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Helene devastated two iconic hiking trails in Western NC. When will they reopen?

October 11, 2024 | Herald-Sun, The (Durham, NC) Author: Richard Stradling; Staff Writer | Section: News | 970 Words Page: 3A

Among the places that will have to be rebuilt after Hurricane Helene are two long-distance hiking trails that traverse and symbolize the rugged mountains of Western North Carolina.

The Appalachian Trail and the Mountains-to-Sea Trail were both heavily damaged by Helene. Downed trees, landslides and washed out paths and bridges have made the trails impassable in many places, and they will likely remain that way for a while.

"We know it's bad," said Les Love of Weaverville, who heads the Carolina Mountain Club, which supports hiking in Western North Carolina. "When you've got both wind and water, it's just catastrophic to the trails."

No natural disaster has affected as much of the Appalachian Trail in its 100-year history as Helene, according to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the nonprofit that manages and protects the 2,200-mile trail from Georgia to Maine.

The trail is officially closed on U.S. Forest Service land in North Carolina, Tennessee and Southwest Virginia. Many of the roads normally used to access the A.T. are closed as well, and the towns that normally welcome hikers with a meal and a place to rest are struggling to recover from the storm and not equipped to handle visitors.

Sandi Marra, the conservancy's president and CEO, said roads, electricity and other infrastructure must be restored before the trail's condition can be assessed.

"While we are eager and anxious to tackle the work necessary to restore sections of the A.T. impacted by Helene, we ask for patience," Marra said in a message to supporters. "Once we can safely access the A.T., we will identify the sections and features that need immediate attention and put a call out for volunteers to help restore the trail."

Fixing the trails is a low priority compared to the humanitarian crisis still unfolding in Western North Carolina, says Brent Laurenz, executive director of the Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail. The mountain portion of the trail parallels the Blue Ridge Parkway, which was severely damaged and remains closed.

"So we do not have much direct knowledge of the trail's condition," Laurenz wrote in an email. "The very little we have heard would indicate that the trail has suffered significant damage from downed trees and running water, but we are holding off on any active work on the trail while rescue and recovery efforts and critical infrastructure work are underway."

The Mountains-to-Sea Trail covers nearly 1,200 miles across the state from Great Smoky Mountains National Park to Jockey's Ridge State Park in Nags Head. The trail should be considered "closed and highly dangerous" from Kuwohi (the peak once known as Clingmans Dome) through Stone Mountain State Park in Wilkes County.

When the time is right, Laurenz said, crews will get out on the trail and get a clearer picture of the needed cleanup and repair work. But the group's website warns hikers "it is likely that sections of the trail will remain closed for a significant length of time."

'Everybody's itching to get out'

Much of the maintenance work on both long-distance trails is done by volunteers. Love said about a third of the more than 1,200 members of the Carolina Mountain Club regularly work on the trails to keep them in shape and

well marked.

Love said volunteers have been told to stay away from trails for the time being.

"Everybody's itching to get out and do what they can for the trails," he said. "But right now the word is, 'Concentrate on your neighborhood and help each other.' That's the best thing we can do right now."

Volunteers often adopt sections of the trail and go out every week or two to maintain it, says Franklin Tate, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's associate regional director based in Asheville.

"It makes them a little anxious to not be about to get out and assess their section," Tate said. "They love the A.T. They love the work that they do. So to be in a temporary stand-down mode is challenging for a lot of them."

Thru-hikers get a Helene dispensation

The Georgia section of the Appalachian Trail has reopened. People are also free to use the trail north of Bland, Virginia, except where it crosses the Blue Ridge Parkway, which remains closed.

Tate said the trail is also in better shape in the Nantahala National Forest in far southwestern North Carolina and in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, though the National Park Service warns of limited emergency services and closures elsewhere in the park.

The worst damage is north and west of Asheville, in Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina and Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee, Tate said.

Hurricane Helene has thwarted the ambitions of an unknown number of people who attempt to walk the entire length of the Appalachian Trail in a single year. Known as thru-hikers, most begin in Georgia and try to reach Mt. Katahdin in Maine before the snow flies.

But some begin in Maine and head south. The A.T. Conservancy says those who must skip around the closed sections are still eligible for "2,000-miler status" if they later pick up where they left off and finish the trail within 12 months of when they restart.

As for people planning to hike the entire trail in 2025, the group says it's too soon to say if and when the trail will be ready. Tate said it depends on the extent of the damage and other factors, such as the severity of winter weather and the supply of experienced sawyers to cut the tangle of trees blocking the trail.

"If I had to guess, I think that large sections of the trail will be open and there will be multiple detours around some of the most problematic areas and some of the bridges that have washed out," he said. "I hope we have a thru-hiker season in 2025. But I think it's going to be a season where the hikers have to exercise more patience than usual."

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NC Republicans suddenly are OK with easing voting rules

October 11, 2024 | Herald-Sun, The (Durham, NC)

Author: The Editorial Board | Section: Editorial/Opinion | 644 Words

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As Hurricane Helene's devastation complicates voting in Republican-heavy western North Carolina, the GOP is showing an uncharacteristic approach to elections.

Suddenly, the party that made voting harder in the name of "election integrity" is in favor of making voting easier in western counties where accessibility to polling places and mail service remain disrupted. Two Republican members of the State Board of Elections joined the board's three Democratic members in voting to make the changes.

No Republicans appear to be complaining about these changes, unlike their complaints then and now about midelection changes made in 2020 because of COVID. Indeed, on Wednesday Republican legislative leaders rolled out legislation that will expand the changes in election procedures from the 13 counties named by the State Board of Elections to 25 counties included in the original disaster designation.

The GOP's softening on voting rules may be out of respect for the right to vote. Certainly it is correct to adjust election rules after the loss of polling places, the displacement of many people and a shortage of poll workers.

But Republicans may also be open to the changes because western North Carolina is their party's base. Two of the affected counties, Mitchell and Avery, have the first and second highest concentration of Republican voters in the state.

Former President Donald Trump, who carried North Carolina by only 1.3 percent of the vote in 2020, will need to win big in the western counties to carry the state in November. The GOP's statewide candidates for governor, attorney general and other offices and judicial seats also can't afford a falloff of votes from rural western counties.

Under changes approved Monday by the State Board of Elections, local election boards in the 13 counties can by a bipartisan majority vote change voting sites and when sites will be open during early voting days. Absentee ballots will be accepted at any county board of elections office - not just the one in the voter's home county. The deadline for requesting absentee ballots is extended to the day before Election Day, rather than a week before.

The legislation, according to a Republican Senate news release, also "Establishes procedures for spoiling and reissuing absentee ballots and for curing deficiencies to accommodate voters who have been displaced by the hurricane."

These and other changes will help voters affected by Helene's flooding. But some Republican lawmakers may wish they hadn't done so much to restrict voting in the first place.

