

The Macon Melody

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Redrawn maps could disenfranchise Black voters, lawmakers say

BY LAURA E. CORLEY
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Members of Bibb County’s mostly Democratic state legislative delegation are blasting Gov. Brian Kemp’s call to redraw Georgia’s voting districts. The lawmakers describe this week’s special session as a blatant effort by Republicans to maintain majority control and disenfranchise Black voters.

The Georgia General Assembly convenes Wednesday to reconfigure the maps that determine which congressional and state legislative districts voters live in.

“It’s going to be a fight,” state Sen. David Lucas, D-Macon, told The Melody. “We’re not going to be nice about it.”

Redistricting typically happens

every 10 years, following the census, but the legal landscape recently shifted. In April, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Louisiana v. Callais* that plaintiffs suing for violations of the 1965 Voting Rights Act must prove “intentional racial discrimination” on the part of the state.

The high hurdle set means that challengers can’t just show a map had a discriminatory effect; they must prove the state’s actions were deliberate.

“When we go to the legislature, I would assume that a district like mine, a district like Congressman Sanford Bishop’s, will be on the chopping block for them to try to increase their Republican percentage,” Lucas said.

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Talley wins MWA seat; voter turnout in Bibb drops in runoff

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
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In Tuesday’s runoff that featured some key statewide primary races, Marshall Talley defeated Ron Lemon for the District 2 seat on the Macon Water Authority board in the lone Macon race on the ballot.

Talley won by 299 votes, earning 1,603 against Lemon’s 1,304. Turnout for the District 2 race was about 11.7%, as 3,030 Maconites in that district cast their votes.

The turnout for that race was cut in half from May 19, when 6,480 people voted in the initial election that also featured candidates Sharif Robbins-Brinson and Renoalda Scott.

This was Talley’s fourth time running for a Macon Water Authority board seat since 2018. He told The Melody earlier this year that he wanted to “reimagine” the Macon Water Alliance, the authority’s non-profit arm created in 2014 to help individuals in need pay their water bills.

“I think the water alliance could



Marshall Talley

do a lot to help our community,” Talley said in April, adding he wants to “restructure billing assistance” offered by the alliance and help ratepayers with leak repairs.

“I really want to deep dive into that nonprofit side.”

Overall, 15,194 people in Macon-Bibb County voted, good for a 14.09% turnout, with 9,868 of those ballots cast on election day.

Turnout was lower for the runoff than the May 19 primary in Bibb County, as more than 29,000 voters cast ballots in the May election. That ballot had several other local races that would not need runoffs, including other Macon Water Authority positions and spots on the Bibb County school board.

In the race that got the most attention statewide, Rick Jackson defeated Burt Jones for the Republican nomination for governor, though

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Macon’s Juneteenth celebrations include van tours and much more



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

A van tour led by Fadil Muhammad is parked out front of H&H Soul Food Monday evening. The tour was part of Macon’s wide array of Juneteenth celebrations in the downtown area and beyond.

BY ALAYSIA EZZARD
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On almost any given afternoon, if you head to the intersection of Poplar and Second streets in downtown Macon, you can see people filing into Oliver’s Corner Bistro for a bite, or to The Vintage Thread to browse, or maybe to Lore Gallery for an appointment.

A century and a half ago, however, these crossroads were the center of another kind of commerce.

Noel’s Brick Mart, erected in 1859, was the first building in the city constructed expressly to house

and auction enslaved people. The building no longer stands, but its history is detailed on a marker near the site.

The location was one of the points of interest highlighted on Fadil Muhammad’s van tours of the city, which took place last week and this week as part of this year’s commemoration of Juneteenth.

Juneteenth marks the June 19, 1865 day that Black people in remote Galveston, Texas, finally received official word that they had been freed from slavery. It came, via Union soldiers, 71 days after the Confederate Army’s surrender and two and a half years

after President Abraham Lincoln’s issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation.

The van tours, which ended Tuesday, were among the many events planned in Macon to mark Juneteenth, which became a federal holiday five years ago. Other events are scheduled throughout the weekend.

Muhammad, co-founder and co-presenter of the Kwanzaa Cultural Access Center and Torchlight Academy, has been doing the tours focused on the city’s Black history for more than 20 years.

Each of the tour stops shed light on pieces of Macon’s history — from Cotton Avenue, once Macon’s thriving Black Wall Street during the Jim Crow era of segregation, to the historic Pleasant Hill neighborhood, started by formerly enslaved people in the 1870s and currently undergoing a revitalization.

His stops included Tatnall Square Park, where Macon was surrendered to Union Major Gen. James H. Wilson on April 20, 1865, a little over a week after Gen. Robert E. Lee, chief of the Armies of the Confederate States, surrendered to his Union counterpart, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, in Virginia.

Muhammad said that when people engage in his tours and express interest, he feels gratified and is excited to share his knowledge. He’s proud of the community and Black people in Macon.

SEE JUNETEENTH
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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Fadil Muhammad (left) leads a van tour as part of this year’s commemoration of Juneteenth. Muhammad emphasized the importance of learning about Black history during the holiday.

For a full Juneteenth calendar, see page 2.

Periodical — Mail Label

Inside how Macon-Bibb tackles housing affordability



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Crews get to work on a house on Davis Street near Payne City that will eventually become an affordable housing unit. The units are part of Macon-Bibb County’s approach to shifting housing affordability.

BY CASEY CHOUNG
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Nearly half of the households in Macon-Bibb County are considered “cost-burdened,” meaning they spend more than 30% of their gross income on housing and utilities.

That amount exceeds the standard guideline on affordability and stretches many families’ monthly budgets. In severe cases, a lack of affordable housing options leaves some residents homeless.

Last week, city officials launched a new project in Payne City to help provide relief. Two houses — one built from the ground up and another fully restored — will be added to the city’s stock of permanent supportive housing.

The construction at 58 and 48 Davis Street is projected to cost \$360,000 and will be financed by the Macon-Bibb County Affordable Housing Fund.

Here’s a closer look at the housing fund and how officials are addressing the affordability issue.

What is the Macon-Bibb County Affordable Housing Fund?

Macon’s Affordable Housing Fund was established in 2023 and loans money to developers on local affordable housing projects. The fund was seeded with \$7.5 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds from Macon-Bibb County.

“To date the housing fund has committed \$5.5 million, leveraging about \$80 million from other funding sources like federal, state and private funding, and these investments are expected to bring in about 285 new affordable housing units in the next three years,” Natalie Bouyett, executive director of the Macon-Bibb County Affordable Housing Fund, told The Melody last September. “We’re bringing housing options to people who once thought housing ownership was out of reach for them.”

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PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Rep. Sanford Bishop speaks outside the Buck Melton Center in Macon last year. Bishop's district, which he has represented for decades, could be impacted by the redrawing of maps in Georgia.

MAPPING

Continued from Page 1

After the April ruling, Republican leadership in other southern states, such as Texas and Tennessee, moved quickly to redraw maps ahead of 2026 elections. However, Kemp has said any changes made to Georgia's districts would not take effect until 2028.

Bibb County is represented in the state legislature by five House representatives. Four of them are Black Democrats. In the state Senate, it is represented by two Republicans and Lucas. In the U.S. House of Representatives, Bibb County is represented by Democratic Rep. Sanford Bishop and Republican Rep. Austin Scott.

Rep. Dale Washburn, the only Republican representing Bibb County in the state House, said, "I'm happy with the district the way it is, and I'd be fine if there was no

change" to other districts representing portions of Bibb County.

Washburn's district includes portions of North and East Bibb County as well as Jones, Jasper and parts of Monroe and Putnam counties.

"I'm not pushing to change anything," Washburn said. "I like my district the way it is and, of course, if you start changing any other districts, then obviously you could affect the adjoining districts, which would include me."

Miriam Paris, whose district includes the north side of the county, said she is "definitely concerned about all of Bibb County's districts."

"The thing is this: Once you affect one, you're going to affect them all," Paris said. "Of course, we're concerned about severe gerrymandering of districts across the state, not just Bibb. I think everybody's [district] lines are at risk."

Paris said Democrats would like for Republicans to "just adhere to

what the rules are, and the rules are that we don't redistrict until after the census has been done. It's just very unfortunate that these southern states have rushed to make these adjustments all because they kind of seem to think they are getting ready to lose power."

In other business, legislators also will have to address a 2024 law that makes the state's current voting machines illegal to use after July 1. Lawmakers have not approved a replacement for the state's electronic ballot counting systems, which use a computer-readable QR code to count ballots.

Critics of the QR code system — which include President Donald Trump — have said the square, scannable codes cannot be read by a human, though voters' choices also are printed in summary beside the code.

It was unclear what alternatives might be presented during the special session.

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Though some of the things he talks about are hard to hear and may upset a few guests, Muhammad said, Black people should feel great because "our ancestors survived."

"We should feel good because our ancestors were strong, and we should be thankful, be blessed," he said. "We are blessed because we are here to fulfill the dreams and the aspirations of our ancestors. All that they endured, we are here. We must have our spirits up."

Houston County native Velicia Lowe traveled to Macon for the tour after seeing a flyer about it in the Macon Black Pages. She's visited the city many times and knew some of its rich history, but, she said, the van tour was a "neat way to come and see a side of Macon that I would normally not see."

For her, Juneteenth is a recognition of freedom and reminder of the strength and resilience of Black people. With her, she brought her 6-year-old goddaughter. Lowe said she wanted her to take in how resilient Black people are and how much has been created.

Lowe said she's looking forward to participating in more Juneteenth events.

She appreciated Muhammad's free van tour and the valuable history lessons she received. It's important to share information, she said, "because that's how we know — by people sharing and telling the stories of those who came and paved the way before us."

MORE LOCAL JUNETEENTH EVENTS

Today (Juneteenth)

- Real Talk Hip-Hop Concert at the Douglass Theatre from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. Artists include Blacc Mel, Esco Vo, Tribe, Sabir, Slim Pikins, XSYKI and Da House of FTE & ASD Inc. Admission Fee: \$10
- Movie in the Park at Third Street Park at 8:30 p.m. Free.

Saturday

- 34th Annual Juneteenth Freedom Festival from 1 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. at Tatnall Square Park. This event will feature a regional dance and arts celebration, living history exhibits, a cultural marketplace and a talent show and jam session. Free.

Sunday

- Fourth Annual Juneteenth Parade in downtown Macon at 4:30 p.m. There will be a fireworks show at 9 p.m.
- Jazz in the Courtyard - Juneteenth and Father's Day music concert from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. at the Douglass Theatre. Mactown Groove Ensemble will perform at 6 p.m. "Saxman" Gregory Daniels and "Lil Saxman" Gregory Daniels II will perform at 7:15 p.m. Free.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

A group on a parade float poses for a picture during last year's Juneteenth Parade in downtown Macon. The parade on Sunday is one of many events returning for 2026 Juneteenth in Bibb County.

