

The Macon Melody

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School board presses deficit leads on budget vote

BY CASEY CHOUNG

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The Bibb County Board of Education will look at potential cuts to reduce a deficit that threatens to deplete the school district's coffers ahead of its June 2 preliminary budget adoption.

Board members were scheduled to vote on the budget May 14 but instead decided to take more time to look at the proposed budget, which would incur a \$23 million deficit.

District administrators received more than 50 questions from school board members in the days prior to that meeting, encompassing everything from rezoning and operational efficiency studies to individual line items.

More than a dozen questions about an efficiency study by consultants at Lean Frog were left unanswered, as district staffers said the study results will be shared soon.

The district aims to implement those items by the upcoming school year, officials said.

Lean Frog consultants told board members in March the district needs to modernize its technology and workflow processes across several departments in preparation for increased pupil costs and more retirees.

When asked about completing the budget before carrying out those recommendations, district leaders noted the need to implement a budget on or before June 30.

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RESTLESS IN MACON

Singles trade apps for in-person connections

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON

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Before the dawn of online match-making and AI-assisted dating services, the dating scene wasn't always so complex.

After all, Harry didn't meet Sally on Tinder.

Some of today's eligible singles are fed up with their technology-saturated love lives and are trading dating apps for more meaningful, in-person connections — something the Greater Macon Chamber of Commerce has tapped into as a means of workforce retention.

"One of the main reasons that people move away is because they can't meet a match," said Rebekah Hollar, the chamber's programs and marketing manager.

Roughly 45% of men and 42% of women in Macon-Bibb County have never been married, according to U.S. Census data.

The chamber's quarterly "Mingle with Singles" event series — part of its Macon Area Connections initiative — encourages residents to plant deeper "roots" within the community, Hollar said.

It's a solution to a universal

SEE SINGLES PAGE 3



PHOTO COURTESY GREATER MACON CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
Attendees mingle during "Speed Dating on the Rooftop," part of the Greater Macon Chamber of Commerce's Macon Area Connections initiative, Nov. 17 at Hotel Forty Five in downtown Macon. The initiative, which also includes the quarterly "Mingle with Singles" series, has outpaced traditional young professional networking events as singles seek more meaningful, in-person connections.

Macon airport bets on growth with revived route, \$50M+ in upgrades

BY CASEY CHOUNG

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When Spirit Airlines backed out of its Macon-to-Fort Lauderdale route last fall, it was disappointing for Doug Faour, aviation director of the Middle Georgia Regional Airport, but the move also led to other airlines taking notice.

Contour Airlines swooped in and picked up the route in April, and the longtime Macon air carrier will send its first plane down to Florida in just a few weeks.

The number of commercial tickets sold by the airport has spiked from 890 in 2012 to more than 15,000 today, marking just one of several ways the airport in South Macon has grown.

The airport is currently tackling roughly \$50 million in projects — with another \$35 million on the horizon — all in the hope of returning additional investment to Macon-Bibb County.

"It's the most concentrated amount of investment and construction and improvements in the history of the airport," Faour said.

The airport's new executive terminal — also known as its fixed-



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

A Contour Airlines plane sits on the tarmac at Middle Georgia Regional Airport. Contour picked up the Macon-to-Fort Lauderdale route after Spirit Airlines dropped it last fall, with flights set to begin June 9.

base operator — broke ground last October and is slated to be completed in early 2027. The guitar-shaped terminal will serve as a pit stop for fueling and maintenance while also including a lounge and restaurant for visiting aviators.

Faour said he hopes the building's design leaves visitors with a good first impression of Macon — and a clear idea of the area's significance in America's musical heritage.

"We don't look at this as an airport project," Faour said. "We look at it as a community project."

Excavators have also been digging up tons of dirt to make way for the airport's 600-foot runway expansion. The process to receive approval and secure funding for the project has spanned more than a decade. It broke ground in 2023.

In 2020, the airport's justification study — demonstrating the needs and presence of larger aircraft that could use the additional runway space — was approved.

Several factors, including the weight of the aircraft, weather and air pressure, affect a plane's ability

to land. While any plane could land at the Middle Georgia Regional Airport under the right conditions, the extra runway will "increase the likelihood" planes can land when facing less-than-ideal conditions, Faour said.

Some of the airport maintenance companies that operate out of the airport, such as Embraer S.A. or Dean Baldwin Painting, work on larger planes like Boeing 767s that

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Macon planners drop window case against 95-year-old after finding their own approval

BY JOSHUA WILSON

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Macon-Bibb County planning officials have dropped a case against a 95-year-old woman they had threatened with fines or jail time over windows in her historic home — after discovering the windows had been approved more than two decades ago.

Paula East learned last week that the complaint against her had been closed. Her granddaughter, Flora Chakmakis, received the news after a meeting with planning and zoning commission officials. Chakmakis, who lives in Miami, had traveled to Macon on several occasions to help her grandmother fight the case.

The matter has taken a toll on East, a dancer whose contributions

to Macon span several decades, Chakmakis said.

She said her grandmother was embarrassed by the commission's ruling and the media attention that followed.

The commission's executive director, Jeff Ruggieri, confirmed May 22 that the matter was resolved.

"In our initial research we overlooked a 2002 [Certificate of Appropriateness] that was issued specifically for vinyl windows," Ruggieri wrote in an email to The Macon Melody. "The matter is closed. The property is in compliance, and we have issued a refund."

The commission voted May 11 to reject a Macon-Bibb County Design Review Board recommen-

SEE CASE PAGE 2



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Paula East's home at 931 Walnut St. dates to 1860. Macon-Bibb County planning officials dropped a case against the 95-year-old this week after discovering they had approved the windows at the center of the dispute in 2002.

Periodical — Mail Label



Affordability more than a political buzzword for many Georgia voters

FROM GEORGIA RECORDER
georgiarecorder.com

Everything is more expensive these days, and Georgia voters across the state say the cost of living is shaping how they vote.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, grocery prices in April had climbed 2.9% since the same time last year. A pound of ground beef that would have cost you \$6 a year ago would set you back \$6.92 today, and that same pound of chuck would only cost \$4.34 in April 2020.

Overall, the Consumer Price Index, a measure for the cost of consumer goods, has increased nearly 30% since April 2020.

The cost crunch has been compounded in recent months by a spike in fuel costs. The average Georgia motorist today is paying \$60.24 to fill up their 15-gallon gas tank with regular gas, up from \$43.98 this time last year, according to data from the American Automobile Association. And higher gas prices means higher prices for all other goods.

Voters feeling the squeeze

Gwinnett County resident Hunter Harsh, a recent college graduate, said that he hasn't been able to buy a car after having to dip into his savings to afford housing and food.

"I'm starting my first job next week, and I won't have a car to go there. So I'm going to have to ride a bike to work every day, as I can save up money," Harsh said. "Thankfully,



it's not too far so for my situation kind of works out, but like a lot of people, if I ended up having to work somewhere further away, I would be in a tough situation."

Voters like Harsh indicated that for them, "affordability" was more than a buzzword. They reported having to readjust their shopping habits to either only buying essentials or opting for less healthy foods, as well as having to pick between necessities.

"You have to check on your medicine, you have to say, 'well I can get this, or I can get gas.' You have to eliminate places you can go because you don't have the money to fuel

up. You can't really buy the stuff you really want. The healthy foods you want cost so much more now, so you really have to demand it on just the cheap foods to survive," said Rockdale County resident Debbie Mitchell.

Other voters indicated they're cutting back on groceries as well as on non-essentials, like going out to eat in restaurants and traveling.

"As far as going out to the movies, eating out, that's not an option because that's just too expensive right about now," said another Rockdale County voter, Raquel McDaniel.

For many, frustration over high

prices is showing up at the ballot box. A recent Atlanta Journal-Constitution poll found economic concerns among the top issues voters say Georgia is facing today. The poll found 31% of Democratic primary voters listed inflation and cost of living as their top issue, with 17% of Republican primary voters agreeing.

"Everything has tripled in prices," said Michelle Hayes, a resident of Stephens County in northeast Georgia who cast her ballot in Toccoa. "They may say they're doing it for the long run, but people got to survive through it to get to that point, and it's not feasible. So I do not vote

the way that I did a couple of years ago."

Hayes described herself as a "very strong" Republican voter, but she said she drew a Democratic ballot for the first time in this month's primary election largely because of the cost of living, but also after seeing images of violent immigration raids.

"People are getting kicked out and beat on and jerked out of their cars, and the violence is just chaotic, and I don't agree with all the violence I'm seeing and the way people are being treated," she said.

Yvonne Chrimes, a 75-year-old retired university administrator who lives in Fulton County, said she's doing all right financially, but worries about having to make repairs on her house with tariffs driving up the cost of lumber and other supplies.

"I've got some savings, but in the long run, I worry more about what would happen if our country continues on the path that's going on under the current administration," she said. She said she also worries about the cost of healthcare for those with less financial security than she has.

Though she used to vote for candidates of both parties, "in the last couple of years, there's no way I'm going to vote for a Republican," she said. "The current administration lost my vote several years ago."

Georgia's economic pain is not evenly distributed, said Sherrell

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CASE

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ation that would have allowed East to keep the vinyl windows she installed in her 1860 slate row house at 931 Walnut St.

Commissioners gave her six months to bring the windows into

compliance with historic district guidelines or face legal action.

The design review board had sided with East, noting the replacement occurred more than two decades ago and that removal "at this time is not reasonable."

The commission overruled that recommendation, according to

reporting from The Macon Newsroom.

Planning and Zoning Commission Vice Chair Tim Jones said at the May 11 meeting that East's age would not factor into his vote.

Chair Jeane Easom said East "knew what she was doing" when she installed the windows and had

"defied" planning and zoning at the time.

East's friends had urged the commission to show mercy, warning that construction work inside the home "could potentially aggravate respiratory insufficiencies and pose unnecessary health risks" for someone her age.

The complaint that prompted the case came from East's neighbor, Edwin Atkins, who argued the windows undermined the authenticity and property values of the historic row homes on Walnut Street.

The Certificate of Appropriateness planners said they overlooked was issued in 2002.

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

A CAT excavator works amid drainage culverts at the site of Middle Georgia Regional Airport's 600-foot runway expansion, which broke ground in 2023 after more than a decade of planning and approval.

AIRPORT

Continued from Page 1

could benefit from the expansion.

Planes can land and go as they please, but many of the 87 planes housed by the airport choose to base their planes in Macon because of the area's affordability and low taxes, Faour said.

The airport received just over \$3 million in grants in August 2024 to construct new hangars and are in talks to add even more, Faour added. Hanger leasing, along with fuel sales, help the airport generate revenue, he noted.

Faour said the airport is also working toward connecting its airport to the international flight network. For example, passengers can book flights to the Caribbean out of Fort Lauderdale through JetBlue.

SINGLES

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problem: No one wants to live and work in a lonely city.

Despite its name, the events aren't just for single people. Hollar assures participants that the in-person meet-ups are meant to foster all types of connection. Attendees wear a wristband with a corresponding color to signify their intentions and relationship status:

— Red means taken but ready to meet friends and be a wingman for their friends.

