

The Macon Melody

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MACON TAKES OFF

Airport's new Fort Lauderdale flight sees success in first month



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

A Contour airplane sits at the terminal at the Middle Georgia Regional Airport in south Macon last week. The airline's new flight to Fort Lauderdale has been a success so far, airport officials said.

BY CASEY CHOUNG
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One month after Contour Airlines launched a new direct flight connecting Middle Georgia to South Florida, demand is far exceeding expectations as local travelers look to avoid the headaches of navigating Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport.

Officials at the Middle Georgia Regional Airport say passenger

volume has soared past their initial projections that 60% of the seats would be booked. They have been surprised to see more than 90% of seats to Fort Lauderdale snatched up, said

Heather Hillstrom Lowe, the airport's deputy aviation director.

With 240 seats available a week, ticket sales average out to 218 on the Fort Lauderdale flights, with their busiest day being Sunday, Lowe said.

Although the prices for flights can exceed what's offered at

Hartsfield, the convenience of parking and proximity for locals "balances out" with a higher cost, Lowe said.

The Fort Lauderdale flights run four times a week, on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.

Fort Lauderdale residents Mike and Lauren Cambias — along with their two kids, Fauster and Charlie — landed at the Middle Regional Airport last week.

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Owners of Melody buy The Telegraph

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
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The Macon Melody's parent organization, the Georgia Trust for Local News, acquired The Macon Telegraph from McClatchy Media this week, the Trust announced Wednesday.

The Melody and The Telegraph will become one news source and operate as The Telegraph under the Georgia Trust, a subsidiary of the National Trust for Local News. The non-profit National Trust's mission is to strengthen communities by building a sustainable future for local news.

Current subscribers to The Melody will become subscribers to The Telegraph, which has served Macon for 200 years. Together, they will continue to build on the community journalism The Melody has accomplished in its first two years.

The final standalone edition of The Macon Melody will be July 31. The Melody will return later this summer as part of The Telegraph. It will live on as a special section highlighting the people, places and moments that make up the rhythm of Macon.

The trust will temporarily remove the paywall on stories from The Melody and The Telegraph to invite community members to connect

with the publications.

"The Macon Telegraph serves as a vital community asset for people in Middle Georgia that should not only be preserved, but reinvigorated and strengthened," said Cynthia DuBose, executive director of the Georgia Trust for Local News. "We are committed to building a modern media organization focused on enhanced community engagement that provides quality local news and information for years to come."

Founded as a weekly in 1826 by Myron Bartlett, The Telegraph has long been a staple of the Macon community. The paper began publishing daily in 1860. Peyton T. Anderson, Jr. served as sole owner and publisher in the 1950s and 1960s, and helped establish The Telegraph's reputation as a highly trusted community resource.

The Peyton Anderson Foundation funded the acquisition of The Telegraph. The foundation wants to honor the legacy of Peyton T. Anderson, Jr., according to a press release from the National Trust for Local News.

"Peyton Anderson believed that a strong community depends on an informed community. Through The Macon Telegraph, he built more than a newspaper, he built a legacy of trusted journalism. It's especially meaningful that the philanthropy

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Atlanta firm pitches revamp of defunct Macon Health Club

BY LAURA E. CORLEY
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A plan is in the works to resurrect the long-vacant Macon Health Club at First and Cherry streets.

Ripple Hospitality Partners, an Atlanta investment and development firm founded in 2024, has spent the past four months developing a business plan for the four-story building at 389 First St. which has sat vacant for nearly a decade.

A proposal, set to be presented during a public meeting next month, calls for transforming the building into a boutique hotel, a membership-based health club with a pool

and a private dinner club, as well as an open-to-the-public restaurant with a bar on the bottom floor, said Alex Morrison, executive director of the Macon-Bibb County Urban Development Authority and also the county's director of planning and public spaces.

"In order for any redevelopment to happen, there would need to be significant demolition and reorganizing of the building," Morrison said. "It will end up being a total rehab of the property once it's all said and done."

Construction could begin as early as 2028 or 2029, he said.

One initial idea floated for the building, which the UDA acquired from the Macon-Bibb County Hos-

pital Authority in a land-swap deal in 2023, included plans for micro-loft apartments. However, Morrison said the floor plans were ultimately too small for residential units.

"A property like this will provide a little bit of a different product," he said, adding that there's a market for a private-dining establishment like the City Club, which once operated on the building's top floor but closed in 2008.

"That's something that is oft requested and being able to restore that to this property would be a great boon for downtown," Morrison said.

SEE HEALTH CLUB
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Summer isn't over yet...

The Melody's local event guide is here!

Check out pages 9-10 to discover upcoming events, concerts and more.

Periodical — Mail Label

Macon farm competing in statewide contest

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON
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BrightFarms looks nothing like your typical Middle Georgia farm. It's an 8-acre greenhouse that serves as a regional hub for lettuce production in the Southeast, churning out roughly 14,000 pounds of greens daily.

The Cox Farms-owned packaged salad supplier opened its South Bibb County location less than two miles east of the Middle Georgia Regional Airport in 2025, making it the fourth BrightFarms greenhouse in the country (along with hubs in Texas, Illinois and New Hampshire).

The Macon greenhouse recently earned a spot in the semifinals of the state Chamber of Commerce's second annual Coolest Thing Made in Georgia competition. More than 30 products made in the Peach state compete in a knockout-style tournament, with each round decided by a public vote. Last year, Lockheed

Martin's C-130J Super Hercules came out on top.

BrightFarms will go head-to-head against TifTuf Drought Tolerant Bermudagrass, developed by University of Georgia researchers. Voting ended on Thursday.

How it's produced

From seed to harvest, BrightFarms grows four varieties of lettuce in an almost entirely automated production process.

Walking from one end of the production line to the other feels much like a "live-in time lapse" of growth, said Jess Soare, assistant vice president of BrightFarms marketing.

A machine drops lettuce seeds into "gutters" filled with peat moss. The gutters each contain 400 seeds and travel through a watering tunnel before entering the germination chamber for 48 hours. The climate-controlled chamber encourages the fledgling plants to sprout above the soil.

"That's really the most important



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

Jess Soare, assistant vice president of marketing for BrightFarms, leads a tour of the company's Macon facility where lettuce is grown.

part of the whole process," Soare said. "When you have a little infant, you want to make sure they get every single thing that they need perfectly. That's what we're doing."

A completely controlled environ-

ment allows for the seeds to sprout much faster than traditional farming methods.

SEE LETTUCE
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If you're a senior who dreads summer, it may be time to turn around your outlook on the season. Summer is ripe for socializing, whether at a neighborhood barbecue or a pool day with friends.

It's the season when warm weather, community activities, and delicious food and drinks pull people together — and it's the perfect time to reap all the social, mental, physical, and emotional benefits that connection with friends and family can offer the aging brain.

WHAT SOCIALIZING AND CONVERSING DO FOR YOUR BRAIN

As we age, our close relationships become even more essential and helpful. Of course, many seniors now know about the adverse mental and physical side effects of loneliness, but social connection is worth more than just avoiding certain risks — it can help you gain entirely new benefits.

Any kind of regular conversation and human connection can be helpful for the senior brain. One recent study showed that even regular phone- and video-based conversations can have a positive effect on older adults' cognition and emotional well-being.

Another study found that social contact, especially with close friends, helped older adults perform better on cognitive tests. They even had improved cognition for a day or two after the interactions. Time spent talking to or hanging out with friends or family can give your brain a "boost" for a few days.

Laughing with those friends and family can make your time together even more beneficial for your health. Many of us know that chronic stress is bad

for our bodies, but did you know that laughter can help decrease your cortisol levels, release tension throughout your body, and even help immediately lower your heart rate and blood pressure? That's not to mention the positive effect laughing can have on mental health, as it helps release feel-good chemicals like endorphins, dopamine, and oxytocin in your brain.

One all-too-common barrier that keeps many seniors from this kind of beneficial interaction? Hearing loss. When you can no longer hear your friends, especially in crowded spaces like a restaurant, you might start withdrawing from conversation. Your brain can start to experience cognitive decline if you're no longer exercising your listening skills or interacting with others. If you're finding that hearing issues are causing you to take a step back from your social life, make this the summer that you finally talk to your doctor about hearing aids.

HOW TO STAY SOCIAL IN SUMMER AS YOU AGE

Summer is a great time to exercise your social side, but it can also be a hazardous season for seniors. If you're connecting with friends outdoors, be sure to stay heat-smart and keep yourself hydrated, sunscreensed, and shaded as much as possible. Now that you're ready to keep safe in the summer heat, let's explore some ideas for connecting with friends, family, and even new acquaintances this summer:

- **Invite a friend to a sports game** - Summer is a great time to catch a baseball or softball game. The reasonable pace of

these events makes them great places to catch up with friends and chat for a few hours.

- **Attend local gatherings** - Summer is the prime season for local concert series, art walks, and festivals. Use your local city calendar or Facebook pages to scope out upcoming events, then invite some friends along (or attend alone with the goal of making new connections!).

- **Explore your local parks** - Make it a goal to get out to all of your city's parks this summer, whether you want to toss a frisbee around, plan a picnic, or simply stroll around the park. Invite your friends along for casual meet-ups, or set a weekly picnic date among yourselves.

- **Connect with neighbors** - Summer is the perfect time to plan a block party and get your neighborhood into the streets. If you don't already know your neighbors, try bringing them freshly baked cookies, going out of your way to introduce yourself, or even inviting them to a happy hour on your stoop or porch.

- **Go digital for the in-between** - As discussed above, even interaction via video and phone calls can be helpful for seniors. On days when you can't get out or schedule anything, try to connect with friends or grandkids on a phone call.

Don't let this summer slip by without taking a chance to exercise your social skills and care for your physical and mental health.

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 UNESCO regulate or control World Heritage sites?

BY GABRIEL KOPP
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No. UNESCO cannot place regulations or restrict local actions on World Heritage Sites. Sites that have "cultural and natural heritage" and "outstanding value to humanity" are chosen by the World Heritage Committee, according to UNESCO. UNESCO's 1972 international treaty leaves decision-making for places like the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge to existing local, state and federal authorities.

The constitution says the international body does not threaten the sovereignty of the locality in which the World Heritage Site sits, adding the participating party should not "take any deliberate measures which might damage directly or indirectly the cultural and natural heritage." Conservationists have kept the Okefenokee from being developed, most recently in June 2025 when a mining operation ended its bid to extract heavy minerals and sold its land to a conservation group. The refuge has been one of 17 tentative World Heritage sites in the country since 2008.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES
Passengers walk off a Contour plane parked outside the Middle Georgia Regional Airport after landing from Fort Lauderdale on July 9. The new route has been at 90% capacity since it started flying back and forth a month ago, officials reported.