JUNETEENTH

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County commission OKs proposed budget, Mayor Miller revisits third term

BY LAURA E. CORLEY
Senior Accountability Reporter
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Lester Miller

protection in hostile environments and a new van for educational purposes.

The proposed budget for courts is \$26.2 million, a figure that is more than double the 2021 amount.

In other business, a question about a contract for fireworks prompted the mayor to hint that he isn't giving up on his quest for a county charter amendment that would allow him to seek a third term. The charter limits the mayor to two consecutive terms.

A bill introduced by state Sen. David Lucas, D-Macon, would have allowed Miller to serve a third term but also would remove term limits for county commissioners. The bill did not get much traction among members of the local delegation and effectively died at the end of the most recent session of the Georgia General Assembly. Lucas or another legislator will have to reintroduce the bill or a similar one if the effort to change the charter is to be restarted.

The mayor's comment came up as Commissioner Stanley Stewart asked about a multi-year contract with South Carolina-based Munnerlyn Pyrotechnics for the Fourth of July fireworks show at Lake Tobesofkee.

"I'm in agreement with it, of course, but I was trying to figure out why five years because it's going to post-date your administration," Stewart said.

"It doesn't matter," Miller said. "It comes up every year for renewal. ... You're assuming it's going to post-date my administration, but yeah. We can make that assumption."

County records show the company was hired to launch fireworks for the Independence Day celebration at Lake Tobesofkee in 2019 for \$15,060. The county hired the company again in 2020, which cost \$15,000 from the county's Lake Tobesofkee department budget. This year's contract is for \$27,500 and will be paid for from the professional services budget for promotions and public relations items.

The Macon-Bibb County Board of Commissioners unanimously approved Mayor Lester Miller's proposed 2027 budget at its regular meeting Tuesday.

The \$221 million budget for the new fiscal year beginning July 1 assumes no increase to the current millage rate, which may or may not mean a tax increase depending on the tax digest figures expected in the coming weeks.

Rising costs due to inflation, the exhaustion of federal money from the COVID-19 pandemic and a decrease in property tax revenue over the past few years have made for lean times in the county government. Miller said he asked department heads to identify a 10% budget cut.

"We get requests all the time from all of our departments," Miller said. "We can't always provide everything that everyone needs unless taxpayers are just willing to open up their wallet and give the money for everything they have. So we have to have priorities. ... Things simply cost more than they did several years ago."

The budget Miller presented weeks ago shows personnel costs make up about 55% with salary and benefits at \$122.6 million. That's up by nearly \$22.7 million from 2021.

The lion's share of the budget is for public safety — which includes the Bibb County Sheriff's Office, the fire department, emergency management services, the coroner's office, courts, the district attorney's office and, as of recently, code enforcement. Combined, those departments make up nearly 60% of the county's \$221.5 million county budget.

The sheriff's office's budget is \$60.1 million, up by about \$3.4 million compared to last year and up by about \$12 million compared to 2021.

The fire department will get \$34.4 million, about \$7.3 million more than it received in 2021. The budget proposal included requests from the department for body armor for

emy once stood. The \$17 million project is expected to bring 64 housing units and be completed in 2027.

The county also completed two homes, with several more on the way in Tindall Fields, which are only going to be sold to buyers under the 120% median income threshold.

Five new homes financed through the affordable housing fund are also slated to be completed in South Bibb County later this year.

Funds also have been directed to Habitat to Humanity and the Historic Macon Foundation for the creation of three homes and two new rental units.

Partnering with the Land Bank Authority connects the affordable housing fund to new properties acquired through foreclosure.

What have officials said about affordable housing?

Mayor Lester Miller previously said affordable housing is a dire need across Macon, the state and the country.

"I'm excited about building houses. For a long time this last year, we've been tearing down houses," Miller said in September. "Now it's time to rebuild those houses."

Laura Corley and Evelyn Davidson contributed to the reporting of this article.

HOUSING

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Who qualifies for affordable housing?

While the homes on Davis Street are going to be filled through the Brookdale Resource Center — the rent will be subsidized with vouchers from the housing authority — other projects completed by the fund create apartments or homes designated for lower-earning families.

The affordable housing fund prioritizes creating housing for individuals and families earning 120% or less than the area's median income. That threshold allows the city to help residents who earn too much to qualify for federal aid, which cuts off at 80% of the median income.

Macon-Bibb County's median household income is approximately \$47,018, according to U.S. Census Data, making 120% of Macon's median income \$56,421.

Where are the county's other affordable housing projects?

Since the fund's inception, developers have broken ground on a handful of projects.

Developers are currently putting up a mixed-use apartment complex in Pleasant Hill, where the former Macon Charter Acad-



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Natalie Bouyett, Executive Director of the Macon-Bibb County Affordable Housing Fund, speaks at the organization's press conference last week announcing new affordable housing units to be opened in the Payne City area of Macon.

Special Content furnished to the Macon Melody.

SUMMER TRAVEL FOR SENIORS: DESTINATIONS YOU CAN'T MISS



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Summertime often means travel. While fun, relaxation, and time to explore new places are all common travel benefits, seniors can take advantage of an added bonus.

Recent studies show that travel may benefit longevity thanks to its positive effects on physical and mental well-being. Socializing and expanding your perspective while you travel can offer some of those mental health benefits, so whether you have a weekend or a month free this summer, consider heading to one of these ideal senior destinations.

SHORT WEEKEND TRIPS

When you want the benefit of travel but don't have the time, schedule a quick weekend getaway. These three locations are perfect for travelers looking to focus on a small location and enjoy everything from relaxing beach days to thrilling adventures.

Williamsburg, Virginia

Step into history with a trip to Colonial Williamsburg. While this destination gets crowded with families during the summer, it's easy to see the most impressive sights with a slow two- or three-day itinerary. The nearly 90 historic sites and attractions offer alternate locations for hot summer days, so seniors sensitive to the heat needn't worry. Stay at one of the resorts to be close to dining, golf, spa services, and the historic sites.

Mackinac Island

Seniors who want to escape the routines of daily life can head to Mackinac Island for a weekend this summer. Visitors will leave their cars on the mainland and enjoy walking, biking, or riding in horse-drawn carriages instead.

Because this historic island is relatively compact, seniors can easily make spontaneous plans. Stop at the Grand Hotel for Afternoon Tea and play a round of golf on one of two unique courses. Request your virtual or mailed guidebook here to start your planning.

Capitola, California

One of the best locations for quick, nature-based trips, Capitola is close to redwood forests and sandy beaches. Visit Capitola State Beach for time in the sun and a taste of brightly-colored small-town shops. Plan a short drive to the redwoods for your second day, followed by a wine tasting at Armida Winery on the way home.

LONGER VACATIONS

If you have time for a longer vacation, these destinations offer enough diverse and immersive experiences to last a week.

Santa Fe, New Mexico

This high desert town is one of the best places to enjoy the Southwest during the summer. Its higher elevation means days aren't as hot and nights still get chilly. Stay in Santa Fe and spend the week exploring Native American and Hispanic art, culture, and entertainment. Browse the town's internationally-acclaimed art galleries and take a day trip to nearby Taos Pueblo. Book your trip to coincide with a performance at the stunning Santa Fe Opera. Outdoor enthusiasts can hike in the Sangre de Cristo mountains or book a rafting trip.

Seattle Area

The Pacific Northwest is the perfect destination for art and nature enthusiasts. Use Seattle as a home base, and be sure

to visit Chihuly Gardens. Plan day trips by ferry to Bainbridge Island and Vashon Island to eat at local spots and go tidepooling. Try at least one of these stunning waterfall hikes to get out of the city on more crowded weekend days.

Extended Travel

Summer is the perfect time for an extended 10-day trip or longer. These destinations offer plenty to do with ample opportunities to spread out the fun and enjoy slow days.

Florida Keys

An extended stay in the Florida Keys is the perfect way to experience Florida beaches at a slower pace. Many RV parks offer units to rent by the week or month, but be sure to plan ahead since this is a popular destination. The compact layout of the Keys makes it easy to explore local shops or take the Conch Tour Train for accessibility. Rent a fishing boat for the day, tour the Ernest Hemingway Home, and visit the Key West Butterfly and Nature Conservatory.

Washington, D.C.

Summer in the capital is hot, but there are plenty of ways to take advantage of indoor activities and cooler mornings in the Washington, D.C. area. Most of the city's plentiful museums offer free senior admission. Plan your trip with a museum visit each day during the hot afternoon hours. Be sure to add a day to visit the Library of Congress and the Hillwood Estate and Gardens. In the early mornings before the heat and crowds hit, take a stroll on the National Mall.

Ready to reap the rewards of travel in your golden years? Start planning a trip to one of these senior-friendly destinations today.



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SNAPSHOTS

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PHOTO NO. 1 — Liz Riley helps lead an Allman Brothers Band Rose Hill Ramble at the historic Macon cemetery on Riverside Drive June 12. *Photo by Jason Vorhees.*

PHOTO NO. 2 — Volunteers help sort food during a community food distribution drive-thru event in the parking lot of Central Georgia Technical College June 12. Three tractor-trailers filled with fresh fruit and vegetables were distributed on a first-come, first-serve basis while supplies lasted. *Photo by Jason Vorhees.*

PHOTO NO. 3 — The Greater Macon Chamber of Commerce held a Macon & Eggs military roundtable last week at Georgia National Guard Headquarters in Macon. The event brought together military, business, civic and community leaders for a conversation on global security, Guard readiness and the role Middle Georgia plays in national defense. *Photo by Leah Yetter.*

PHOTO NO. 4 — Representatives of Middle Georgia State University and Sleep in Heavenly Peace formalized a partnership June 15 that will allow the university's Center for Middle Georgia Studies to examine the impact of providing beds to children in need. *Photo by Tyler White.*

THE CITY OF WARNER ROBINS INDEPENDENCE DAY CELEBRATION & Fireworks Extravaganza!



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**WARNER ROBINS
GEORGIA**

Lawmakers shouldn't choose their voters

There is a kind of work in this country that most people never see. It is the work of tending to a democracy that is always more fragile than we care to admit. That is the work of an election poll clerk. And before a single ballot has been cast, we sit through hours of training, learning rules, rehearsing procedures and practicing how to guide a stranger.

In those rooms, I was often a few decades younger than the other clerks. But still, we all share a commitment and responsibility to the oath, to protect each voter's dignity and to do it without fear or favor. We learned how to walk people through the touchscreen machines and how to print and verify ballots. We count every pin, every stylus, every scrap of paper, knowing the smallest thing out of place can shake someone's faith in the whole system.