— Pink means single and attracted to women.

— Blue means single and attracted to men.

— Yellow means "Ask me about it!" Since it began in 2024, Mingle with Singles has far surpassed participation numbers in the chamber's more traditional networking events for young professionals, Hollar said.

The series of events, hosted at various local venues, garners an average of nearly 50 people per gathering and is often marketed toward new hires at local companies and college students, she noted.

Hollar said she mostly sees participants under 40 — proof that, while the movies "When Harry Met Sally" and "Sleepless in Seattle" captured a generation of hopeless romantics, a new generation has found itself "Restless in Macon."

And for many, dating apps just aren't cutting it.

"You can crunch all of the numbers you want to get whatever statistical chance that you have with somebody else," said Hannah F., a 26-year-old local attorney whose last name is being withheld at her request. "But ... you have to know who they are, and that's not something that can be reduced down to numbers or statistics or to a recommended match that pops up."

A Macon resident since 2022 when she began pursuing her law degree at Mercer Uni-

versity, Hannah attended a chamber singles event at Hotel Forty Five last year.

"It was nice to meet people face to face that were actively looking for something," she said.

As a Florida native and recent college graduate, Hannah said meeting people has become increasingly intimidating, but Mingle with Singles took the edge off the awkwardness of meeting someone new.

"It was different for me because I've grown up with technology," she said.

In person, "it's not like you can swipe left and forget about someone," Hannah said. These local networking events can be "nerve-racking" and require a "leap of faith," she said, but she tries to go with the flow and avoid overthinking.

"It's downtown, to a good bar, where there's something structured," Hannah said. "You don't have to worry like a first date where you look at somebody and go, 'So, the weather was nice today.'"

Hannah said she plans to attend the next Mingle with Singles event, which is Tuesday from 6-8 p.m. at The Rose Room in downtown Macon.

Rose Room bartender Ezelious Adams said he still witnesses modern-day charming first encounters and has even seen people return to the bar with someone they met there previously. As a bartender, he sometimes helps break the ice between two individuals or ensures both parties are comfortable.

At The Rose Room in particular, the vibe is more laid back, which he said gives customers more confidence.

"Human interaction is something we all strive toward," he said. "The bar is just a more relaxed environment that allows that to flourish."

The event costs \$20 to attend, and advance registration is requested but not required. To register in advance, visit the chamber of commerce's website at maconchamber.com.

Adopting the waiver would increase kindergarten through fourth grade class sizes by two students but would also bring in \$3.8 million in revenue.

"We were already there last year," district Chief Financial Officer Eric Bush said of the waivers. "It's not making a significant change."

The board's general fund could be drained by 2028 without any action. Superintendent Dan Sims acknowledged the district's need for action to remedy its financial situation but said it will remain committed to its students through the process.

"We committed to making decisions through a strategic and transparent process rather than implementing across-the-board cuts," Sims told board members.

Board President Daryl Morton said "business as usual is not sustainable." It's "incumbent" on the board to demonstrate they are working toward a balanced budget, he said.

"A lot of this doesn't happen overnight," Morton said. The board will vote June 2 on its initial version of the budget. The board will have to hold two public hearings before it is able to approve the budget.

DEFICIT

Continued from Page 1

If no budget is adopted by then, the board will have to pass a monthly spending resolution.

District administrators also noted the school system would save more than \$1 million per elementary school closed and their reasoning for considering a tax increase.

"We are at a critical point in time which has created financial stress within the district, where not considering a millage rate increase would show a gross lack of fiscal management and responsibility," district officials wrote.

The board met May 21 to dig deeper into ways the school district can get out of its budget deficit, and financial staff presented a handful of measures which could get them out of the hole.

Those adjustments include the elimination of vacant positions, central office furloughs, implementation of a class size waiver, outsourcing paraprofessional hires and department-level reductions.

Making all of those moves would amount to \$11.4 million in cuts. Of that, outsourcing 80 paraprofessional hires would reduce \$2.3 million in retirement and health insurance costs.

Special Content furnished to The Macon Melody

RECLAIMING FOCUS IN THE DIGITAL AGE: TIPS FOR SENIORS



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Does the world feel too fast? Are constant digital distractions making it hard to concentrate on daily tasks?

If you're feeling this way, you're not alone — especially if you're entering your senior years.

The ability to concentrate, especially on newer skills, is one of the cognitive functions that can take a hit as we age. Being proactive and developing your focus can help lessen the normal effects of aging on your brain.

Aging and Cognitive Function

According to the National Institute on Aging, some decrease in cognitive function is normal as we age.

Most older adults need more time to complete cognitive tasks than they would have 30 years earlier. Similarly, older adults may have more trouble recalling names or multitasking.

The Physical-Cognitive Connection

As our physical health changes, our brain function is affected. Many physical conditions can impact cognitive function, including your ability to focus.

If you experience hearing or vision loss, for example, your brain will work much harder to interpret sensory inputs and have less energy to concentrate. Increased inflammation and decreased blood flow as you age can impair your brain's ability to send quick communication between neurons. All of these underlying physical conditions can make focus and concentration more difficult.

What Else Affects Your Ability to Focus?

While aging is one of the elements that can affect your ability to focus, Harvard Health points out several more, including medication side effects, excessive drinking, and information overload.

Medications and Side Effects

Many older adults take medications for physical and mental well-being. If you're experiencing trouble focusing, talk with your doctor about whether that's a common side effect of your medications and whether there's an option to switch.

Information Overload

In this day and age, it's almost impossible to get away from a constant flow of information. Our world is full of visually stimulating ads, news, and entertainment, not to mention the device that most of us keep in our pockets all day.

When we're exposed to so much material all day long, our brains lose the ability to find the important pieces and concentrate on what really matters.

How to Reclaim Deep Focus

Even if you're experiencing underlying physical conditions that make it harder to concentrate, the impact of our information-overloaded society can't be understated. Fortunately, there are several simple ways to retrain your brain to filter out the noise and reclaim a deep, calm focus.

Change Your Environment

One of the simplest ways to improve focus is by limiting the stimuli in your environment. Make sure there's at least one corner in your home that's free from screens, then plan to sit there for meals, reading, and other leisure activities. Sitting outside is the perfect way to naturally decrease overwhelming digital brain clutter.

Slow Down Your To-Do List

Some of the information overload comes from our own internal pressure. If we have a mile-long to-do list, we often try to multitask, even when it comes to things we enjoy.

Rewrite this pattern by purposefully

tackling one item at a time, focusing on that specific task without letting your brain wander. Don't be surprised if this feels strange at the outset; concentration is a skill you will strengthen over time.

Prioritize a Digital Detox Period

Schedule blocks of time when you put down your phone and don't check emails, texts, or app notifications. Activate one of the "focus" options on your phone to silence all notifications except for urgent messages from your chosen contacts. Stick to these time slots just as you would other meetings on your calendar.

Choose a New Hobby

Putting down the devices and creating a calmer environment are key to minimizing your brain's input overload, but actually reclaiming the ability to focus well requires a new skill to engage those muscles.

Choose a new hobby (or an old one that you've lost touch with) that will require your concentration and commitment to learn. "Analog hobbies" that don't use any screens are perfect for this new skill.

Painting, gardening, crochet, and even learning magic tricks — all of these hobbies can happen without a device. Check out reference books at the local library for inspiration and instruction rather than relying on digital media. You can also look for local clubs and groups to join for a social aspect.

Once you've begun learning the new hobby, set a goal for yourself; for example, spend 30 minutes a day for four weeks practicing your new skill. See how your focus and concentration have changed after that time period.

With these simple changes, you can start to improve your focus and continue enjoying strong cognitive function for years to come.



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SNAPSHOTS

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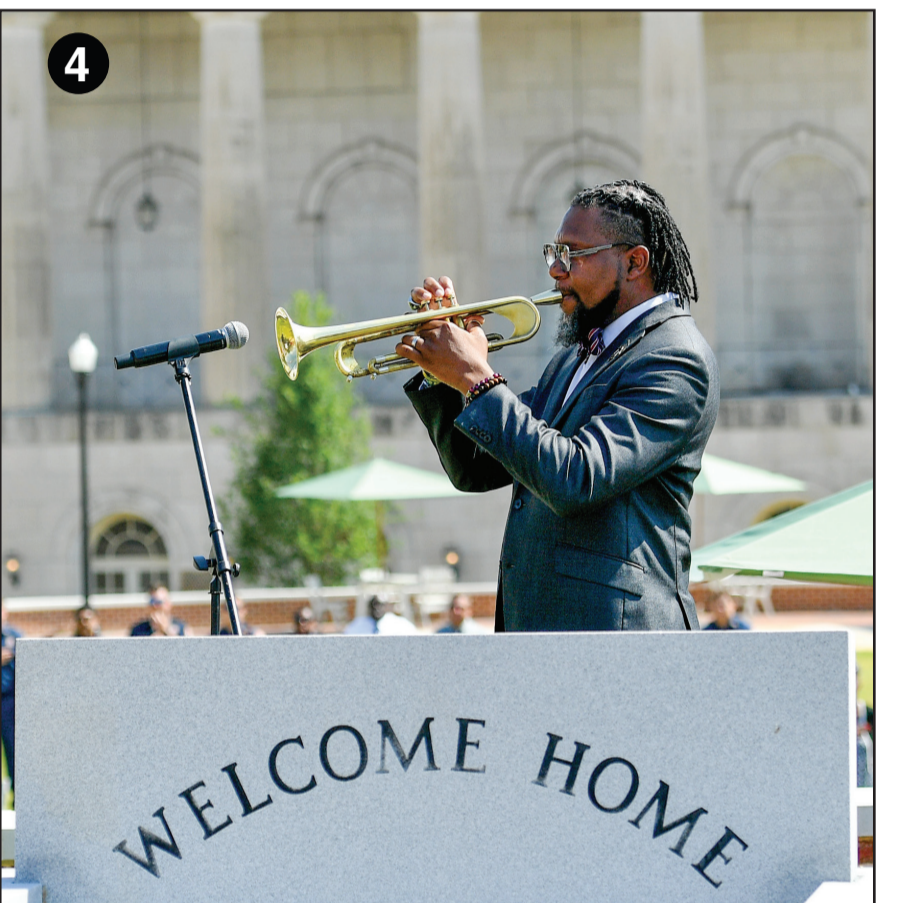


PHOTO NO. 1 — The family of Sgt. Rodney M. Davis unveils his Medal of Honor Monument at Rosa Parks Square May 21 during a rededication ceremony. *Photo by Jason Vorhees.*

PHOTO NO. 2 — Veterans salute the U.S. flag during a rededication ceremony for Sgt. Rodney M. Davis' Medal of Honor Monument. *Photo by Jason Vorhees.*

PHOTO NO. 3 — 2026 Wesleyan College graduates congratulate each other after their commencement ceremony. *Photo courtesy of Wesleyan College.*

PHOTO NO. 4 — Nelson Render performs Taps during a rededication ceremony in downtown Macon. *Photo by Jason Vorhees.*

PHOTO 5 — 2026 VIP Academy graduates flip their tassels May 20. *Photo courtesy of Bibb County Schools.*

PHOTO 6 — 2026 Westside High School graduates walk into the Macon Coliseum May 21. *Photo courtesy of Bibb County Schools.*

PHOTO 7 — Members of the 2026 Central High School class perform a song during their graduation ceremony May 21. *Photo courtesy of Bibb County Schools.*

CORRECTION: A photo on the May 22, 2026, Snapshots page was misidentified. The image shows 2026 Wesleyan College graduates — not Middle Georgia State University graduates — congratulating each other following their commencement ceremony. We have republished the photo with the correct caption. We apologize for the error.