AIRPORT

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It was the first time they've flown the new route, which the couple described as a "life-saver" and much easier than flying into the Atlanta airport. Chuck and Melanie Byrd, who came to pick up the family from the airport, noted they had recently spent \$210 to park at Hartsfield when they were traveling. A round-trip flight from Atlanta to Fort Lauderdale can be purchased for as low as \$80, while flying out of Macon's airport starts at about \$240. "I feel like it was competitive and much more convenient," Mike Cambias said. The airline also brought back direct flights to Baltimore ten times a week. For a year and a half, Contour flew into Washington Dulles International Airport in D.C. instead of Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport. Since making the change, the utilization of

the route has gone up by 10%, Lowe said. The Washington D.C. metro area is the number two destination for passengers departing from Macon. New York is the most popular city to travel to, even though there's not a direct route. Martissa Jones and her father Alfred Jones were waiting inside the airport lobby for their flight to Baltimore last week and kept checking their flight status once their departure time was pushed back from 2:35 p.m. to 7 p.m. It's not the first time they've been delayed. The two have flown several times to the Baltimore or D.C. airport and back to Macon on Contour with varying degrees of punctuality, but Martissa Jones said she is glad the airline has expanded its service. She said the Middle Georgia Regional Airport has been her "hidden gem" for the past five years. Baltimore and Fort Lauderdale are currently the only regular nonstop destinations being offered by Contour. However, the airport also advertises flight packages through casinos to the Borgata in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and Beau Rivage in Biloxi, Mississippi.

ACQUISITION

Continued from Page 1

created through the success of the newspaper he built can now help preserve its future," Peyton Anderson Foundation president Karen Lambert said. The Georgia Trust owns several newspapers and digital outlets across Middle, West and South Georgia. It established The Macon Melody in June 2024 as a community-focused, startup newsroom using funding from the Knight Foundation. It announced today that it also purchased

The Columbus Ledger-Enquirer newspaper in West Georgia from McClatchy. That deal was funded by the Local News and Information Fund at the Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee Valley. The Georgia Trust now serves a geographic area of more than 1 million people statewide across 21 different news organizations. The acquisition comes soon after DuBose's arrival at the Georgia Trust for Local News, as she stepped into her executive director position June 1. She previously worked with The Atlanta Journal-Constitution for nine years, spending time as both a reporter and in digital and audience roles. DuBose also spent seven years with McClatchy Media.

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5300 Zebulon Rd. | Macon, GA 31210

P&Z meeting covers new Macon eats and more

BY LIZ FABIAN

The Macon Newsroom
macon-newsroom.com

People living near Brookdale Avenue will have new food options, Fatty’s Pizza patrons won’t have to leave their car, and Love’s Travel Stop plans more overnight parking following Monday’s Macon-Bibb County Planning and Zoning Commission hearings.

At 3527 Brookdale Ave., P&Z approved Chriszetta Mercado’s “Lot Bites” proposal for a nearly 24,000-square-foot concrete parking platform for up to three food trucks that would lease spaces.

Macon–Bibb County Mayor Pro Tem Valerie Wynn told commissioners she favors having more options in that “food desert,” but questioned whether the food trucks will be affordable.

“The folks that live there can’t buy \$15 tacos and hamburgers and stuff you see at the Cherry Blossom Festival or some place like that,” Wynn said. “I’d like to see a vegetable food truck, or fruit food truck, something that the residents around there that can come, can afford to buy.”

Donnell Somerset, who represented Mercado at the hearing, said they plan to lease to trucks providing a variety of affordable food options.

P&Z Commissioner Kesia Stafford said, “If a food truck is not viable, I mean if they’re not profitable to be there, they probably won’t come back there.”

The applicants don’t plan to have any seat-

ing or permanent kitchens or restrooms, but will have a porta potty available for food truck workers.

Commissioners also approved Vivian Morgan’s application for a new Jamaican restaurant to be nestled among houses at 327 Pittman St., which is a little more than a block off Broadway a few blocks south of Eisenhower Parkway.

P&Z Executive Director Jeff Ruggieri, an admitted fan of Caribbean cuisine, proclaimed: “I think this is the perfect Jamaican restaurant.”

The 980-square-foot, shotgun-style, 1900 building has a history of commercial use dating back to 1960, including as a barber shop, daycare facility, restaurants and retail shop in this light manufacturing zoning district.

With only on-street parking available, P&Z staff originally recommended a carryout-only business due to concerns about patrons impeding traffic on the side street, or causing problems for nearby residents.

Commission Chair Jeane Easom said: “I’m good with this,” referencing the proposal for seating inside.

P&Z staff also mentioned Morgan needs to secure the necessary permits from the health department to open, but did not have other major concerns since it is not a bar and no live music is planned.

“The proposed restaurant is small in scale and, in general, is not expected to create significant impacts such as excessive noise, smoke, or other contaminants,” the staff report stated.

Commissioners also withdrew a require-

ment for a fence between the restaurant and a nearby house after P&Z Executive Director Jeff Ruggieri questioned the effectiveness of screening a building that’s been in the neighborhood for over 125 years.

“It’s been there forever,” Ruggieri said. “I’m just not sure if a fence really accomplishes anything... besides adding some substantial cost, in my opinion.”

Commissioners also granted conditional use approval for Fatty’s Pizza to have a pickup window at 3955 Arkwright Road.

When the drive-up window was originally proposed late last year, P&Z staff and the commission had concerns about the tight turns around the building in the parking lot, which also serves Steve’s Steak & Seafood, Azul Salon and Spa, and Republic Finance in that strip mall.

In late January, after the owner failed to show for three hearings, P&Z denied the request.

The restaurant reapplied, and Fatty’s representatives Olivia Aycock and Savannah Harris were present Monday.

They explained that staff will keep an eye on traffic, and if customers start lining up and interfere with people getting in and out of parking spaces, they will ask drivers waiting for an order to move to one of their reserved curbside parking spaces.

Parking proposals

At 5955 Zebulon Road, P&Z approved a variance for Walmart due to changes in its parking lot that left them with not enough

parking spaces under the code for a store over 207,000 square feet.

When the sprawling shopping center was approved in 2002, P&Z already granted a variance from the required six spaces per 1,000 square feet of the store’s floor area, or 1,262 spaces, down to 1,006 spaces.

After 2017, the addition of metal shopping cart corals further reduced the number of spaces to 981.

Because the parking lot rarely reached capacity even in the height of Black Friday shopping, P&Z approved a variance for the remaining 974 spaces that will remain following installation of more cart corals.

Commissioners also approved expanded overnight parking for Love’s Travel Stops & Country Stores at 5189 Sardis Church Road.

A year ago, P&Z approved 12 parking spaces for recreational vehicles with an entrance on Frank Amerson Parkway, and 47 tractor trailer spaces at the travel center.

Monday, P&Z granted the company permission to add an additional 44 smaller “bobtail” parking spaces for truckers to park without trailers.

Across the street at the new 7-Eleven at 5230 Sardis Church Road, commissioners granted a variance to Full Tilt Sign Company to place an additional freestanding sign to direct tractor trailers to the appropriate parking lot.

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

LETTUCE

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Next, a fully automated system transports each gutter inside the 450,000-square-foot greenhouse, which holds between 1,200 and 1,600 gutters at a time. That’s 640,000 lettuce plants growing under one roof.

As new gutters enter the greenhouse, the ones with ready-to-harvest lettuce are removed. Plants spend about 18-21 days inside the growing chamber where temperature, humidity and CO2 levels remain controlled at all times.

BrightFarms’ “Ultra-clima” technology allows the entire environment to be “managed actually down at the level of the plants,” Soare said.

Air circulates directly on top of the greens and water spigots deliver water through the gutters and from automatic overhead sprayers. Shades on the greenhouse ceiling allow complete control of sun exposure

and LEDs allow for added UV light.

Growers regularly inspect the vast greenhouse to ensure plants are getting what they need.

Lettuce leaves are separated from their roots in the harvest room before being hand-inspected for quality and packaged and shipped to stores across the Southeast. All BrightFarm lettuces are packaged in ready-to-eat containers and don’t require washing. Any organic waste is shipped to local farms for use as fertilizer.

Only four products remain in the Coolest Thing Made in Georgia contest. BrightFarms has beaten out Elysian Parfum, Hot Hands, Claxton Fruit Cake and the Original Chick-fil-A Sandwich, among others.

If BrightFarms wins this week’s match, it will move onto the finals against either Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Food or Blue Bird Vision Electric School Bus. Final votes can be cast from July 17-23 and the winner is announced Aug. 5.

Visit coolestthingmadeinga.com to cast your vote and learn more.

PHOTO COURTESY BRIGHTFARMS

BrightFarms’s facility in Macon features a sprawling greenhouse in which different types of lettuce are grown with almost no human aid.



HEALTH CLUB

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Goodwill Industries is also part of the ongoing conversation about the redevelopment of the old Health Club, Morrison said.

“They run a Pinnacle Club in Augusta, which is very similar to what the City Club was in Macon,” Morrison said.

The Pinnacle Club first opened in 1967 and is located on the 17th floor of an office building at 7th and Broad streets in downtown Augusta. The club is managed by Edgar’s Hospitality Group, a division of Goodwill that also operates Edgar’s Bistro on Eisenhower Parkway in Macon.

The UDA also acquired the building across First Street from the Health Club in its 2023 land-swap deal. Morrison said the UDA is planning to rehab the building and maintain it as an office space. The parking garage attached to that building would be used by the city club development too, he said.

As part of the deal, the UDA

took responsibility for paying off a \$1.3 million bond note the hospital authority had on the property. Morrison said the UDA got a loan from NewTown Macon, a nonprofit that is the UDA’s development partner on this project, to get enough cash on hand to close the deal. The properties acquired by the UDA serve as collateral for the loan.

“We’re paying that off over time, and the hope is that, whomever we work with on the development, they will generate enough money that they’ll pay that note off,” Morrison said.

Morrison said getting the Health Club building back into productive use will make the First Street corridor “a very welcoming place.”

The Health Club building includes a basketball gym, a wooden walking track and a visibly deteriorating swimming pool. The gym closed permanently in 2017. The building was constructed in 1960 and designed by local architect W. Elliot Dunwoody Jr. It opened as the P.A. McArthur Youth Center of the Young Men’s Christian Association of Macon Georgia.



PHOTO BY JASON VORHEES

The long-vacant Macon Health Club at 389 First Street, pictured here, could be transformed into a boutique hotel. An Atlanta development firm will present a proposal a public hearing next month.