On Election Days, we guide voters, step by step, toward the moment their voice becomes a vote. As a poll clerk, we are bound by oath to admit no one to vote unless we firmly believe they are registered and entitled, and to carry out our duties impartially, faithfully and without delay. That oath is not poetry; it holds a lot of weight, privilege and responsibility. It's our guarantee of free, fair and secure elections.

And it is precisely because of that oath that I cannot ignore what is happening now.

Gov. Brian Kemp has called state lawmakers back for a special session, setting the stage for several unresolved issues to be finally addressed. At the top of that list is Georgia's voting system. Under a law passed in 2024, voters' ballots can no longer use QR codes to count ballots after July 1, 2026, yet law-



DeMarcus Beckham

makers in both the House and the Senate have allowed bills proposing alternatives to sit without action on this pending issue. Multiple hearings have come and gone, but no replacement system has been finalized. With a major election in November, the question of how ballots will be counted remains wide open.

Now, during this special session, lawmakers will be tasked with confronting that deadline head on. And into that already uncertain moment, another major topic has entered the conversation: redistricting. Gov. Kemp has asked the General Assembly to consider new district maps, similar to those recently pursued in other Republican-led Southern states. It's an issue that wasn't originally part of the voting system debate.

This special session did not appear out of thin air. The Supreme Court added *Louisiana v. Callais* to its active docket in November 2024. In April 2026, the ruling finally came down, 6-3, clearing the way for states to split minority-majority districts for political gain. This decision by the high court caused the ground to shift beneath minority communities, especially for the many activists old enough to know that they will fight for voting rights.

In a little more than a month, legislatures across the South suddenly began moving at a speed that felt less like governance and more like strategy. Alabama. South Carolina. Tennessee. And now Georgia — again.

Georgia has been here before. In December 2023, our state updated its congressional and state legislative maps after a federal court ruled that the 2021-2022 maps violated the Voting Rights Act. Now, state lawmakers and supporters of redistricting, like Lt. Gov. Burt Jones and Sen. Mike Hodges, chairman of the Senate Reapportionment and Redistricting Committee, seem determined to undo that work. They have been holding the redistricting question hostage, waiting for the Supreme Court to hand them a new playbook.

Gov. Kemp has said that any redistricting done this year would not affect the next cycle but would shape Georgia's maps for 2028 and beyond. That may be true, but the timing is no accident. When lawmakers redraw the lines that determine who their voters are, they are not simply adjusting boundaries; they are adjusting power. Instead of establishing an independent redistricting commission to create fair maps, as Colorado and many other states have done before, our lawmakers are taking it upon themselves to redraw the lines. State lawmakers and supporters of redistricting understand that power, once adjusted, is rarely returned.

I say this with every bit of fervor in my being. Lawmakers should not be choosing their constituents. Constituents should choose their lawmakers. That would mean multiple major changes to congressional and legislative districts within a very short period. Such instability can create confusion for voters, commu-

SEE BECKHAM
PAGE 7

World Cup shines a spotlight on MARTA's safety failures

Policymakers were thrilled when a World Cup committee chose Atlanta to host eight soccer matches. Being a host venue would put Atlanta back on the world stage, generate revenue and allow Georgians to showcase our amenities, like Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

As the matches approached, the refrain among local leaders has largely been the same: Georgia will be or is ready for prime time. But that only seems partially true. Sure, we boast a world class sports arena, the world's busiest airport and myriad hotels — all of which are prepared for the events and influx of travelers.

Wholesome viral social media posts likewise show that the South's natural appeal is winning over foreign soccer fans. However, Atlanta's Achilles' heel predictably seems related to transportation, especially crime on MARTA, which has left officials demanding answers. More on that in a moment.

If you are part of the throngs of X users, then you may have come across @FreddyLA7, who apparently is a German soccer fan visiting the South. His viral posts show that without much effort, Southern charm is endearing foreigners to Georgia and the rest of the South.

His X account has been chronicling his trek through the Southeast as he experiences what we have to offer, including restaurants and gas stations, quirky cities and locals' kindness.

"I love Americans. We were about to walk an hour to the stadium in the rain to save on an Uber, and the receptionist at the hotel we were parked in front of decided to drive us there," he tweeted.

We call that Southern hospitality, and his glowing reviews didn't end



Marc Hyden

there: "Just had our first Waffle House experience at 1am," he said. "Great food, great prices, and friendly staff. 10/10, we will be coming back."

On a drive through Georgia, he came across the faux Bavarian city of Helen and remarked, "We found a German village in the mountains of North Georgia lol I feel right at home." @FreddyLA7 also seemed impressed with Buc-ee's, Walmart, Chili's and so forth.

At this point, we should make him an honorary southerner, but it wasn't all good news.

He decided to give MARTA a try — with a less than positive experience.

"[Not going to lie] riding the metro in Atlanta is a bit scary," he remarked. "If any of you guys are going to a game there, I'd probably recommend getting an Uber instead. It's like a [Grand Theft Auto] lobby, one person next to us taking off his shirt and declaring war on Donald Trump while another person is moonwalking across the platform."

Recent events on MARTA have also captured the attention of lawmakers.

"Within the last week there have been two violent stabbings and a shooting [on the MARTA system]. One of them being fatal resulting in the death of a 66-year-old grandmother, Margaret Swan. These events have continued to raise our concerns regarding security measures throughout the transit system," Senate Majority Leader Jason Anavitate and House Majority Leader Chuck Efstoration said in a June 7

letter to MARTA's interim general manager and CEO.

"As Atlanta prepares to welcome millions of visitors for the 2026 FIFA World Cup these concerns take on even greater significance," the letter continued. "MARTA will play a central role in transporting residents and visitors to venues, hotels, and events associated with the tournament."

The majority leaders then requested information on how MARTA will safeguard employees and customers.

MARTA's leadership evidently feels as though they have a plan: "MARTA has rolled out a World Cup operations plan that adds more officers, longer shifts, and outside support to handle the expected surge in riders and visitors. MARTA will use six-day workweeks with 12-hour shifts for officers, especially on match days and during other large World Cup events. MARTA will also deploy transit police officers from Denver to Atlanta for the tournament," 11 Alive News reported.

It is not clear whether this will be enough or not. Gov. Brian Kemp has offered additional state resources to Atlanta and explained all Atlanta needs to do is ask for help and the state will provide it. While Georgia has clearly proven itself a gem to World Cup fans, no venue is perfect, and MARTA risks being a blemish on visitors' Atlanta experience. With the international spotlight on Atlanta, the pressure is on officials to ensure a safe and welcoming environment.

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



The Macon Melody

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

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LEGALESE

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Republicans in U.S. Senate left in the dark by Trump on Iran deal, but want details and a vote

BY JENNIFER SHUTT
States Newsroom

WASHINGTON — U.S. senators from both political parties said Tuesday they had yet to see the text of the deal Trump administration officials struck over the weekend to end the war in Iran, though several indicated any final agreement will require their approval.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., said administration officials have signaled they expect to share the text of the memorandum of understanding with lawmakers, though he didn't know when.

"Hopefully that'll happen sooner rather than later," he said. "But, you know, obviously it sounds like they're not going public with it until later in the week. So we'll see."

Thune said he's heard the deal sets up a 60-day framework for negotiators to reach agreement on more specifics, including about Iran's nuclear ambitions.

"I think at the end of the day the goal here is to make sure that Iran ends its nuclear program and whatever financial incentives they have should be conditioned upon that," he said. "But we'll see when we know more."

President Donald Trump, speaking from the G7 convention in Europe, said he may hold a press conference in "a couple days" to release the text of the memorandum of understanding and appeared ready for a vote in Congress.

"What I would like to do is send it to Congress, saying you shouldn't approve it. And I will get it approved. Whatever I say, they want to do the opposite," he said. "It is not working too well for them, by the way."

North Dakota Republican Sen. John Hoeven said he believes the plan is to vote to approve the Iran agreement at some point.

"I think anytime you have Congress ratify something, it gives it longevity," Hoeven said. "You can't have the next president come in and change it with an executive order. So I think that's a benefit. I think it helps strengthen it."

Hoeven said he hasn't heard from administration officials why they haven't shared the text of the memorandum of understanding with senators, even in a classified setting.

But he said he's more focused on U.S. enforcement of agreements on Iran's nuclear program in the long term.

"The real issue is that we have something that we can enforce and that's hard with Iran because they don't honor any agreement," Hoeven said.

Is the agreement a treaty?

Louisiana Republican Sen. Bill Cassidy said he believes an agreement with Iran would represent a treaty and be subject to Senate approval.

"It sounds like a treaty," he said. "And if it's a treaty, it certainly seems like it."

That would require strong bipartisanship, since the Constitution sets a two-thirds threshold for the Senate to approve a treaty.

Cassidy added it appears the administration will need the Israeli government — which initiated the attack on Iran with the United States — to stop its war in Lebanon in order to reach a final deal with Iran during the next two months.

"To make a deal, it takes two sides. In this case, maybe three, maybe four because you have Hezbollah and Israel," Cassidy said, referring to a powerful Lebanese political party and militant group opposed to Israel. "Hezbollah can just stir it up with impunity if they want to under certain circumstances. So you tell me, I mean, it takes two to dance, and so now it takes four to dance. Can you pull it off in 60 days? I don't know."

North Carolina Republican Sen. Thom Tillis said the administration needs to be as transparent as possible about what exactly is in the memorandum of understanding it's reached with Iran.

"Minimally, there has to be maximum transparency," he said.

Tillis said it "makes sense" for the Senate to approve any final deal, saying President Barack Obama made a mistake when he didn't have lawmakers ratify the agreement his administration struck with Iran in 2015. That deal was named the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA.

"I've said repeatedly Obama made a mistake when he didn't do the work to have it rise to the level of



PHOTO BY JENNIFER SHUTT/STATES NEWSROOM

U.S. Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., said on Tuesday, June 16, 2026, he's heard the president's deal with Iran sets up a 60-day framework for negotiators to reach agreement on more specifics. In this photo, Thune speaks with reporters on Capitol Hill on Sept. 19, 2025.

a treaty, and I believe that we should here," he said. "Otherwise, it's only good for two and a half years."

Tillis said he wasn't concerned Congress hasn't received the text of the memorandum of understanding yet, but that it's imperative the administration share those documents.

"Trust but verify," he said.

'Essentially a surrender'

Connecticut Democratic Sen. Chris Murphy said he "doubts" the memorandum of understanding is actually real, but that if it is, lawmakers should expect there are "side deals" the administration may not share.

"If what's reported is real, it's Iran's terms. I mean, it's essentially a surrender. But I think that's the only play we can make at this point," he said. "We have to end this war and stop wasting money and stop killing Americans and civilians and stop driving up prices. So it's a bad deal but he's not going to get a better deal. So we just have to accept the humiliation. But I don't even know if it's real."