OPINION

FRIDAY, MAY 29, 2026 » THE MACON MELODY » REPORTING FOR MACON, FROM MACON » MACONMELODY.COM » PAGE 5

Paula East deserved better

Irked.

That's what I was when I read Liz Fabian of The Macon Newsroom's latest report on the Macon-Bibb County Planning and Zoning Commission, which had decided in early May to punish a 95-year-old Maconite for replacing windows on her historic slate row home on Walnut Street some 20 years ago.

As I said in my column last week, the entire matter seemed petty and made Macon's planners and zoners look like busybodies. I took some flak for those comments — one reader called my take on the commission's silly move "simplistic" — but I stand by them even more so now.

We send our print product to our press in Perry on Wednesday afternoons, and it's mailed to subscribers and appears on newsstands on Fridays. A lot can happen in two days, which is one of the perils of print. So, by the time the print issue was circulating across Macon, there was a major development in the window affair.

Paula East is the historic homeowner who apparently defied our planning czars. I was sitting in my home office on Friday morning when I got an email from "Flora C." with a window-related subject line. I sighed. I had already been raked over the coals by several readers upset with my opinion on the commission's pane problem. I expected more of the same and clicked on the message.

It was nothing of the sort. Instead, Flora is Paula's granddaughter, a resident of Miami who has frequently traveled to Macon to help her grandmother fight this matter. She wrote about a big development in the case and asked me to give her a call, which I did within minutes. What she had to say was indeed shocking.

The commission's entire case against Paula hinged on her fail-



Joshua Wilson

ure to get their approval before she replaced her windows more than two decades ago. A neighbor, Edwin Atkins, took offense to the vinyl windows, saying, according to meeting minutes, they have "taken away from the ... beauty and historical elements of the ... homes." The county's design review board, which reports up to the planning and zoning commission, reviewed the matter and said it should be left alone.

The commission rejected that recommendation and, with much grandstanding, talked about how Paula had openly defied them. They ordered her to, within six months, replace the vinyl windows, even as neighbors and friends said such a project could endanger Paula's health. That was of no consequence to the majority of the commission, which threatened the 95-year-old with fines or even jail time for non-compliance.

I was again irked as I listened to Flora talk about her grandmother's embarrassment over this entire ordeal. Paula has also been in and out of the hospital, the granddaughter told me, due to stress over the issue. Flora then upped the ante, telling me the entire thing was resolved, anyway, as planning and zoning staffers had recently found Paula did, after all, get approval to replace her windows.

She did everything by the book and has still been dealing with, at an advanced age, a bureaucratic nightmare. I told Flora we'd follow up, wished her and Paula the best, and, like any good journalist, sought to verify this information. The commission's executive director told me it was indeed correct. Paula had sought and received the appropriate approvals before replacing her win-

dows. They'd be issuing a refund, he said.

And I guess that's that. I wrote up an update and pushed it online Saturday. It quickly gained legs, with thousands of views and social media comments. Erick Erickson, the former Macon City Council member and popular talk radio host, even shared the article, adding some fiery planning and zoning commission critiques.

As a journalist, I've spent years covering power imbalances, whether those be citizens versus government or patients against health systems. You cover these cases to the best of your ability and then move to the next thing. You try not to dwell on an issue or think too hard about how unfair life can sometimes be.

Sometimes, though, a story can stick with you. A good therapist — or a friend with a few well-timed gin and tonics — could probably find many of those haunting me. One I'll think about for a while is Paula's. Her advocates can tell you much about the dancer's many community contributions and kindness. For now, all I can think about, though, is how systems failed her.

Paula did everything right. She requested approval, got it and then spent some of her final years on God's green earth being told otherwise by the very body that approved the windows in the first place. Her case is a reminder that behind every agenda item, every complaint filed and every certificate number is a person — a neighbor, a family member, someone's grandmother. They deserve to be met with compassion and basic decency, not the puffed-up outrage of officials who seem to love the authority of their offices more than the people those offices exist to serve.

Joshua Wilson is the executive editor of The Macon Melody. Email him at joshua@maconmelody.com.

"Sometimes, though, a story can stick with you. A good therapist — or a friend with a few well-timed gin and tonics — could probably find many of those haunting me. One I'll think about for a while is Paula's. Her advocates can tell you much about the dancer's many community contributions and kindness. For now, all I can think about, though, is how systems failed her."

How rural Georgia lost HOPE

For the first 16 years of its existence, Georgia's HOPE scholarship program did something unusual for a state entitlement: it tilted toward the people who needed it most — not dramatically, not necessarily by design, but measurably.

From 1995 through 2011, the 147 counties that I call "Notlanna" — sparsely populated rural counties and the state's regional hub cities — produced substantially more HOPE scholars than my 12-county "Atlanna" region.

In 1995, the program's first full year, Notlanna was home to about 58% of the state's population and produced nearly 70% of the first full HOPE class. That's according to Census Bureau population estimates and HOPE data from the Georgia Student Finance Commission. By 2011, those numbers had moved somewhat in Atlanna's direction, thanks in some measure to population shifts, but Notlanna was still producing the lion's share of the state's HOPE scholars (64%) and earning most of the HOPE scholarship dollars (55%).

Then came House Bill 326. Passed by the General Assembly and signed by Gov. Nathan Deal in March 2011, HB 326 was sold as an act of fiscal necessity. The Georgia Lottery — HOPE's funding source since Gov. Zell Miller created the program in 1993 — was projecting a \$243 million deficit for fiscal year 2011 and a \$317 million shortfall by 2012. Deal's framing was blunt:



Charlie Hayslett

reduce HOPE or lose it altogether.

So the legislature reduced it. The new law decoupled scholarship awards from actual tuition, stripped book and fee coverage, added rigorous course requirements, imposed a seven-year eligibility cap, and — most consequentially for working Georgians — raised the GPA requirement for the HOPE Grant, which serves technical college students, from 2.0 to 3.0.

Approximately 9,000 technical college students lost their grants almost overnight. Full-time equivalent enrollment in Georgia's technical college system fell nearly 25% between 2011 and 2012.

The legislators who passed HB 326 by and large represented rural Georgia. The General Assembly in 2011 was majority Republican, majority rural in its political weight, and operating under the conviction that it was making a hard but responsible choice to preserve a program that might otherwise collapse. What they did not appear to consider — or perhaps could not see — was who would bear the cost.

The county-level data make the distribution of that cost unmistakably clear. And it runs directly counter to the interests of the voters whose representatives cast the critical votes.

In the year after HB 326 took effect, Georgia's smallest counties — those with fewer than 35,000 residents — lost 23.4% of their HOPE scholars in a single year. The state's largest counties, those over 150,000 in population, lost 16%; for Atlanna, the hit was smaller yet, just 13%. The penalty, in other words, was inversely proportional to county size: the smaller and more rural the county, the harder the blow.

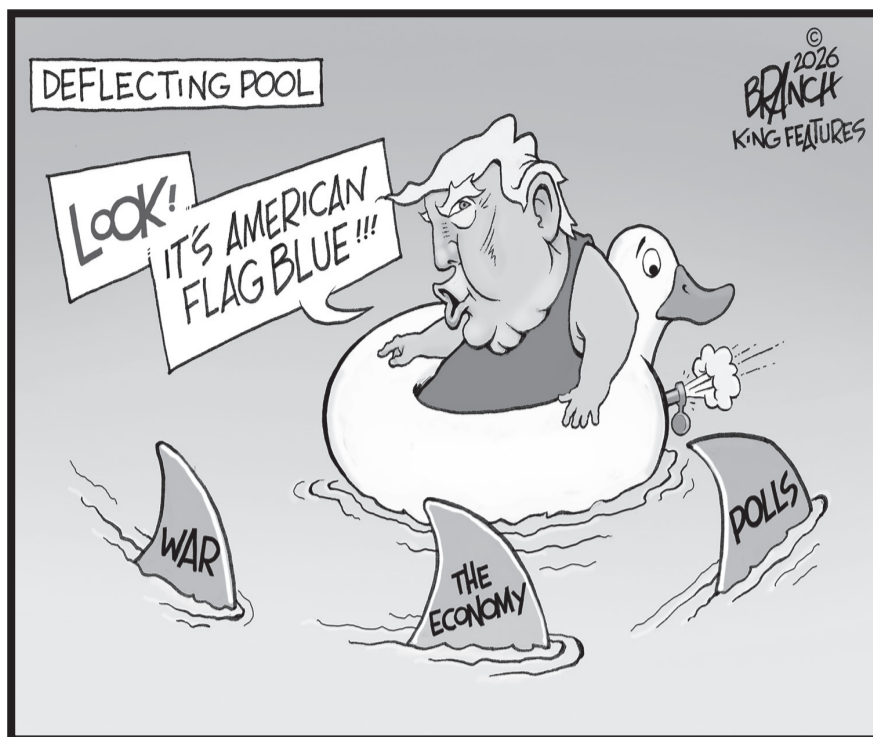
But the immediate shock was only the beginning. What happened in the years that followed is the real story.

Atlanna recovered. Notlanna still hasn't.

By 2025, the 12 Atlanna counties had gotten back to their 2011 peak. The other 147 counties — Notlanna — were still 63,000 HOPE scholars below their 2011 high water mark. HB 326 basically knocked them off a cliff and they've mostly been sliding downhill ever since.

The HB 326/HOPE story follows the patterns I've found with every other socioeconomic calamity I've studied, including the Great Recession and COVID-19. Atlanna bounces back pretty quickly. Notlanna, not so much. But nowhere is that pattern clearer than with education and educational attainment — and now it seems clear that HB 326 was an inflection point that dramatically widened the education gulf between the Two Georgias.

SEE HAYSLETT
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Democratic voters eclipsed Republicans in Georgia's election. What happens in Nov.?

BY ROSS WILLIAMS

Georgia Recorder
Georgiarecorder.com

Last week's primary election didn't feature any races with both a Democrat and a Republican on the ballot, but Georgia Democrats still feel like they won.

If you are one of the more than 2 million Georgians who cast a ballot, you will likely recall the poll worker asking you to choose a Democratic, Republican or nonpartisan ballot.

In all, Democrats pulled more than 1 million ballots to Republicans' nearly 940,000, or about 52.6% to 45.4%.

