solution*

When country singing celebrity Roy attended black-tie affairs, did he wear Acuff-links?

CryptoQuip answer

F	E	A	R	S
L	A	S	E	R
S	C	A	L	E
L	A	C	E	D
C	L	O	U	D

FiveSpot™ Solution

Weekly SUDOKU — Answer

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

Trivia Answers
1. Henry
2. Bucket
3. Isthmus of Suez
4. 23
5. Igneous
6. "Just one more thing"
7. Southwest Airlines
8. Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune
9. Nearly one-third of the world's population
10. An herbivore

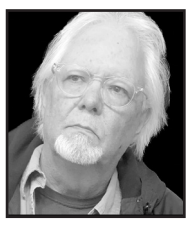
King Crossword — Answers

Solution time: 24 mins.

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

Gallery West sees final First Friday, plus South of Atlanta Fest returns

It's time for May's First Friday and a lot is happening in Macon. In addition to monthly events, the second South of Atlanta Music Fest is another highlight coming this Friday and Saturday.



Michael W. Pannell

The South of Atlanta Fest

The Capitol Theatre's Hubbard Beasley talked about developing the festival in 2025 alongside Georgia musician Brent Cobb.

"The festival is something we first put together with Brent Cobb last year to showcase Macon since Brent is someone who grew up on Macon music, played a lot in Macon and has recorded at Mercer's Capricorn Sound Studios," Beasley said.

The Americus-born, Ellaville-raised Cobb is a Grammy-nominated, self-proclaimed "songwriter first, singer second" who's written hits for some of country music's biggest artists, including "Don't It" for Kenny Chesney, "Days Like These" for Luke Combs and "January Heart" for Miranda Lambert.

His own latest album is "Ain't Rocked in a While."

"We're really glad to have the second year happening," Beasley said. "Brent was key in making sure it did and we all wanted it to highlight a number of spots in Macon."

Festivalgoers with wristbands can attend Friday's kickoff event with live music from 4-6 p.m. on the back lawn of The Big House Museum, where Cobb will be tending a boiled-peanut pot. Doors open at 3:30 p.m.

In addition, Tobacco Road and American Aquarium will perform at The Capitol — now The Robins Financial Capitol Theatre — at 8 p.m. Doors open at 7 p.m.

Saturday offers an intimate "songwriter round" with Cobb and fellow songwriters in Capricorn's legendary Studio B from 1-3 p.m. — a not-to-be-missed opportunity for longtime and would-be songwriters.

There will also be a pre-concert party at Grant's Lounge Saturday from 3-7 p.m. prior to doors opening at 7 p.m. at The Capitol, where Kristina Murray will open for Cobb and his band, The Fixin's. Afterparties will follow at Grant's on both nights.

Visit tixr.com/groups/capitoltheatremacon/ for tickets and information.

The "songwriter round" is a separately ticketed event and not included with festival wristbands.

Kirsten West retires and Gallery West closes doors

Kirsten West is retiring after 11 years as owner-operator of Gallery West, which she opened to show husband Kirk West's rock photography and, in recent years, guest exhibits and local artists' work by John Mollica, Kevin Lewis, Doug Miles, Deneise Ricketson, Maura Lucchese and David Knoll.

Her last day is May 31, so this will be her last First Friday at the gallery — but it's going to be a good one with the usual Gallery West goodies plus special performances by musical guests EG Knight and Caroline Aiken.

"It's been quite a ride, and we've had a great time at the gallery, but it's about time I retired," Kirsten West said.

She said sales are still on for Kirk West's work at the gallery and online at kirkwestphotography.com.

Gallery West is at 447 Third St., and the retirement party is from 5-8 p.m.

Unfortunately, Kirsten West's retirement means closing the gallery, which has become a fixture of downtown Macon's revival and a landmark for national and international music tourists coming to Macon, especially those seeking Allman Brothers Band connections.

Kirk West served as the band's road manager and chief photographer for many years, as well as a master craftsman photographer of all manner of entertainers, beginning with Chicago bluesmen in his younger days.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL W. PANNELL

Kirk and Kirsten West of Gallery West are set for Kirsten's retirement party this First Friday at the gallery. Kirsten has owned and operated the gallery for 11 years, making it one of the first galleries to be a part of the vision for downtown Macon's revival.

But let me say this: stay tuned because you never know — something may still be afoot.