They may regret the new requirement for voters to present an authorized photo ID because some Republican voters may have lost their driver's license along with other possessions in the flood.

Given Helene's effect on mail delivery, Republican lawmakers may wish that they hadn't eliminated the three-day grace period for the receipt of absentee ballots postmarked on or before Election Day.

Sen. Warren Daniel, a Burke County Republican who co-sponsored the legislation that ended the grace period, said at the time of the bill's passage in 2023 that "Every day that passes after Election Day with votes still coming in creates the possibility of distrust in the process." What will create distrust in the process is a stream of mail-in ballots going uncounted because closed roads and other obstacles delayed their delivery.

Republican lawmakers may also be sorry they empowered partisan observers at polling places. That could lead to an increase in challenged votes in western counties as voters show up at new locations and some vote from outside their home county.

Finally, Republican lawmakers may wish they had given the State Board of Elections all the funding the board said it needed to run an ordinary election, let alone one complicated by a natural disaster.

There is no problem with voter fraud in North Carolina. There is a problem with voter suppression.

Now, only temporarily and only in certain counties, Republicans are willing to make the voting process what it should always be for everyone: Easy to do.

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Work begins to restore I-40 through Pigeon River Gorge

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Author: Richard Stradling; Staff Writer | Section: News | 631 Words

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The N.C. Department of Transportation has hired contractors to stabilize the surviving two lanes of Interstate 40 through the Pigeon River Gorge but says no decision has been made about what to do with them.

It also says there's still no timetable for reopening the highway that connects North Carolina with Tennessee.

The eastbound lanes of I-40 washed out in several places on both sides of the state line. During a visit to the gorge on Monday, Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee told reporters that work had begun to convert the westbound lanes to two-way traffic while long-term repairs are made.

"We'll have the road moving in another week or so," Lee said.

But NCDOT says the North Carolina side isn't ready. Contractors arrived Tuesday to begin a process called "soil nailing," essentially driving reinforced steel bars up to 20 feet long into the side of the gorge under the road to keep it from eroding further.

That work will take a few months, said NCDOT spokesman David Uchiyama. In the meantime, NCDOT and the Federal Highway Administration will determine the best use of the westbound lanes as plans for major repairs come together, Uchiyama said.

"This temporary shoring operation will save the remainder of westbound lanes in sections where eastbound lanes slid into the river gorge," he said. "Around the time this operation concludes, plans for a larger complex and complete repair will be in progress."

The \$10 million shoring contract has incentives if the contractors - Wright Brothers Construction of Charleston, Tennessee, and Colorado-based GeoStabilization International - can finish the work by Jan. 4.

Engineers are still trying to figure out how to restore the land that once supported the eastbound lanes of I-40.

Historic rain from the remnants of Hurricane Helene turned the Pigeon River into a torrent that wore away the earth below the highway. The guardrail and shoulder along the eastbound lanes fell into the river in several places. In some spots, the travel lanes themselves also disappeared.

The westbound lanes remain intact. But in at least one place, all that separates them from the river is the median barrier.

Options for travel between the two states

In North Carolina, I-40 is open as far as Exit 20, the Maggie Valley interchange with U.S. 276. On the Tennessee side, westbound I-40 opens at Exit 447, while eastbound traffic must get off at Exit 440, U.S. 321.

Tennessee DOT has begun converting the westbound lanes of I-40 to two-way traffic around its damaged section of the highway, between the North Carolina line and Exit 447, a distance of about 4 miles, according to spokesman Mark Nagi.

TDOT hopes to finish the conversion by the end of next week, though drivers won't be able to go beyond the North

Carolina state line.

Speaking with reporters, Gov. Lee called the Pigeon River Gorge section of I-40 "incredibly important." More than 26,000 drivers a day normally use what is the busiest route between the two states.

Meanwhile, an alternate route, Interstate 26, remains closed after floodwaters knocked down twin spans that carried the highway over the Nolichucky River in Erwin, about 40 miles from the North Carolina line. Nagi says there's no timeline set for rebuilding the bridges and reopening the highway.

For now, NCDOT advises drivers wishing to go west toward Tennessee to take either I-77 north to I-81 near Wytheville, Virginia, toward Knoxville or take U.S. 74 west toward Chattanooga.

NC Reality Check is a continuing series holding those in power accountable and shining a light on public issues that affect North Carolina. Have a suggestion for a future story? Email realitycheck@newsobserver.com

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Vice President Kamala Harris returning to NC with campaign trip to Greenville

October 11, 2024 | Herald-Sun, The (Durham, NC) Author: Danielle Battaglia; Staff Writer | Section: News | 244 Words Page: 2A

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Vice President Kamala Harris plans to return to North Carolina to campaign in Greenville on Sunday, the Harris-Walz campaign told McClatchy exclusively Wednesday.

The news comes as Hurricane Milton was expected to make landfall as a Category 5 storm in Florida, and the campaign added that the vice president was continuing to monitor the storm and taking her travel day-by-day.

This marks the Democrat's 19th visit to North Carolina this election cycle. The campaign didn't provide details of what Harris would do in Greenville or whether the public could attend her event.

She last visited the state on Saturday as part of an official trip to tour areas impacted by Hurricane Helene, a storm that made landfall in Florida on Sept. 26 as a Category 4 storm before traveling up the East Coast, killing at least 230 people and causing devastation in its wake.

Harris has spent a lot of time campaigning in North Carolina but has cut back on campaign appearances in the state since Helene, having last visited Greensboro and Charlotte on Sept. 12.

North Carolina is considered a battleground, and both Trump and Harris' campaigns believe the path to the White House runs through the state.

Trump has inched up in the polls in recent weeks, with FiveThirtyEight showing him ahead of Harris by 1 point, well within most polls' margin of error.

Early voting by mail has started in North Carolina. The election is less than a month away, on Nov. 5.

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State treasurer candidates lay out their financial visions

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Author: Luciana Perez Uribe Guinassi; Staff Writer | Section: News | 1402 Words

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The two candidates vying to become North Carolina's next state treasurer debated Tuesday night at Greensboro College, laying out their vision on how the state's health plan, pension plan and billions in state taxpayer funds should be managed and invested.

Republican Brad Briner laid out a vision that was more narrowly focused on cutting liabilities and growing investments. Meanwhile, Democrat Wesley Harris also called for focusing on economic policy, in addition to the treasurer taking on a more active role advocating for state employees and laying out an economic vision for the state.

This race should matter to "every taxpayer," because "the treasurer's office consumes a large and growing share of our state budget every year, a number that continues to accelerate as we deal with the unfunded liabilities of our state pension plan and our state Health Plan," Briner said.

"If we elect an experienced investment professional, we will consume a smaller share of the state budget, which will allow us to invest in roads, salaries, tax reduction, all the above," he said.