West Virginia Republican Sen. Shelley Moore Capito said that lawmakers need to see the memorandum of understanding so she and others can "express our opinions."

"But right now we can't because it's not fully out there," she said.

Senate Intelligence Committee ranking member Mark Warner, D-Va., said he hadn't seen the text of the memorandum of understanding or been briefed by administration officials. But he does believe the administration needs to submit it to lawmakers within five days, as outlined in a 2015 law.

"My fear is that the details are not going to be as good as the president represents," Warner said.

Law requirements

Congress approved legislation in 2015 that requires any presidential administration to submit the text of a deal addressing Iran's nuclear program within five days. Those documents don't need to be sent to every lawmaker but are supposed to go to the congressional leaders as well as eight committees with jurisdiction.

That transmission creates a 30-day review period for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee to hold hearings and briefings.

The law created a pathway for Congress to approve a joint resolution of disapproval for any Iran nuclear deal. The House and Senate would likely need the support

of at least two-thirds of members in order to override a likely veto from Trump.

Congress overriding a presidential veto of a disapproval resolution would block the Trump administration from lifting sanctions on Iran, though that seems an unlikely scenario given both chambers are controlled by Republicans.

A report from the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service says a joint resolution of disapproval taking effect "would not invalidate the agreement itself but would affect only the possibility of presidential sanctions relief to Iran; nevertheless, precluding the President from providing such relief would almost certainly result in a dissolution of the agreement by Iran."

The law, officially titled the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015, also clears the way for Congress to approve a joint resolution of approval.

The CRS report says that "would, upon enactment, allow the President to waive sanctions, apparently even if the review period had not yet elapsed."

Congress taking no action during the 30-day review period would allow the administration to begin sanctions relief as soon as that deadline passes.

MARTA unveils changes for World Cup crowds

BY TY TAGAMI
Capitol Beat News Service

ATLANTA — Metro Atlanta's transit system unveiled its new phone app Tuesday, touting the technology's utility for planning and safety.

The announcement came the same day that federal prosecutors described the defendant accused in a third violent attack on Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority property in nearly as many weeks.

On Monday, the U.S. Department of Justice charged Anthony Gresham, 42, of Lithia Springs, in connection with the shooting Friday of a 17-year-old boy on a MARTA train.

"Gresham was allegedly undeterred by decades of prosecution for robberies, drug trafficking, and other crimes, which compounds the need for federal intervention in this case," U.S. Attorney Theodore S. Hertzberg said in a statement Tuesday.

Gresham is accused of pulling a handgun from his bag and firing three times at the boy, Hertzberg said.

The boy had entered the train at the Midtown station. He was taken to Grady Memorial Hospital for gunshot wounds to his left hand and leg.

The violence comes as MARTA updates its trains, stations and systems in preparation for visitors from across the globe for the FIFA World Cup, with the first match in Atlanta on June 15.

Gresham was charged with committing an act of violence with intent to cause serious bodily injury on a mass transportation system, possession of ammunition by a convicted felon, and discharging a firearm during and in relation to a crime of violence.

Hertzberg said Gresham had prior felony convictions in at least three different counties that would have precluded him from legally carrying a gun. The convictions included armed robbery, aggravated assault, possession of cocaine with intent to distribute, burglary, theft, and robbery by force.

Many will probably ride a MARTA train from Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, heading the same direction as Margaret Swan, 66, who was stabbed to death on May 30 as her train approached the Oakland City station on Atlanta's south side.

John Elijah Matthews, 25, of Decatur, was arrested at that stop. He also was charged in federal court, in his case on June 2.

Hertzberg, the U.S. Attorney for



the Northern District of Georgia, said the U.S. Attorney General would decide whether to seek the death penalty.

After Matthews was charged, U.S. Transportation Secretary Sean P. Duffy ordered the Federal Transit Administration to investigate safety protocols and security spending because of the recent violence.

Prior to Swan's death, a 40-year-

old man survived being stabbed in an Atlanta MARTA station on May 24.

The transit agency said on Tuesday that its new app, available on phones running on Apple's App Store and on the Google Play store, offers live train and bus tracking, trip planning and system alerts. It also allows riders to report safety concerns and incidents to MARTA police, and it works in several lan-

guages.

"MARTA is committed to improving the customer experience, whether it's on our buses and trains, or when riders use our website or apps," MARTA Interim General Manager and CEO Jonathan Hunt said.

The app was designed by the company Reflexions, which is also working on an update to the transit system's website, itsmarta.com.

Macon Water Alliance, an MWA nonprofit, could face \$20K deficit

BY LIZ FABIAN
The Macon Newsroom
macon-newsroom.com

Board members of the nonprofit Macon Water Alliance recently learned that a budget deficit nearing \$20,000 is possible if they can't raise more money.

The subsidiary of the Macon Water Authority takes in roughly \$12,000 annually from employee and customer donations. In April, the alliance gave \$27,000 to organizations that assist customers with their bills.

Late last summer, the authority board learned that the \$5,000 the alliance awarded the Macon-Bibb County Division of Family and Children Services in July 2024 was depleted in a matter of months. Alliance members opted to increase DFCS funding to \$7,000 and awarded the Macon-Bibb County Economic Opportunity Council \$20,000 to assist those in need.

As of the June 4 meeting, the financial statement of cash on hand through April 30 shows a nearly \$2,500 loss for the fiscal year ending Sept. 30, but that deficit is expected to rise with roughly \$15,000 in annual Kids Fishing Derby expenses that the alliance owes the authority.

This year, sponsorships raised about \$16,000, which did not cover the \$21,000 spent for the free fishing event, which has been a spring staple for more than two decades.

The alliance does have a certificate of deposit of more than \$200,000 that is maturing, so they will cash that in to pay off the derby debt and will likely



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

The Macon Water Authority's nonprofit subsidiary, the Macon Water Alliance, could face a \$20k deficit. The nonprofit overused funds for donations to help with water bills, board members learned recently.

redeposit the remaining balance to keep earning interest. That CD produced about \$7,000 in annual interest over the last year, according to the alliance's financial statement.

MWA Finance Chair Dwight Jones, who contributes to the alliance but currently is not a board member, warned the sustainability of the organization is

at risk if expenses continue to exceed revenue.

In addition to providing funds to assist with water bills and qualified plumbing repairs, the alliance supports environmental education and solicits donations and other funding to enhance STEM education.

ELECTION

Continued from Page 1

Bibb County voters favored Jones by more than 1,000 votes.

Bibb County voters also went against the state's overall numbers on the Republican nomination for lieutenant governor. John F. Kennedy won Macon-Bibb by more than 2,500 votes

but lost the state to Greg Dolezal. Kennedy is a Mercer alum who previously represented District 18 in the state Senate, which consists of parts of Bibb County as well as Monroe, Crawford, Peach and Upson counties.

As far as turnout for each party, Republicans this time outvoted Democrats in Macon, a flip from the May 19 election. Republicans cast about 8,200 ballots — a 7.6% turnout — compared

to just under 7,000 ballots cast by Democrats, a 6.44% turnout.

As of Tuesday night, there were 13 questionable ballots that needed to be checked before the election was certified, according to an employee at the Macon-Bibb County Board of Elections. The election will be certified Monday because of the Juneteenth holiday on Friday.



BECKHAM

Continued from Page 5

nities, candidates and election officials.

Communities need consistency and stability in representation, not repeated political disruption. Rural communities, Black communities and so many of our neighbors already stand at the margins of political influence. To redraw the lines now, in a way that further weakens all voters' voices, is not just a policy choice. It is a moral one. And it will echo long after the 2028 election cycle.

Some days it feels as if certain political leaders have learned to plant seeds of doubt in our democracy. Their words have shaken the faith in our elections, leading ordinary people to question their civic duty. And that doubt, once planted, grows fast.

Every Election Day, our precinct fills with the familiar voters. They come with smiles and manners, sometimes with their spouses or children. But others arrive carrying the weight of rumors

and fears. They come ready for a fight. I remember a woman from the 2022 primary who approached my check-in table with suspicion already rising in her eyes. Before I could greet her, she began expressing her concerns about the Dominion voting machines.

So I guided her gently. I handed her the ballot card. I asked if she needed help. I stepped back to give her privacy. When she finished, I showed her how to print her ballot, reminded her to review the candidates' names beneath the QR code and made sure her choices were her own. Even as she repeated her doubts, we walked her to the tabulator, reminded her to place the ballot face down, and watched the machine accept her vote.

Only then did I allow myself a small smile. "Well," I told her, "you made sure your vote counted."

She nodded, still uncertain, but no longer alone. And that, too, is part of the work.

In that spirit, I remind every voter

we have a hybrid system where we will have tabulating machines doing exactly what they're supposed to do, while also having paper receipts, to give people the confidence that what they're putting in is what is being counted, and that also those receipts can be used for a hand recount if necessary. There's no need for hand-counting the ballot, only for extreme circumstances.

I have seen enough elections to know that democracy is not a machine that runs on its own. Democracy is a living thing, tended by ordinary people who refuse to look away, who speak up when something is amiss, who show up and cast their ballots. During this special session, voters must contact their elected officials and make clear that any redistricting plan that dilutes the power of rural or minority communities is unacceptable.

Silence, in moments like this, is its own kind of surrender.

DeMarcus Beckham lives in Macon.

FACT BRIEFS

Fact Briefs are sourced answers to questions and claims circulating in our community. They are produced in partnership with Gigafact, a nonprofit that helps local newsrooms address false and misleading information.

Can Georgia Power use eminent domain for private purposes?

BY GABRIEL KOPP
Editorial Intern
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Yes. Public utilities can acquire land if it drives private "economic development," according to the U.S. Supreme Court's *Kelo vs. City of New London* ruling from 2005.

Georgia Power is invoking eminent domain in Coweta County, where 20-30 properties are located along proposed project sites for the company. The seized land will be used, in part, to bolster transmission lines and substations. The infrastruc-

ture is needed to respond to projected increased demand as part of the company's Integrated Resource Plan approved by Georgia regulators in 2025.

Part of that increased demand is due to a swelling number of data centers, which have used tax breaks for their development. Gov. Brian Kemp gave incoming data center companies financial relief in May 2024, vetoing a suspension of incentives for them. A study by the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute of Government said such incentives had "mixed" success.

Has the racial turnout gap grown since 2013?

BY GABRIEL KOPP
Editorial Intern
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Yes. The country's racial turnout gap between Black and white, non-Hispanic voters has grown since the U.S. Supreme Court's *Shelby County vs. Holder* decision. The 2013 decision ended preclearance, which gave the federal government oversight of electoral processes in nine states — including Georgia — to prevent discriminatory voting practices.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Black voters turned out at a higher pace than white voters did in 2012 — the first time Black voters outpaced white voters since the bureau measured the metric.