First Friday Art Crawl

The 567 Center for Renewal, 456 First St., has a unique exhibit opening this First Friday featuring two artists: the abstract architectural paintings of Brandon Narsing and pottery by Margaret Peth.

Peth started as a 567 pottery class student, later continued her work as a studio member and now teaches a 567 pottery-wheel date-night class.

"Margaret has sold work before at events, but we're excited for her to have the first gallery show of her pottery and ceramic artistry here at the 567 this month," said Melissa Macker, 567 executive director. "Her work is beautiful, and I think it pairs beautifully with the architectural and city life abstractions depicted by Brandon."

With all the art offerings downtown, Macker said it's a great time to go out and about on First Friday.

"Of course, spring is a great time to stroll downtown and strolling from gallery to gallery is certainly an inspiring way to see different kinds of art displayed at different galleries — from paintings and pottery to photography and more," she said. "It also allows the opportunity to mingle with the artists themselves and learn what inspires them and how they create their work."

The 567 Center's First Friday reception runs from 5-8 p.m and will include light refreshments.

Here's a quick look at a few other galleries and venues:

— Lore Gallery, 505 Second St., 4–7 p.m. This is one of Macon's more intriguing spots with the mission of bringing works of art and the handcrafted items of indigenous peoples of Central and South America to Macon with profits benefiting them when possible. I'm pleased to have work from Lore on my walls. This First Friday, it's 20% off any tribal mask.

— The Bohemian Den, 502 Cherry St. For years, Scott Mitchell has faithfully supported the arts by displaying their work at The Bohemian Den and his other enterprises. This Friday, The Bohemian Den presents art by Sydnee Robertson with a reception from 5-9 p.m.

— Macon Arts Alliance, 486 First St., 4-7 p.m. This month's exhibit is "Happy Places," featuring works from a variety of artists exploring the spaces — real or imagined — that bring comfort, calm and joy, allowing reflection on places we return to when the world feels heavy.

— Wesleyan College Leadership Lab, 522 Cherry St., 5-8 p.m. Don't miss a last chance to see Cedric Smith's exhibit, "Layers of Reflection," at the lab's gallery space during its First Friday closing reception. Smith will have an artist's talk at 6 p.m.

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

Fort Hill Cemetery: buried but not forgotten histories

In 1806, the Ocmulgee River served as the western boundary of the southern United States. In that same year, President Thomas Jefferson ordered the construction of Fort Hawkins on 14 of the 100 acres reserved for it. It was built to protect settlers from the Muscogee (Creek) tribe, whose ancestral lands the U.S. government claimed. By 1821, the U.S. border had shifted west to the Flint River, and the fort was no longer needed.



Kathleen O'Neal

Death and taxes are the two certainties in this world, thus a burial ground was established near the fort, and the first interment took place in 1808. In an unusual move for that time, the burial ground did not delineate separate areas for Black and white individuals.

In 1823, when the Georgia legislature created Macon on the west side of the Ocmulgee, a measure was included "to grant and secure to commissioners of the incorporation of the town of Macon, five acres of ground at or near Fort Hawkins for the purpose of a public burying ground."

This recognized that a burial ground had been in existence since 1808 on this previously federally-owned land and granted the cemetery to the new town of Macon.

For years, the cemetery at Fort Hill (sometimes referred to as the East Macon Cemetery) received little notice from the government of Macon.

A surveyor hired in 1885 to find the boundaries reported that as many burials could be found outside the official boundary of the cemetery as could be found inside.

Adjacent to Fort Hill Cemetery, Lamar Clay owned six acres that also served as a private burial ground and collected money for

SEE FORT HILL
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PHOTO BY KATHLEEN O'NEAL

Although Fort Hill Cemetery in Macon is the resting place for nearly 10,000 individuals, the burial grounds remain in a state of disrepair.

Sweet corn and summer evenings

BY JEFF COOK
Special to The Melody

There is nothing better than a fresh ear of sweet corn on an early summer evening — or maybe for breakfast, for that matter. Around my house we love sweet corn so I hope the information in this article will help you grow a bumper crop this year.

The most important factor to consider is the variety that you choose to plant. This will determine the sweetness, crispness and shelf-life of your sweet corn. Sweet corn can be divided into three distinct types according to genetic background: normal sugary (su), sugary enhanced (se) and supersweet (sh2). There are also hybrid varieties exhibiting qualities of each.

Standard sweet corn varieties, such as Silver Queen, contain a "sugary (su) gene" that is responsible for the sweetness and creamy texture of the kernels. Su's are best suited to being picked, husked and eaten within a very short time.

