

Fundraising could affect FEMA payouts - Crowdfunding benefits may not be duplicated

October 16, 2024 | Fayetteville Observer, The (NC) Author: Lianna Norman; USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA Section: News 891 Words Page: A7 OpenURL Link

For those who lost their homes or belongings as a result of Hurricane Milton or Hurricane Helene, rebuilding and replacing can be daunting.

And there are plenty of rumors flying around about FEMA disaster assistance, which can add a whole other layer of confusion on top of the stress of rebuilding.

Some people affected by hurricanes have made or are considering making a GoFundMe or online fundraiser to help pay for the cost of any damages they have to their home or property. They might be wondering if that interferes with their FEMA eligibility.

The answer: It might. If a person uses crowdfunding or GoFundMe, it isn't likely that they'll be able to receive disaster assistance from FEMA. However, there's still a chance.

According to FEMA's site for mitigating rumors in the wake of Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton, FEMA cannot duplicate benefits or funds disaster victims receive from another source. But it depends on the situation.

"If you receive money from a GoFundMe page for a specific disaster-related expense – such as home repairs, funeral expenses or other emergency needs – you may not be able to receive FEMA aid for the same expense," FEMA's website says.

"For example, if you receive donations to clean up storm damage to your home, FEMA may not be able to also grant you financial assistance for home clean up."

FEMA adds, "We encourage all survivors to apply for assistance regardless so we can review your specific case."

There are a wide variety of post-disaster needs that FEMA can help cover – like temporary housing, purchasing a generator or covering costs related to funerals and reburials caused by a storm. Here's a nonexhaustive list of what FEMA money may be used for, provided by the Asheville Citizen Times.

Home repairs

General repairs: Even if there was a preexisting issue with a home, if it receives major damage from Milton, FEMA can provide funds to repair.

Accessibility: Whether a person has a preexisting disability and the accessibility features of their home were damaged, or they suffer a disability caused by Milton, FEMA can fund the repair or installation of features such as ramps, grab bars, paved paths and more.

Privately owned roads, bridges, docks: FEMA will fund these repairs if they are the only access to the home.

Replacement: "Limited funds may be available under rare conditions to replace a disaster-destroyed home," as per the FEMA website.

Housing expenses

Direct temporary housing: Temporary housing units, multi-family lease and repair or direct lease are available to those who have been displaced by flooding.

Displacement: This money helps those displaced by flooding seek immediate housing needs while looking for a longer-term rental.

Personal property: These funds are allocated for replacing essentials lost in flooding, such as kitchen appliances, computers and furnishings, as well as books, uniforms and tools required for school or work.

Moving and storage expenses: If those affected by a disaster wish to store their possessions in a safe place like a storage unit while looking for a rental property, FEMA may assist.

Group flood insurance: If a home suffered flood damage in a Special Flood Hazard Area, FEMA can purchase a group flood insurance policy on the homeowner's behalf. This policy gives three years of coverage.

Clean and sanitize: This pays for minor damages to a home if the FEMA inspector decides that the home remains livable.

Miscellaneous

Serious needs: Funds cover immediate needs like water, food, first aid, prescriptions, infant formula, breastfeeding equipment, diapers, personal hygiene items and fuel.

Funeral: FEMA can assist with payments for funerals and reburials.

Transport: Repairs for a personal vehicle, if there is no other feasible way to get around.

Child care: FEMA can help with new child care expenses caused by the disaster.

It's important to note that "some disaster aid does not have to be paid back, while other types of help may come in the form of loans. The FEMA representative will explain the details to you when you call," FEMA says.

FEMA money can't be used to go to the movies or buy a lottery ticket. FEMA recommends that disaster survivors keep their Hurricane Helene- or Hurricane Milton-related receipts for about three years "to show how you spent FEMA grants and document how your disaster funds were used."

For people who want to use crowdfunding, GoFundMe has set up a general fundraiser with the money going to people impacted by any hurricane. GoFundMe delivers cash grants from this fundraiser directly to those impacted by domestic hurricanes.

The money goes to "verified individuals who qualify and are fundraising for themselves or on behalf of someone else. We may also provide grants to fundraisers benefiting small businesses and community relief efforts, or to vetted nonprofits coordinating long-term recovery," according to the website. Find information at gofundme.com/f/enxh8-hurricane-relief-fund.

GoFundMe also has a landing page for verified nonprofits that are supporting victims of Hurricane Milton, including Team Rubicon, Feeding Tampa Bay, The Red Cross and Americanes at gofundme.com/c/act/hurricane-milton.

Dozens of families impacted by Milton have set up their own accounts on GoFundMe to raise money. GoFundMe has a page for verified fundraisers for people asking for help with replacing and restoring their houses and belongings. Find them at gofundme.com/c/act/hurricane-relief/florida.

Contributing: Jake Allen, Indianapolis Star

• Citation (aglc Style)

Lianna Norman, USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA, 'Fundraising could affect FEMA payouts - Crowdfunding benefits may not be duplicated', *Fayetteville Observer, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 A7 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3E4E9C4E73408>



Latter-day Saints begin relief work following Hurricane Helene

October 16, 2024 \mid Franklin Press, The (NC)

Section: News | 489 Words

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Since Oct. 4, over 6, 100 volunteers in their trademark yellow shirts and vests from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the Southeastern United States have arrived in Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina to help homes and houses of worship affected by Hurricane Helene. Volunteers traveled at their own expense to clear debris, muck out homes, and - according to a local Church official - to bring hope with them everywhere they served.