Democratic Party of Georgia Chairman Charlie Bailey said that margin is the biggest for Democrats since 1998 and shows that voters are ready to line up in November behind candidates like U.S. Sen. Jon Ossoff and former Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, the Democratic nominees for U.S. Senate and Georgia governor.

"It's just another piece of evidence of growing Democratic momentum, the work of the party, the strength of Jon Ossoff, the strength of Keisha Lance Bottoms coming into this governor's race," he said. "People are fed up with (Republicans), and what those numbers in the primary tell you is that that momentum is building towards November, when they're going to vote these Republicans out."

In 2018, a midterm year with President Donald Trump in the White House and an open race for Georgia governor at the top of the ticket, Republicans pulled more ballots than Democrats by about 52% to 48%.

Comparing the number of ballots drawn is not a perfect measure. Some people choose the other party's ballot because they live in an area dominated by that party and they want to have a say in local races, or because they want to promote a weaker opponent for their candidate in the general election.

Still, the discrepancy spells good news for Democrats looking ahead to the Nov. 3 election, says Emory University political science professor Andra Gillespie.

"What it connotes or implies is that Democratic candidates are capturing the imagination of voters in ways that, if this energy can be sustained, could be helpful for them in terms of flipping seats nationally, and in Republican states like Georgia, narrowing those margins between Democrats and Republicans, even in contests where Republicans are the odds-on favorite," she said.



PHOTO BY ROSS WILLIAMS

Voters line up outside Shiloh Hills Baptist Church in Kennesaw, Georgia on Election Day, May 19

The difference in ballots is even more notable because Republicans had more high-profile races, said University of Georgia political science professor Trey Hood.

No Democrat challenged incumbent U.S. Sen. Jon Ossoff, while Republicans had competitive races for U.S. Senate and Georgia governor at the top of the ticket.

Hood said it's also notable that Republicans who voted on Election Day did not outnumber Democrats by a large margin.

Republicans only had about 4,000 more voters on Election Day than Democrats, about 508,000 to 504,000. Hood said that might signal a shift in GOP voter behavior, with more conservatives preferring to cast a ballot during Georgia's three weeks of early voting.

"I don't know that we can expect to necessarily see a huge surge in Republican turnout on Election Day anymore," he said.

Voter demographics strong for Democrats

Former Atlanta mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms gives a speech after winning the Democratic primary for governor outright. Jeff Amy/Georgia Recorder

Results also show demographics that tend to favor Democratic

candidates in Georgia had a strong showing.

Statistically, Black voters in Georgia largely favor Democrats, and they made up nearly 32% of the vote.

"If Black turnout was 31% in a general election, yeah, that would be probably a good Democratic year," Hood said. "I mean, before now, the highest it's ever been is about 29%."

"And the more Black turnout as a percentage of the total electorate, the less of the white share of the vote you have to draw off as a Democrat. So if that pattern held and Black turnout was 31% in the general, it would be big."

Data from the secretary of state's office also shows that the electorate was nearly 57% female and 43% male.

That number is likely boosted by high turnout among Black women, who are registered to vote at a higher rate than Black men.

Reality check?

Still, the high Democratic turnout was not enough to land a pair of Democratic-aligned candidates on the state Supreme Court, and not everyone thinks the numbers show the wind is at Democrats' back.

Georgia Republican Party Chairman Josh McKoon said turnout in

primary elections does not correlate with general election turnout.

McKoon said he chalks up the ballot discrepancy to the typical midterm backlash to the party in the White House and Democrats having a competitive field for governor for what he said was the first time in more than two decades.

"It was Mark Taylor and then it was Jason Carter, then it was Stacey Abrams twice," he said. "Now, this time they actually had a wide open primary, and a lot of people ran."

"And so, yes, it's not surprising that they had more than their usual turnout because usually they don't have anything to turn out for. So, I mean, there's not really a surprise there."

McKoon said Georgia Republicans won't be resting on their laurels, but he's confident that their messaging will resonate with voters come the fall.

"Georgia is an extremely competitive state, and we're going to have to earn our victory in November," he said. "But I think that Georgia Republicans have a really good record to run on."

"We've got tremendous economic success to run on. We've got low unemployment in our state. Our state's been consistently ranked the number one state to do business."

Gillespie said while Democrats have reason to be optimistic, November's race is far from a sure thing.

"(Republicans) don't have the same numerical advantages that they had 20 years ago, but the fundamentals still privilege Republicans," she said. "And even where you can see greater Democratic engagement and where you can infer greater Democratic excitement, that sometimes means that Democratic candidates lose by smaller margins."

"It doesn't guarantee them victory. They still have to campaign and prepare like they are underdogs."

Bailey said the Democratic Party of Georgia is ready for action and poised to take advantage of the four-week period before the runoff while Republicans candidates are still duking it out over the GOP Senate and governor's nominations.

"This will be the biggest and the best coordinated campaign this state has ever seen, and that is the work we are doing," he said. "Ain't nobody around here sitting around and just expecting something. We are going to push with everything we have."

This story was originally published by the Georgia Recorder on georgiarecorder.com.

Federal court says state Medicaid rules shortchanged medically fragile 3-year-old

BY TY TAGAMI

Capitol Beat News Service
Capitol-beat.org

ATLANTA — The policies that Georgia uses to approve or deny services for children enrolled in Medicaid fail to satisfy federal requirements for adequate care, according to a new federal court ruling.

A three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit upheld a federal district judge's order requiring the Georgia Department of Community Health (DCH) to provide nearly five times more in-home nursing care to a child at risk of dying than the state had approved through a contractor.

The 3-year-old boy, referred to by the court as L.W., has a rare metabolic disease that interrupts his body's ability to store and use glycogen, a kind of fuel.

He must be fed every three hours through a tube inserted into his stomach.

Before moving to Georgia from Virginia, Medicaid was paying for 56 hours of nursing care per week while paying the boy's mother to provide another 40 hours.

After moving to Georgia in 2023, Alliant Health Solutions, a contractor that manages Medicaid for the state, approved only 21 hours of nursing services with no supplement for the mother, since Georgia lacks such a program.

"Over the months that L.W.'s parents and physician were asking Georgia to increase L.W.'s nursing hours, L.W.'s parents managed to keep L.W. alive," the judges wrote in their May 18 opinion. "But their success came at a tremendous cost to L.W.'s parents and L.W.'s health."

The boy's fatigued mother often slept through the alarms she set to

wake herself up so she could feed him in the middle of the night. Several times she awoke to find his glucose readings dangerously low. Once, when his parents could not maintain his glucose levels, L.W. had to be hospitalized for about a week.

In 2024, his mother requested a change in the number of nursing hours. When Alliant denied it, she sued in federal court in the Northern District of Georgia. Federal Judge Thomas W. Thrash Jr. decided 21 hours of weekly nursing care was inadequate and ordered the state to pay for at least 100 hours.

DCH appealed. The agency's failure to win that appeal produced a ruling that could influence how Medicaid is administered in Georgia and in the rest of the Eleventh Circuit's jurisdiction, which includes Alabama and Florida.

"This is telling DCH, 'your

responsibility is to ensure that care gets provided,'" said Roland Behm, co-founder of the Georgia Mental Health Policy Partnership.

"As long as it's medically necessary and it can go to correct or ameliorate, then you have to say yes to that because that's the obligation that you took on as the state Medicaid agency and that you contracted with these other entities to do," he said.

Under the federal Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic and Treatment standard, states must cover medically necessary services for children that "correct or ameliorate" a physical or mental condition.

A spokeswoman for DCH said Tuesday that the agency was still reviewing the court decision and had no comment.

The agency's lawyers had contended in court that the decision to limit L.W.'s nursing hours was legal

because it followed agency policy. But the three-judge panel ruled that the policy had failed L.W. and his parents and that the state had an obligation to review the facts of each case to provide the minimum level of care required under the federal Medicaid Act.

One of the Eleventh Circuit judges wrote a concurring opinion that criticized DCH's policy as "poorly drafted and hard to make sense of." The policy was written with a "repetitive structure and odd phrasing," Judge Britt C. Grant wrote.

Her critique also noted that DCH had not included the relevant policy in the court record and that she could not find it in the agency's manual.

"Given these discrepancies," she wrote, "I am unsure about what the Department's real policy is. Nor do I have any idea what policy, if any, was applied to L.W.'s change request."

Chattahoochee Riverkeeper files lawsuit over muddy water at Columbus site

BY ALANDER ROCHA
Georgia Recorder
Georgiarecorder.com

The Chattahoochee Riverkeeper has filed a federal lawsuit against the owner and developer of an apartment complex in Columbus that alleges ongoing violations of the Clean Water Act.

The lawsuit, filed last week against Phenix City, Alabama-based developer SCorUSA and apartment complex Aspire at Old Guard in Columbus, alleges the companies failed to follow regulations intended to protect waterways from muddy stormwaters during the construction phase.

“The failure to implement and maintain basic pollution controls has destroyed the neighboring creeks and aquatic life downstream.

“Given the gravity of these violations and the defendants’ refusal to work collaboratively on a solution, CRK is moving forward with our lawsuit,” Jason Ulseth, Riverkeeper and the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper’s executive director, said in a statement Tuesday.

The Chattahoochee Riverkeeper first notified Columbus officials in 2025 after muddy stormwater had been released into the Chattahoochee river system due to “broken and insufficient pollution controls.” Despite the city requiring developers to fix the problem,

the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper found that the situation had worsened by early 2026 after heavy rainfall that the environmental group said caused the pristine stream that is normally teeming with life to be filled with sediment from the muddy waters flowing from the construction site.

The lawsuit comes after the riverkeeper filed an open records request in February for site inspection reports that showed the 25-acre development had been poorly managed and the problem had gotten significantly worse.

The city issued a stop-work order shortly after that and again in early May, which Chattahoochee Riverkeeper Deputy Director Henry Jacobs said in an interview Tuesday demonstrates that city officials are more engaged.

But Jacobs said the group moved forward with the federal lawsuit because they argue local officials haven’t done enough to hold the developers accountable.

Jacobs said that the runoff from the construction site impacts “everything living in the creek,” as well as surrounding properties and downstream users.

“If the creek is full of mud and it can’t hold as much water, the risk of flooding can increase,” he said. “Property values are being impacted, especially further downstream, where you have private ponds, and then Lake Oliver, and then the river itself.”

Messages seeking comment were left Tuesday with Steven W. Corbett and Dan Nibblett, who were named in the lawsuit as being associated with SCorUSA, LLC and Aspire at Old Guard, LLC, as well as a spokesperson for the Columbus Consolidated Government.

The Chattahoochee Riverkeeper sent a 60-day notice of intent to sue, which is required in these cases, to the developers in March, but the developers never replied to the notice.

Jacobs said it is “very rare that an entity does not respond to us during those 60 days.”

The lawsuit asked the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Georgia for an injunction to prevent further damage and require the developer to restore the tributaries.

They also seek civil penalties of \$68,445 per day for each violation of the Clean Water Act, which would be paid to the U.S. Treasury, as well as the costs of bringing the lawsuit.