Sugary enhanced hybrids contain the sugary enhancer (se) gene that significantly raises the sugar content above standard varieties while retaining the tenderness and creamy texture of standard varieties. No isolation from standard varieties is necessary. Silver King is a sugary enhanced variety.

Supersweet hybrids contain the shrunken (sh2) gene, which delays the conversion of sugar to starch, allowing them to stay sweet longer than su varieties. The kernels of the supersweet varieties have a crispy, tough-skinned texture and contain low amounts of the water-soluble polysaccharides that impart the creamy texture and "corn" flavor to other sweet corn varieties.

Although the lack of creamy texture is not especially noticeable in fresh corn on the cob, it affects the quality of frozen and canned corn, as does the toughness of the seed coat. Unless corn must be stored, shipped or mechanically harvested, se's are superior in eating quality to sh2's.

Supersweets (sh2) should be isolated from any other type of corn planting (tasseling) at the same time to ensure sweetness and tenderness. Their pollen is weak and easily supplanted by other types, which causes the kernel to revert

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BILLY'S LET'S EAT REVIEW

Local restaurateurs open newest downtown eatery





PHOTOS BY BILLY HENNESSEY

J. Reid's Tavern in downtown Macon offers oven-roasted green beans. The new restaurant uses oven baking, slow cooking methods and a panini press for its entire menu.



Billy Hennessey

There's something about walking into a brand-new restaurant in downtown Macon that immediately tells you whether it's going to make it or not. Sometimes it's the energy, sometimes it's the people and sometimes it's the space itself.

When I walked into J. Reid's at 317 Cotton Avenue, the very first thing that hit me was just how big it was. This isn't a cozy little bistro where you're elbow-to-elbow with your neighbor. This is a wide-open dining room with around twenty tables, a ten-seat bar and an outdoor deck. It is easily one of the largest dining spaces I have seen in downtown Macon, and it immediately sets the tone.

Let me be honest, because you know I am going to be. They have labeled themselves as a "tavern," and that is not the vibe I picked up at all. However, the menu fits that description. You will find starters, salads, flatbreads and sandwiches on the lunch menu, as well as hearty entrées, including chicken pot pie, pot roast with mashed potatoes, lasagna and meatballs on the dinner menu. The space itself, however, leans more industrial chic with a minimalist edge. There are clean lines, an open kitchen and a few vintage touches scattered throughout. I noticed a Mickey Mouse bookend near the bar that made me smile. It feels intentional, but not fully dressed yet, like they are still settling into who they are. There is something exciting about catching a restaurant at that stage.

The open kitchen is a bold choice, and I respect it. When you design a space like that, you are telling your customers you have nothing to hide. As someone who dines out as much as I do, that level of transparency matters. It's almost like watching artists at work.

Many foodies in Macon will remember Kinjo Kitchen + Cocktails, a downtown favorite that closed unexpectedly in the summer of 2025. Business decisions involving the building's ownership fueled the restaurant's closure, not a lack of community support. For Chelsea Hughes, that moment became a turning point. After more than twenty years in the restaurant industry, she did not step away. She stepped forward. Almost immediately, she began looking for a space of her own, and when this opportunity presented itself, she knew it was the right move.

What she has created here is deeply personal. She told me she wants J. Reid's to feel like one big dining room table. The space is open and accommodating, especially for families. As a mother, she said she understands the anxiety parents feel when dining out with children, and she wanted to create an environment where kids are not just tolerated, but welcomed.

Her partner in this venture is also her life partner, Jonathan Johnson, also known as J. Reid. Jonathan is a professionally trained opera singer with an international performance background. I wouldn't be surprised if during a busy dinner rush, Jonathan comes out into the dining room and starts singing. I just hope I'm there when it happens!

His path to the kitchen did not come from culinary school. It came from experience, travel and a deep appreciation for food, especially Italian cuisine. He has spent years eating, learning and refining his understanding of what makes dishes like lasagna and meatballs memorable. Those recipes are now part of the menu, alongside Chelsea's family influence, including her mother's pot roast, which is cooked for eight hours and served as one of their signature dishes.