Briner is a retired financial investor who previously managed the philanthropic assets of former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. He also serves on the UNC-Chapel Hill Board of Trustees. He has a master's in business administration from Harvard University

Harris is a former economic consultant and has been a state representative from Mecklenburg County since 2019. He has a PhD in economics from Clemson University

Harris spoke on his background growing up in rural North Carolina, saying "we didn't have a lot, but I was so blessed that we had a state that invested in me, and I had great teachers, and I had a great public school system, and I had great treasurers that took care of them for my parents, so that I was able to have those opportunities."

This position "is about the future of North Carolina, making sure we're investing in our people and this knowledge," he said.

North Carolina's state treasurer manages the state's pension plan and the State Health Plan, which provides medical and pharmaceutical benefits to more than 750,000 current and retired public employees.

The debate, hosted by the NC Institute of Political Leadership in partnership with Spectrum News, lasted for an hour and spanned various topics. It was moderated by Spectrum News 1 political reporter and anchor Loretta Boniti.

Here are four highlights from the debate.

Local recovery efforts following Hurricane Helene

The Department of State Treasurer approves debt issuance for local governments and assists them with fiscal management via its Local Government Commission. The treasure heads that commission.

Asked how the treasurer's office would help local recovery efforts in Western North Carolina, Harris said local finances need to be solid.

Citing a bill in the General Assembly that would be released Wednesday morning providing \$273 million in state funding for recovery efforts, Harris said "that's just scratching the surface."

He said "we have to be serious about making sure that we're making the investments on the state level, because these counties in the western part of the state are going to take years to recover."

He said he thinks it's a responsibility of the treasurer's office to make sure people around the state understand local finances and that if a local government cannot make investments - such as for recovery efforts - "it's because the state is simply not doing their job."

Briner said Harris's answer "has nothing to do with what the state treasurer does" as the state treasurer is not "involved in economic development."

"We need to grow the assets of our state, deliver checks to our beneficiaries, make sure their health care is in place, and really stay in our lane to make sure that all the services the State Treasurer's Office are provided to all of the people in the western part of the state," he said.

Investment approach for the pension plan

North Carolina's state treasurer manages the state's pension plan.

The North Carolina Retirement Systems - which administer the pension plan, as well as the other supplemental retirement plans -returned a net 5.3% for the fiscal year that ended June 30, 2023. This was below the plan's benchmark's for a 6.5% return. The Retirement Systems returned a net 8.2% for the fiscal year that ended in June, according to a quarterly investment report.

The state's pension fund, which is among the largest public pensions in the country, was valued as of June 30 at \$123 billion. It has a 88.3% funded ratio, which means it can cover a large part of accrued benefits owed with assets.

Yet the current state treasurer, Republican Dale Folwell, who is not running for reelection, has been scrutinized for his investment approach, with some saying he is too averse to risk and keeps too many assets in cash. Both candidates honed in on this, but their suggested investment approach differed.

Folwell took office in January 2017 and was reelected in 2020. This year, he ran unsuccessfully for governor in the Republican primary, meaning he could not run again for treasurer, leaving the seat open.

Harris said "we have one of the best-funded pension plans in the country, but we also have the worst performing pension plan in the country," due to the plan being cash-heavy. He said the treasurer's office needed to take advantage of the "good times in the stock market" for investments and lower the cash balance to get higher returns. This would allow the state to give state employees a cost of living adjustment (COLA), he said.

Briner said the state needs to have a more "assertive" investment strategy to give COLAs to state employees without needing to increase taxes and crowding out other state funding priorities. To do this, the pension plan needed to hit a 6.5% return and investments would need to go not toward stocks but toward assets like mortgages, Briner said.

Sole fiduciary responsibility model

North Carolina is one of few states where the state treasurer has sole fiduciary responsibility for making investment decisions for the pension fund. Most other states delegate that authority to boards or investment experts.

Asked whether this should change, Briner said it should, and that "if we keep the current sole fiduciary governance

model, it matters entirely who the treasurer is. Everyone else is just an adviser."

Harris said he "fundamentally" disagreed with Briner and that the treasurer should remain the sole person accountable to North Carolinians.

"If you take that power away from the treasurer, you are giving it to the legislature," he said.

This power will go to the legislature by allowing it to appoint experts, who in fact will be political appointees who will be "doing the will of the political leadership," he said.

State Health Plan solvency issues

The State Health Plan is facing financial strains, according to Folwell, who has cited rising health care costs, inadequate state funding and more as reasons for this.

The plan is projected to have a cash balance at the end of the calendar year of \$591 million. But during the State Health Plan's most recent board of trustees meeting in July, the plan's staff forecasted the plan to be \$816 million in the red by calendar year 2027, with the plan "likely to be unable to pay bills in fall 2026."

Also facing strain are retiree health benefits, which are facing a \$26.65 billion liability, according to a June 2023 report from The Segal Group.

Both Harris and Briner said they would be able to fix the liability.

Harris said because the State Health Plan is "broke" the state is "having to cut benefits," such as cutting access to popular weight loss drugs like Wegovy and Saxenda.

"That's making us make short-term, financially necessary decisions" to stay solvent but will lead to higher expenses in the future, Harris said. Because of this "we have to pressure the General Assembly to fund this" and hold elected officials accountable, he said.

This would allow the state to improve compensation and benefits for state employees, which would help recruit more state employees, including younger employees who would improve the risk pool for the health plan, he said.

Briner said "we have to get creative" to make "our dollars go further - whether it's (investing) in preventative care," or another solution.

"We have to have a better method going forward than just going back to the legislature every year asking for more and more money," he said.

Throughout the debate, Harris also cited the importance of prioritizing preventative care measures.

Both Harris and Briner said they wanted to get GLP-1s, the popular weight loss drugs, covered again.

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Trop assessment could take 'weeks'

October 11, 2024 | Hickory Daily Record (NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: News | 223 Words OpenURL Link

The Tampa Bay Rays said it may take weeks to fully assess how much damage was done to Tropicana Field, which saw its roof ripped to shreds by the force of Hurricane Milton as the deadly storm barreled across much of Florida.

The team said no one was injured when the St. Petersburg ballpark was struck by the storm on Wednesday night. A handful of "essential personnel" were inside Tropicana Field as the roof panels were blown apart, much of the debris falling on the field and seats below.

"Over the coming days and weeks, we expect to be able to assess the true condition of Tropicana Field," the Rays said Thursday. "In the meantime, we are working with law enforcement to secure the building. We ask for your patience at this time, and we encourage those who can to donate to organizations in our community that are assisting those directly impacted by these storms."

Milton was the second hurricane to hit Florida's Gulf Coast in the span of two weeks, preceded by Hurricane Helene, which flooded streets and homes on that same side of the state and left at least 230 people dead across the South.