SNAPSHOTS

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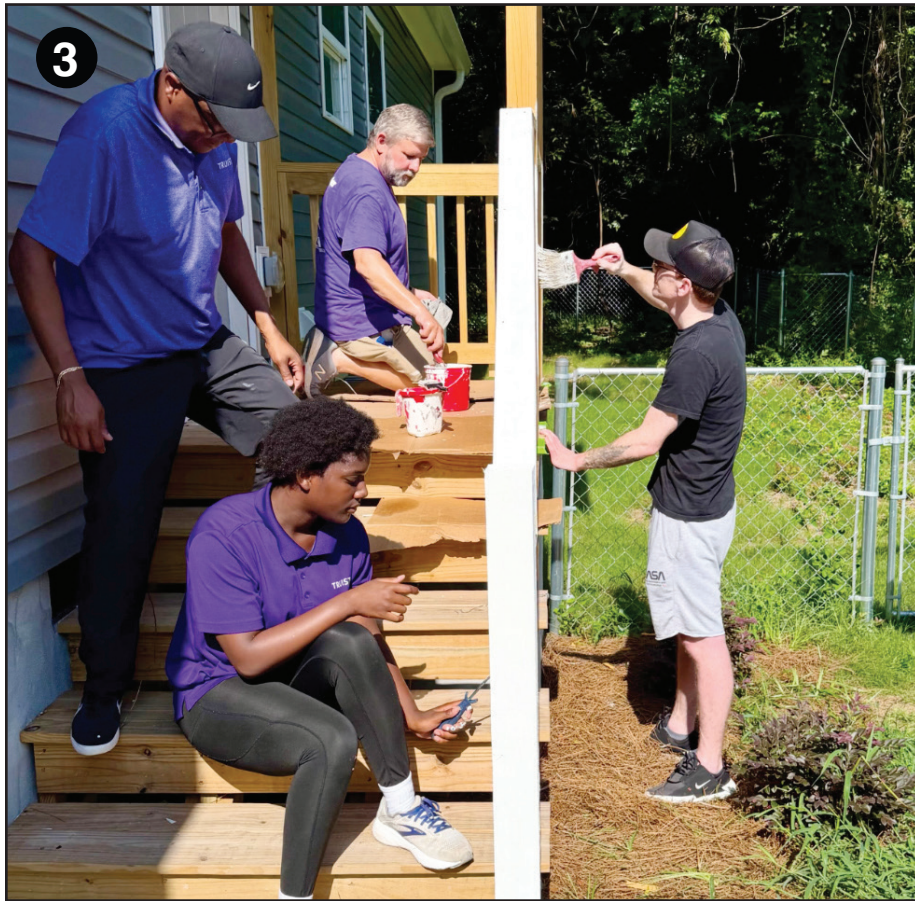


PHOTO 1 — Bibb County students were among a cohort of dual enrollment students with Central Georgia Technical College participating in a Humanities course in Ireland this summer. *Photo courtesy of Bibb County School District*

PHOTO 2 — Members of the United Way of Central Georgia present at the 2026 Governor's Summit on Early Language and Literacy at Georgia College & State University. *Photo courtesy of United Way of Central Georgia*

PHOTOS 3 — Volunteers from Truist help put the final touches on a Habitat for Humanity house on Holt Avenue Saturday. *Photo courtesy of Macon Milledgeville Regional Habitat for Humanity*

PHOTO 4 — The Macon Arts Alliance held an opening reception for "Connected Through Art & Heart" last week. It featured artists from Creative Pathways, a collaboration between The Arc Macon and Artspace Macon, created to empower artists with developmental disabilities and other neurodivergent experiences. *Photo courtesy of Macon Arts Alliance*

PHOTO 5 — Macon Bibb County Recreation's R.A.W (Real Actors Workshop) summer camp ended last week. Participating teens learned the fundamentals, skills, confidence and discipline of acting. *Photo courtesy of Macon Bibb County Recreation*

PHOTO 6 — Kristyne Watson was recently named exceptional care Atrium Health Navicent's DAISY Award winner for extraordinary nurse. *Photo courtesy of Atrium Health Navicent*

PHOTO 6 — Shy Company performs at the Robins Financial Capitol Theatre during the inaugural \$10 Beer + a Local Show concert series on Friday. *Photo by Olivia Walter*



Disaster recovery and aid cannot rely on the whims of the president

As hurricane season begins, Georgians should understand a dangerous truth: disaster recovery depends not only on the strength of our communities, but how the government decides to respond. Will they choose competence, compassion and accountability or cruelty, neglect and political retribution? Across the South, we’ve seen both responses, often in the same state for the same disaster. I grew up in Mississippi and came of age in Georgia, and I’ve personally seen the difference.

Here in Georgia, we have experienced nine federally declared disasters since the pandemic. These weather events — tornadoes, hurricanes, tropical storms, winter storms — create damage on a scale that means affected communities cannot recover alone. We survive and rebuild by pulling together and martialing a response that includes state and federal resources. When we do it



Stacey Abrams

right, we are more resilient so that our communities are less vulnerable to future disasters.

A familiar chain of events follows disaster. In the immediate aftermath, true stories abound about the best of our neighbors and what our society can do. We rush to help one another with basic necessities, we rally around impacted communities with donations, and we promise to be with them every step of the way as they recover. Soon, the news cycle moves on. That’s often when only government intervention can move the work forward, but then the pace of recovery tends to slow dramatically. Rebuilding our homes and infrastructure can take years, and the process of accessing the funds needed to recover is agoniz-

ingly slow.

The problem we are now facing is that while the science is clear in showing that a warming climate is causing more dangerous, more frequent, more costly disasters, our government capacity for disaster response is shrinking and largely dependent on an autocrat’s whims.

FEMA, the agency responsible for immediate disaster response and long-term recovery support, has been pushed into instability. The agency has lost experienced staff, leadership posts have gone unfilled and critical preparedness programs have been canceled, frozen or delayed. These are the very programs that help state and local governments prepare before disaster strikes: strengthening infrastructure, reducing flood risk, hardening

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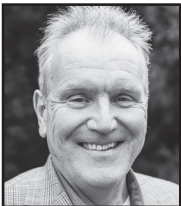
And then there were two

On Sunday July 19th at 3 p.m., an estimated two billion people from around the planet will watch as the very last two surviving teams meet in the FIFA 2026 World Cup.

Over those 90 minutes, those two teams will exhaust themselves trying to win the most treasured sports trophy in history. What a moment we have coming on Sunday afternoon! Somewhere between the round of 32 and this climactic moment, the World Cup stopped being a tournament and became a fever. Forty-eight nations have been boiled down to four, and by Wednesday night they will be boiled down to two. My son Sam (who had been with me at the Spain v Saudi game in the group stages) texted me at midnight after Argentina finally, agonizingly, saw off Switzerland: “It’s happening.”

He did not need to specify what “it” was. We both knew. The old rivalry between England and Argentina over the past sixty years was to be re-lived in 2026. Oh my, this game puts your life in perspective.

Here is the number that ought to stop you in your tracks: for the first



Christopher Blake

time in ninety-six years of this competition, the four semifinalists are precisely the four teams that FIFA ranked highest in the world before a ball was kicked.

Argentina, Spain, France, England. No Cinderella. No Croatia sneaking through on penalties, no plucky Belgians spoiling the party.

FIFA, sensibly, redesigned the bracket this year so that the top four could not collide before the final four, sorting them into separate pathways the way Wimbledon protects its seeds. It worked exactly as drawn. Whether that is a triumph of competitive integrity or a small tragedy for chaos is a question I leave to wiser heads than mine. I confess a part of me, the part that fell in love with this sport watching minnows torment giants, misses the chaos a little.

Chaos, mind you, was not entirely absent. It simply arrived early and left its fingerprints everywhere.

SEE BLAKE
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Trump axes DOGE agency

The once-vaunted Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) — originally led in part by Elon Musk — is officially no more. As of July 4, 2026, President Donald Trump allowed the agency to sunset, even though it imploded and virtually ceased to exist as a functioning program in November 2025.

It was an ignominious end to a hyped-up, pseudo-government entity that was supposed to rely on private-sector actors to transform the federal government and cut wasteful spending.

The results, on the other hand, were as underwhelming as its goals were ambitious, but this was a predictable outcome to just about anyone with an understanding of government budgeting.

Musk suggested in October 2024 that he could identify and eliminate at least \$2 trillion from the federal budget, which stunned many spectators. \$2 trillion at the time represented about 30% of government spending and was also approximately equal to the federal deficit. Cutting this much would have been an astounding feat and could have put the United States on more stable



Marc Hyden

financial footing.

Musk evidently learned how difficult it would be to achieve this, and by January 2025, he revised his goal to \$1 trillion. A few months later, he altered his projection to a much more modest (well, modest for the spendthrift feds) \$150 billion in the first year. By late April 2025, Musk left his post to return to the private sector, which was a wise decision. He has since become the world’s first trillionaire.

DOGE limped along after his departure, and now with it officially shuttered, the results are in. The agency asserts \$215 billion in savings through a “Combination of asset sales, contract/lease cancellations and renegotiations, fraud and improper payment deletion, grant cancellations, interest savings, programmatic changes, regulatory savings, and workforce reductions.”

Considering DOGE’s lauded goals, it is hard to consider it anything but an abject failure. I can already hear my readers grumbling

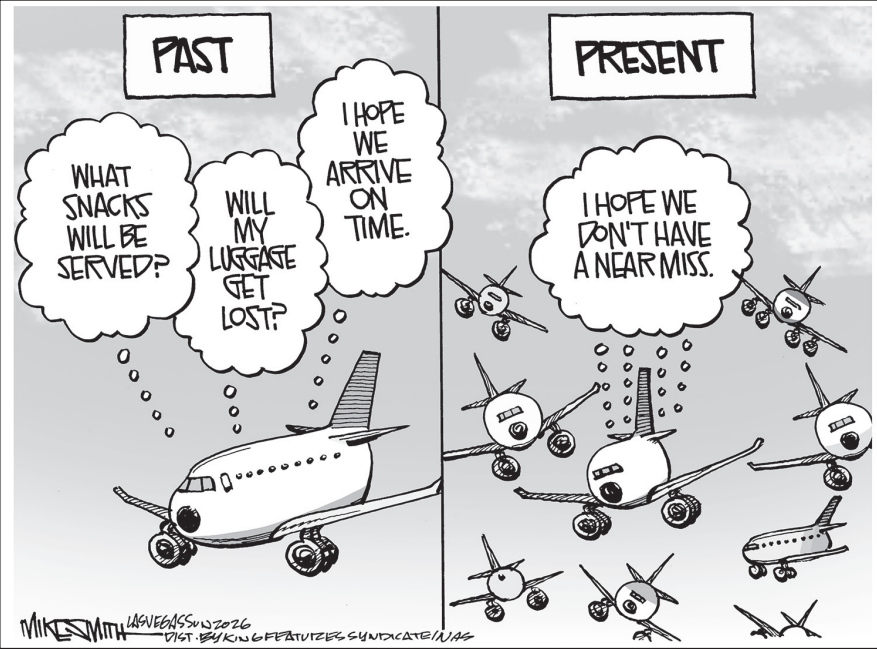
that saving a couple hundred billion dollars is hardly a failure. I readily admit that saving taxpayer money, regardless of how much, is a noble and important cause, but the alleged savings are only about one-tenth of Musk’s initial objective of \$2 trillion.

To put this another way, if Braves manager Walt Weiss promised to win 100 games this season but only won 10, would you call that a success? No, Braves nation would be calling for his ouster. Of course, baseball and government are not the same thing, but the problems for DOGE don’t end there.

Even suggesting that DOGE saved taxpayers \$215 billion might be misleading. The agency often faced scrutiny over its accounting and whether its numbers were accurate or grossly overstated.