One of the more surprising aspects of J. Reid's is how the food is prepared. There is no fryer, no stovetop and no traditional grill. Everything is executed through oven baking, slow cooking methods and a panini press. The result is a menu that leans toward what they describe as healthier, while still being hearty and satisfying. Their oven-roasted green beans have quickly become a favorite and often sell out. After trying them myself, I can completely understand why. They are simply magical. Another standout feature is their gluten-free offerings. They have built a nearly full gluten-free menu that mirrors the standard one with only minor modifications.

I do have to mention one thing that made me laugh: "Massaged kale." I had questions. I pictured a massage table in the back with aromatherapy and Tibetan Gongs. But in all seriousness, massaged kale is raw kale that has been kneaded with oil, citrus or salt for 2–3 minutes to break down its tough cellulose fibers. This process tenderizes the leaves, making them softer, less bitter, easier to digest and much better suited for salads — turning vibrant green and reducing in volume.

Chelsea did not hesitate when I asked about her personal favorite menu item: the caprese sandwich on Cuban bread. I ordered it immediately, and it absolutely lived up to the recommendation. It is a reminder that simple dishes, when done right, can be the most memorable. I devoured mine!

What stood out most during my visit was the honesty. Chelsea openly acknowledged that they are not going to get everything right every time. Their goal is to get it right as often as they can, with a focus on quality ingredients, strong execution and a team that cares.

After I left, I ran into Ben, one of the cooks and he shared that they are already planning future menu additions, specials and refinements. Somewhere in that conversation, I was let in on a few things that they have in store. I feel as if I was given the gift of some juicy gossip about this upcoming eatery and all I can say is… dearest gentle reader, keep an eye on this one. As you promenade in the streets of Macon, might I suggest that you stroll over to Cotton Avenue and see for yourselves… it may very well be the diamond of the season!

Opening a restaurant is never easy. Opening one in downtown Macon, especially in today's economy, comes with even greater challenges. What I saw at J. Reid's was not hesitation. It was intention, resilience and a clear desire to build something meaningful.

J. Reid's may still be finding its rhythm, but the foundation is there. The story is there. If they stay the course, this is a place Macon is going to be talking about.

Until next time Macon, Let's Eat!

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



FORT HILL

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digging graves and burying the deceased. There was no such provision for the city-owned cemetery next door. In Fort Hill, the city provided no services and the dead were buried without any government supervision.

In an 1892 meeting, The Macon Telegraph reported that approximately 200 people complained that the East Macon cemetery is in a "badly dilapidated and unkempt condition with no one having authority to prevent trespassing or internments, (and that) it's necessary to place some restrictions to these 'promiscuous interments."

The article continued that, "In the past any one has assumed the right to dig graves and make interments in whatever place and at whatever time was convenient to those interested. It being a well known fact that many have been buried here at night, and a few times the party interred was unknown to those who made the interment." The meeting was described by the reporter as "spicy."

In 1914, the city government bought the cemetery owned by Lamar Clay and combined it with Fort Hill Cemetery. It formally asserted control by appointing a sexton and enacting ordinances concerning burials, as well as building a fence around the grounds. The new sexton began keeping records of all interments.

Several attempts have been made by private groups or individuals to document the burials in Fort Hill Cemetery. Based upon those efforts and the formal record keeping that began in 1914, there are approximately 9,000 to 10,000 people buried there.

As other cemeteries opened, Fort Hill Cemetery received fewer and fewer burials, the most recent of which came in September 2024. Today, no plots are available for purchase in Fort Hill Cemetery because of the fear of finding an unmarked grave once digging begins.

The Fort Hill Cemetery is the final resting place of many of Macon's earliest residents. Considered the earliest settlers to this area, brothers Roger and Eleazar McCall of Connecticut arrived in 1818. They were the first to build boats to transport cotton grown in Jones and Baldwin counties down the Ocmulgee to the port of Darien on the coast.

In 1823, they were both included in the group of citizens who helped a surveyor lay out the town of Macon.

In 1825, Eleazar was among the first elected commissioners in the new city, and later became a justice of the peace.

He was also among the first members of the newly-created Masonic Lodge. As Macon grew, the two brothers opened a saw mill and a cotton warehouse in in the city.

When Roger died in 1844, he was buried in Fort Hill Cemetery. In 1853, Eleazar died of pleurisy and was buried there, too.

Fort Hill is accessible by turning off Emery Highway onto Short Street. After a few blocks, the entrance will be in the curve as Short Street turns right and becomes Hall Street.

In 2025, Liz Riley and Kathleen O'Neal began a visual inventory of every monument in Rose Hill Cemetery.