The Rays aren't scheduled to play in the ballpark again until March 27, when they are supposed to play host to the Colorado Rockies to open the 2025 season.

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CAKED IN MUD

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COMMENTARY

One of Miss Letitia Currie's favorite topics in her history class in the 1950s at Davidson Junior High School was the Great Flood of 1916.

Miss Currie was the daughter of a Davidson College professor.

Many of her students also knew what she was talking about because their parents had experienced that 1916 fl ood and talked about it whenever rain poured down hard.

Today, many of Miss Currie's students, their parents and grandparents, great-grandparents, and their children and grandchildren are having a similar experience dealing with the fl ooding that followed Hurricane Helene.

And they will be talking about it for the rest of their lives.

"News of Davidson," the news outlet in my hometown, published the following account by Gatewood Payne Campbell, granddaughter of Davidson professor Gatey Workman and niece of the late, great opera singer William Workman. Gatewood and her husband Johnny live near Black Mountain.

"Life has stopped. We don't know dates or times. Sirens are 24 hours a day. It's relentless. Helicopters invade our sky. Chainsaws sound nonstop and we run outside in hopes it's in our neighborhood. ... "Let me back up. We awoke around 6 Friday morning without power. The storm was loud and pounding but we didn't know where we were in the storm. We could not get updates. Around 8:30 we lost internet across cell lines. I called a friend and got her to look at radar and let me know an ETA on rain ending. That was the last call I was able to make. By 9:30 all cell signal was completely lost. The rain was increasing. We could see the creek rising. Johnny stepped outside under the porch and was soaked from head to toe after 30 seconds.

"Around 11 we felt like we could go out and survey the neighborhood. We began to feel the weight of the destruction, yet we had no clue. The creek had turned into a river greater than 50 yards wide. The noise of water heaters, propane tanks, bikes, grills, construction supplies and yard equipment banging on the rails of our bridge to Black Mountain was deafening. We saw two neighbors with trees on their homes and knew they were taking on water."

Meanwhile in Asheville, Bryan King and his wife Angela Koh are assessing the damage to their 12nBones Smokehouse restaurant on Foundry Street in the River Arts District. As I wrote in my book, "North Carolina's Eateries," "Even if 12 Bones had not been made famous by Barack Obama's visits there, it would be a 'must-do' in Asheville." When I first visited 12 Bones several years ago, it was located closer to the French Broad River. Had Bryan and Angela not moved the restaurant a few blocks up the hill, it would have been completely washed away. At its current location, they may be able to repair and survive.

Angela's sister writes, "As the fl oodwaters recede, we see catastrophic damage to homes and businesses, including the River Arts District, where 12 Bones was founded. Entire livelihoods have been lost. In nearly every direction you look, everything is caked in mud and scattered debris. Broken wood and mangled wiring now stand where intersections once existed."

Coincidentally, on Oct. 15, the publisher Blair is releasing "River Road," a book of poems by mountain author Wayne

Caldwell. His fine poetry describes the power of the fl ooding waters on the French Broad as shown in the following excerpt:

A selection from "River Road"

The French Broad, being a river, fl oods.

How many times over the millennia has it left its banks and moved whatever was swept up in it To some far away (and sometimes ridiculous) place? Perhaps thousands. And each time it returned to its placid face.

The worst (in the last century) was in July 1916.

Asheville's Riverside Park was washed away.

Parts of which one could have seen rushing by my house

Had it been there then. (Even this relatively high ground

Would have been inundated for several days.)

Only a half dozen people died in Asheville,

Which I'd consider a small miracle. Thanks to the telephone, Warning came to Marshall, and only two or three drowned, Even though the courthouse was about the only thing left On Main Street. Fifty-Three houses disappeared. From high ground one could have seen rushing by Bales of cotton, houses, mules, gas tanks, Vehicles, sheds, chickens, roosting on pieces of roof, Tires, fences, trees, pigs, dogs, cats,

Anything thing not tied down — and many things that were.

D.G. Martin, a retired lawyer, served as UNC-System's vice president for public aff airs and hosted PBS-NC's "North Carolina Bookwatch."

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Vance holds town hall in Greensboro

October 11, 2024 | High Point Enterprise (NC) Author: Luciana Perez Uribe Guinassi and Caitlyn Yaede The News & Observer Section: News | 295 Words OpenURL Link

TRIAD — Republican vice presidential candidate JD Vance took questions from the public during a town hall at the Koury Convention Center that was moderated by former race car driver Danica Patrick.

About 500 to 600 people attended.

Vance took a question asking for his and Trump's plan to manage illegal immigration. Vance said they planned to deport people in the country without authorization who had committed crimes.

"The plan, to put it simply, is we gotta send them home. We gotta send them home ASAP," he said.

Vance also honed in on the fiscal impact of immigrants living in the United States without legal authorization and blamed undocumented individuals for the high cost of housing.

A woman asked Vance to clarify Trump and Vance's plan for Social Security.

Trump "is going to protect Social Security and he is going to cut taxes on Social Security income," Vance said. He then once more shifted to immigration, saying that "illegal aliens" would "bankrupt" the program.

Non-citizens are not eligible to receive Social Security benefits, though they pay Social Security taxes on any legal wages they earn.

Vance is set to return to North Carolina Sunday with an appearance at the NASCAR race at the Charlotte Motor Speedway, the Charlotte Business Journal reported.

Multiple people waiting to enter the Town Hall told The News & Observer they have Hurricane Helene at the top of their minds.

Penny Godfrey of Davidson County said Hurricane Helene had damaged two of her cars and her driveway, and a tree had fallen.

"That \$750 will sure help pay for that," she said, referring to the \$750 that the Federal Emergency Management Agency makes available, which does not need to be repaid, for disaster survivors to cover immediate costs like food and water. FEMA also provides up to \$42,500 for other needs.

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NC is red hot as election battleground state

October 11, 2024 | High Point Enterprise (NC) Author: Paul B. Johnson PAXTON MEDIA GROUP | Section: Thomasville Times | 639 Words OpenURL Link

TRIAD — With Election Day less than a month away, North Carolina's role as a battleground state for the presidential race couldn't loom much larger, area political analysts say.

Vice President Kamala Harris, former President Donald Trump and their campaign surrogates have made regular trips to the Tar Heel State seeking to convince voters to support their cause. The visits to North Carolina have included local campaign rallies for Harris in Greensboro and Trump in Asheboro.

Results released last week by the High Point University/Survey USA Poll showed the race a dead heat, with Harris and Trump tied at 48%. Other polls have reflected a close race, with Trump leading in most surveys of voters but by a slight margin.

North Carolina will play a critical role down the stretch as voters decide the contest Nov. 5 because each presidential campaign needs the infusion of North Carolina's 16 Electoral College votes, said John Dinan, professor of political science at Wake Forest University.