But in the first presidential election after the *Shelby* decision, the Brennan Center for Justice found the nationwide gap had reversed. White voters had a turnout rate 5.9% higher than Black voters and, by 2020, that gap widened to 8.3%.

Aging Georgia reactors cleared to keep running

BY TY TAGAMI
Capitol Beat News Service
capitol-beat.org

A nuclear power plant in Georgia that predates the presidency of Jimmy Carter got a new lease on life to operate for an additional two decades, Georgia Power announced Monday.

The licenses for the reactors at the Edwin I. Hatch Nuclear Plant near Baxley were set to expire in the 2030s. The two reactor units will be 79 years old when the renewed licenses issued by the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission expire in 2054 and 2058.

Georgia Power CEO Kim Greene said in a statement accompanying the announcement that the company's nuclear portfolio provides reliable energy at a stable cost.

"This license extension is great news as our state continues to grow and demand for electricity continues to increase," she said.

Plant Hatch's first reactor unit came online in 1975, two years before Carter took office as president.

Unit 2 entered service in 1979.

Together they produce about 1.8 gigawatts of power, or about 40% of Georgia Power's nuclear energy.

Altogether, Plant Hatch and Plant Alvin W. Vogtle near Waynesboro produced nearly 30% of the company's energy last year.

The larger Vogtle has four reactor units, two that date to the late 1980s and two that began generating power in 2023 and 2024.

It produces a total of about 4.7 gigawatts.

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Amber Waves

by Dave T. Phipps



Out on a Limb

by Gary Kopervas



The Spats

by Jeff Pickering



TIGER

by BUD BLAKE



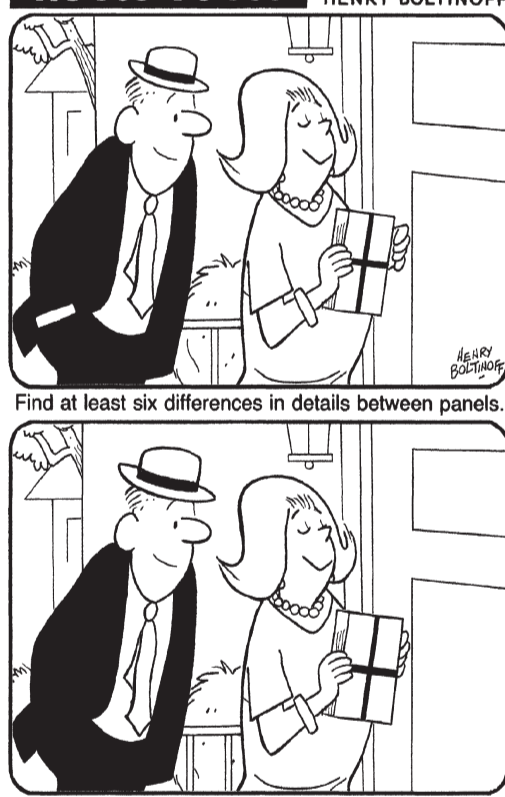
OLIVE & POPEYE

By Randy Milholland



HOCUS-FOCUS

BY HENRY BOLTINOFF



Just Like Cats & Dogs

by Dave T. Phipps



CryptoQuip

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

Clue: E equals F

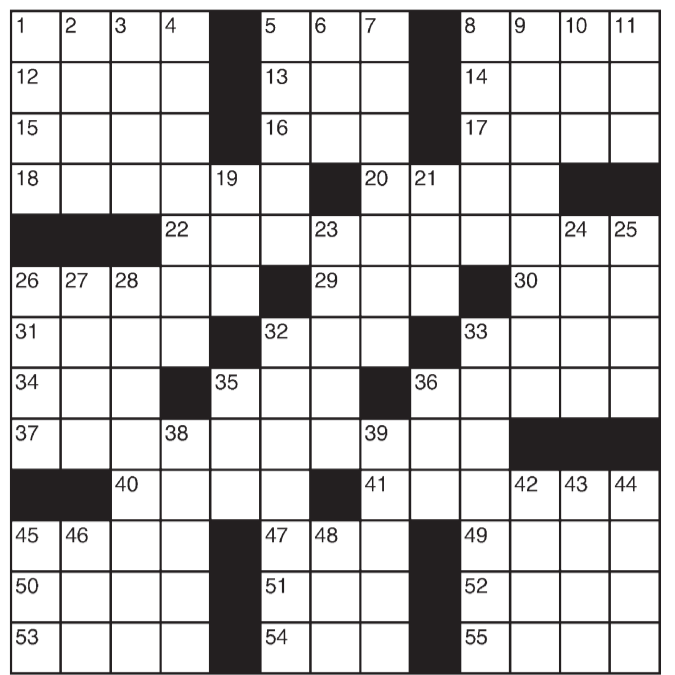
RE F QFQ BZBFRIX EBJA
AFYRIO F HRO XPRIY FHJKP
F PFX Y, UJN RX RP QJIZ?
NRPUJKP EFPUZB FQJ.

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King Crossword

ACROSS

- 1 Mule, for one
- 5 Unruly group
- 8 Bygone fliers
- 12 Lawman Wyatt
- 13 Stop — dime
- 14 Ornamental jug
- 15 Heart charts
- 16 Business card no.
- 17 Calf-length
- 18 Stop
- 20 Son of Erik the Red
- 22 "War and Peace" author
- 26 Violin stroke
- 29 Cyclades island
- 30 British verb ending
- 31 Subject, usually
- 32 Fellow
- 33 Healthy
- 34 Internet address
- 35 Continent north of Afr.
- 36 Disinfectant brand
- 37 Oscar-winning actress in "The Fighter"
- 40 Arizona tribe
- 41 Prisoner
- 45 Conspiracy
- 47 Corn core



- 7 Inflated party prop
- 8 Big rigs
- 9 Fans of pop icon Taylor
- 10 — Talks (online lecture series)
- 11 Lanka lead-in
- 19 Stitch
- 21 Golf's Ernie
- 23 Pageant crown
- 24 City on a fjord
- 25 Holler
- 26 "E Pluribus —"
- 27 Skin opening
- 28 Megaphone's kin
- 32 "Suffs" or "Rent," e.g.
- 33 Cheyenne's state
- 35 Mentalist's gift
- 36 Cariou of "Blue Bloods"
- 38 Smidgens
- 39 Slander in print
- 42 Mine, in Marseille
- 43 Tart flavor
- 44 Alimony recipients
- 45 USMC rank
- 46 Privy
- 48 Japanese sash

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Weekly SUDOKU

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

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

DIFFICULTY THIS WEEK: ◆

- ◆ Moderate ◆◆ Challenging
- ◆◆◆ HOO BOY!

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FiveSpot™

Aviators' convention?

F	L	O	C	K

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

FiveSpot is a trademark of Michael McLinden. See more at www.sproutsuzzle.com 02644

Trivia test

by Fifi Rodriguez

1. U.S. STATES: Which state has the most national parks?
2. ANATOMY: Which blood type is considered to be a universal donor?
3. GENERAL KNOWLEDGE: Which three signs of the Zodiac are considered to be Earth signs?
4. ROYALS: What was Queen Elizabeth's favorite dog breed?
5. GEOGRAPHY: Which continent has a mountain range called The Great Rift Valley?
6. MONEY: What is the basic currency of Russia?
7. TELEVISION: Which long-running TV sitcom features a dog named Comet?
8. MUSIC: How many strings does a standard violin have?
9. GAMES: How many title deeds does the Monopoly game have?
10. SCIENCE: What is the main cause of ocean tides?

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UNMARRIED

Today's Word

1. Duress; 2. Learn
3. Raise; 4. Myriad

SCRAMBLERS

S	D	R	I	B
S	R	O	D	
D	I	O	S	
L	S	I	O	
C	L	I	C	
K	O	C	K	

Solution

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

Answer

Weekly SUDOKU

CryptoQuip
answer
If a dad refrains from making a big stink about a task, how is it done?
Without father ado.



Solution time: 25 mins.

King Crossword

Answers

1. California
2. Type O negative
3. CAPRICORN, TAURUS and VIR-
4. Corgis
5. Africa
6. The ruble
7. "Full House"
8. Four
9. 28
10. The gravitational pull of the Moon



SCRAMBLERS

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

- Force **SUDERS** [] []
- Grasp **RENAL** [] [] []
- Increase **AIRES** [] [] []
- Slew **ADMIYR** [] [] [] []

TODAY'S WORD

FEATURES

FRIDAY, JUNE 19, 2026 » THE MACON MELODY » REPORTING FOR MACON, FROM MACON » MACONMELODY.COM » PAGE 9

Middle Georgia heart transplant recipient competes in Transplant Games of America

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON
Features Editor
evelyn@maconmelody.com

Three years ago Middle Georgia resident Robert Slaughter struggled to walk to his mailbox.

This Father's Day weekend, he joins thousands of fellow transplant-recipients from more than 40 different states in the Transplant Games of America.

A member of Georgia's 18-person team, Slaughter will compete in basketball and a 5k walk, two of 20 sports hosted at the six-day tournament in Denver.

Hosted by the Transplant Life Foundation since 2011, the bi-annual event takes place in a different U.S. city each time and includes 60 special events.

The tournament brings together transplant recipients, those awaiting transplants, caregivers, donors and their families in a celebration of resilience and hope.

For Slaughter, that hope came in the form of a new heart.

In June of 2019, Slaughter suffered a heart attack and had stents put into his heart at the age of 61.

He tried to continue on with his

life, but after a year and half, physical activity became a challenge and Slaughter entered advanced heart failure.

"It wasn't getting any better," he said, noting that at night he would wonder if his heart was going to stop beating.

Doctors gave Slaughter an external defibrillator vest to wear. Then he visited the Piedmont Atlanta Hospital in the fall of 2022 to have an internal defibrillator implanted.

But Slaughter said the question still lingered: "How many times would the defibrillator save me?"

At that same Piedmont Atlanta visit, his doctor spoke with him about a heart transplant as a longer-term solution.

Though Slaughter knew little about the organ transplant and donation process, he agreed to the X-rays, scans, blood work and other tests that followed.

Eligible patients must be sick enough to need an organ transplant, but healthy enough to recover from the procedure, he explained.

By the beginning of 2023, Slaughter had made the waiting list. He told himself, "I've done what I can, I'm turning it over to the hand of the

Lord."

In June, Slaughter's phone rang at 11:30 p.m. They had found a heart match from a 23-year-old male donor. Slaughter, who needed to be in Atlanta by 7 a.m. the next morning, said his gut reaction was to ask if he could wait for the next available heart.

He took a ride down the street to get himself together, packed a bag and woke his wife Annetta, who drove him to the hospital.

In Atlanta, Slaughter recalled feeling winded on the walk from the parking deck to the emergency room.

"I was just that bad. Walking from the parking lot, I could not do it," he said.