What’s more, DOGE’s cuts might cost taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars, which sounds counterintuitive at first. However, DOGE’s activities have led to lawsuits, costly buyouts related to workforce

SEE HYDEN
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Researchers launch Ga.’s first Superfund research center

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

Just across the road from the waterfront in Brunswick, Semona Holmes lives in a house surrounded by fruit trees, potted flowers, a fish pond — and often, when it rains or the tide is extra high, floodwater.

“If you can imagine this entire area here completely flooded,” she explained on her front porch on a recent afternoon. “The flooding would be — we would have like a

river on our street.”

The floodwater has reached to her knees at times. Once, after a hurricane, her neighbor canoed down the block.

Improvements to the stormwater system have helped a bit in recent years. But Holmes’s concerns go beyond the inconvenience of an occasionally flooded street. She lives about half a mile from a former pesticide plant, which is now a toxic Superfund site — contaminated former industrial sites according to the federal Environmental Protection

Agency. Holmes is worried about what exactly the floodwater might contain.

“Everything from that chemical plant has flowed into our community,” she said.

Scientists want to get a better handle on what, exactly, has flowed into this community’s air, soil, water, and people. Researchers from six universities are launching Georgia’s first Superfund research center, with \$15 million in funding from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences over five years.

The team made up of scientists from Emory University, the University of Georgia, Georgia Tech, Morehouse School of Medicine, Spelman College, and Texas Tech University will look at Glynn County’s four toxic Superfund sites, including the one near Holmes.

The work has two main goals, according to Emory public health professor Noah Scovronick.

“One is to understand the health effects of past chemical exposures, and the other is to try and reduce people’s future exposures,” he said.

To do that, they’ll study links between the toxic substances at the former industrial sites and possible health effects, and conduct environmental sampling to figure out how and where people may have been exposed.

They’ll also need to model impacts of climate change, like rising seas and stronger storms.

ing forward,” Scovronick said.

The researchers met with community members like Holmes to plan their work, so that the studies can answer the lingering questions Glynn County residents have about the industrial pollution in their environment.

For her part, Holmes and her family already don’t drink their tap water or eat fish and crab from Glynn County waterways. But she said they need more information about what chemicals they’ve been exposed to, and the possible consequences. She has six grandchildren, several of whom attend an elementary school just blocks from the toxic site near her house.

“We want them to be healthy,” she said. “And you don’t want to worry about, they’re playing on a playground that has contaminated soil.”

Even if the new research uncovers damage that can’t be undone or exposure to health risks that can’t be reversed, Holmes said, it’s important to have all of that documented — and acknowledged by the companies that operated the industrial sites in Glynn County.

“It shows that you care about humanity,” she said. “And that you are able to acknowledge that, ‘yeah, by our actions, we have possibly contaminated an entire county.’”

But beyond that recognition of wrongdoing, Holmes said, “there has to be continued action.”

This coverage is made possible through a partnership between WABE and Grist, a nonprofit environmental media organization.



PHOTO COURTESY SEMONA HOLMES
Deep floodwater outside Semona Holmes’s house in Brunswick. The new Superfund research center, fuinded by several Georgia universities, will help with environmental research in the area.

Climate change is fueling Georgia’s brutal summer heat wave

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

Much of Georgia is enduring sweltering heat this week, with heat advisories across the southern part of the state and an extreme heat warning for parts of the coast. Heat index values between 95 and 105 degrees are expected across the state through this weekend, following brutal heat and humidity over the July 4 holiday last weekend.

The conditions go beyond an ordinary hot Georgia summer.

A northward shift in the jet stream last week created ultra-hot conditions known as a heat dome for much of the eastern U.S., blanketing the region in warm, moist air. That overlapped with another weather pattern to drive the heat up even more, according to Zachary Handlos, director of the atmospheric and oceanic sciences program at

Georgia Tech.

The increased heat can be dangerous, he said.

“We’re already used to the hot and humid conditions, but it is amazingly even hotter and more humid than we’re used to,” Handlos said. “We’re already close to our breaking point as humans.

Now you’re going beyond that breaking point into dangerous territory for long outdoor exposure.”

Critically, the heat and humidity have lingered even after the sun goes down. Nighttime cooling provides essential relief from extreme heat, allowing the body to recover.

“There have been major cities including Atlanta that just haven’t really cooled off at night,”

Handlos said of the last week of brutal heat. “That can actually make the heat impacts actually worse because there’s never that time to cool off at night.”

Climate change is already driving up summer temperatures overall.

Atlanta’s average summer temperature has increased by more than three degrees since 1970, according to Climate Central. Summer nights have warmed even more, with the average temperature climbing by four degrees. And climate change has added nearly a dozen more days per year with dangerous humid heat during the 2020s.

Beyond those impacts, Handlos said, climate change may be making heat domes like last week’s more common.

Models show the jet stream shifting farther north in the coming decades, which would bring warm air northward as well. There is also some evidence that a weakening jet stream could take on a more meandering, “increasingly wavy type of pattern,” Handlos said. There’s still some debate in the scientific community over that prediction, but it would lead to more of the conditions that create heat domes.

“The expectation is with a warm-



PHOTO COURTESY OF UNSPLASH
FREE USE / JONAS WECKSCHMIED

ing global average temperature that the probability, the frequency of occurrence of such heat dome type of setups certainly increases,” he said.

The weather cycle known as

New federal housing law to stop spread of corporate-owned homes

BY ALANDER ROCHA
Georgia Recorder
georgiarecorder.com

U.S. Sen. Raphael Warnock on Monday touted a new federal law that went into effect over the weekend that is aimed at making homeownership more attainable.

Speaking in southwest Atlanta in front of a home that is corporate owned, Warnock was joined by city leaders and a local resident struggling to find an affordable home for sale.

The legislation, which was headed by Massachusetts Democratic U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren and South Carolina Republican U.S. Sen. Tim Scott, automatically became law over the weekend after President Donald Trump did not sign the measure but also did not veto it.

Warnock, who is a Democrat, highlighted a provision he pushed for that limits the number of single-family homes an institutional investor can own to 350 homes.

“What’s happening in Metro Atlanta is happening in communities all across

the state. Private equity firms and major corporations have bought up thousands of single-family homes, leaving Georgians without an opportunity. Let’s be clear. If you’re a single mom, if you’re the married father of two trying to buy a home, owning a small barber shop, you cannot compete with Wall Street,” Warnock said.

Most of the Georgia delegation voted in favor of the new law, with only GOP U.S. Reps. Andrew Clyde of Athens and Clay Fuller of Lookout Mountain voting against it.

The law is “forward-looking,” Warnock said, and corporations won’t have to divest if they currently own more than 350 investment homes. But moving forward, if a corporation goes beyond the 350-home cap, the federal government can impose a fine of up to \$1 million per violation or three times the purchase price of the home involved, whichever is greater.

“What I want to do is to stop the spread of corporations buying homes. If you’re already in a home that’s owned by one of these corporations, this does

not force the corporation to sell that home. But what we’re trying to do is stop the spread, and this is a start in that direction,” Warnock said.

Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens, who joined Warnock Monday morning, said the new federal law would complement his administration’s local efforts to build or preserve affordable housing, pointing to initiatives that are aimed at revitalizing underserved neighborhoods in Atlanta.

“Large institutional investors, private equity firms — they buy up neighborhoods and the homes in bulk. It becomes so much harder for working families to achieve their dream of home ownership, and it becomes harder for legacy residents to remain rooted in the communities that they helped to build,” Dickens said. “Here in Atlanta, we see the negative impacts of unchecked institutional investment. Over the last decade or more, corporate investors have suffocated metro Atlanta’s hous-

SEE WARNOCK
PAGE 7



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WARNOCK

Continued from Page 6

report as a hotspot for investor-owned homes. The report named the city as the top market in the country for homes owned by private equity firms, with 25% of single-family homes owned by a private equity firm.

Despite the lack of data on private-equity homeownership outside of Atlanta, Todd Edwards, director of governmental affairs for the state association that represents counties at the state Capitol, said that any place in the state that is growing or has a tourism industry is a target area for corporations to buy homes.

Edwards said that rural areas, however, aren't as impacted.

"Any cities and counties that are growing. It's not just Atlanta. You go up all the way to Chero-

kee (County), anywhere on the outskirts, inside and out. It's all demand," Edwards said. "And then if it's not for outright purchasing and renting, it's purchasing for short-term rentals anywhere that's a vacation spot around the state."

Jacob Parcel, a Smyrna barber-shop owner who joined Warnock at the Monday press conference, has been trying to buy a home for the last two years in that area.

He said that affordable homes for sale "have been few and far in between." He said that with unaffordable options, he's had to consider moving farther away from his family and business.

"I believe if you work hard and if you save for years, you should be able to buy a home in the neighborhood that you want to be in, and with all the homes being purchased up by major companies, it's very hard to do," Parcel said.

HYDEN

Continued from Page 5

reductions and may result in lost revenue thanks to a now understaffed IRS. So tax cheats may get away with tax evasion, while people like you and me pay our share.

The reason Musk fell well short of \$2 trillion isn't necessarily his fault. As a nominal part of the Executive Branch, Musk and DOGE did not have the authority to make the kind of substantive cuts he wanted to facilitate.

He could advise Trump to curtail discretionary spending, but the biggest line-items were out of his reach.

Congress holds those purse-strings, and it was not going to make serious cuts, despite running deficits for over two decades. "To eliminate a third of the government, you would have to dramatically eliminate full functions of the federal government. You would have to dramatically scale back programs like Social Security, Medicare, and defense

and veterans. It's not going to happen," a Manhattan Institute scholar correctly predicted in 2024.

Give credit where it is due. Musk and DOGE tried to tackle a long-standing dilemma: runaway spending and crippling government debt.

We are nearly \$40 trillion in debt, and there is no end in sight. Attempting to rein this in was a worthy pursuit, but thanks to government realities, it was a fool's errand.

Back in January 2025, Musk and the Trump administration probably would have predicted that DOGE would have been wildly successful and garnered great fanfare by its sunset date.

However, as its charter's expiration date came and went, little admiration for DOGE existed. Instead, Trump quietly put the failed project out of its misery.

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

ABRAMS

Continued from Page 5

public facilities and making communities more resilient. And it's no wonder the agency is losing its footing: President Trump has expressed a desire to shutter the agency altogether and push the burden of disaster recovery onto the states alone.

Even when federal aid exists, communities cannot access much of it unless the president approves a disaster declaration. That means one person can determine whether families receive emergency supplies, whether local governments can begin rebuilding and whether communities can access long-term recovery dollars. In the hands of a responsible leader, that authority can speed relief. In the hands of an authoritarian leader, it can become another instrument of control.

Since taking office for the second time, Trump has denied at least 23 requests for aid from states, many from Democrat-led states, and left many more unanswered. With disaster declaration powers, Trump can decide whether or not you and your neighbors have short term assistance like generators, bottled water, or agents to help you with filing cumbersome requests for more assistance. His decision also determines whether or not your community will be eligible for the long term assistance that comes to communities via block grants.

Sadly, the president, aided and abetted by Congress, is willing to let Americans suffer as retribution for leaders who disagree with their policies. Sometimes, responses are unnecessarily delayed, leaving even citizens who have supported him to wonder if help or when help is coming.