The goal of this project is to provide a free, complete and accurate database of those interred, as well as maps for locating them. This column shares the fascinating stories discovered during this project.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY UGA EXTENSION SERVICES

Sweet corn comes in several varieties that affect taste, shelf-life and texture of your home-grown corn.

CORN

Continued from Page 9

to a form with the toughness and starchiness of field corn. Because corn is wind-pollinated, this isolation distance should be 500 feet or more, especially downwind.

Many new varieties contain two or all three types of genes. These may be called by several different terms including mixed gene, multigene, superior eating quality, sweet breeds and extra tender, among other names. All of these should be isolated in the same manner as the sh2 varieties.

Sweet corn germinates best when soil temps are above 60 degrees Fahrenheit, and need a soil pH of 6-6.5. Seed should be planted at least 1 inch deep and about every 8-12 inches in the row. Since corn is wind pollinated, it is better to have multiple short rows rather than one long row. Separation of different varieties can be by distance or by tasseling date.

Water is critical for a successful sweet corn crop. The ear and kernels are beginning to form at about the "6 leaf stage" of growth, and continue to develop just before silking.

Any stress due to insects or drought can significantly decrease ear size and kernel numbers. I am sure that most gardeners have picked an ear of corn that has had missing kernels or zippering. This is most likely the result of stress during the ear development.

Jeff Cook is the agriculture and natural resources agent for Peach and Taylor counties and the area peach agent.

ONE LAST RIDE

In head coach Robby Jones' final season, the ACE Gryphons are seeking a deep playoff run







PHOTOS BY MARK POWELL

TOP: ACE head soccer coach Robby Jones speaks with his players in the huddle during a game this season.
LEFT: Striker Sohan Patel weaves his way past defenders during a game against East Laurens this year.
RIGHT: Lily Bivins dribbles forward and preps for a shot during ACE's second-round playoff victory Tuesday.

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
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When the ACE girls soccer team defeated Gordon Central in the first round of the playoffs last week, it was the first step in a long-awaited playoff run for a team full of seniors on their last ride.

But this postseason effort has roots that run deeper. This team found its beginnings around six years ago, when current seniors were just starting middle school and barely getting their feet wet on the soccer field.

That was when head coach Robby Jones met Lily Bivins and other players, many of whom would become leaders for the Gryphons in 2026. Jones did not forge a connection with Bivins then. She was only in sixth grade, after all. But the pieces fell into place nonetheless — several talented players were part of ACE's soccer program, which ran seamlessly all the way from middle school to the varsity level.

"Consistency," Jones said of the school's soccer pipeline, "is something that matters."

That consistency has helped Jones, across roughly a decade of coaching at ACE, build a soccer dynasty.

The girls team has won a state championship. The boys team, which Jones also coaches, has played for one. Both teams consistently dominate their respective regions. They each earned the No. 2 seed in the Class A-Division I state tournaments this season.

Jones — and his players, who flawlessly follow their fearless leader's example — shrug off the accolades. They want to win, of course, but they are more concerned about each other.

When Bivins scored a hat trick barely 10 minutes into ACE's first-round playoff game, for example, her own teammates seemed more excited than Bivins was.

"We have the mentality that when one scores, we all score. You can tell that because the girls celebrate other people's success. When you see that, you can tell that they're true friends," Jones said after that victory. "Yes, Lily scored four goals, but she doesn't look at it that way. She thinks of it as, 'my teammates put me in position to score.'"

Later, as Jones was sitting in his office with the second round of playoffs looming the following week, he considered what was at stake as the girls and boys teams both surged in the playoffs.

"I want it really bad for them," Jones said. "And this is my last shot."

Because as difficult as it is to trace the path of ACE's soccer story, it is easy to picture where this chapter of it will close: Jones' coaching tenure for the Gryphons will end after this season. He is set to become the head of school at ACE.

"It's going to be hard. I'll still come to games. … This job is going to be so demanding going forward, and I felt like (the soccer teams) deserved someone who is able to be there and devote more time. The students and parents deserve someone

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A local connection in Atlanta



Micah Johnston

With an unassuming paper bag in my hand and a baseball game unfolding in front of me, I considered the possibilities.

On the field, there was not much left to the imagination. The Atlanta Braves were, much to my satisfaction, smearing the Cleveland Guardians in a game that would eventually end in an 11-5 win. While baseball is always intriguing no matter the score, there wasn't much tension left on the diamond, be it on infield dirt or outfield grass.