"The general expectation is that Trump needs to win North Carolina in order to chart a path to victory, because North Carolina has been a Republican state for all but one election during the last half century," Dinan said.

Harris could still triumph in the presidential election without winning North Carolina, he said.

"But she is still spending a lot of time and resources in the state in the hope that it would turn Democratic this year, just as it did back in 2008 for President Barak Obama," he said.

Prior to Obama, the last Democratic presidential nominee to carry North Carolina was Jimmy Carter in 1976.

North Carolina's role is magnified because there are only about a half-dozen states classified as swing states, said Brandon Lenoir, professor of political science and strategic communication at High Point University.

"North Carolina could help decide the next president of the United States," Lenoir said. "For those reasons we can anticipate a lot of campaign activity from both candidates in the runup to the election."

But the stretch run of the presidential race in North Carolina has been cast into uncertainty because of the destruction wrought by Tropical Storm Helene in the western region of the state. Election officials are scrambling to come up with contingency plans to find ways for voters to cast ballots in areas devastated by the storm.

Leaders of the N.C. State Board of Elections held a briefing last week and pledged to find options for voting despite the destruction, which included destroying a dozen county election offices. Executive Director Karen Brinson Bell acknowledged the daunting task on a short time frame.

"We are taking this situation one step at a time, and this will be an ongoing process between now and Election Day," Bell said. "We do not have all the answers at this time, but we are diligently working to figure them out."

Lenoir said it's hard to gauge what the devastation in the western part of the state will have on the election because there's no precedent in North Carolina for such a devastating storm striking so close to voting.

"The storm hit traditionally Republican and Democratic communities," Lenoir said. "Watauga and Buncombe

counties voted for Biden in 2020, while the neighboring counties went for Trump. The disaster did not pick sides."

Dinan said that state and western North Carolina election officials will confront challenges getting polls set up for the start of in-person early voting Oct. 17.

"But it is also certain that a lot of efforts will be made to help ensure that all western North Carolina residents who want to do so will be able to cast ballots under these circumstances," Dinan said. "In short, too early to tell what effect the storm will have on the election outcome, even if we know it will have an effect on where and how votes are cast in that part of the state."

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Proceeds from bluegrass concert series

October 11, 2024 | Laurinburg Exchange, The (NC) Author: Exchange report | Section: entertainment events features news | 375 Words OpenURL Link

LUMBERTON — The Carolina Civic Center Historic Theater in downtown Lumberton continues its yearly Bluegrass on the Blackwater series at 7 p.m. on Oct. 17 with up-and-coming artist Carolina Owens and her band.

This annual event has been converted into a fundraiser for relief efforts in Western North Carolina following Hurricane Helene.

All proceeds from the evening will be donated to the North Carolina Disaster Relief Fund to help communities recover from Helene. United Way of North Carolina is the fiscal agent for the Fund. The Fund, with assistance from the United Way of North Carolina, will help provide for immediate unmet needs through reimbursements to nonprofits working with disaster survivors.

Caroline Owens is a two-time IBMA & SPBGMA nominated Bluegrass Vocalist, recording artist for Skyline Records, and publisher for Billy Blue Records, of Nashville, TN. She has performed alongside many of the music industry's most accomplished artists such as: Alison Krauss, Ricky Skaggs, Rhonda Vincent, Suzanne Cox, The Isaacs, Larry Gatlin, Larry Cordle, Carl Jackson, The Malpass Brothers, Darin & Brooke Aldridge and many others.

In addition to her undeniable vocal talent, Caroline made her mark in the songwriting industry when her debut single, Heartbreak Train, claimed the No. 1 Bluegrass song of 2023, on the Bluegrass Borderline Charts.

Caroline's vocal abilities, paired with her "down-home southern charm," have received critical acclaim from some of the music industry's most accomplished performers.

The band features musicians on mandolin, fiddle, bass, banjo and guitar.

Tickets are \$20 adults and \$15 students. This performance is partially underwritten by a grant from the Robeson County Arts Council.

Tickets for the Mainstage Series can be purchased online by going to the theater's website at www.carolinaciviccenter.com. Tickets also can be purchased in-person or with credit card or cash from 1 to 5:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, through the administrative offices in the theater's second floor (enter on the Fourth Street side); or by calling the Civic Center at 910-738-4339. When available, tickets can also be purchased at the door. The theater lobby box office opens for ticket sales one hour prior to performance.

The theater does not guarantee the authenticity of tickets purchased from any third-party reseller and recommends that tickets be purchased directly through its box office, etix.com or its website to ensure ticket authenticity and pricing.

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Marion McDonald's, Wendy's among restaurants closed by Hurricane Helene effects

October 11, 2024 | McDowell News, The (Marion, NC) Author: MIKE CONLEY nconley@mcdowellnews.com| Section: Food Drink | 517 Words OpenURL Link

McDowell County has several restaurants that are closed after Hurricane Helene hit North Carolina as a tropical storm. Some owners are looking at expensive repairs and remodeling before reopening.

Patrick and Heather Joyner of Hickory own the two McDonald's restaurants in Marion. The one on U.S. Highway 70 East closed due to the extensive damage caused when the entire business was flooded. Patrick Joyner said when the flood was at its worst, the water caused a dumpster used by that McDonald's to float away. It ended up at the far end of the shopping center.

Joyner said that he and his wife are waiting to hear from an insurance adjuster about what to do next. The restaurant's equipment will have to be assessed for damage.

"We were able to salvage some of the product and donate it to the Red Cross," Joyner said.

This McDonald's has around 50 to 60 employees, some of whom are now working at the West Henderson Street location. Joyner said he and his wife have McDonald's locations in Burnsville, Newland, Banner Elk and Spruce Pine that saw worse damage from Helene.

"Our goal is to get it open as soon as possible," he said of the location at Food Lion shopping center.

In the same shopping center, there is a Wendy's restaurant. This location is owned and operated by Tar Heel Capital in Boone, which owns 89 Wendy's restaurants in North and South Carolina and Georgia.

"We are committed to rebuilding and starting the process of cleanup," Tar Heel Capital CEO Tad Dolbier said.

Dolbier said the process of cleaning up and remodeling could take four to six months. Meanwhile, the restaurant's 35 employees can get work at other locations in the company.

The Wendy's on U.S. Highway 70 in Marion has flooded before, most notably in 2004 when Frances and Ivan came through and dumped rain all over western North Carolina, Dolbier said.

Next door to Wendy's is J. Hartman's Restaurant, which suffered flooding, damage and lost \$30,000 in food.

The restaurant posted an update on Facebook in the aftermath.