But by 6 p.m. after his afternoon surgery, Slaughter could stand up. He spent 11 days in the hospital, where he took more steps and pushed himself farther each day.

"By the time I left out of there, I was walking pretty good," Slaughter said.

Upon returning for checkups, he joined a monthly transplant support group, where he first learned about the Transplant Games.

He also became an ambassador



PHOTO PROVIDED BY ROBERT SLAUGHTER
Middle Georgia organ transplant recipient Robert Slaughter attends the 2024 Transplant Games of America in Birmingham, Alabama. His wife Annetta, daughter Tasha, grandson Grant and daughter Rosalind attended the event as well.

for LifeLink, a national network that assists in organ transplant procurement and education.

"I want to do everything that I can to help somebody else," Slaughter said.

After each support gathering, members meet with pre and post-transplant patients. Slaughter tells them to keep their head up and shares his own experiences as a patient nearly three years post-transplant.

Slaughter also had the opportunity to thank his donor's family.

He said the donor's mother plans to attend the Denver tournament so she too can see how her son's heart gave a stranger a second chance at life.

With father's day fast approaching, Slaughter said it "means the world" to be with his five daughters and five grandkids and present "to see those kids and those grandkids continue to grow."

Meet a Georgia pollen superhero

Yes, the Western honey bee is Georgia's state insect. Yes, thousands of managed honey bee colonies are hauled in by the truck load to help pollinate crops across the state each year.

No doubt honey bees are important — but they aren't the only insects helping to feed us.

Meet the humble bumble bee, one of Georgia's native pollinators and a member of the more than 540 bee species found in our state.

These fuzzy flying gardeners possess two superpowers that make them uniquely valuable for farms and gardens that grow tomatoes, peppers, eggplants, cranberries, watermelon or rabbit eye blueberries.

Without bumble bees and other native buzz-pollinating bees, these crops would produce fewer fruits and seeds.

Superpower #1: Bumble bees can buzz pollinate

Some plants keep their pollen locked inside specialized structures called poricidal anthers. Honey bees can visit these flowers,



Rosann Kent

but they cannot effectively release the pollen.

But a female bumble bee can force the pollen out of the anther. She grasps the pollen-pro-

ducing structure of the flower, disconnects her flight muscles from her wings, and then vibrates them hundreds of times per second.

This vibration creates a high-pitched "buzz" that acts like a tuning fork and causes the trapped, heavy pollen to spill out of pores in the plant's anther and coat the bee's body.

Imagine children erratically shaking a container of glitter and then tracking it everywhere they go.

The next time you see a bumble bee on a flower, listen closely. You may hear the distinctive buzz of a bee vibrating its flight muscles to shake loose pollen.

SEE POLLEN
PAGE 10

Otis Music Camp concert finale comes to The Grand

Magic happens every day at the Otis Redding Center for the Arts downtown, and on Saturday, the public is invited to get a taste of what it's all about.

That's when campers at this year's three-week summer music program, Otis Music Camp, bring their talents to the Piedmont Grand Opera House stage for the music camp grand finale.

Karla Redding-Andrews, Otis Redding's daughter, leads the center and the Otis Redding Foundation. She has called the camp and its energy "absolutely electric."

While such camps have been held in various locations for years and predecessor camps were conducted by Otis Redding himself in the 1960s, this is only the second camp since the Otis Redding Center for the Arts, or ORCA, opened in March 2025.

Imagine spending three weeks learning aspects of the music business, including musicianship, singing, songwriting and performing, then getting to take the songs you've written and record them in the center's state-of-the-art record-



Michael W. Pannell

ing studio.

At the end of it all, you get to bring the songs and all you've learned, rehearsed and worked for to the Grand for the public to enjoy as well.

Of course, everything in the less-than-two-year-old, 15,000-square-foot facility is state-of-the-art. That includes seven creative labs, five private lesson rooms, an amphitheater with its indoor-outdoor stage and O3 Recording Studio, named for the late Otis Redding III.

The Otis Music Camp is for ages 12-18 and strives to not only serve young people — and thereby the community — in all things musical but also teach how to successfully make dreams come true regardless of one's ambitions, according to Redding-Andrews.

In turn, kids 5-11 years old get to participate at Camp DREAM, a two-week musical arts exploration camp. The Otis Music Camp Grand

Final show is free and starts at 7 p.m. — but attendees are welcome to make a \$10 donation.

And just a note: Fall music lesson registration at ORCA opens July 6 at noon.

ORCA is located at 436 Cotton Ave. There's more information on lessons, events and how to support the center's work at orcamacon.org and otisreddingfoundation.org.

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



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
The Otis Redding Center for the Arts opened in downtown Macon less than two years ago.

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.

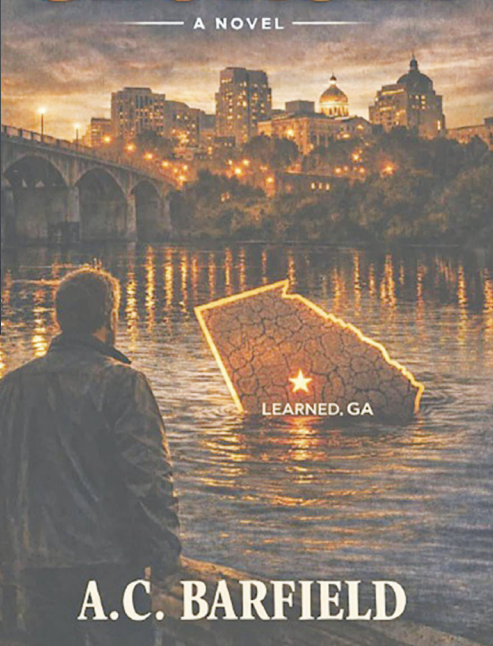
As Barfield explains, the purpose of the novel is not division, but conversation — encouraging readers to think more deeply about the communities they live in and the importance of staying engaged before problems become impossible to ignore.



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!

LESSONS LEARNED IN GEORGIA



A.C. BARFIELD



<https://rb.gy/k09axf>



<https://rb.gy/nc7ixz>

Recapture one's respect for God

The sign read, "Warning! Pet Peeves Ahead!"

It wasn't posted on a roadside, like an alert letting you know "bridge out ahead" or "road closed." It appeared online.

However, the sign reminded me most everyone has those little irritating annoyances other people commit that get under one's skin, don't we? We try to ignore them, but they get to us anyway.

Like interrupters who won't let you finish your sentence. Or loud public phone conversations.

Or having a conversation in which the other person's phone dings and they stop and read the new text word for word, suddenly tuning you out.

Or people who treat yield signs like stop signs. Or people who roll through "stop" signs that must not apply to them. Or people throwing trash out their car windows.

Have you ever wondered if God has pet peeves? Like, maybe, believers who say they desire spiritual growth, yet do not read His Word?

Or who claim to trust God but whose lives are filled with constant worry? Or who do not spend time with God in prayer? What about people who skip church Sunday after Sunday? Does that perturb God?

Actually, these examples are more than pet peeves and minor annoyances to God. They are heartbreakers because they indicate disobedience and a rebellious spirit. Our disobedience grieves God.

What about believers who fail to live in the fear of God?

What does it mean to live in the fear of God? Ray Prichard wrote, "It's the choice I make to obey God because I want to love Him and please Him."

The fear of the Lord is the ongoing attitude of my heart that causes me ... to obey Him even when it might be easier to do something else."

The person who fears God possesses a sense of awe and respect for the majesty, holiness and greatness of God.

Fear is loving respect combined with respectful love for God. Our disobedience shows God we don't love, respect or honor Him.

Has our culture lost a sense of respect and honor? Have we? Jerry Bridges in "The Joy of Fearing God" wrote, "There was a time when committed Christians were known as God-fearing people ... but somewhere along the way, we lost it."

Now the idea of fearing God, if thought of at all, seems like a relic



David Chancey

from the past." For example, when we think about the commandment, "You shall not take the name of the Lord God in vain . . .", (Exodus 20:7), usually we think of the expletive, "God ____!" God does direct us to refrain from cursing, but this commandment also means we should not take His name lightly or dishonor His name. Do we break this commandment by misusing the name of God?

How do we take His name lightly or misuse His name? It happens when we use God's name as an exclamation when shocked or angry.

Have you ever heard someone say, "Oh, my God!?" Or texted OMG? When I hear this, I cringe, like when someone runs fingernails down the chalkboard. This expression is so common in media and personal speech we're insensitive to it.

Or, we say, "God, I wish it would rain." We're not praying. We're misusing God's name for emphasis to make a point or express a desire.

Or, we say in exasperation, "I swear to God!" Is this expression acceptable to God? Is it necessary?

Another version is when people, with much exasperation, shout, "Jesus Christ!" and they weren't calling Him.

Why do we tolerate this bad habit? Apparently, we've lost our sense of awe for almighty God. We've become too flippant in our relationship with God or we've lowered our view of God.

How do we stop it? With God's strength and a commitment to fulfill Ephesians 4:29 ("Do not let unwholesome talk come out of your mouth . . ."), we can overcome these showings of disrespect.

Ask God to help you recapture a healthy fear of God because you love Him, you recognize His holiness and you want to please Him in all you do, including your speech. Decide to delete these expressions.

Simply put, what's wrong with just saying "Oh my goodness!"?

Dr. David Chancey lives in Fayetteville, where he was pastor of McDonough Road Baptist Church for more than 20 years.

He currently serves as the transitional pastor of Griffin Church in Griffin. Write to him at davidchancey.com.



PHOTO BY GERALD HOLMES FOR BUGWOOD.ORG. A bumble bee perches on a cantaloupe flower.

POLLEN

Continued from Page 10

It's one of nature's most remarkable pollination techniques, one that honey bees cannot perform.

Superpower #2: Bumble bees work in tough weather

Bumble bees are larger and hairier than honey bees, allowing them to stay active in cooler temperatures, cloudy weather and even light rain.

While honey bees may remain in the hive waiting for better conditions, bumble bees are often already at work collecting nectar and pollen.

These flying gardeners may not make honey, but they help keep Georgia's gardens, farms, and landscapes blooming.

Bumble bee or honey bee?

Bumble bees are the "flying teddy bears" of the bee world. They are larger, rounder, and much fuzzier than honey bees.

Their bodies are densely covered with yellow and black hairs,

although some species may have orange or reddish markings.

Honey bees are smaller and slimmer, with golden-brown hairs and distinct amber-and-black stripes. Their abdomen is bald and shiny. Think of them as a flying race car.

Honey bees live in large colonies that may contain 50,000 individuals. However, a bumble bee nest may have a few hundred. Bumble bees must start over every spring. Most die out in fall, leaving only newly mated queens to survive the winter and start new colonies the following spring.

Rosann Kent is a Bibb County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer. The University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service 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.