“Our biggest concern is all of the mud and sediment that has already been dumped into the creek over the past year,” Jacobs said. “We want this developer to clean up the creek and mitigate any further damages.”

This story was originally published by the Georgia Recorder on georgiarecorder.com.



HAYSLETT

Continued from Page 5

As I reported last year, based on data from the American Community Survey, Atlanna’s educational attainment numbers put it on a par with the best educated states in the nation; Notlanna, were it a state unto itself, would come in next-to-last, behind Mississippi but ahead of West Virginia. The state’s 103 smallest counties would, collectively, trail Puerto Rico.

This story’s political irony bears repeating. The predominantly Republican, predominantly rural state legislators dropped a legislative bomb on their predominantly Republican, predominantly rural constituents. By passing HB 326, they essentially redirected HOPE resources away from rural, lesser-resourced school districts and toward wealthier school systems, primarily in Atlanna.

What’s more, they were warned at the time. Vincent Lloyd and Devin Fergus, professors at Georgia State University and Emory, respectively, tried to sound the alarm in a March 13, 2011, op-ed in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

“Especially troubling is the effect that the changes to HOPE would have on students from rural Georgia,” Lloyd and Fergus wrote. “While 40 percent of students from Alpharetta High School would qualify for full scholarships based on the SAT requirements (about 166 students), just 1.8 percent of students from Meriwether County would qualify (about two students total last year).”

“Our resources,” they concluded, “would be better directed at those thousands of students from rural Georgia and from working-class families whose lives will be dramatically changed for the worse if HOPE is taken away.”

In the fullness of time, we can now see just how right Fergus and Lloyd were.

Take, for instance, the 56 counties of interior South Georgia, which is heavily rural and heavily Republi-

can. In 2011, those counties produced just under 45,000 HOPE scholars; in 2025, that number was down to 21,436. In contrast, Gwinnett County alone saw its HOPE numbers rise from a little over 16,000 in 2011 to 21,146 in 2025, nearly matching all of South Georgia.

To put a finer political point on this story, Georgia’s five most Republican counties — Banks, Brantley, Echols, Glascock and Pierce, all rural and all 90% GOP or close to it — have seen their combined HOPE scholar production drop nearly 38% since HB 326 was passed in 2011. In 2011, they sent 1,699 HOPE scholars to college; in 2025, that collective number was down to 1,058.

The Georgia Lottery’s reserve fund, the supposed crisis that made all of this necessary, now stands at more than \$1 billion. And while that surplus was building, countless young Georgians, mostly rural, missed their chance at a higher education. The vast majority lost ground they will never recover, and the same goes for their hometowns.

Given everything else we know about the trajectory of the Two Georgias, there is little reason to think either they or their communities will ever fully recover. Educational attainment drives income, income drives population stability and population stability drives the tax base that funds the schools that produce the next generation of HOPE scholars.

HB 326 upended those building blocks and did more than reduce a scholarship program. For tens of thousands of young people in the reddest, most rural corners of Georgia, it foreclosed a future. That’s how rural Georgia lost HOPE — not all at once, and not with anyone intending it, but thoroughly, and with the receipts now in plain sight.

Charlie Hayslett of Decatur, a retired journalist and public relations executive,

researches and writes about the challenges of rural life in Georgia. Read his blog at troubleingodscountry.com.



PHOTO COURTESY CREATIVE COMMONS “CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER” BY NIKSNUT IS LICENSED UNDER CC BY-SA 2.0.

The Chattahoochee River, a tributary of the Apalachicola River, forms part of the Alabama and Georgia border.

AFFORDABILITY

Continued from Page 2

Byrd, founder and executive director of SOWEGA Rising, a nonprofit aimed at revitalizing southwest Georgia.

“We’re already in a community that’s economically depressed,” she said. “We’re in a community that’s already two or three times higher than the national average when it comes to poverty rates. We don’t have a lot of jobs here that pay living in wages and we’ve had a lot of major corporations and manufacturers that have left the area, so people are already feeling the weight of not having enough money to pay their bills, but it’s even more compounded now that gas is higher, food costs and groceries are higher, rents are increasing.”

Byrd said there’s a vicious cycle where people leave the area in search of jobs, decreasing tax revenue and pressuring municipalities to institute new taxes to help pay for services like police and fire protection.

Some loyal Republicans urge patience

Many Georgia voters placed the blame for high prices on Republicans in power, and specifically on President Donald Trump, citing the war in Iran and the tariff policy favored by the

president. But Republican voters interviewed during early voting predicted the current pain at the pump would ultimately be just a blip.

Hugh Holley, a 79-year-old retiree, said he is trusting the plan, even as he is cutting back on luxuries.

Holley, who cast his ballot in Alpharetta for Derek Dooley in the GOP primary for the U.S. Senate race and Chris Carr for governor, said he’s concerned about rising costs, but he sees the spike in oil prices as a necessary step in order to prevent Iran from building a nuclear weapon.

“To me, it’s a short-term thing we have to live with,” he said.

Holley and his wife have been choosing to save money by cutting back on travel and splitting an entree at restaurants rather than ordering two dishes.

“We haven’t given it up,” he said. “But in our case we split meals, so you reduce the total cost of the eating out by doing that.”

Lauren Shera, a retired radiologic technologist from Martin, a small town in northeast Georgia, voted in the Republican primary and cast her ballot for Mike Collins in the U.S. Senate race and Rick Jackson for governor earlier this month.

For her, the most important issues were combating child trafficking, securing the U.S.-Mexico border and

promoting oil independence. The cost of living was further down her list of concerns.

“It’s a factor, but I’m a wait-and-see sort of person,” she said. “As soon as all this crap is over in Iran, I think we’re going to level out and it’s going to be better than what it was before. Now that everybody’s griping about the gas prices going up, well, I’ll take a little bit higher gas prices for a couple more months opposed to Iran nuking us, you know what I’m saying? I like my safety more than paying a couple bucks extra for gas for right now.”

Roger Goodwin, a retiree from Homer, which is about 75 miles northeast of Atlanta, voted for Derek Dooley and Jackson.

He said he’s as perturbed at the pump as anyone.

“I’m on Social Security, so I’m on a fixed income,” he said. “I don’t like paying \$4 and some odd cents for gas. I won’t say it’s a total hindrance, but it’s definitely a concern and it makes things a little bit tighter.”

But Goodwin said he’s also confident in the economy long-term.

“I think what we’re seeing now is a result of when the strait (of Hormuz) was completely closed, and this is kind of the after effect, and I’m suspecting that prices for gas, for example, will come down,” he said.

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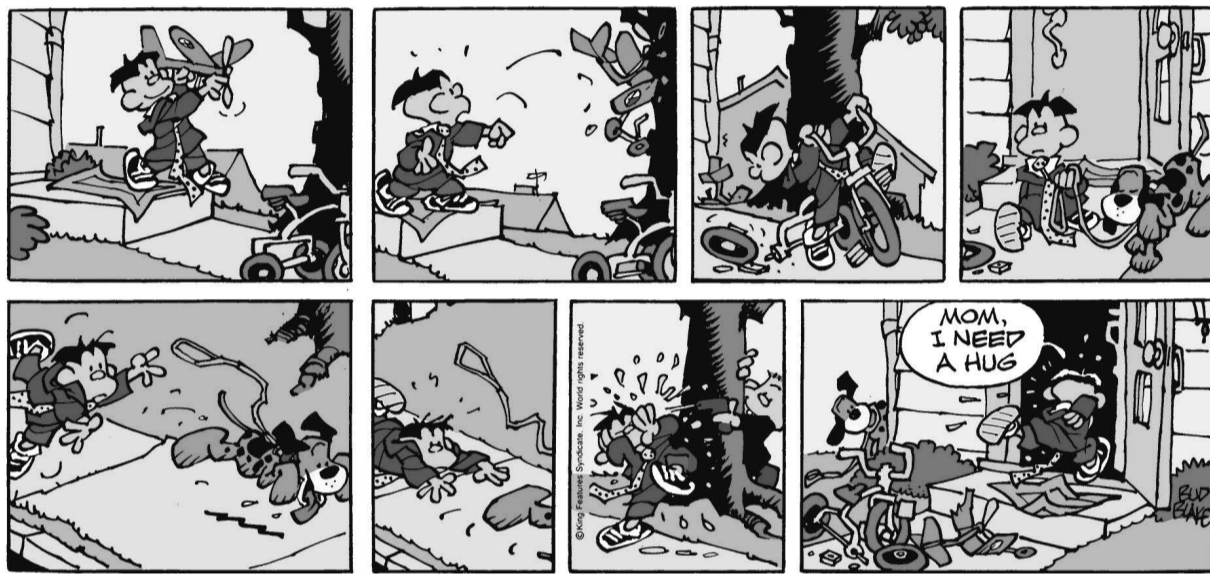
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Nature's tiny lanterns



PHOTO PROVIDED BY UGA EXTENSION SERVICES

Fireflies glow because of bioluminescence and each species has a distinct light flashing pattern. Georgia is home to more firefly species than any other state in the country, but the tiny creatures face increased threats of habitat loss.

For many people, fireflies are woven into childhood memories of warm summer evenings spent chasing blinking lights through the grass, catching them in mason jars or watching them drift above the lawn from a porch swing.

Fireflies, often called lightning bugs, are one of the South's most recognizable signs of summer.

Beyond their soft glow, these fascinating insects play an important role in the environment, though they now face growing threats from habitat loss and increasing light pollution.

Inside the glow of a firefly

Despite their name, fireflies are not actually flies at all. They are beetles belonging to the Lampyridae family. Their famous glow comes from a natural chemical reaction inside their bodies called bioluminescence.

Unlike a light bulb, a firefly's glow produces almost no heat. Scientists refer to this as "cold light," meaning very little energy is lost as heat, making a firefly's glow far more energy efficient than many manmade light sources.

Each firefly species has its own unique flash pattern, almost like a tiny Morse code signal blinking across the yard.

Not all fireflies glow the same color either. Depending on the species, their light may appear yellow, green or even pale orange. Some firefly larvae glow as well, earning them the nickname "glowworms."

Scientists believe fireflies originally developed their glow as a



Morgan Durden

warning to predators, signaling that they may be toxic or unpleasant to eat. Over time, that same glow also became an important form of communication.

Each species produces its own unique flash pattern to attract potential mates. Some species flash while flying, while others remain low to the ground or perch quietly in tall grass waiting to respond.

Fireflies in Middle Georgia

Georgia happens to be an excellent place for fireflies, with more than 50 known species recorded across the state, more than any other state in the country.

Firefly populations thrive in Middle Georgia landscapes thanks to the region's moisture, leaf litter, tall grass, wooded edges and low levels of artificial light.

While adult fireflies steal the spotlight during summer evenings, most of their lives are spent hidden from view. Before reaching adulthood, firefly larvae can live in soil and leaf litter for up to two years, where they serve as active predators feeding on slugs, snails and other small invertebrates.