The tension was inside my paper bag instead.

In the bag was a baseball. I purchased it from the Atlanta Braves at one of their many memorabilia stores inside the ballpark for the crisp price of $45. The bin I plucked that brown bag from promised that this baseball had either been used in a Major League Baseball game or autographed by a Braves player — you had to rip open the paper bag to find out.

There was a barrel holding probably more than 100 of these sack-lunch-style baseballs in one of the stadium shops. It put into perspective the sheer, insane number of baseballs they go through in an MLB game. Nearly every foul ball, pitch in the dirt or ball in play gets discarded. I suppose this is what happens to many of them: They get authenticated and sold in some way.

I wondered if the ball could have been thrown by that night's starter, Braves ace and future Hall-of-Famer Chris Sale. Maybe it was a double off the bat of first baseman Matt Olson, or a fly ball caught by a leaping Ronald Acuna Jr. out in right field.

So, with the Braves polishing off a blowout and Bob Costas not far from my seats — the legendary announcer eventually filmed a field spot for NBC right next to our section — I tore the paper bag open.

For all my thoughts of netting a ball that was thrown, caught or hit by a superstar, what I got was even better.

The baseball had a nice dirt-stain on it, one I learned was from a foul ball once I typed in the code that was printed on a holographic sticker between the baseball's stitches. Plugging the code into MLB's website pulled up the details of what the ball saw in its day of MLB service.

As it turns out, the ball was thrown by none other than former FPD and Mercer pitcher Austin Cox in a game.

I know it's cliche, but I have to say it: What are the odds?

I won't actually get into calculating that — I don't think any Melody readers want to see my woeful math skills on display — but I'm guessing they're pretty long.

It was an awesome moment. Austin Cox played in the same little league as me at Vine-Ingle (though we played several years apart). He played at FPD before he pitched for Mercer, my alma mater, though he was drafted by the Kansas City Royals before I got to school there. Heck, I interviewed Cox for a feature last year. (Maybe I ought to send him a text about this.)

According to the MLB notes attached to the ball, it was used on Aug. 5, 2025. The Braves were facing the Milwaukee Brewers, who had the best record in the majors at the time, and eventually lost 7-2 in a blowout.

It was already 5-1 when Cox entered the game in the top of the seventh and threw two pitches — with the baseball now in my possession — to former MVP Christian Yelich. The Milwaukee outfielder took a slider for a ball, then fouled off a curveball.

And that was that. Just two pitches, both breaking balls, and this sphere of mud and leather was out of commission, soon to be authenticated and placed in a paper bag for me to find months later.

SEE JOHNSTON
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PHOTO BY MARK POWELL

Stratford golfer Will Fruticher eyes the ball after a shot at the Brickyard golf course during the GIAA's boys golf championships this week.

NOTEPAD

Private schools finish golf playoffs, MU lax wins title

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
micah@maconmelody.com

Macon's GIAA private schools competed in the organization's state golf tournament this week, with the boys teams playing in Macon and the girls teams facing off in Eatonton.

In the boys' championship, Stratford placed fifth with a 299, as only five teams shot under 300. Clay Jones and Will Fruitticher both shot 74 for the Eagles. FPD placed sixth, just missing that cutoff with a final tally of 301. Tattnall and Mount de Sales did not have full teams compete, though Bryton Tarver played for Tattnall while Liam Frawley and Andrew Defore played for Mount de Sales.

On the girls side, Tattnall placed highest of the Macon schools with a 200, putting them in ninth place.

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ACE

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who can devote all their time, too," Jones said. "I wouldn't be able to give the players what they needed while still giving this building everything it needed."

But for now, Jones is still captaining the ship. The girls team romped past Pepperell in the second round Tuesday to reach the Elite Eight. Bivins had a whopping six assists, positioning the ball perfectly for her teammates from across the field into the box.

From a hat trick to six assists, Bivins' effort demonstrates a culture of teamwork that Jones has built at ACE with one oft-overlooked method: instilling tradition.

Building the culture

Tradition is hard to build when your school has only existed for two years, but it was a top priority for Jones when he arrived in 2016 after ACE was founded in 2014. It's one of the few aspects of his footprint at ACE that he'll openly take pride in, the one accomplishment that escapes the cloak of Jones' humility.

Jones began a tradition where players on the girls and boys teams are awarded a coin and named "Man of the Match" after games. They then bestow the coin to a mentor, typically a parent, coach or teacher, that has helped them improve.