"It is with much regret to inform our loyal customers that J. Hartman's is closed for the foreseeable future," the restaurant said on Facebook. "We are so appreciative of the help and support we have already been shown by so many of you in our community. We would like to personally thank all the of the volunteers from Grace Community Church, Nebo Crossing, friends, family, and employees who have offered so much of their time and efforts to help us clean. Please let us know if there is anything we can do to help you or your family. You are all in our thoughts and prayers. We built it once, and with a whole lot of love, we will build it again."

Hillman Beer in Old Fort is a restaurant as well as a craft brewery. All of Hillman's locations closed initially because of Helene. The Asheville and Old Fort locations remain closed, according to the business' Facebook page.

Hillman Beer set up a GoFundMe page to help employees through this time. So far, nearly \$40,000 has been raised out of a \$100,000 goal.

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MIKE CONLEY nconley@mcdowellnews.com, 'Marion McDonald's, Wendy's among restaurants closed by Hurricane Helene effects', *McDowell News, The* (online), 11 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C2480199DDCBB0>



Hurricane-related topics dominate McDowell board agenda

October 11, 2024 | McDowell News, The (Marion, NC) Author: From Staff Reports | Section: Government Politics | 181 Words OpenURL Link

On Monday, the McDowell County Board of Commissioners will hold the regular meeting for October and much of it will center around the county's recovery from Tropical Storm Helene.

The commissioners will hold the regular meeting at 5 p.m. Monday at the County Administrative Offices at 69 N. Main St.

The commissioners will hear a report about Helene response from Emergency Director Will Kehler. County officials will then get a report about the N.C. Department of Transportation's restoration work.

Kim Effler with the McDowell Chamber of Commerce will give an update on businesses and how they can rebound from Helene.

The commissioners will get information about FEMA recovery resources.

Elections Director Kim Welborn will talk about the upcoming general election.

The commissioners will take action on a list of Helene-related topics, including debris management, building inspection fees, county emergency staffing policy, costs associated with Tropical Storm Helene and a parking agreement with Baxter Healthcare.

Monday's meeting will include a citizen comment period when the public can speak to county officials about any item not on the agenda.

County Manager Ashley Wooten will give his report to the board.

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From Staff Reports, 'Hurricane-related topics dominate McDowell board agenda', *McDowell News, The* (online), 11 Oct 2024 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C248019C7055A0



Old Fort Elementary students headed to PG as flooded school undergoes repairs

October 11, 2024 | McDowell News, The (Marion, NC) Author: MIKE CONLEY nconley@mcdowellnews.com| Section: Education| 371 Words OpenURL Link

Hurricane Helene damage has closed Old Fort Elementary.

Old Fort students will attend Pleasant Gardens Elementary until the school is repaired, according to McDowell County Schools officials.

McDowell students returned to school on Oct. 9. Classes have been on a two-hour delay all week, Superintendent Tracy Grit said, as the schools work toward a regular schedule following Helene, which ripped up roads and damaged homes.

The school schedule will return to normal on Monday.

Pleasant Gardens Elementary has enough space for the students from Old Fort to remain together in their own dedicated space, said Amy Dowdle, public information officer for McDowell County Schools.

Meanwhile, the school system will start the repair of the damage at Old Fort Elementary, which was dedicated in 2022.

"There was anywhere from a foot of water to a couple of inches on the bottom level in the school," said Dowdle.

"Crews have come into the school and cleared out all the mud and began removal of the (luxury vinyl tile) flooring in the classrooms. Cabinets on the bottom level were torn out and will be replaced. Doors throughout the bottom level will also be replaced."

Dowdle said the damage was limited.

"Thankfully, most electrical and HVAC equipment were located upstairs in the building and were not damaged," she said. "The moisture mitigation process is currently taking place in the building."

Repairs to the building include the following: replacement of cabinets on the first floor, LTV flooring replacement, gym flooring replacement, replacement of damaged sheetrock in the office, replacement of doors on the first floor, electrical and plumbing work, and removal of mud from drains and gutters, according to Dowdle.

"Due to the extensive flood damage, we currently do not have an estimated date of return to the building," she told The McDowell News.

As for the teachers and staff at Old Fort, they are currently setting up classrooms at Pleasant Gardens Elementary.

"We will have a staggered attendance next week for Old Fort students. Grades 3-5 and pre-K will begin Monday at Pleasant Gardens Elementary," she said. "On Tuesday, K through 2 will begin and Wednesday all students Pre-K through 5 will be in attendance. Our Smart Start part-day pre-K classrooms from Old Fort will have class at Pleasant Gardens Baptist Church Campus starting on Monday."

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Crews working on temporary bridge to Marion IV fluid plant; it is among 450 damaged in hurricane

October 11, 2024 | McDowell News, The (Marion, NC) Author: Chrissy Murphy| Section: Government Politics| 839 Words OpenURL Link

Crews across western North Carolina are working to make communities accessible about two weeks after Hurricane Helene whipped through the state. One major project is reopening a bridge to Baxter International in McDowell County. The plant produces much of the country's IV solutions.

Nathan Moneyham, division construction engineer for the N.C. Department of Transportation's Division 13, said damage to roads in western North Carolina was significant, but crews are making improvements. Division 13 includes McDowell, Burke, Mitchell, Rutherford, Buncombe, Madison and Yancey counties.

"We're working every day to get as much open as we can," Moneyham said.

Tim Anderson, division engineer, said NCDOT has identified about 450 bridges or large pipes in the division that were damaged in the storm.

Anderson said the department's 2,100 employees along with contractors have been working to clear major state roads and make repairs to damaged roads and bridges, including in the North Cove area of Marion.

"We were able to open up several of our large primaries, including I-40 across Old Fort Mountain, early on," Anderson said. "We've got a whole lot left to do. It's going to take some time to pull together our contractors, get some of those larger repairs designed and get those executed and get folks to work."

On Wednesday, crews were working on a temporary bridge on Pitts Station Road off U.S. Highway 221 over the North Fork of the Catawba River to give residential community access to their homes and allow tractor-trailers to access the Baxter Healthcare facility that uses Pitts Station Road as its access point.

During Helene, flood waters washed out the foundation of the original bridge and toppled its supports, Moneyham said.

Baxter makes about 74% of the saline bags for hospitals in North America, Anderson said.

"When the bridge was compromised, they couldn't get their inventory out," Anderson said. "They sustained some damage inside they're working on, but they've got to be able to get that equipment and get those tractor-trailers out so they can serve the nation."

Baxter was forced to limit how much IV fluids hospitals can order in the wake of the storm, according to press releases from Baxter International.

Moneyham said Baxter worked with NCDOT and a contractor to build a temporary bridge to get into the business until a more permanent solution was built.

In a release Wednesday, Baxter said it has eased some allocation limits for products but is still limiting how much customers can buy at once. The company is monitoring stock levels and ramping up production at other facilities, the release said.

Baxter said it hopes to restart production at the North Cove facility in phases and get customers back to 100% allocation on some IV products by the end of the year. The company is already working to restore the

manufacturing plant.