Some adult fireflies also contribute to pollination while visiting flowers, adding another layer to their ecological importance. Because fireflies depend on clean water, healthy soil, and undisturbed habitat to survive, their presence is often considered a sign of a healthy environment.

Keeping summer nights bright

Unfortunately, fireflies face growing challenges. One of the greatest threats to fireflies is habitat loss. As forests, fields and other natural areas are cleared for development, fireflies lose the moist soil, leaf litter and tall grasses they rely on throughout their life cycle.

Light pollution is another growing concern, as artificial outdoor lighting can disrupt the flash signals fireflies use to communicate and locate mates.

Fortunately, homeowners can help support fireflies in their own landscapes. Leaving some leaf litter in garden beds, planting native vegetation and allowing parts of the yard to remain a little "wild" can make a big difference.

Turning off unnecessary outdoor lights during summer evenings also helps preserve the nighttime conditions fireflies need.

For many Georgians, fireflies aren't just insects, but a bit of summer magic. By protecting natural habitats and reducing outdoor lighting, homeowners can help these insects thrive and continue lighting up Georgia nights for many generations to come.

Morgan Durden works for the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service in Bibb County.

The county office provides resources for gardeners as well as educational services and community support. Visit their office at 715 Oglethorpe Street, call them at 748-310-5350 or email their staff at bibb.extension@uga.edu.

Arts and culture roundup: Mark your calendars

It's a good time to flip through my writer's notebook and pick some things coming in the next few weeks, and down the road, that are worth securing tickets for or marking on your calendar.



Michael W. Pannell

Here we go:

— The McEachern Art Center opens its Summer Georgia Artist Exhibition, highlighting the work of eight Georgia-based artists, on June 5, the next First Friday. The opening reception at 6 p.m. offers the chance to see the work of familiar artists as well as other creatives who may be altogether new to you.

Artists include Hannah Mock, Craig Coleman, Jeff Schmuki, Wendy DesChene, Jenni Horne, Isabel Neely, Meredith Ochoa and Reed Gallo.

Works include both two- and three-dimensional pieces in a variety of styles and media. From a sampling I've seen, all are immensely interesting, well-crafted pieces that will both delight and intrigue.

Aside from the First Friday opening reception, summer hours at the McEachern are Thursdays from 4-8 p.m., Fridays from 4-8 p.m. and Saturdays from noon to 4 p.m. The MAC is at 332 Second St. and online at macmacon.com.

— On June 6 at 3 p.m., Kali Dance Studio for the Arts, 438 Second St., presents A Tribute to the King of Pop at the Piedmont Grand Opera House, 651 Mulberry St. The recital performance is an opportunity to catch one of Macon's most vibrant dance-studio communities, where artistic expression and learning have flourished for two decades under the guidance of founder Terra Hitchcock. You've likely seen Kali students — kids and adults — perform at community events across Macon; this is a chance to see them in full-performance-mode.

Tickets are available through The Grand: \$25 for adults and \$20 for kids. The Kali studio is online at kalidancestudio.com.

— What else is coming to The Grand? "Girls Night: The Musical" is on for June 13, and "Toast: The Ultimate Bread Experience" is set for June 22. And yes, John Berry will be back for his annual Macon Christmas show on Dec. 19.

But before all that is the Macon premiere on June 11 of "Gregg Allman: The Music of My Soul." Special guest Chuck Leavell will be on hand, as will filmmakers. Leavell was The Allman Brothers

Band's pianist and is currently the Rolling Stones' piano player and musical director — as well as studio player for basically any

band that wants the best guy at the keys around. The new documentary explores the life and times of Gregg Allman with interviews and archival footage. It hits theaters June 17, when there will be another screening at The Grand.

— And how about the Macon Centreplex venues? It's a toss-up as to what to highlight, but to cover the range of great shows ahead, how about "Disney on Ice: Magic of Family," beginning a run at the Macon Coliseum on Oct. 20? The Goo Goo Dolls at Atrium Health Amphitheater on Aug. 27? Or Travis Tritt at the Macon Auditorium on Sept. 25? Considering these and others you can find at maconcentreplex.org, when has Macon had such a lineup of the best-of-the-best musical artists coming to town as are in store this summer and beyond?

— Bragg Jam's 2026 Concert Crawl is July 25. The concert crawl lineup was revealed at a co-event with Tanglewood Art Studios in April in conjunction with a Bragg Jam-related art exhibit at Tanglewood. Along with music, a hallmark of Bragg Jam is its community-building, which is only natural given the whole event began when a bunch of friends came together to remember the Bragg brothers.

If you can't wait until late July to get Bragg Jam connected, take them up on other events in June like their Second Sunday free live music on Coleman Hill, First Friday Soul Spots and whatever secret shows they may have planned that aren't announced until just before they pop up somewhere. Find more on all this on the Bragg Jam site and their socials, braggjam.org.

— Turn your calendar to August and mark down Aug. 20-23 for the Macon Film Festival. Festival volunteers are busy right now making final selections for films and guests while also preparing workshops, their website and app, and the ticketing system. Everything good about past festivals will be repeated

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LESSONS LEARNED IN GEORGIA

A New Southern Novel by A.C. Barfield

Some stories come from imagination. Others come from years of watching how a community rises, struggles, and changes over time. *Lessons Learned in Georgia* blends both into a gripping Southern political drama that feels authentic because it is written by someone who has spent decades living through the kind of issues many communities face every day.

Author A.C. Barfield has called the Macon area home since 1978. Over the years, he has closely observed how local politics, power structures, economic decisions, and public trust can shape the direction of an entire city. Those experiences inspired a fictional story that explores what happens when ordinary citizens begin questioning the systems meant to serve them.

Set in the fictional town of "Learned, Georgia," the novel follows a community slowly pulled into conflict as political influence, hidden alliances, and public frustration begin changing the town from within. While the book is fictional, readers throughout Middle Georgia may recognize the emotions, tensions, and civic struggles woven throughout the story.

Rather than attacking individuals or retelling real events, the novel focuses on larger themes: accountability, leadership, civic responsibility, and the lasting impact local government decisions can have on families, neighborhoods, businesses, and future generations.

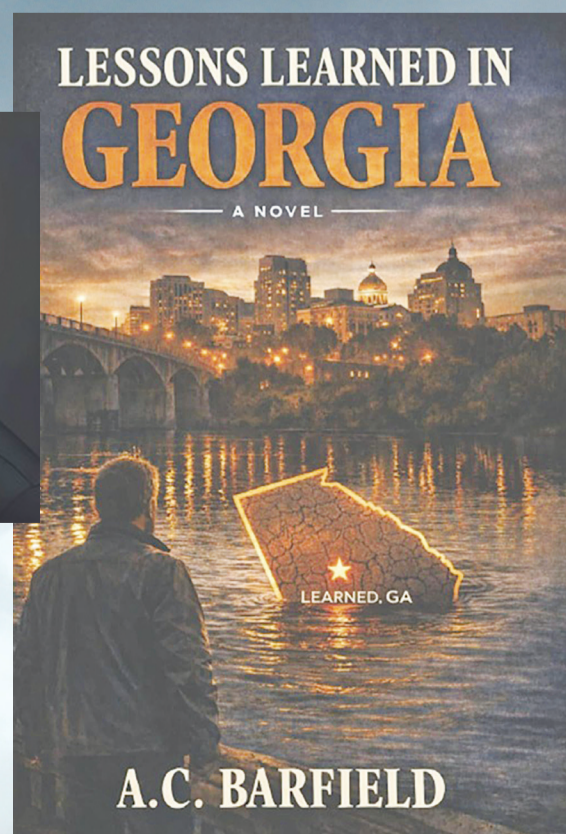
Early readers describe the book as thought-provoking, realistic, and difficult to put down — combining the pacing of a political thriller with the emotional weight of a hometown story.

As Barfield explains, the purpose of the novel is not division, but conversation — encouraging readers to think more deeply about the communities they live in and the importance of staying engaged before problems become impossible to ignore.



How to Order

Lessons Learned in Georgia is currently available for preorder and will be released on Amazon and BookBaby June 26, 2026, and wherever books are sold. Search "Lessons Learned in Georgia" to preorder today!



<https://rb.gy/k09axf>



<https://rb.gy/nc7ixz>

A.C. BARFIELD

The historic Old City Cemetery that has endured Macon's sprawling city growth

When the city of Macon was formed in 1823, provisions were made for a new cemetery as part of the master plan. Four acres, known as Old City Block 35, were set aside for this purpose. Bounded by Cherry, Sixth, Poplar and Seventh streets, the first burial in the new Cherry Street Cemetery was for a painter, John Clark, in 1824.



Kathleen O'Neal

Unlike Fort Hill Cemetery across the river in unincorporated East Macon, a superintendent oversaw the new cemetery. City council passed ordinances regulating the minimum depth of graves to be "not less than five or six feet" and that this digging was to be done by city-employed grave diggers. No interments were to take place after dark, and the superintendent was tasked with reporting to the mayor anyone who tried to skirt these requirements. Those found guilty in a court of law of breaking this rule would be fined a maximum of \$20.

As Macon's population increased, a larger burial ground was needed. The new Rose Hill Cemetery opened in 1840. At almost 64 acres, it was much larger, but the Old City Cemetery, as it was now known, continued to receive burials.

The Civil War brought many injured soldiers to Macon to recover from their wounds. During the war, Macon was second only to Richmond, Virginia in the number of hospitals for injured Confederate soldiers. There were 12 hospitals in Macon, and those who died were initially buried next to the hospitals, but after the Civil War ended in 1865 they were moved to the old cemetery. The Ladies Memorial Association decorated 284 graves of the Confederate dead with flowers, according to an 1867 story in *The Georgia Journal & Messenger*. A few years later, these graves would be moved to Soldier's Square in Rose Hill Cemetery.

Not just soldiers, but many others who were buried in the Old City Cemetery were moved to Rose Hill. Edward Dorr Tracy, a mayor of Macon in 1826, was buried in the old cemetery in 1849 next to his first wife, Susan, who had died in 1834. In 1890, *The Macon Telegraph* reported that Edward, his wife and three children were being moved to Rose Hill. The article also stated that removal would provide a fitting place for the former mayor and judge of the Macon judicial circuit as the cemetery has been "allowed to grow up in bushes and trees."

Sadly, the original record of interments between 1824-1839 has been lost. Fortunately, an interment book listing burials between 1840-1871 still exists. In 1870, the city passed an ordinance prohibiting further interments in The Old City Cemetery, but the parish records of Christ Episcopal Church record burials in the cemetery as late as 1879.

A newspaper article from 1885 describes the cemetery as being shaded by tall oaks, hickories and elm trees, as well as jasmine, honeysuckle, roses, creeping ivy and many other plants. The 1885 city map of Macon depicts the cemetery as a thickly wooded grove of trees rather than a cemetery.

Besides benign neglect during that time, several businesses were allowed to encroach upon the cemetery grounds. In October 1927, descendants of those buried in the Old City Cemetery objected when the city proposed leasing an 80'x80' section of the cemetery to an ice cream factory which planned to convert the space into a stable for mules.