Republicans's collective lack of concern in the wake of disasters has already impacted Georgians this year. When a winter storm hit eight counties this January, Georgians waited 78 days to be told there would be no disaster declaration and no federal assistance,

despite a Republican governor making the ask.

So much of our ability to recover from disaster could be determined by someone who is animated by revenge and petty grievances. Worse, it can be exacerbated by powerful legislative leaders who refuse to publicly hold their party accountable. Autocracy may start with one man, but authoritarianism often has a cheering section. In a state where Republicans in Congress outnumber Democrats, and Georgia has healthy representation in the federal cabinet, delays and denials are more than cruelty. They are complicity in action. Legislative leaders must resist the propaganda that would shift responsibility for natural disaster recovery to states, municipalities, and people already suffering. Appointed officials from the Small Business Administration to the V.A. must muster the courage to point out that a failing economy means that building and fortifying our local networks of care is more important than ever. They asked for power - now they must use it for the people at home.

But we can't wait for politicians to save us. This year, hurricane preparedness needs to stretch far beyond buying enough batteries and bottled waters for our household. To prepare for dangerous weather, we must strengthen our communities with networks of care. Engage with your city and county governments and ask about their disaster readiness in light of decreased funding for emergencies. Nonprofits and grassroots organizations working locally are an indicator of community resilience; invest time and resources in supporting their missions. Find and join local mutual aid networks. Get to know your neighbors and talk about how you can pool resources in the event of disaster.

We can only survive natural disasters the same way that we survive authoritarianism, economic hardship, or anything outside of our control: by working together to survive and then rebuild something better.

One foot in the grave: when it's your turn to go, you just got to go

Back when I was a young man, just a boy really, I was terrified of getting on an airplane. I still don't like flying, but who does? There is nothing natural about cramming people into a metal tube and then sending said tube 600 mph at 30,000 feet. And that's after strangers rummage through your luggage and your dignity is destroyed by standing in long lines and being poked and prodded in security.

Still beats walking though.

When it was time to board my first cross-country flight, my parents sat me down and tried to assure me that everything would be OK; that statistically speaking, flying is safer than riding in an automobile; and lastly, I should never fear death, because the good Lord wasn't going to call me home until it was my turn.

I wasn't worried about my time to go, the young me quipped, I was more concerned about if it was somebody else's. Surviving a plane crash seems worse than dying in one.

You often hear people use phrases like "halfway dead," or "near



Kyle Dominy

death." Those colloquialisms, when you think about it, don't really make sense, because we're always a hair breadth away from dying and you never know when your number is going to come up. My paternal grandmother, when asked how she was doing, always said she had one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel.

Truer words are hardly ever spoken.

Famed Greek playwright Aeschylus died when an eagle dropped a tortoise on his head. The wordsmith, considered the founder of tragedy, stared death in the face numerous times in his life.

He survived the Battle of Marathon, helping drive the Persian invaders from Athens. Later he was accused of spilling the secrets of a cult he belonged to on stage and escaped the clutches of an angry, bloodthirsty mob.

This guy was like a cat with nine

lives. He surely didn't expect to go by wayward airborne reptile. Something's going to kill you, am I right?

I recently read a report outlining a new study showing the dangers of sitting down. Sitting for 30 minutes at a time, apparently, is just as bad for our collective health as smoking used to be. It has taken me about 45 minutes to string these words together, so now I'm at a higher risk of cancer. I hope it hasn't taken you that long to read it. If so, get up and walk around a little bit.

If you focus on death, you'll quickly consume your life with worry. If you start looking for ways to die, you will find many. Dying is easy. It's the living that gets hard sometimes.

Next time you find yourself scared of dying, just remember we all have one foot on a banana peel and that we're not going to go until it's our time to go. But look out for falling turtles.

Better known as "The New Southern Dad," Kyle Dominy writes for The Courier Herald.

BLAKE

Continued from Page 5

him forty-three years old. Nobody expects it, exactly. But nobody who has watched him this summer is quite prepared to rule it out either.

The USA, and a very peculiar red card

One of my great joys this past six weeks has been to witness the enthusiasm Americans have shown toward the still somewhat unfamiliar game of (real) football. Of course that enthusiasm has been galvanized by the United States team and its impressive run. The USMNT thrilled millions, and fans chanting U-S-A celebrated the nation's 250th birthday and the success of their team at the same time.

Yet, the FIFA World Cup is also a heartbreaker. The United States team's run ended in Seattle at the hands of Belgium, 4-1, a result far more lopsided than the mood beforehand suggested it would be. But the story that will be remembered from that night began days earlier, when Folarin Balogun's red card against Bosnia and Herzegovina, a straightforward one match suspension under FIFA's own rules, was abruptly lifted by FIFA's disciplinary committee mere hours before kickoff.

Belgium, understandably astonished, protested. UEFA (the European body of FIFA) called the decision unprecedented and indefensible. The involvement of the American president in lobbying FIFA's leadership only sharpened the sense that something unusual, and uncomfortable, had occurred. Balogun played.

The United States still lost, and lost badly, which rather undercuts any theory that the whole affair was worth the trouble. It leaves an odd taste, this business, and I suspect it will be debated in football governance circles long after this World Cup has ended.

The Viking row

Then there was Norway, where my other son, Lewis, lives and works. Norway arrived at this tournament with no expectation beyond respectability and instead produced the most purely joyful story of the summer.

Erling Haaland scored in each of his first four World Cup matches, equaling a record set by a Polish forward in 1974, while his compatriots performed their now famous Viking Row from the steps of Times Square to the touchline of every stadium that would have them. It ended, fit-



PHOTO FROM UNSPLASH

The World Cup games continue. Christopher Blake reflects on the rapidly evolving competition that has captivated sports fans across the globe.

tingly and cruelly, against England in the Miami heat.

Haaland was visibly spent, hauled off with fifteen minutes of extra time remaining. As his manager conceded, with startling honesty, he probably should have been substituted ten minutes earlier. Jude Bellingham of England scored twice. Haaland and Bellingham, former teammates at Dortmund, embraced at the final whistle, and something in that image, two young men who plainly adore each other on opposite sides of heartbreak, felt like the whole tournament in miniature.

Azteca chaos, and Henderson's freak night

England's own passage to the semifinal produced the strangest footnote of the summer. Against Mexico at the fabled Azteca, England won an extraordinary match three goals to two.

In the chaos of celebration, Jordan Henderson, an unused substitute who had not kicked a ball all evening, was booked from the bench for remonstrating with the referee, then fell attempting to leap the advertising hoardings to greet the fans. He broke his wrist badly enough to require surgery and end his tournament. A yellow card and a serious injury, sustained without playing a single minute. Football, I have long maintained, specializes in the absurd.

David, Goliath, and a heavier heart

I would be remiss not to pause here, briefly and soberly, on two matters that resist my usual playfulness. Cape Verde, debutants

representing fewer than 530,000 souls, came within a whisker, an own goal in extra time, of eliminating Argentina and producing perhaps the greatest upset in the tournament's history, before falling three goals to two. And this week brought the genuinely heartbreaking news that Jayden Adams, the twenty-five-year-old South African midfielder who played through the death of his own grandmother to help Bafana Bafana reach their first ever World Cup knockout round, has died. No cause has been given, and none should be speculated upon. He deserved better, and so do the family and teammates now grieving him.

Wednesday

Which brings me, hand pressed nervously over one eye as promised, to Wednesday. To meet publishing deadlines, I am writing this before Wednesday. When you read this, it will be history and we shall all know what it delivered.

For on Wednesday, England faced Argentina, ancient adversaries bound by 1966, 1986 and 1998, in a semifinal that carries the whole weight of history on its shoulders. Two wins from the final. I shall be watching from Georgia, thinking of Sam and Lewis, thinking of Wembley, thinking of Maradona's hand (the infamous "hand of God"), hoping that this time, at last, it goes our way.

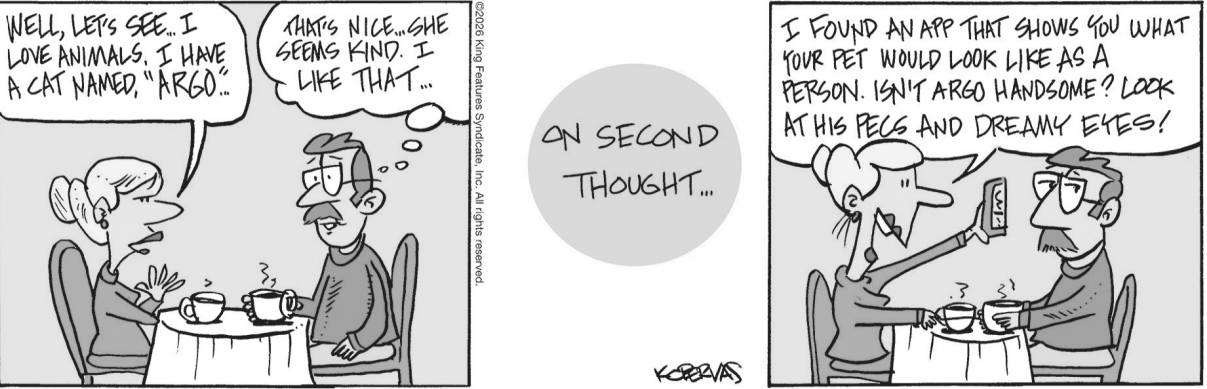
Christopher Blake is president of Middle Georgia State University. He is a passionate supporter of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club, and the men's and women's national football teams of England and the United States.

Amber Waves



by Dave T. Phipps

Out on a Limb



by Gary Kopervas

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TIGER



by BUD BLAKE

OLIVE & POPEYE



By Randy Milholland

HOCUS-FOCUS

BY HENRY BOLTINGOFF



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 T

VSE WVL OPUSDL REFWGDL
PRDM OH V MJWEJL XCDT CD
UVGDR CJPRD WVQQR:
"CDVQEC FR JT ECD XVH!"