These awards, more than things like wins or hat tricks, are some of the head coach's favorite moments.

"Seeing the kids give the coin to their mom or dad, or even a physical trainer who helped them through an injury," Jones said. "Those are moments of beauty. We're a classical school, and we focus on the truth, goodness and beauty. And that's a beautiful thing. That's the most beautiful thing to see."

Another now-beloved practice installed by Jones is "wearing the 14," where the players vote on one player — a high-character teammate and leader — to wear No. 14 and act as an "ambassador" of the team's best qualities.

Yet another event the players have latched onto is the "Battle for the Paddle," a rivalry Jones kindled with Mary Persons, the school he coached before arriving at ACE. The winner each year takes home an oar, emblazoned with the winning team's logo and the final score.

Bivins, who was voted to wear that coveted No. 14 by her teammates, echoed Jones' sentiments about consistency.

"We've been together since sixth grade. It feels like we've been building this for a long time," she said of her teammates after the Gryphons' second-round win. "It's really just about how the girls jell each game. We always jell a little bit differently."

Jones was excited for ACE's K-12 school structure for this reason: he could interact with players as they developed their skills. Now the teammates celebrate each others' goals and chatter ceaselessly on the pitch, having known and played with each other for years.

The boys team is no different, with tight-knit units taking the field each year. The boys have been less dominant than the girls of late, as they have not won a second-round playoff game in four seasons. That only makes them hungrier, Jones said.

So does the fact that it's their coach's last season at the helm.

"To a certain level you're preparing the same way, but obviously you're putting more effort in. I think it helps when you have extra motivation," Jones said of it being his final year as the head coach.

The players feel it, too.

"He definitely takes it one day at a time. He doesn't say it, and he doesn't talk about the tournament as a whole," senior star Kate Thomason said after ACE's first-round victory. "But underneath, there's always this level of excitement knowing we could go very far."

In addition to these incentives, players are also invested because of yet another tenet of the team established by Jones: playing time.

"From when they start in middle school, we emphasize playing time a lot over winning. When you get a bunch of people excited about playing, you tend to get them to hang around," Jones said.

That much was exemplified when nearly every player on ACE's roster got into the girls' second-round playoff game. The Gryphons also use much of their boys' team roster, which consists of an impressive 25 players.

Developing talent

Friendship and participation alone do not make a dynasty, however. You need players with great instincts and true ability on the field.

ACE has that in spades. The Gryphons' girls team has at least five players on the front end that can score seemingly at will, fueled by players like Bivins who deliver precise strikes into the box to create assist opportunities. The boys team is led by Sohan Patel, a smooth finisher who has several hat tricks this season and is still only a sophomore.

Both teams are balanced by stout defenses. Jones' own daughter, Scout, is crucial on defense for the girls along with senior center back Mia Johnson. Henry Carter excels on defense for the boys, and DJ Fanning — who has not allowed a goal against a region opponent across his entire career— is stifling in the net.



PHOTO BY MARK POWELL

Bayleigh Loosier (13) celebrates with teammate Kate Thomason (16) after Loosier scored the opening goal of the match with a header off a Lily Bivins' corner kick.

Aside from the long-term development Jones already lauded, how have the Gryphons achieved this?

"We're not training everybody to do the same thing. We say, 'alright, you're playing center forward. We need you to train to put the ball in the net.' We then need the center back to train to be able to defend well, organize and communicate," Jones said. "We used to kind of train everybody to do everything. So now it's more specialized — this is your role from a tactical standpoint."

It sounds obvious, but in an area where soccer is not as popular, many players only begin learning the ins and outs of the sport when they join a high school team. When there's not as much prior experience, the broader basics come first instead of positional specifics.

ACE can get into the nitty gritty because of their middle school team. Jones has also run a summer camp where he gets kids into soccer.

"Mia Johnson, she's a senior, there's a picture of me and her when she was little. She came to my summer camp. Now she's the center back and she's incredibly important," Jones said.

That long-term investment has led to the Gryphons competing at a high level. That's another piece of the puzzle Jones is proud of: ACE schedules extremely tough opponents in the regular season, including nearby Middle Georgia teams that are several classifications higher.

The Middle Georgia Invitational, a regular season tournament the Gryphons have played in, is a great example. This year the girls team won the event, defeating Perry, Veterans and Houston County at Freedom Field in Warner Robins.