On Oct. 7, Baxter said it had not found any structural damage to the North Cove facility, power and water was restored and cleanup was in progress. The company expects to have a production plan in the next two weeks, the release said.

"We will spare no resource — human or financial — to restart operations and help ensure patients and providers have the products they need," said Baxter CEO Joe Almeida.

NCDOT is working on a longer-term, temporary bridge until permanent repairs can be made, Moneyham said. He said the temporary structure would be in place for about a year to a year and a half while a permanent bridge is built. NCDOT hopes the temporary bridge on Pitts Station Road will be ready in about a month, he said.

Anderson said NCDOT employees have been adapting to the challenges throughout the storm. When the power went out, NCDOT offices had generators. When cell services went down, staff in Raleigh made it possible for western North Carolina employees to use satellite phones instead.

"It's just been a Herculean effort by our folks and the entire community," Anderson said. "Our staff in Raleigh all the way to the governor, they've been here since day one. Supporting us there, supporting us here in the field, and without that, we wouldn't be where we are at this moment. I just can't say enough about what they do for us."

He said NCDOT is making emergency repairs first, then moving to long-term, temporary repairs, and finally making permanent repairs. There isn't a timeline yet for how long repairs could take.

"It's a process, and it does take time," Anderson said.

While repairs are underway, Anderson said people should only travel when it's essential in the hard-hit areas of Burke, McDowell and other mountain counties.

"There's a lot of folks wanting to help and a lot of folks bringing help, and that's great to see the community outpouring from across the state and across the Southeast. It's nothing short of inspiring to see how much folks care," Anderson said. "But keeping that travel to essential travel only so that our dump trucks can go up and down the road and folks can get back to life. Especially on the one-lane roads, ... extra traffic is not very helpful."

Check www.drivenc.gov for updated road closures and traffic conditions.

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CAKED IN MUD

October 11, 2024 | McDowell News, The (Marion, NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: Caked In Mud | 754 Words OpenURL Link

COMMENTARY

One of Miss Letitia Currie's favorite topics in her history class in the 1950s at Davidson Junior High School was the Great Flood of 1916.

Miss Currie was the daughter of a Davidson College professor.

Many of her students also knew what she was talking about because their parents had experienced that 1916 flood and talked about it whenever rain poured down hard.

Today, many of Miss Currie's students, their parents and grandparents, great-grandparents, and their children and grandchildren are having a similar experience dealing with the flooding that followed Hurricane Helene. And they will be talking about it for the rest of their lives. "News of Davidson," the news outlet in my hometown, published the following account by Gatewood Payne Campbell, granddaughter of Davidson professor Gatey Workman and niece of the late, great opera singer William Workman. Gatewood and her husband Johnny live near Black Mountain.

"Life has stopped. We don't know dates or times. Sirens are 24 hours a day. It's relentless. Helicopters invade our sky. Chainsaws sound nonstop and we run outside in hopes it's in our neighborhood. ...

"Let me back up. We awoke around 6 Friday morning without power. The storm was loud and pounding but we didn't know where we were in the storm. We could not get updates. Around 8:30 we lost internet across cell lines. I called a friend and got her to look at radar and let me know an ETA on rain ending. That was the last call I was able to make. By 9:30 all cell signal was completely lost. The rain was increasing. We could see the creek rising. Johnny stepped outside under the porch and was soaked from head to toe after 30 seconds.

"Around 11 we felt like we could go out and survey the neighborhood. We began to feel the weight of the destruction, yet we had no clue. The creek had turned into a river greater than 50 yards wide. The noise of water heaters, propane tanks, bikes, grills, construction supplies and yard equipment banging on the rails of our bridge to Black Mountain was deafening. We saw two neighbors with trees on their homes and knew they were taking on water."

Meanwhile in Asheville, Bryan King and his wife Angela Koh are assessing the damage to their 12 Bones Smokehouse restaurant on Foundry Street in the River Arts District. As I wrote in my book, "North Carolina's Eateries," "Even if 12 Bones had not been made famous by Barack Obama's visits there, it would be a 'must-do' in Asheville." When I first visited 12 Bones several years ago, it was located closer to the French Broad River. Had Bryan and Angela not moved the restaurant a few blocks up the hill, it would have been completely washed away. At its current location, they may be able to repair and survive.

Angela's sister writes, "As the floodwaters recede, we see catastrophic damage to homes and businesses, including the River Arts District, where 12 Bones was founded. Entire livelihoods have been lost. In nearly every direction you look, everything is caked in mud and scattered debris. Broken wood and mangled wiring now stand where inter sections once existed." Coincidentally, on Oct. 15, the publisher Blair is releasing "River Road," a book of poems by mountain author Wayne Caldwell. His fine poetry describes the power of the flooding waters on the French Broad as shown in the following excerpt:

The French Broad, being a river, floods.

How many times over the millennia has it left its banks and moved whatever was swept up in it To some far away (and sometimes ridiculous) place?

Perhaps thousands. And each time it returned to its placid face.

The worst (in the last century) was in July 1916.

Asheville's Riverside Park was washed away.

Parts of which one could have seen rushing by my house Had it been there then. (Even this relatively high ground Would have been inundated for several days.)

Only a half dozen people died in Asheville, Which I'd consider a small miracle. Thanks to the telephone, Warning came to Marshall, and only two or three drowned, Even though the courthouse was about the only thing left On Main Street. Fifty-Three houses disappeared.

From high ground one could have seen rushing by Bales of cotton, houses, mules, gas tanks, Vehicles, sheds, chickens, roosting on pieces of roof, Tires, fences, trees, pigs, dogs, cats, Anything thing not tied down — and many things that were.

D.G. Martin, a retired lawyer, served as UNC-System's vice president for public affairs and hosted PBS-Nc's "North Carolina Bookwatch."

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Trop assessment could take 'weeks'

October 11, 2024 | McDowell News, The (Marion, NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: News | 223 Words OpenURL Link

The Tampa Bay Rays said it may take weeks to fully assess how much damage was done to Tropicana Field, which saw its roof ripped to shreds by the force of Hurricane Milton as the deadly storm barreled across much of Florida.

The team said no one was injured when the St. Petersburg ballpark was struck by the storm on Wednesday night. A handful of "essential personnel" were inside Tropicana Field as the roof panels were blown apart, much of the debris falling on the field and seats below.

"Over the coming days and weeks, we expect to be able to assess the true condition of Tropicana Field," the Rays said Thursday. "In the meantime, we are working with law enforcement to secure the building. We ask for your patience at this time, and we encourage those who can to donate to organizations in our community that are assisting those directly impacted by these storms."

Milton was the second hurricane to hit Florida's Gulf Coast in the span of two weeks, preceded by Hurricane Helene, which flooded streets and homes on that same side of the state and left at least 230 people dead across the South.