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SCRAMBLERS

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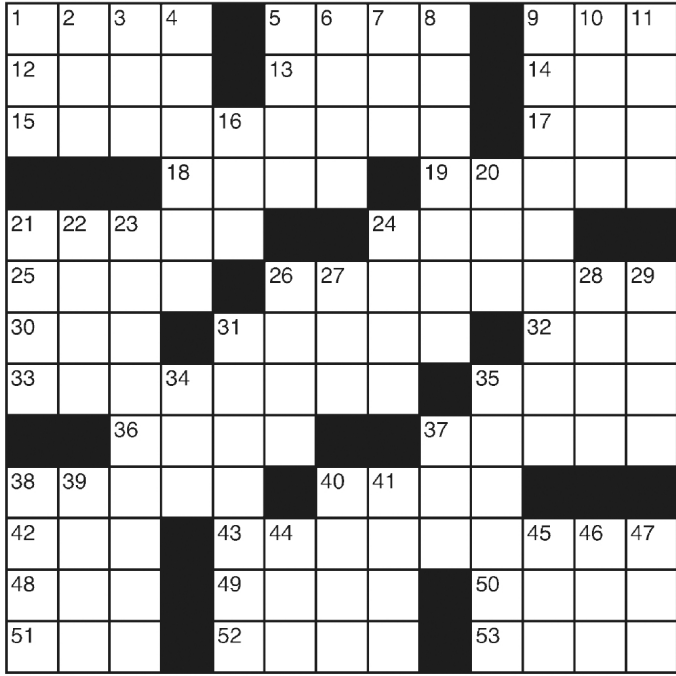
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30 Lucy of "Kill Bill"
31 Desert haven
32 Call — day
33 Native of Yerevan
35 Read quickly
36 Mast
37 Bracelet site
38 Pocket breads
40 Japanese soup
42 Hindu honorific
43 Street game
48 Pouch
49 Actress Fisher



50 Party cheese
51 "For shame!"
52 Penn or Astin
53 Harvard rival
10 Henry VIII's Catherine
11 Slightly
16 Josh
20 "— voyage!"
21 First lady of scat
22 Dark film genre
23 Chicken choice
24 Actress Moran
26 Twosome
27 Botanist Gray
28 List-ending abbr.
29 "Great" dog
31 Jackie's Ari
34 Ecol. watch-dog
35 Stuck-up
37 Request
38 "Hey!"
39 Nest egg choices
40 "— 18" (Uris novel)
41 Optimist's credo
44 Mao — -tung
45 Celestial altar
46 Like Abner
47 Country music's Greenwood

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Weekly SUDOKU

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

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™

Current Events

F	L	U	I	D

A state of matter

In command of one's wits

Provided a hint

Sticker

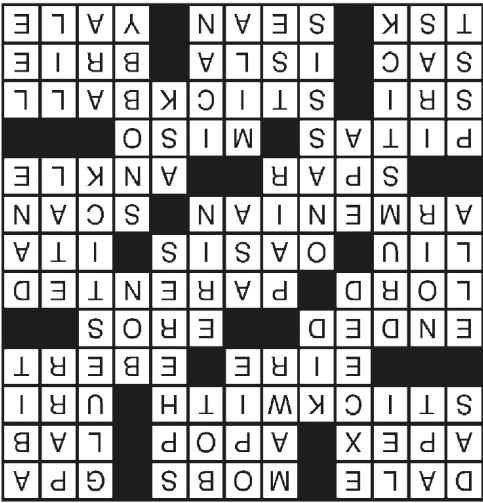
Tidy

Clooney movie role

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.sproutspuzzle.com

02648



Solution time: 23 mins.

Answers

King Crossword

Trivia test by Fifi Rodriguez

- MOVIES: Which 1997 film features a villain named Dr. Evil?
- HISTORY: When was the Declaration of Independence officially signed?
- GEOGRAPHY: The country of Eritrea is located on which continent?
- TELEVISION: Which 1980s-90s sitcom includes a neighbor named Winnie Cooper?
- U.S. CITIES: Which city is home to the Mall of America, the largest mall in the United States?
- ANATOMY: What is the largest muscle in the human body?
- SCIENCE: How much of Earth's water is saltwater?
- MEASUREMENTS: How many ounces is 3/4 of a cup?
- ANIMAL KINGDOM: What is a baby goose called?
- MUSIC: When was Taylor Swift's first album released?

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REMOTE

Today's Word

1. Immune; 2. Acid
3. Adopt; 4. Forest

SCRAMBLERS

N	A	N	A	N	A	N	A	N	A	N
C	L	E	C	A	L	C	L	E	C	A
O	C	E	D	C	L	U	C	L	U	C
F	L	U	D	C	L	U	D	C	L	U

Solution

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
6	4	3	8	5	7	2	9	1	10	11
5	3	4	1	6	8	7	2	9	1	10
8	7	6	3	4	2	1	5	7	6	3
9	5	7	1	8	3	6	2	4	1	5
6	1	3	2	7	4	5	6	8	7	6
2	4	8	5	9	6	7	1	3	2	4
3	6	1	4	9	5	3	2	7	6	3
7	8	2	6	3	1	4	9	5	6	8
4	9	5	8	2	7	6	3	1	2	3

Answer

Weekly SUDOKU

"Health is on the way!"

Apt car bumper sticker used by a doctor when he makes house calls.

Cryptoquip

answer

1. "Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery"

2. Signed on Aug. 2, 1776. Adopted by the Second Continental Congress

3. Africa

4. "The Wonder Years"

5. Bloomington, Minnesota

6. Glueus maximus

7. About 97%

8. 6 ounces

9. A goshing

10. 2006

The Summer Setlist

As summer wraps up and folks swap their beach bags for backpacks, here’s a sneak peek at what’s still on the calendar

Macon’s Bragg Jam Concert Crawl returns to where it began 27 years ago

BY ALAYSIA EZZARD
Community Reporter
alaysia@maconmelody.com

This year, Bragg Jam is taking it back to where it started. It’s been 27 years since local musicians first came together at The Rookery on Cherry Street for an impromptu jam session tinged with sadness.

They gathered there to honor the lives of Brax and Tate Bragg, two brothers killed in a car accident in Texas on July 3, 1999 while on a cross-country trip.

Brax, a 27-year-old singer-songwriter from Macon, had just recorded a CD with his band, the Buckleys. Tate, 17, was an accomplished classical guitarist.

That outpouring of grief grew into an annual concert crawl involving various downtown venues and gave birth to a nonprofit organization that aims to support and promote live music in Macon.

On July 25, the concert crawl will kick off again at The Rookery, which is celebrating 50 years in Macon.

“One thing that is unique about Bragg Jam is, every Bragg Jam, we’ve opened the whole concert crawl with the Buckleys performing,” said Bragg Jam president Olivia Walter. “Typically, they open at Grant’s Lounge. But this year, because The Rookery is involved, we thought it was only appropriate that we have the Buckleys perform at The Rookery where it all began.”

Music will flow through Macon’s downtown streets, with more than 35 Bragg Jam

performers at eight venues, all included in the ticket price.

“What I love most about Bragg Jam is you’re going to find some of the musicians that you’re going to hear about in the next couple years,” Walter said. “And you can say, ‘Hey, I heard that person in Macon before they were famous.’”

In the past, Bragg Jam has featured Jason Isbell, Rainbow Kitten Surprise and the Zac Brown Band among others.

Genres include R&B, Americana, Afrobeats, Latin, hip-hop, punk rock, indie and bluegrass. There will be jam bands, as well.

Walter is looking forward to the guitar pull, when a small group of musicians will come together and take turns playing and discussing their songs.

“This year, we have an all-female guitar pull, and they have all different types of genres they’re representing as songwriters — Ash Tuesday, CC Witt, Julia Barfield and Sam Stephens. I think they’re going to be so much fun to see and just learn about their process and hear about how they’ve created music,” she said.

Walter has been Bragg Jam president since 2022, but joined the board in 2018. Originally from Nashville, she was involved with radio stations and recording studios in her hometown. After moving to Macon, Walter attended Bragg Jam for the first time in 2012. It was a moment that cemented her love for the city.

“It wasn’t even just about the music that I happened to see that night,” she said. “It felt like the whole environment made me really love Macon. I knew that this was something



PHOTO BY MARK POWELL

A musician performs at the 2024 Bragg Jam Concert Crawl. This year’s concert crawl kicks off on July 25 this year and will feature an all-women musician roundtable.

that I wanted to be involved with because I felt like it brought a little bit of what my hometown was to what I was now calling home.”

If you’re planning to attend the festival, central ticketing will be on Cherry Street, across from The Rookery. Wristbands will be

issued there.

VIP tickets will allow you access to the lower level of Churchills on Cherry for an air conditioned space with beer and wine.

Tickets are available now at braggjam.org.



PHOTO BY MARK POWELL

Ash Tuesday performs at the 2024 Bragg Jam Concert Crawl. She will be a part of this year’s guitar pull.

A melody from a Bragg Jam artist

Ashlynn Kilcrease — Ash Tuesday — will be joining CC Witt, Julia Barfield and Sam Stephens in this year’s guitar pull, featuring all women artists.

“I feel happy that someone is championing for women in the scene, and I really appreciate that,” she said. “I’m honored to be a part of who they thought of when they thought of women in Macon. I always love being a part of Bragg.”

Kilcrease performed at Bragg Jam in 2024 and loved the opportunity to

play for her friends and see them wearing her merch. Music for her is very therapeutic and gives her the space to express her emotions.

During the guitar pull, you’ll hear about the featured artists’ creative processes, similar to the videos on Genius — an online lyric database and community hub for music fans — where an artist explains the meaning of their song and takes viewers behind the scenes.

“I’m excited to talk about the songs,” Kilcrease said. “This will be my

Genius moment to explain how they came about, or just gab about myself, and also hear everybody else’s story. I think you take your own meaning from songs, but to hear the artist’s original meaning is going to be really cool.”

You can catch Ash Tuesday and the other women artists at Capricorn Sound Studios from 4:45-6:15 p.m. during the concert crawl July 25.

Macon Film Festival highlights local, up and coming filmmakers in four-day event

For the 21st year, the Macon Film Festival stands as one of Macon’s premier events, providing local film fans as well as those coming from across the Southeast and around the world with the very best in a variety of independent films.

This year, the festival spans four days from Aug. 20-23.

“The festival has become an anticipated event each year for film lovers, young and old,” said Hannah Hartman, Macon Film Festival’s board president. “Our board, volunteers and committees work the whole year to bring the festival to life for viewers. We couldn’t do it without any of them — our volunteers or those who make the festival happen by filling the seats and enjoying the movies — movies you wouldn’t nor-



Michael W. Pannell

mally get to see.”

Festival highlights

The Macon Film Festival is organized around film blocks which tie groups of films together by themes, types and other classifications. Block categories include short films, longer narrative films, and both short and long documentaries. Other blocks highlight local filmmakers, Georgia-made films and student films. Theme blocks include music and music documentaries, LGBTQIA+ films and more.

Now in its fourth year, a block of Native American-made films has

become a mini-festival alongside the Macon festival.

“We’ve incorporated what’s known as the Fire Starters Film Festival and anticipate that being part of the festival this year,” Hartman said. “Part of our mission is to keep finding and including Indigenous filmmakers as part of our lineup.

“That’s important overall and especially to our area, the traditional homeland of the Muscogee (Creek) nation. It’s a priority and we kick off the festival with it on the first day. We’re pleased that Fire Starters has become a programming partner with us.”

The Fire Starters festival often includes other aspects besides Indigenous-created films, such as visual art exhibitions and cultural events

strongly tied to Muscogee (Creek) artists and artisans.

All of these are in addition to the highlighted feature films that are shown each evening of the festival and typically include special filmmaking guests, such as directors, producers, writers or actors.

Fulldome and immersive films

Another aspect of the Macon Film Festival is the Fulldome Festival. While other elements take place in downtown theaters and venues, the Fulldome Festival is hosted at the Museum of Arts and Sciences on Forsyth Road in its 360-degree planetarium space. Former museum director Susan Welsh’s spearheaded the relatively new art form of Fulldome and immersive film and its

application as an added use of the planetarium space.