"I remember five years ago, we played (Houston County) and we were just glad we didn't get mercy-ruled. This year we beat them 5-0," Jones said. "We won the invitational, so Freedom Field? Now we call that Perkins Field South."

Jones wants the tough schedule to prepare his teams for the most important games. With the first two rounds of the playoffs out of the way, this girls team — one of the top squads in the state all year — will start to face off with even more talented groups.

But Jones — the man who is jokingly called the "czar of Gryphon soccer" by beloved PA announcer Tam Smith before games — is not concerned. He has trained them for this, not just in terms of talent, but in terms of character.

"I think they're ready in more ways than one. If we win a state championship but we're lousy people, I have failed. We focus on character and I think it shows," Jones said. "I think we're ready for the challenge."

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JOHNSTON

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I'll probably think more about those two pitches than anyone ever will — and now you're thinking of them too, hopefully.

I'll add one last note: Cox might have fallen off the radar for some fans since he no longer plays for the Braves, but he's still pitching. He currently plays for the Yokohama Bay Stars in Japan. He's thrown 9 innings so far this year and allowed three earned runs while striking out seven batters. Funny enough, Cox also has four plate appearances. (He's struck out three times.)

There's not much I love more than Macon getting represented on the biggest stage, and now I've got a piece of history to remind me of Cox's career.

NOTEPAD

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They outpaced Stratford by just one stroke, as the Eagles finished at 201. FPD was next in 11th place, shooting 210.

Stratford's Ora Smith had a great day, shooting 89 to finish 14th out of 60 competitors in the girls championship.

Women's lacrosse wins Big South trophy

The Mercer women's lacrosse team won the Big South Conference regular championship for the fifth consecutive year, defeating Longwood last week to take the title outright after clinching a share of it earlier this season.

The Bears defeated Longwood 18-8 on Saturday in a dominant showing much in line with their stellar season, as Mercer improved to 11-6 overall and 8-0 in conference play with the win. The Bears clinched at least a share of the regular season trophy with a 17-2 victory over Wofford, the No. 3 team in the Big South, earlier this month.

The regular season title also gives Mercer the No. 1 seed in the Big South conference tournament for the fifth straight year. The Bears have won that tournament for five consecutive seasons as well as the premier team in the conference.

They will play Friday at 4 p.m. in a home game — Mercer will host the semifinals and championship because they earned the No. 1 seed — against the winner of No. 4 Furman vs. No. 5 Radford.

Caroline Glus, a staple in Mercer's lineup as an attacker who arrived in 2023 and blossomed in 2024, led the way again for the Bears this season with 56 goals and 68 points. She averaged four points per game and 3.29 goals per game, leading the Big South conference in both statistics.

Glus scored four goals and added on two assists, three caused turnovers and four ground balls in the win over Longwood to clinch another conference title. The Hershey, Pennsylvania native is a senior for the Bears.

Mercer baseball gets crucial sweep of Wofford

The Bears swept the top team in the southern Conference, the Wofford Terriers, right out of OrthoGeorgia Park last weekend, winning three games 9-8, 5-1 and 13-8 to get back above .500 in conference play.

Wofford came into the game with an 8-1 conference record while Mercer was 4-5, making the series a critical momentum swing for the Bears after they were swept by Western Carolina in their last SoCon series.

The first game was by far the most dramatic, as Mercer needed 11 innings to get a walk-off win. The victory was delivered by Chris Katz, who hit an RBI double to end things.

It was part of a huge weekend for the Mercer left fielder, who also had a grand slam Friday as part of a 4-for-6 effort at the plate that evening. Katz hit another home run in Saturday's 5-1 win. By the time Sunday rolled around, the Terriers wanted nothing to do with him, as Katz walked twice in the series finale and came around to score both times.

Though Mercer's pitching struggled a bit to contain opposing hitters in two of the three games — run prevention has been a bit of an issue in conference play — Miguel Hugas had an encouraging outing in Saturday's game, throwing seven dazzling innings and allowing only three hits.

The sweep took Mercer to 32-13 overall and 7-5 in SoCon play, the latter of which leaves them in fifth place in the conference. Katz, fellow outfielder Eli Stephens and shortstop Titan Kamaka are third, fourth and fifth in the conference in OPS, respectively. The Bears lead the conference with 406 runs scored. The offense did not miss a beat against Wofford despite the Terriers having the lowest team ERA in the conference.

Mercer will attempt to keep slugging its way through the SoCon this weekend with a road series against Samford.