BILLY'S LET'S EAT REVIEW

Giganti On Main brings big flavor and big personalities



PHOTO BY BILLY HENNESSEY

Tomato and basil bruschetta is just one of the appetizers offered at Giganti On Main in Gray.

Sometimes a restaurant's name tells you everything you need to know. Other times, it takes a few minutes. When I first heard the name Giganti On Main, I assumed it was a nod to large portions, bold Italian flavors or perhaps some centuries-old Italian family recipe. Then I met the family behind the Gray restaurant. Ladies and gentlemen, these people are giants. Giganti is Giant in Italian.

Nick DuPree stands 6-foot-6. Keith DuPree, the restaurant's head chef and visionary, comes in at 6-foot-8. Dylan towers over them both at 6-foot-9. Then there is Ashley Roberson, who repeatedly referred to herself as the "little sister." Ashley is 5-foot-11, but still taller than most people I know. Standing next to her brothers, however, she looks like she should qualify for a booster seat at the table. Suddenly, the name Giganti made perfect sense.

My visit to Giganti On Main was prompted by curiosity. Living between Macon and Gray, I often feel our neighbors to the northeast deserve a little more attention.

Gray is only about twenty minutes from downtown Macon, yet many Macon residents rarely venture that way for dinner. They're missing out. The atmosphere is exactly what Ashley and her brothers envisioned: casual, family-oriented and welcoming.

Located at 125 West Clinton Street, Giganti On Main occupies the former Ben's Bent Axle location. The building was already familiar to locals as a gathering place, but the DuPree family had a vision of creating something entirely their own.

Ironically, that vision wasn't originally Italian food at all. According to Ashley, the dream started with her brother Keith, a chef whose original idea was to open a takeout hot dog restaurant.

Life, however, had other plans. After helping launch Bent Axle Neighborhood Grill in 2021, before it eventually morphed into Ben's Bent Axle and closed, the family was approached about taking over the space.

As ideas bounced around the dinner table, Ashley drew upon her experience managing an Italian restaurant while Keith realized that



PHOTO BY BILLY HENNESSEY

Billy Hennessey tried several dishes with his friend at Giganti On Main, like the mushroom fettuccini.

making sauces from scratch was already firmly in his wheelhouse. The more they discussed it, the more the idea made sense. Gray didn't really have an Italian restaurant, and the family didn't want to become another copy-and-paste concept. They wanted to create something different.



Billy Hennessey

What I found especially refreshing is that the DuPrees are not Italian and aren't pretending to be. They are an all-American Georgia family with a genuine appreciation for Italian cooking, hospitality and tradition. They proudly describe themselves as Italian-inspired.

That brings me to a confession. During my first visit, I was absolutely convinced they were making their pasta in-house. Then Ashley, during our phone call, politely informed me that while the sauces and dressings are absolutely made from scratch, the pasta is not.

The fact that both my best friend and I immediately assumed it was homemade probably says more about the quality of the finished dish than it does about my investigative skills. I am choosing to call this a victory. Or at least a draw.

We started with the bruschetta, which featured tomatoes and basil atop crispy bread. It was fresh, light and flavorful.

Personally, I would have loved a little more basil, but debating basil quantities is basically the Italian version of arguing about college football in Georgia.

For my entrée, I ordered the fettuccini alfredo pesto with meatballs. The pesto, garlic and alfredo combination worked beautifully together, while the meatballs arrived swimming in pomodoro sauce.

One detail immediately stood out. None of the meatballs were exactly the same size. I loved that. It was proof that somebody in the kitchen actually rolled them by hand instead of opening a freezer bag and calling it a day.

My dining companion ordered the fettuccini mushroom cream with blackened chicken. As someone who can be a bit of an Italian food snob herself, she immediately

commented that the sauces tasted homemade. We both agreed the dishes could have been served a little warmer, but the flavors more than made up for it.

When I later asked Ashley what dishes best represented the restaurant, she pointed to the chicken parmesan and alfredo, while her personal favorites included the pesto alfredo, eggplant parmesan and alla vodka with whole wheat penne.

For first-time visitors, she recommends stopping by during happy hour, ordering an appetizer, trying the Caesar salad with its house-made dressing and pairing everything with a "Gigantis Martini," their version of a dirty martini.

One of Ashley's favorite parts of this journey has been watching her brother thrive.

"I'm the proudest big sister watching Keith make this happen and seeing it become such a success," she said. "I love seeing him in his element doing what he loves."

That pride comes through in every conversation. This isn't simply a business venture. It's a family dream that became reality.

Like every restaurant, Giganti On Main has faced challenges. Opening day brought point-of-sale issues that backed up the kitchen and tested everyone's patience. Summer can be slow. Running a restaurant is never easy.

Yet when Ashley talks about the future, she sounds optimistic. She believes restaurants like Giganti help bring people into Gray, benefiting neighboring businesses and encouraging additional investment throughout the community.

She said she would love to see more specialty food businesses arrive, including markets focused on fresh produce and meats.

After spending time with the DuPrees, I walked away with one overwhelming impression. The food is good. The family is even better. But if the height requirement for working there gets any higher, I may need a ladder just to conduct my next interview. Until next time, Let's Eat!

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

'Summer Breeze' downtown open-mic jam set for Sunday

BY LIZ FABIAN

The Macon Newsroom
macon-newsroom.com

When it comes to marketing Macon, its music history and famous musicians are some of the biggest draws.

The city's love of music takes center stage Sunday at Rosa Parks Square for the community's 10th observance of Make Music Day from 3 p.m. until 4:30 p.m.

The event is free, family-friendly and open to the public.

Through a 2017 Downtown Challenge grant from the Community Foundation of Central Georgia, organizer Gloria Stanley first joined the international celebration that

began in France in 1982 and has grown to more than 2,000 cities worldwide.

"I'm really happy that I have great support from the city of Macon and those that worked with me on this project," Stanley told the Downtown Macon Community Association early this month. "We should have, hopefully, a lot of fun. So I'm asking people to come out." Stanley said this year's theme, "Summer Breeze," offers an open-mic jam featuring gospel, soul and reggae genres.

She said it's a perfect way to celebrate families' special men on Father's Day.

The biannual Make Music Day event, held on the summer and winter solstices, encourages musicians

to take up their instruments and perform in the public square.

Community celebrations also embrace their own flavor and seasonal themes.

For instance, some cities hosting the FIFA World Cup will feature sounds from countries playing matches that weekend.

Additionally, along Route 66, performers will sing selections such as "Every Day is a Winding Road" to mark the 100th anniversary of the highway that connects Chicago and Santa Monica, California, and there will be a "Sousapalooza" in participating cities to celebrate the nation's 250th anniversary.

That event honors John Philip Sousa, the composer of many U.S. military marches.

SPORTS

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Spring Showdowns: The best moments of baseball, soccer and more around Macon

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
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And so the dog days of summer begin.

As far as professional sports go, summer is a great time. You have the NBA Finals and the Stanley Cup Finals, both of which were thrilling this year. There's baseball nearly every day, and the trade deadline to boot.

But high school and college sports have their inverse hibernations in the summer. Aside from football workouts and the occasional bit of recruiting news, things sort of grind to a halt until school starts back up in August — we're left to pine for high school football as the sun beats down on us.

It won't be as hard this year, because we have a simply incredible season of spring sports to look back on.

Plenty of teams had some unforgettable moments, many of them coming as spring turned into summer and championship dreams turned into realities. Here's a recap of some of the best games, moments and memories from the spring.

Honorable mentions: Henley's hot streak, coaches and more

It wouldn't really be a list of "favorite so-and-sos" unless there were some honorable mentions, right?

There's always too many great things for lists like this, so we need a few extra slots.

Russell Henley had a fantastic spring, representing Macon well on golf's biggest stage. The Stratford grad had the best Masters performance of his career, then followed it up soon after with a clutch comeback victory at the Charles Schwab Challenge.

Macon had its fair share of tennis championships this spring. Katelynn Jackson dominated the girls individual bracket for FPD to win the 4A girls championship, while Noah Perry and Ethan Lashley took home the boys doubles trophy.

And then there were the coaching hires — not really "moments," per se, but important spring items that sent some considerable reverberations through Macon's sports community.

Mount de Sales brought back Robert Slocum as its football coach, setting up some truly legendary rematches with Tattnall head coach Barney Hester. The Trojans coach added a well-known name to his staff as well, bringing former rival Mark Farriba into the Tattnall fold this spring.

Mount de Sales also added a notable alum on the basketball side of things, too, hiring skilled former player Michael Walton as its next head coach.

That's only scratching the surface, too — Todd Whetsel arrived at CFCA, ACE hired the legend-



PHOTO BY MARK POWELL
Stratford's Emma Lizotte boots a ball past an FPD defender during the rivals' showdown in the championship game.

ary Kurt Green to lead its girls basketball program, and multiple Bibb County schools found new football coaches.

There will be lots of new faces, and returning ones, to keep track of this fall.

No. 3: ACE girls soccer falls to Model in the semifinals

I know, I know. Why on earth would we want to remember a gut-wrenching, nail-biting loss in the penultimate round of the playoffs, a loss that made an entire team collapse to the turf when the final horn sounded?

Watching the Gryphons lose 1-0

to Model for a second straight season was not easy for fans. It was a hard-fought game — fittingly so, considering the insane amount of work the ACE girls put in to reach the semifinals for a second year in a row.

But that's just it. Without games like these, the tearjerkers and heartbreakers, there would not be the triumphant comebacks or heartfelt championship victories. To happy-cry, we must sad-cry... if that makes sense.

So yes, the loss was hard to watch. Even tougher to observe were the crushed reactions afterward. It was an afternoon of big feelings at ACE's Perkins Field. But it was only so wrought with emotion because of the bond that team had. So many of the squad's seniors had played together since sixth grade, and head coach Robby Jones had worked with them for almost as long.

The loss itself is not a great moment — but the deflating nature of it, no matter how difficult, symbolizes many relationships that cannot be sullied by one bitter ending. That's why it has a place on this list.

No. 2: FPD baseball finally climbs the mountaintop

Oh, how tempting it was to put this in the top spot. Ironically, the only reason it's not there is because of how thoroughly dominant FPD was on the diamond this season.

The Vikings came into the 2026 campaign looking to avenge two consecutive losses in the state championship, both of which were against Brookstone. They

cruised through their schedule, only losing one regular season game against Veterans en route to the No. 1 seed in the GIAA Class 4A bracket.

The playoffs didn't change much. Aside from a stumble in Game 2 of its first playoff series, FPD kept its composure and trounced opponents on the way to the championship.

The Vikings faced off against rival Stratford in the championship series, but the toughest opponent they faced was the pouring rain. After FPD beat Stratford 7-0 behind a great Conner Strandmark pitching effort, delays halted things a few times before Game 2 could begin. The Vikings were unfazed, beating Stratford 9-2 behind homers from Strandmark and star shortstop Keon Johnson to hoist the trophy.