An article in *The Macon Tele-*

graph stated "there are numerous structures upon it (Old City Block 35) at this time, including the tracks of the Southern Railway, the Builders Lumber Company, the Washburn warehouse, Pan-American Oil Company, the DuBose junkyard, according to city records."

The descendants sought an injunction to prevent the construction of the new stable but the businesses were permitted to stay as it was determined that the title to the cemetery rested with the State after the city abandoned the cemetery.

The title is now held by Macon-Bibb County and the cemetery is half its original four-acre size. The tall trees, bushes and flowering vines are gone, except for a lovely garden of native plants added by the Fringed Campion Society of Middle Georgia near the gate on Cherry Street.

Today, the grass is kept tidy by Macon Parks and Beautification and a sprinkling of about 40 gravestones can be seen. Among the markers is a tablet grave for Nicholas Scott, a laborer working on the Monroe Railroad. He died in 1857 by a kick from a mule. Also buried there is Thomas Ellis, murdered by Henry C. Byrom in 1832. Byrom was upset over the failure of The Macon Bank and blamed Ellis. Although Ellis was a director of the bank, many professed that he was not responsible for the bank's failure. However, Byrom was found not guilty at trial as eyewitness testimony was contradictory. When news of Ellis' death was reported, the announcement said "He was a respected member of the Baptist Church; a Vice President of the Georgia Agricultural Society; and a member of several other religious and charitable associations. He has left a bereaved widow, two helpless orphans, and a long train of relations and friends to mourn his untimely exit."



PHOTO BY KATHLEEN O'NEAL

The Old City Cemetery in Macon, bounded by Cherry, Sixth, Poplar and Seventh streets, remains despite growing city encroachment on the neglected plot of land.

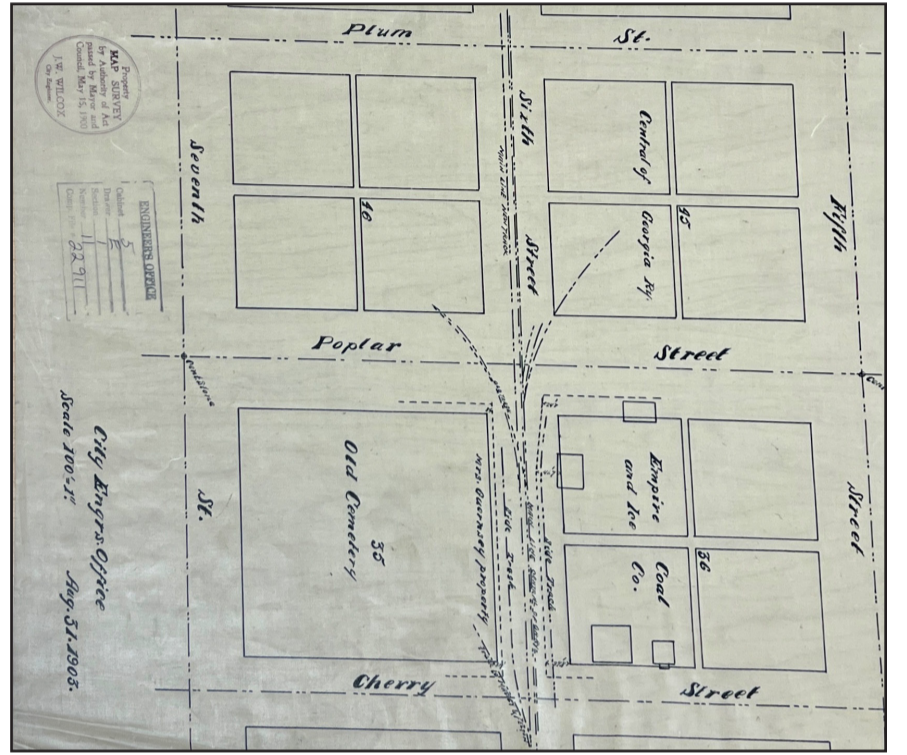


PHOTO FROM THE MACON-BIBB COUNTY CITY ENGINEERING OFFICE

A surveyor plat shows the Old City Cemetery originally extended far enough that Seventh Street had to turn and go around the cemetery between Cherry and Poplar streets.

Macon's go-to hibachi and sushi joint

There are some restaurants that become part of the rhythm of a city. The kind of places people instinctively recommend when somebody says, "I'm craving sushi," or "Let's do hibachi tonight." In Macon, Mikata Japanese Steakhouse and Sushi Bar has earned that place over the years. Located at 2972 Riverside Drive, Mikata has built a loyal following by offering two different dining experiences under one roof: the high-energy excitement of hibachi and the more laid-back comfort of sushi and traditional table service.

Interestingly enough, the word "Mikata" in Japanese translates to ally, friend or supporter. Honestly, I can't think of a better name. Because when it comes to good food, who doesn't want a good friend?

Before we even talk about the food, let's address the elephant in the sushi bar. I absolutely love sushi. However, I do not eat seafood, mushrooms or seaweed. Yes, I fully understand this probably causes a small internal panic attack for sushi chefs everywhere. Somewhere in Japan, an ancestor just sighed dramatically. But enter Joshua, our server at Mikata, who handled my complicated order like an absolute professional and made the entire process incredibly easy.

Whenever I order sushi, I substitute soy paper instead of seaweed. Soy paper has a softer texture, lacks the strong ocean flavor that seaweed can sometimes have, and really allows the ingredients and sauces to stand front and center. For people who are sushi curious but intimidated by seaweed, soy paper honestly changes the entire experience.

Now let's eat.

We started with the pork gyoza for \$6.35. Gyoza are Japanese dumplings that can either be steamed or fried. We chose fried food this time around, though I personally prefer steamed because they stay softer.



Billy Hennessey

Fried gyoza tends to be a bit chewier, but the savory filling and dipping sauce still made these disappear quickly from the table.

Next came the vegetable tempura for \$13.75, and honestly, this may have been one of my favorite items of the evening. Tempura batter differs from traditional batter because it is light, airy and crisp instead of dense and greasy. Mikata's version included onions, broccoli, sweet potato and zucchini. It normally also comes with mushrooms, but we substituted those with extra broccoli. Tempura broccoli might be one of the most underrated foods on the planet. Crispy. Hot. Perfectly salted. Completely addictive.

As for the sushi, simplicity sometimes wins.

The avocado roll cost \$5.95 with an additional \$1 soy paper upgrade. This roll was clean and satisfying. There is nowhere for bad ingredients to hide in a simple roll like this. The avocado was fresh, the rice was well prepared, and it soaked up dipping sauces beautifully.

Then came my completely customized sushi chaos creation: a chicken tempura roll with cream cheese, cucumber and soy paper upgrades totaling \$13.45. Was this traditional sushi? Probably not. Would sushi purists clutch their pearls? Most likely. Did I absolutely love it anyway? Without question. It was crunchy, creamy, flavorful and exactly what I wanted. Mikata accommodated the customization without hesitation.

We also ordered the Hawaii roll for \$12.95 along with the chicken hibachi entrée for \$19.95 with the fried rice upgrade for an additional \$2.25.

Let's discuss hibachi fried rice for a moment because somehow hibachi



PHOTO BY BILLY HENNESSEY

Macon's Mikata Japanese Steakhouse and Sushi Bar offers a hibachi entrée with fried rice that *Melody* food columnist Billy Hennessey swears by.

restaurants have mastered a level of fried rice perfection that science still cannot explain. It always tastes better in the restaurant. Always. I think it's the butter!

One thing that became very clear while researching Mikata is that customers tend to have strong opinions about the restaurant, but the overwhelming majority lean positive. Diners consistently praise the freshness of the sushi, generous portion sizes, entertaining hibachi chefs and friendly service. Many reviews describe the restaurant as welcoming, fun, and reliable for both family dinners and casual nights out.

Of course, no restaurant escapes criticism entirely. Some reviewers noted that service can occasionally slow down during peak hours, particularly in the hibachi section where seating and chef timing play a major role.

Others mentioned that the dining room can become loud when busy, though honestly, that comes with the territory at many hibachi restaurants.

A few guests also pointed out that costs can rise quickly once specialty rolls, upgrades and add-ons enter the picture. But even many mixed reviews still complimented the quality and freshness of the food itself. All in all, the 4.3 Google rating is pretty good with nearly a thousand reviews.

What stood out most to me during this visit was consistency. Nothing felt rushed. The service remained friendly even with custom requests. The portions were generous. The food arrived hot and fresh. Sometimes reliability is exactly what keeps local restaurants relevant year after year.

In a world where restaurant trends constantly come and go, Mikata continues to hold its place as one of Macon's dependable go-to destinations for sushi and hibachi. Until next time Macon, Let's Eat!

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

ARTS

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this year, including partnering with the Museum of Arts and Sciences for the Full Dome Festival and the continuation of bringing Indigenous films and filmmakers to Macon for the Fire Starters Festival.

Macon's growing creative scene

Now is also a good time to acknowledge how Macon's cultural life and offerings are expanding with new young groups of creatives becoming increasingly active, doing unique and different things as well as taking up the torch to carry Macon's artful, cultural traditions forward — and I'll be doing a lot of that in the future. Think creative co-ops like Court of Miracles and the Belltower Collective.

Not to leave behind Macon's longtime creative forces and talents, I've got in my notebook a list of those artists and artful doers to write about.

I want to push the boundaries of what we normally think of as art to include the work of some of Macon's most talented people who can't hang their work on a wall or building side, place it on a street corner or perform it from a stage.

I can never promise what I will or won't write about, but to do all this, I issue a plea that you help me out: who do you know of that you'd like to see me explore this summer and in the coming months?

Use my email below or stop me as I'm out and about. I do look a little like the picture — but maybe with a ball cap.

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

SPORTS

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PERFECTION!

Stratford defeats FPD in overtime to claim state championship and perfect season



The Eagles won the match 4-3 on a heroic goal by Emma Lizotte (12), who scored with a few minutes left in overtime and celebrated with teammate and captain Elle Tomek (3).



Overtime was a necessity only because FPD star Bowen Matthews (7) scored a game-tying goal with less than a minute left, stunning the fierce Stratford crowd.



The win gave Stratford a 20-0 record on the season and marked the first trophy for beloved coach and former Eagles player Kate Blankenship. "The resilience of this group is just unbelievable," she said of her team. "I'm so proud of them."



The rain turned Hays Field at Stratford into a slurry of mud and grass, but the slippery conditions did not deter players on both teams from going all-out in the championship game.

The highly-anticipated rivalry game did not begin until 9:30 p.m. after a rain delay hijacked the championship schedule. Even so, Stratford and FPD fans filled the stands to make it a memorable night.

"After the last game we had here and the way we'd been playing and how they'd been playing ... I knew it was gonna be a battle," FPD head coach Josh Trieste said. "At the end of the day, it's like (someone) said: 'Whoever paid their \$20 got their money's worth tonight.'"