Through the years, Macon,

SEE FILM
PAGE 10



PHOTO BY STEPHEN COOK PHOTO
The Macon Film Festival will return for the 21st year in August.

Iconic Australian music group The Wiggles to play at City Auditorium

BY EVELYN DAVIDSON
Features Editor
evelyn@maconmelody.com

Long before “Bluey” lit up screens across the globe, another Australian kids’ show, “The Wiggles,” raised an entire generation of youngsters on DVD and VHS.

The colorful — and for many, nostalgic — real-life musical group behind the hit TV show is set to perform at the Macon City Auditorium Aug. 15 as part of its Tree of Wisdom Spectacular Tour.

Members of the original Wiggles lineup initially performed in the ’80s rock band The Cockroaches, but pursuing careers in early childhood education inspired them to pivot to children’s music in 1991.

The music group — and its TV show, which first aired in 1998 and quickly became a popular kids program — used song and dance to teach preschoolers basic developmental skills.

Hit songs such as “Fruit Salad” and “Hot Potato,” wiggled their way into the hearts of young audiences all over the world. More than three decades later, the iconic group has garnered more than 4 billion music streams and 30 million album and DVD sales.

“It’s a massive part of Aussie culture,” said Tsehay Hawkins, better known as the Yellow Wiggle.

This will be her first time in Macon. Though unaware of Macon’s musical history as the home of Little Richard, Otis Redding and The Allman Brothers



PHOTO PROVIDED
The Wiggles raised a generation of young children and soon they will hit the Macon stage on their North American tour.

Band, Hawkins said it has “added more excitement to going.”

Many of the original members have since retired, but The Wiggles have continued to adapt to new audiences and maintain appeal with newer generations.

Hawkins joined the group in 2021. She was the youngest member, and also became the second woman and the first person of African descent to join the Wiggles.

“I get to see a lot on this job, so it’s really cool that we get to go to these different places,” said Hawkins, who performed in Atlanta last year.

Before becoming the Yellow Wiggle, the young entertainer and world champion Latin dancer began as a backup dancer for The Wiggles. A choreographer had discovered her dance videos online.

Hawkins noted that The Wiggles

have garnered different audiences while also expanding into other genres like hip-hop.

Growing up in Australia, she said she didn’t see many people of color on TV. She’s happy that she can inspire young girls to feel “comfortable to be themselves.”

“It’s just pretty cool that I get to be that role model for this next generation and show that Black girls, they have magic and power, too,” she said.

As a little girl, Hawkins grew up listening to The Wiggles. She described working alongside original member Anthony Field (the Blue Wiggle) as a “full circle moment.”

“I also never thought I’d have this as a job opportunity,” she said “It’s the best thing I’ve ever done.”

Purchase tickets at maconcentreplex.org.

What’s playing

BY MEG DONAHUE
Special to The Melody

If you aren’t a bingo enthusiast or a plant enthusiast, you may be forgiven for not having heard of “plant bingo” before. Cam Cirmi of Cam’s Plants in Ingleside Village, who hosts the event at Society Garden, says the previous two plant bingo events sold out, so it seems that more and more people are becoming familiar with this botanical twist on traditional bingo.

At Plant Bingo, there are 10 rounds of bingo with each round winner receiving a plant that Cirmi hand sourced from central Florida. In addition, attendees can win plant-themed prizes through a raffle. Even the losers are winners since all attendees go home with a plant from Cam’s Plants.

“It’s a great way to get to know the plant community and learn something new,” said Cirmi, adding that each plant won at the end of each round is identified and its growing conditions and habitat are explained.

The event, which meets at the crossroads of Generation Z whimsy and Boomer’s passion for traditional hobbies, should make for an eclectic group brought together by their love of nature.

The details:

Wednesday, July 29

5:30 p.m. check-in with a 6:15 p.m. bingo start

Society Garden 2389 Ingleside Ave.

\$35 tickets can be bought online or at Cam’s Plants (2320 Ingleside Ave.)

Other upcoming events

Murder Mystery Dinner: Till Death Do Us Part

Friday, July 17

6 p.m.

Overlook on First 484 First St.

\$59.62 tickets available at Eventbrite

Dress in your finest wedding attire for this immersive theater experience where attendees will find themselves at the heart of a murder mystery when a member of a wedding party meets an unfortunate end. Ticket prices include a four-course dinner and a show with audience participation.

Finding Shapes: Drawing from Found Objects Workshop

Saturday, July 18

9:30-11:30 a.m.

Tanglewood Art Studio 1080 Third Street, Suite 500

\$25 tickets available at mamahawkdraws.com

Part community clean-up, part observation workshop, part drawing class and wholly art — this workshop is different from the everyday “learn to draw” classes. Led by Savannah-based artist Adrienne Berkland, this two hour class begins with a neighborhood clean up then segues into how to create art based on the items that were discarded in the street. All materials (both artistic and community clean-up) are provided as well as light refreshments.

In by 10

Saturday, July 18

5 p.m.

Late Nite 420 Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.

If you had a middle school crush on Donny Wahlberg from “New Kids on the Block” then the “In by 10” dance party at Late Nite is for you. Doors open at 5 p.m. and the first 50 people enter free. The DJ starts at 6 p.m. and will spin bangers from the ‘80s to the 2000s.

Reptile Day

Saturday, July 25

10 a.m.- 4 p.m.

Museum of Arts and Sciences 4182 Forsyth Rd.

Free with General Admission; \$10 ages 18 and up, \$5 ages 3-17, \$8 ages 62 and up, \$8 with Military ID, \$7 with College ID

Back for 2026, the Museum of Arts and Sciences presents Reptile Day. Attendees can experience a meet and greet with the slithering citizens of the museum. In addition there will be reptile activities throughout the day.

Jazz in the Courtyard Finale

Sunday, July 26

7 p.m.

Douglass Theatre 355 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

Free

The final performer for the Douglass Theatre’s yearly summer series is jazz vocalist Tony Hightower. Make sure to check the Douglass Theater’s social media prior to the show to be alerted if inclement weather (such as excessive heat or rain) has moved Hightower’s performance from the outdoor courtyard of the Douglass into the theater.



PHOTO BY STEPHEN COOK PHOTO

Macon Film Festival attendees listen to a filmmaker talk at The Piedmont Grand Opera House.

FILM

Continued from Page 9

the museum and the festival have become internationally known for the promotion of Fulldome film and as a showcase for international creators working in both its educational and artistic forms.

Jim Greenhouse, the museum’s new executive director, said he’s committed to continuing the museum’s dedication to Fulldome and to the film festival.

“It has been very successful and I see no reason for it not to continue,” he said. “Typically, there is a day devoted to educational and travelogue-style Fulldome creations that are perfect for children and families to enjoy and learn from. These types of films have been a staple for Fulldome creators for years. The evenings and the rest of the festival are dedicated to more artful creations and dramatic works.”

Macon Film Festival passes allow admittance to Fulldome showings, but museum members enter for free.

Something for everyone

Those who love the experience and the craft of filmmaking are obvious patrons of the Macon festival, but those with special interests are given much to explore, too.

Portions of the Fulldome Festival are perfectly suited to children and families, while student film blocks

may be of particular interest to young people and adults wanting a glimpse into what some of tomorrow’s big-name filmmakers are doing today.

“We’re working now to complete plans and determine just which films will be featured, but we’re also working on workshops, which are traditionally an important part of the festival,” Hartman said. “They give people even more opportunities to learn as a part of the festival.

“I think that’s a very cool part because it’s not just about the entertainment element — though that’s the really fun part of it — but it’s a chance to go deeper into film and filmmaking, whether it’s a session with a writer, director or someone else connected to the business. There’s a lot that can be learned and a lot that’s of real value to those interested in taking part in filmmaking.”

A connected festival experience

There’s another part of the Macon Film Festival that almost every attendee talks about: the chance to be with, talk with, have a meal with or maybe even walk down a Macon sidewalk with other film lovers and filmmakers themselves — some of them famous.

“It’s a response we get a lot,” Hartman said. “The opportunity to come out and interact with people who are attending the festival or showing films there is so unique. If you have a screening pass, you get to sit together

with others in one place experiencing a film and then, you typically get to be part of a Q&A session with someone connected to it.

“Then you might walk to the next showing, talking with someone about it, or grab a cup of coffee or have lunch or dinner. With an all-access pass, you get to attend after-parties with filmmakers often attending. Last year, we had quite a few filmmakers attending in addition to our special guests. This year, we’re hoping for even more. And being in August — hot, hot August — it’s always a pleasure to sit down in a nice, air-conditioned theater.”

Film festival tickets can be bought as entire festival passes, allowing admittance to all films on all days, all-access VIP passes for all films plus after-parties and special events, or day passes for films on individual days and passes for single viewings.