Almost as entertaining as watching those home runs leave the yard — they were the last homers those two seniors would ever hit as Vikings — was watching the FPD gloves sail into the air when they made the final out.

It was a long time coming for the Vikings and head coach Greg Moore. The normally stoic skipper, who has been at FPD for decades and coached a variety of sports, showed some emotion after the victory. Johnson compared the title win to finally scaling Mount Everest.

All in all, it was an almost cinematic victory. But, somehow, an even better movie involving Stratford and FPD played out earlier

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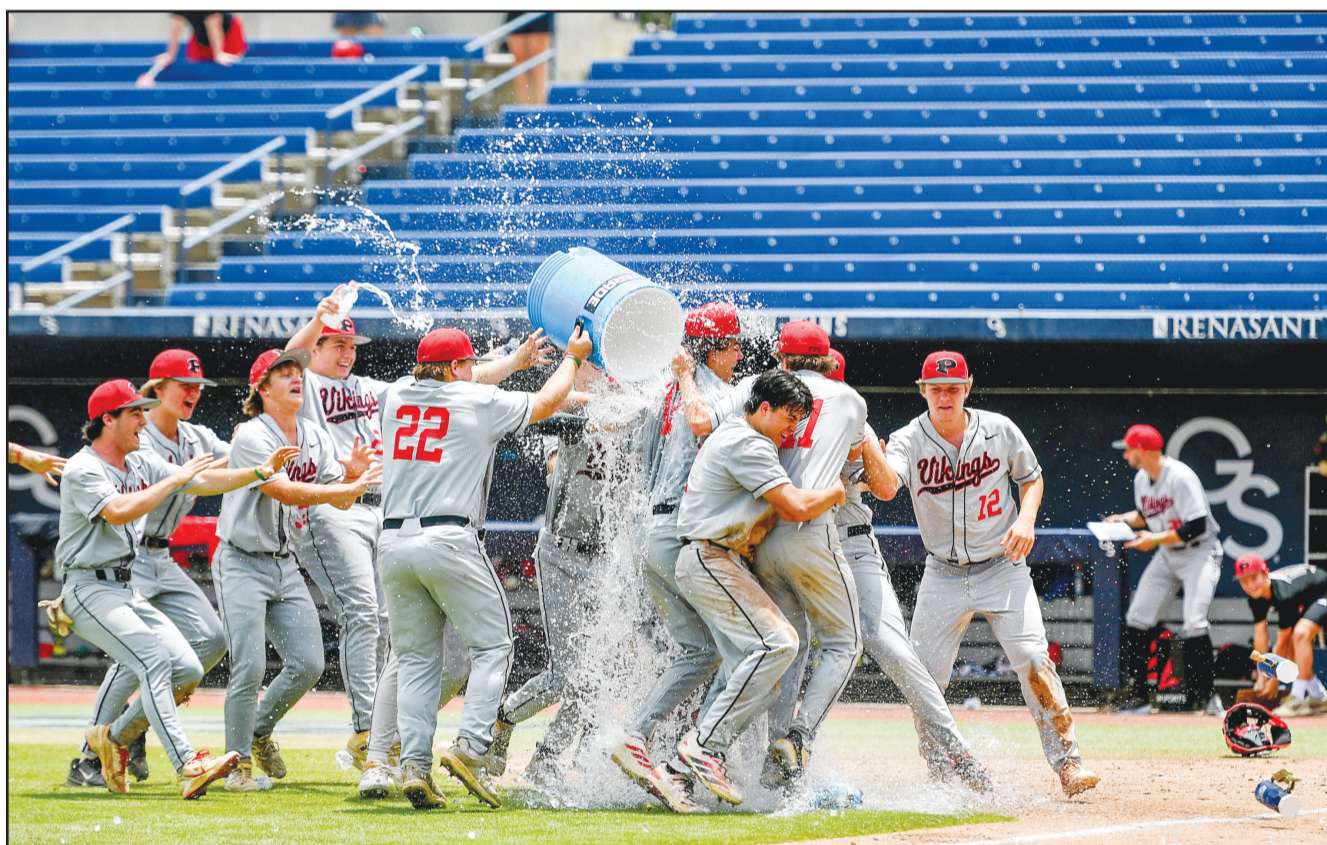


PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

The FPD baseball team dump douse one another in coolers of water as they celebrate enthusiastically after winning the GIAA Class 4A State Championship last month. It was a cathartic win for the Vikings, who had lost in the championship series the past two years in a row but took home the trophy this year.

Former SW assistant back with Patriots as head coach

BY KENNON PAULK
Melody Contributor

The Southwest Patriots' new head coach has no trouble finding where the football field is located.

After serving as an assistant coach for three years, Southwest made the decision to appoint Roderick Cummings to take over for former head coach Joe Dupree Jr. back in February.

Cummings knows the shoes he is attempting to fill are big ones, with Dupree being a Southwest alum and also the second-winningest coach in Southwest history.

"I think Joe means the world to this place," Cummings said.

Most coaches could be a little intimidated by this, accepting a new position and replacing a very well respected coach. For Cummings, it's more like an



Roderick Cummings

advantage.

"That was the great part about taking the job, I knew everything about it," Cummings said. "I knew the community, I

knew the people, the only thing I really had to do was come here and learn these kids."

In addition to knowing his way around campus and having a finger on the pulse of Southwest, Cummings also has a good relationship with administration as well.

"The principal that's coming back now, she was an (assistant principal) when I was over here so, administratively I think we're going to be fine," Cummings said.

While knowing these things and having people know your name is always a nice touch,

Cummings wanted to make it clear that he wants to bring his own style to the Patriots. Defense should loom large in his coaching style, he said. Cummings had defensive coordinator roles at Central, Baldwin and Southwest respectively before a head coaching role at Twiggs County.

"I'm a little bit more of a go-getter," Cummings said. "Coach Dupree was great as far as the relationship piece and that's one thing I will continue to do."

Cummings knows a lot about building relationships with players, as he described his tenures with the other teams he's worked with.

"What I learned about all of those places, even being here in Bibb, is that you have to build



PHOTO BY CLAY REYNOLDS / THE COURIER HERALD

Southwest running back Tkorian "Drop" Davis plows his way through a wall of East Laurens defenders during a game last season. Davis should be key for Southwest under new head coach Roderick Cummings.

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that same week in late May.

No. 1: Stratford girls topple FPD in soccer championship

If you kept track of spring sports this year, you might have known this was coming.

This game had some of the highest expectations of any play-off game I can remember. The Stratford girls had a perfect 19-0 record coming in, including two wins over FPD. But the Vikings had taken the Eagles to penalties in one of those games and were 15-2 themselves coming in.

Then there was the rain. The Class 4A championship at Stratford was originally scheduled for earlier in the evening, but torrential downpours sent the schedule on the fritz and the match did not begin until 9:30 p.m.

This also meant an uncanny haze of fog settled in over the grass and, of course, that the field was a mess. Michael Lough accurately quipped that some of the players looked like the NFL players of the old days as shown in documentaries, slogging through the muck with their muddied uniforms.

Despite the late start, there was a great crowd for both sides. The FPD fans got to celebrate almost instantly when the Vikings scored a goal within the game's first two minutes. Stratford was down for much of the first half but tied it right before the break at 1-1.

The second half was similarly chaotic. FPD scored early to take the lead, but Stratford managed to tie it with about 15 minutes left. Then, with about three minutes to play, it looked like the Eagles secured the win with a clutch goal from Maddie Biesterfeld.

But FPD star and Auburn commit Bowen Matthews scored an incredible header with less than one minute left, shocking the Stratford crowd and sending it to overtime. The Eagles went on to win an all-timer with an OT goal by Emma Lizotte.

Ordinarilly, a great championship has off-the-field stories that make it even more memorable, but that's what made this championship between two rivals so great — the match itself was simply top-notch.

Somehow, a game with so much hype managed to live up to those lofty expectations and become the best showdown of the spring.



PHOTO BY MARK POWELL

FPD's Bowen Matthews (7) works against a pair of Stratford defenders during the two rivals' championship match last month. Matthews provided one of the most excellent moments of the spring sports season when she scored a game-tying goal in the title game with less than a minute left on the clock.

SOUTHWEST

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a relationship with the kids," he said.

While having those relationships is high on Cummings' list, he did say he was excited to take a look under the defensive hood and fine tune the details there.

Looking at the past few seasons for Southwest, defense is something that can be improved upon.

Last season the Patriots allowed 273 points through 10 games and finished eighth in Region 2-Class A Division I.

Cummings is also tasked with finding replacements for the seniors who graduated, both in

roster spots as well as leadership positions.

"They had 26 seniors, so a lot of these kids now are the guys," Cummings said. "I think just being able to be seen a bit more and be appreciated to the point where 'it's my time now,' I think that is kind of what's been moving the program."

While there are definitely a lot of opening starting positions, Cummings is already seeing some of the stars start to shine during spring workouts.

Offensively, Cummings named Ajavion Wilson, a junior quarterback, as one of the guys he hopes to lead the offense under center.

"It's his team, his program, he's the guy that's going to be one of the leaders," Cummings

said. "He throws a great ball and is trying to do a lot more leading ability now."

Cummings also mentioned that Wilson will have mostly the same offensive staff from last year, so he doesn't have to get used to a new quarterback coach.

Alongside Wilson on the offensive side of the ball, Cummings mentioned junior Running back Tkorian "Drop" Davis.

"He'll have a lot of exposable ability and he is a very athletic kid," Cummings said.

Cummings also mentioned that even with the loss of seniors, he feels they have gained a lot more speed for this upcoming season.

Defensively, Cummings highlighted Kewon Johnson, who will be a senior for the 2026 sea-

son.

"He is probably one of the strongest kids in the building," Cummings said. "He's a good leader and definitely going to be able to make an impact on Fridays for us."

Justin Humphrey could also be a defensive weapon for the Patriots, Cummings said. He likened Humphrey to Rinaldo Callaway, a superstar for Southwest who played last season before moving on to play football at Rutgers.

"We're going to put him in kind of the same position that they had Calloway playing last year," Cummings said. "We hope he can make those same plays."

Every new coach's dream is to go undefeated in their inaugural season. While that's certainly a

tough ask, Cummings knows it's a process to the top and that's where he has his sights set.

"We know we're going to take it one game at a time, we know we got to be able to work and we got to improve," Cummings said. "I definitely think we're in a position for what we have done so far to be better than where we were last year."

Cummings and his Southwest Patriots will have the chance to put all of these factors to the test in August when they play Howard for their season opener.

"I think Macon is my home and it's my community," Cummings said. "I'm just happy to be back and to build service to this community."



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