The Rays aren't scheduled to play in the ballpark again until March 27, when they are supposed to play host to the Colorado Rockies to open the 2025 season.

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McDowell County Schools to resume regular schedule on Monday

October 11, 2024 | McDowell News, The (Marion, NC) Author: From Staff Reports | Section: Education | 212 Words OpenURL Link

McDowell County Schools will operate on a regular schedule starting Monday with a modified bus service.

On Friday evening, School Superintendent Tracy Grit announced the return to a regular school schedule as McDowell County rebuilds from the devastation from Hurricane Helene.

On Monday, Oct. 14, McDowell County Schools will operate on a regular schedule with limited bus routes and some designated community stops. For a detailed list of the routes, review the bus lists provided on the McDowell County Schools website at www.mcdowell.k12.nc.us.

"To ensure the safety of your children, parents or guardians should always remain present to supervise at each of our community bus stops," reads a news release. "Safety is, and always will be, our top priority.

"Students and staff living in the affected area of our county, please work individually with principals should your commute require additional time in the mornings."

In addition, Grit stated in the news release: "I am also happy to report that our athletic practices will resume on Monday for our student-athletes in our middle and high schools. Fans, we ask for your patience while we allow our teams to begin practicing, and our administrators an opportunity to adjust the fall schedules. As soon as we have game dates available we will post them for you on our websites."

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BRIEFLY

October 11, 2024 | McDowell News, The (Marion, NC) Author: Staff Writer | Section: Briefly | 205 Words OpenURL Link

SETTLEMENT: TD Bank will pay about \$3 billion in a historic settlement with U.S. authorities who said Thursday that the financial institution's lax practices allowed significant money laundering.

UNEMPLOYMENT: The Labor Department reported Thursday that applications for jobless aid jumped to 258,000 last week, up by 33,000 from the prior week. That's the most since Aug. 5, 2023, and well above the 229,000 analysts expected.

GEORGIA: A federal judge said Thursday that she won't order the presidential battleground state of Georgia to reopen voter registration for November's elections despite disruptions caused by Hurricane Helene.

MORTGAGES: The average rate on a 30-year mortgage in the U.S. surged to 6.32% this week from 6.12% last week, mortgage buyer Freddie Mac said Thursday.

RECALL: BrucePac of Woodburn, Oregon, this week recalled nearly 10 million pounds of meat and poultry products made at an Oklahoma plant because they may be contaminated with listeria bacteria. The products have a best-by date of June 19, 2025, to Oct. 8, 2025, and should be thrown away.

MINE ACCIDENT: One person was killed and 12 rescued from about 1,000 feet below ground in a former mine after an elevator malfunctioned at the Mollie Kathleen Gold Mine tourist site near Cripple Creek, Colorado, authorities said Thursday.

Associated Press

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Waynesville fire station flooded during Helene

October 11, 2024 | Mountaineer, The (Waynesville, NC) Author: Aarik Long | Section: News | 318 Words OpenURL Link

One of Waynesville Fire Department's stations flooded during Helene but dodged the level of damage suffered by Clyde firefighters, in part because the Waynesville station almost flooded before.

"We're very fortunate. It could have been a lot worse," Waynesville Fire Chief Joey Webb said.

Station 2, located in Hazelwood, is connected to other Town of Waynesville offices. This marks the first time the building has taken on water during flooding.

"To my knowledge, that's the first time it's ever got in the building," Webb said. "In 2004, they said they had sandbags, and it got up to the sandbags."

Water and mud spilled into the building, creating a headache to cleanup.

"It's mostly mud," Webb said. "There was quite a bit of mud in the bays, but it didn't affect the door operation. Water rose and washed in."

Luckily, the water didn't rise too far inside of the building.

Unlike the Clyde Fire Department, where floodwaters had never come close to that structure and the level of flooding caught all by surprise, the close calls in Hazelwood helped prepare for this flood.

"As far as equipment, we were able to get a lot of stuff out before it happened," Webb said. "They moved some stuff ahead of time, anticipating that it could flood because we've seen water there before."

Only the backup tanker was still at the station when flooding occurred, and the vehicle didn't sustain any damage.

Servpro teams were at the station last week cleaning things up. Webb said it appeared that it was mostly furniture damage.

"There might be a few things that might be damaged or will need to be replaced," Webb said.

The chief said he was unsure when they would be back in the building. "Hopefully, it won't be a long ordeal," Webb said. "Electricity is still on, and all of that stuff is still OK."

For now, those who were stationed in Hazelwood are working out of Station One off of Main Street.

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Edwards: Government shut-down would've worsened catastrophe

October 11, 2024 | Mountaineer, The (Waynesville, NC) Author: Vicki Hyatt vhyatt@themountaineer.com| Section: News | 436 Words OpenURL Link

As Western North Carolina's Congressman Chuck Edwards focuses on disaster response in his 15-county district ravaged by Hurricane Helene, he's especially thankful the government is still running.

"Can you imagine Western North Carolina dealing with this catastrophe had we heeded the calls of so many who demanded we shut the government down?" Edwards asked.

Last month, there were heated debates in Congress on passing a stop-gap measure to fund the government through Dec. 20. Failure to do so would have led to a partial government shut-down, but that was avoided by a bipartisan vote. Former President Trump was one of those advocating for a shut-down unless a measure requiring proof of citizenship to vote was included.

"Shutting government down is a bad idea under any circumstances," Edwards said, noting the measure that was passed added \$20 billion to disaster relief funding. "That will not be nearly enough, but in mid-November, I'll be bringing up the topic of a supplemental to help Western North Carolina rebuild. We have the money we need (for) right now."

Edwards said the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is on the ground in critical areas, is well-staffed and providing a direct contact for each county.

He criticized the agency's initial response, saying it took up to 30 hours to get on site, something he called unacceptable and "unbelievably irresponsive."

Haywood's situation was different because emergency management leaders had called for FEMA and state emergency help early in the week after tracking the dire warnings put out by the NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. NOAA is an agency that's on the chopping block in a policy recommendation document, Project 2025, compiled by a conservative think tank representing about 100 organizations.

A major obstacle after the storm was the downed communication systems that prevented emergency workers from communicating with each other early on. The internal emergency communication in Haywood was fixed by Sunday, two days after Helene left the area Friday morning, Sept. 27.

For the rest of the public, it was a different matter. Most in the county had no cell phone service, nor internet signal, for days.

Edwards said there will be a time to discuss building in redundancy and shoring up the communication network, but said this is not the time.

"The reality now is, we're still fishing bodies out of the mud and trying to ensure we can make contact with people," he said.

Congress has adjourned until after the election. Most who are facing an election are spending the fall recess campaigning. However, "I have suspended all my campaign activity ... so I can help folks in Western North Carolina address the catastrophe we face," Edwards said.

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