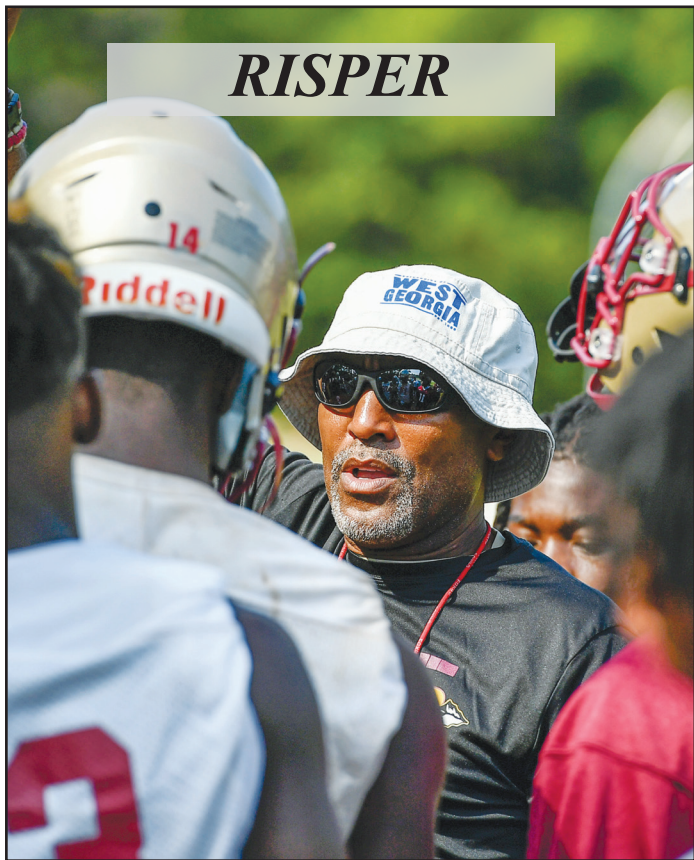
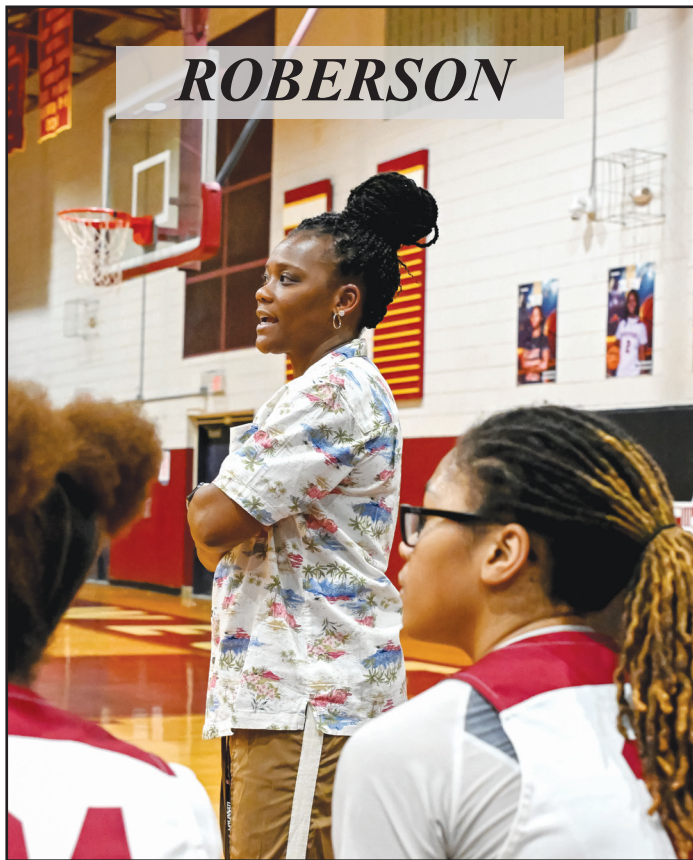
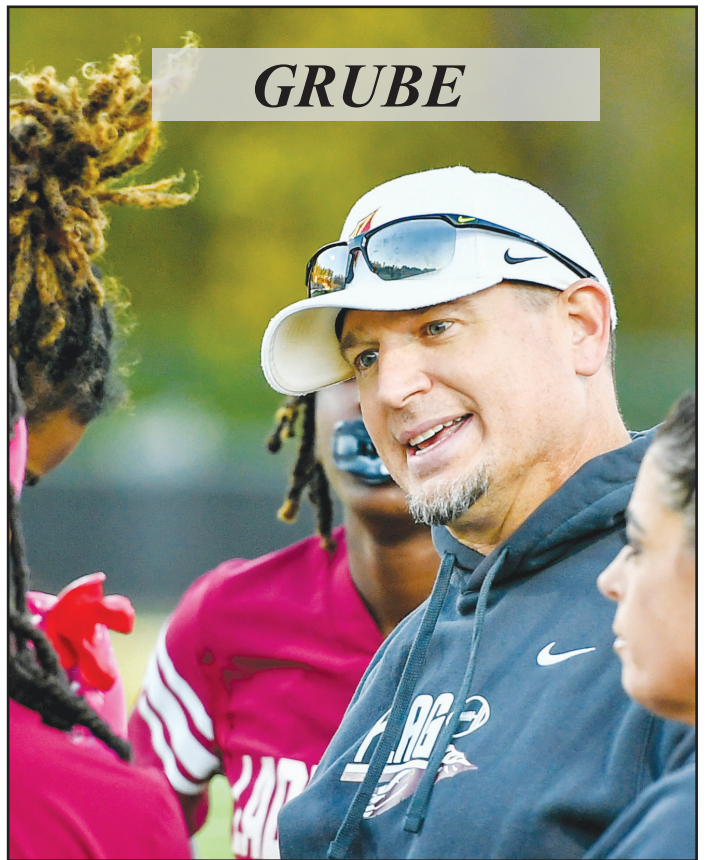
Traditionally, ticket prices have run from \$10 for individual film viewings upwards to \$150 for inclusive tickets.

Passes are not yet on sale, but when they are, you can purchase them at maconfilmfestival.com. For the latest on festival happenings, follow the Macon Film Festival on Facebook and Instagram.

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

A NEW WESTSIDE ERA BEGINS

As they move to new roles, three longtime Seminoles coaches reflect on their careers, legacies and the school's future

**RISPER****ROBERSON****GRUBE**

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
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A new era is beginning to unfold at Westside High School.

“New era” might sound a bit heavy, but it seems like an appropriate phrase when three of the most beloved coaches in Macon move to new positions at the same time.

That’s exactly what’s happening for the Seminoles. Three leaders who have shaped Westside’s athletic identity — football coach Sheddric “Spoon” Risper, girls basketball coach Candice Roberson and flag football and boys basketball coach Josh Grube — all left their respective roles at the end of the 2025-26 school year.

It was not all at once, of course. Risper announced his departure

long before football season. Roberson and Grube decided later to move on from their coaching gigs.

After those announcements and a bittersweet end to the school year, the trio of coaches reflected on the culture they had built at Westside — and what will become of it in the future.

The three of them agreed that it ought to last a while.

Creating a standard

Risper was the first of the group to arrive, beginning as an assistant at Westside in 1998 while working at its “feeder” school, Weaver Middle. He quickly realized that Macon was a place he could build.

After all, legendary Westside football coach Robert Davis — a mentor of Risper’s and his predecessor — was already in the process of turning the new school out

on Heath Road into Macon’s gridiron powerhouse. The Seminoles went more than a decade without losing to another Bibb County school on the football field under Davis and then Risper.

When Risper took over for Davis years later in 2009, it was relatively seamless. The next 16 years were marked by big wins, emotional losses and many bonds.

Through all that time, Risper said, he tried to coach about life as much as he did football.

“We had students walk through here a little rough under the neck. We ended up smoothing a lot of kids out. They became successful students, but also successful husbands and successful dads,” Risper said. “We’ve just tried to hold it down and keep a high standard.”

Helping Risper all the while with that coaching philosophy was Josh

Grube, who came on as an assistant when Risper took the head coaching job in 2009.

Grube also became the boys basketball coach soon after, implementing many of the same life lessons with his players as Risper did, preaching level-headedness and poise. Grube also was quickly recognized for his animated nature on the sideline as he became a fixture at Bibb County hoops games.

While players sometimes drew his ire as he emoted on the sideline, Grube always bonded with them — it was something he prioritized.

“I think we’d all rather be remembered by our relationships with the kids,” Grube said. “For me personally, I’d rather be remembered by: ‘Oh, I really loved playing for Coach Grube. He really cared.’”

And then there was Grube’s rela-

tionship with Risper. The two were — and still remain — like brothers, texting each other constantly, asking about family members and offering favors.

“When you work with somebody that long, you have so many (memories),” Grube said. “Just being around each other and the camaraderie and the small talk. We became like brothers and best friends. I’ll cherish that stuff forever.”

It wasn’t long until Roberson arrived and fit right into the mix. The girls basketball coach was hired in 2012 and later replaced Risper as the school’s Athletic Director.

Together, the three of them patrolled the halls, fields and courts of Westside as important figures in

SEE WESTSIDE
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Players with Macon ties picked in MLB Draft

BY MICAH JOHNSTON
Sports Editor
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Macon had an impressive showing in MLB’s 2026 Draft last weekend, with several players with Bibb County connections getting selected by Major League squads in the league’s 20-round draft.

An FPD baseball star, a former Tattnall pitcher, a trio of Mercer players and multiple Macon Bacon players were selected.

FPD shortstop Keon Johnson, who has long been a top prospect for the Vikings and attracted attention for his entire high school career, was the 93rd overall pick in the third round of the draft by the Houston Astros.

Johnson’s senior year was just his latest masterpiece. The Vanderbilt commit hit .540 with 63 runs, 38 RBIs, 13 doubles, 11 home runs and three triples as a senior, according to MLB.com. Astros amateur scoring director Cam Pendino told MLB.com that Houston expects to sign Johnson and also commented on the Macon native’s prodigious bat-to-ball skills.

“When you have a guy who’s a special blend of bat-to-ball and approach and pitch recognition as an 18-year-old kid with really good actions in the middle of the diamond, it’s an awesome repertoire,” Pendino said.

Johnson helped FPD win the GIAA Class 4A state championship in his final season with the Vikings.

While his prospect status has been notable for years now — he was the Georgia Gatorade Player of the Year in 2025 as a junior — Johnson’s evaluation on MLB.com does note that some scouts “like the player more than his tools and his profile.” Johnson was also reported to have regressed during high school showcases last year.

Regardless, one of Macon’s best high school baseball players in a long time will get a shot to climb through the minors and eventually play with a big league club. His

contact skills, which were far better than the average high school hitter, should serve him well as the Astros attempt to develop him.

Former Tattnall standout Benjamin Stubbs was another Macon native who had his name called. Stubbs, who was a standout pitcher for Troy this year and helped the Trojans — the same mascot as his high school alma mater — go on an impressive run in the College World Series, was taken in the ninth round by the San Diego Padres with the 275th pick.

Stubbs was a stellar southpaw at Tattnall and pitched at Flagler in Florida before moving to Troy. He finished with a 5.12 ERA as one of Troy’s busiest arms with 95 innings pitched. He also played for the Macon Bacon in 2024.

Mercer stars get selected

Mercer had three players drafted, including the reigning Southern Conference Player of the Year and a member of the Freshman All-American team.

Garrett Lambert, a redshirt freshman pitcher, was the earliest Bear selected, going to the Colorado Rockies in the third round at pick 165.

The 6-foot-2, 200-pound righty had a serious injury in his first campaign with Mercer back in 2024 but was fully recovered this season, posting a 4.31 ERA and 90 strikeouts in 71 innings. Before getting drafted, Lambert announced that he would transfer to Alabama for the 2027 baseball season, so it remains to be seen if he will sign with Colorado.

Mercer head coach Craig Gibson and the Bears’ coaching staff were aware of Lambert’s skill when they started recruiting him and took pride in it.

“Garrett is another example of what we can give players. These guys can do this from our university,” Gibson said. “They don’t need to go to an SEC school or ACC school to get drafted.”



PHOTO BY JESSICA GRATIGNY

FPD standout Keon Johnson stands on second base during a road game against Tattnall last year. The Vikings’ star shortstop was drafted by the Houston Astros this year.

An even more impressive example of Mercer’s player development came in the form of Chris Katz, who was selected by the Arizona Diamondbacks in the ninth round at pick 266.

Katz, a North Carolina native, originally played at Wake Forest for four seasons before transferring to Mercer for the 2026 campaign. Aside from some solid numbers as a freshman, the outfielder struggled through poor play and injuries as a Demon Deacon.

“I don’t really think (Katz) had a career at Wake Forest, to be honest with you. I don’t want to devalue it, but coming here changed everything,” Gibson said. “He put in so much hard work. When we put him in our system, I think it brought out the best in him.”

Katz broke out, to put it simply. The

outfielder became a key piece of Mercer’s offense, which was one of the best in the country last season. He slugged 23 homers, notched an eye-popping .389 batting average and recorded an OPS of 1.301.

Gibson was not surprised when the Diamondbacks called and drafted Katz, the So-Con Player of the Year.

“He’s just a special human,” the head coach said. “We’re glad he could reach that point.”

The third Mercer player drafted was Miguel Hugas, the Bears’ Saturday starter who transferred from Chipola Community College in Florida for the 2026 season. The

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