GOAL SCORERS:

Stratford: Hadley Stewart, Campbell McIntyre, Maddie Biesterfeld, Emma Lizotte
FPD: Bowen Matthews (2), Katelynn Jackson

Photos by Mark Powell / For The Melody

For the full story, see page 12.

Despite shocking goal from Matthews, Stratford downs FPD

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
micah@maconmelody.com

When the Stratford girls soccer team — less than 60 seconds from a state championship and a perfect 20-0 season — gave up a gut-wrenching, game-tying goal against archrival FPD in Tuesday's title game, two words went through Eagles head coach Kate Blankenship's head.

"Uh oh," Blankenship recalled after the game of her thoughts in that moment.

An appropriate thought, given that Vikings star Bowen Matthews' header came barely two minutes after Stratford had notched its own dramatic score to take a 3-2 lead. The swing was an agonizing one that, for just a moment, cost the Eagles a trophy and sent the game to overtime.

Lesser teams might have withered after the heartbreaking equalizer.

This Stratford team was different. So was their head coach, who did not let the words "uh oh" stick in her mind for long.

"Well, I turned around (after the game-tying goal) and was like, 'Alright, we gotta find a way to win again,'" Blankenship said.

And the Eagles did find a way. They were unphased in overtime, heeding Blankenship's encouragement and riding a game-winning goal from Emma Lizotte to win the GIAA Class 4A State Championship 4-3 over FPD in an epic rivalry clash for the ages.

"The ability for them to be down twice and fight their way back, then score (what they thought) was a game-winner with two minutes left and give up a goal, and not fold. That shows their resilience," Blankenship said after celebrating with her team. "The resilience of this group is unbelievable. I'm so proud of them."

Lizotte, a junior, had plenty of time to set up a sizzling shot with about three minutes left in overtime after a nearby defender wobbled a bit and lost track of her. She loaded up and belted one from about 20 feet outside the penalty area that streaked

past the Vikings' keeper to give Stratford the lead and the win.

"In the moment, I knew I had already gotten a couple shots so I was just waiting for that next goal. I just got a good foot on it," Lizotte said. "When I took my touch, I knew it was gonna go in."

Her effort was one of many sparkling performances for Stratford, which also got goals from freshman Hadley Stewart, senior Campbell McIntyre and eighth grader Maddie Biesterfeld. Those scores countered impressive FPD goals from Katelynn Jackson and Matthews, who punched in two goals to cap her all-time great FPD career.

The match was a fight to the death that both rivals expected — especially after their most recent meeting, a Stratford win, was decided by penalty kicks after a 1-1 draw in regulation.

"After the last game we had here, the way we'd been playing and how they'd been playing ... I knew it was gonna be a battle," FPD head coach Josh Trieste said. "At the end of the day, (someone) said, 'Whoever paid their \$20 got their money's worth tonight.' I knew it was gonna be a good game. They've got a good team."

There was even more anticipation for the contest after a rain delay pushed kickoff all the way to 9:30 p.m. That rain also turned the field into a slurry of mud and grass, quickly dirtying FPD's all-white uniforms and giving the showdown even more of an "instant classic" vibe — but also making the pitch more treacherous for the competitors.

Both coaches said they were satisfied with their teams' performances on the slippery field, especially in a hard-fought game that was tied at 1-1, 2-2 and 3-3 at different points.

Jackson scored the Vikings' first goal almost immediately after the game began, its near-instantaneous nature shocking the Stratford crowd. She did a good job evading defenders before she skidded a wormburner that eked past Stratford keeper Maggie Jamison.

It was an interesting start for the Eagles, who have not trailed often



PHOTO BY MARK POWELL

Stratford head coach Kate Blankenship hoists the GIAA Class 4A State Championship trophy as her team dances and sprays water in celebration around her. Blankenship graduated from Stratford in 2006.

this year amid a dominant campaign. But they had already come back from a 2-0 deficit in the semifinals last week. With another hole to climb out of, Blankenship's squad didn't seem to miss a beat.

"We're a talented team, but there's a lot of talented teams in this state. I think that tonight showed the kind of separation and reaching potential," Blankenship said. "You have to have the intangibles, that kind of extra grit, the character and the maturity to look at a down-goal situation and know that we're still in it."

"To push through and make that fall their way is just a testament to their heart and leaving blood, sweat and tears on the field."

After the early FPD goal, things were scrappy and intense. Both teams created plenty of chances by intercepting and moving the ball across the entire field. Players ran full speed for every ball in space, often slipping and sliding on the mucky grass. Jamison made some solid saves that kept it a one-score

game.

But after 36 minutes of that, Stratford had seen enough. Stewart's goal, a stunning one, tied the game and booked the opening half. Her shot — a corner kick, in fact — somehow curled its way from the field's left boundary to the right side of the net, putting the Eagles right back in it before halftime.

The second half had a similar flow. Matthews scored on a laser after a deflected free kick to put FPD up 2-1 only three minutes into the second half. Stratford got its game-tying goal with about 15 minutes left to play from Campbell McIntyre.

Then came Biesterfeld's heroic shot for Stratford. After corraling a deflected ball and swerving her way past a defender, Biesterfeld blistered one into the net with only three minutes left as the post-rain haze, which had been procuring all night, was at its thickest over the scuffed grass of Hays Field.

It felt like the death knell for the Vikings — until Matthews' miracle

header with less than a minute remaining.

"We had this three years ago. In the Final Four, it was a 0-0 game, (St. Anne-Pacelli) scored with 1:40 left and Bowen scored less than a minute later," Trieste recalled. "I think that's just something that every coach would like his players to do. We've got players that don't necessarily panic. ... These girls don't quit."

But the Eagles got the last laugh, dominating the overtime period. Lizotte's clutch shot was one of three great looks she had in the 10-minute time frame, and she only needed to net one to clinch the trophy for Stratford.

The 4-3 final likely cemented the matchup as one of the best in the rivalry's lengthy history.

"For Middle Georgia to see that game go 90 minutes just is a testament to the whole Middle Georgia soccer community," Blankenship said. "I'm just proud to be a spoke on that wheel."

Mercer bows out of SoCon, gets snubbed from NCAA tourney

BY MICHAEL A. LOUGH
Melody Contributor

There are headlines a program doesn't want to make, and that's where Mercer is.

"Highest-rated RPI team ever to miss an at-large bid to the NCAA Baseball Tournament" is just such a headline, and Mercer's attached to it.

The last team meeting of the year ended up being the most brutal, as Mercer watched Monday's selection show while teams with lower RPIs were picked. As the closest locations — Atlanta, Athens, Auburn, Gainesville — flew by with other selections, hope dwindled.

When the field at Florida State didn't include Mercer, the Bears' odds dropped dramatically. Then Starkville — where Mercer made its

2013 trip to the tournament — came and went.

West Virginia was the final host site updated, and when Kentucky was the third team noted, that was officially it.

The social media debate began soon after, as many on X.com and Reddit said Mercer was "robbed," among other verbiage. There were gripes about Kentucky, Troy, NC State and Texas State, among others, getting in over Mercer.

What did Mercer in, for the most part, wasn't a surprise: non-conference strength of schedule.

"Really looking at the strength of the schedule and especially non-conference strength of the schedule," selection committee chairman Michael Alford said on ESPN after the selections. "That was something that stood out to the (committee), and you compare them to oth-

er teams like Santa Barbara — who intentionally went out and scheduled tough — you look at Troy, intentionally scheduled tough.

"And looking at the geographic region where Mercer is located, we felt that they had those opportunities to go out and get some games to improve their RPI and strength of schedule. ... They had a fantastic season. But when you compare them to other teams who went out and really intentionally scheduled tough games, we felt that the other teams got the nod."

Despite an embarrassing 1-2 finish in the Southern Conference tournament as the top seed, Mercer's RPI dropped from only 26th to 28th, and stayed there through dozens of conference tournament games throughout the nation.

Among those who put forth such ever-changing guesses on tournament fields, there was no consensus either way about Mercer's fate, other than it was going to be close, very close.

The Bears stormed into the Southern Conference tournament having won the regular-season title, and with a consensus top-30 RPI and a record number of wins and home wins.

They headed home Friday afternoon after a fairly stunning and humbling visit to Greenville, as The Citadel thumped the Bears 9-2 and 14-4. Mercer won just one game, a 9-8 win over Wofford in between its two losses.

The good news was that the impact on the Bears' RPI was minimal, dropping only a few spots, and hadn't changed from No. 28 by the time of the selection show.

Mercer had plenty of good on its resume: 44-15 record, 29-2 at home, a win over top-5 Georgia Tech late in the season. The Bears also won two games against Troy, a tournament team, and played relatively well against top contender Oregon State during a series in Corvallis.

The Southern Conference RPI was strong as well, ahead of Conference USA and Southland, among others, and far ahead of similar mid-major conference Coastal Athletic, Atlantic Sun and Big South.

In 2015, the Bears got an at-large bid with an RPI of 42.

But there were some flaws, too.

While The Citadel launched itself into

the top 40 in RPI with its impressive SoCon tournament run, Mercer getting run-ruled in the elimination game while the Bulldogs outscored them 23-6 was a tough blow.

Mercer had only five games against Quad 1 teams, tied for the third-fewest Quad-1 games of the top 50 in RPI.

The average RPI of teams Mercer beat is 162, fourth-worst of the top 50.

Part of the strength of schedule problem — mentioned plenty in NCAA tournament analysis — is that Mercer played 28 games, fully half of its regular-season schedule, against Quad 4 teams, second-most among the top 100 teams in Warren Nolan (Southeast Missouri played 31).

And 61.4% of Mercer's wins came against Quad 4 teams. A conference sweep by non-NCAA candidate Western Carolina, a respectable top-70 team, didn't help.

Mercer's strength of schedule improved from 120 to 118 after the SoCon tournament, still the third-worst among the top 50 RPI, as per WarrenNolan.com.

Baseball America predicted Mercer getting in, citing Alford's previous praise of the "eye test" in addition to RPI metrics, though it was perhaps that same "eye test" that could have doomed Mercer if committee members watched the Bears' games against The Citadel. The magazine had Mercer as a 3 seed at Chapel Hill facing Tennessee.

D1Baseball.com had Mercer as the No. 65 team — the first one out. On3.com had Mercer among the last four in (with TCU, East Carolina and Virginia Tech) and as the third seed in Atlanta. USA Today had Mercer as the No. 3 seed in Gainesville.

Recent postseason history wasn't a boost to the program's otherwise solid reputation. Entering this year's conference event, Mercer is 4-6 in its last 10 SoCon tournament games, getting outscored 93-75.

The Bears were 4-6 in their last 10, outscored 107-82.

Mercer was hoping for its fifth NCAA Tournament bid under head coach Craig Gibson, who had two while in the Atlantic Sun (2010 and 2013) and two in the SoCon (2015, 2019).



PHOTO COURTESY MERCER ATHLETICS

Mercer outfielder Chris Katz taps helmets with a teammate to celebrate during a Mercer game earlier this season. Katz was named to the All-Tournament team for the SoCon despite Mercer's early exit and eventual snub from the NCAA baseball bracket.