More than 3, 000 work orders (1 order = 1 home) were completed last weekend by volunteers. In preparation for the cleanup and relief effort, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sent several trucks of supplies to the area for the volunteers' use and distribution.

Among those serving residents in Western North Carolina were close to 100 volunteers from local congregations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints and almost 250 more from Sugar Hill, Georgia, and Greenville, South Carolina, congregations of the Church.

"It's certainly not just members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints giving service after the hurricane," said Kyle Gillett, a leader for the Church in the Asheville area. "We're embedded in the Bible Belt, and there are so many people who are seeking to serve and do what Christ would do at this time. We love to work together with all our brothers and sisters of every faith to minister to those who are suffering." Since 1998, thousands of volunteers from the Church have helped people worldwide whose lives have been affected by natural disasters and other emergencies. These include cleanup after the 2022 flooding in Eastern Kentucky, the numerous tornadoes throughout the South, fires in California, and Hurricanes Idalia, Ian, Ida, Katrina, Ike, Gustav, Isaac, Matthew, Michael, Florence, Laura, Sally, and many others.

Rachel Stay, a member of the Arden congregation of the Church of Jesus Christ, spent Sunday morning cleaning deep mud and spoiled drywall out of a stranger's house in Black Mountain during the hours she normally would have spent worshiping at church.

"Helping people who have suffered more than my family did during this disaster helped me to feel the Holy Spirit and feel closer to Jesus," said Stay. "He would be helping everyone, even on the Sabbath. Serving and helping others in need is doing as Jesus did; it's being His hands."

Added Gillett, "My mind has been called back many times this weekend to a verse from the story of Esther [chapter 4, verse 14] in the Old Testament. Who knows if perhaps God put each of us where we are and gave us the blessings we have for a time such as this? We have to go out and share." In the coming weekend, 7, 500 more volunteers from the Church of Jesus Christ will assist with the Hurricane Helene and Milton clean-up effort.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

'Latter-day Saints begin relief work following Hurricane Helene', *Franklin Press, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 B3 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35DEB260540



Macon qualifies for Disaster SNAP benefits

October 16, 2024 | Franklin Press, The (NC)

Section: News | 323 Words

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The United States Department of Agriculture and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services have said Macon County is eligible to receive Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (D-SNAP) as a result of Hurricane Helene. Macon County is one of the 25 counties in North Carolina that was declared eligible for individual assistance by Gov. Roy Cooper. Any household that resided within one of the designated counties at the time of the September 2024 storm (Hurricane Helene) and suffered disaster losses may be eligible to receive temporary D-SNAP assistance. D-SNAP benefits are provided via an electronic debit-like card and can be used to purchase food items at grocery stores and other authorized retailers.

To be eligible, a person MUST: · Live in one of the 25 designated counties · Be a member of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians living in zip code 28719 · Have suffered losses/damages related to Hurricane Helene, such as damage to property or loss of income · Have proof of identity and proof of residency (if available)

· Have income and resources below certain levels · Not currently be receiving benefits through the Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) program. People receiving FNS can also get extra help buying food, but do not need to fill out a D-SNAP application.

Residents seeking assistance may apply beginning Friday, Oct. 18 through Thursday, Oct. 24 for the D-SNAP. To apply, please visit the Macon County Distribution Center located in the vacant Ingles at 183 Holly Springs Plaza or call the D-SNAP Virtual Call Center at 1-844-453-1117. Weekday hours of D-SNAP at the Macon County Distribution Center are 8 a.m.-4p.m. and weekend hours are 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Residents can also use the online ePASS Pre-Registration Tool, which opened Oct. 15 and will close on Tuesday, Oct. 22. Once the pre-registration is completed, applicants will be issued a confirmation number and will receive a call to complete the interview part of the application.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

'Macon qualifies for Disaster SNAP benefits', *Franklin Press, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 A11 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35DD9F0CEE0



Nantahala National Forest reopens some areas

October 16, 2024 | Franklin Press, The (NC)

Section: News 254 Words

Page: A11 OpenURL Link

The USDA Forest Service has updated its closure order related to Hurricane Helene on the Nantahala National Forest in Western North Carolina. The USFS continues initial response and assessment activities across the national forests in North Carolina, but opened the following on the Nantahala National Forest on Oct. 11: · On the Cheoah Ranger District: All developed recreation sites, trails and roads.

- · On the Nantahala Ranger District: All developed recreation sites, trails and roads, with the exceptions of Appletree Group Campground, Balsam Lake Lodge, Wayehutta OHV Trail System, Wine Springs Horse Camp, and Rainbow Springs Road, FSR 437.
- · On the Tusquitee Ranger District: All developed recreation sites, trails and roads.

Closures remain in effect for the entirety of the Pisgah National Forest.

"We initially focused most of our efforts on helping our neighbors and first responders by clearing roads and improving access to critical infrastructure throughout the area," said Forest Supervisor James Melonas. "We recognize the significance getting to connect with nature has with everyone who lives in Western North Carolina. After thoroughly assessing the conditions on the Nantahala and found that it was safe, we knew the time was right to begin inviting our neighbors back to the forest."

The public is advised to use caution on roads and trails. Hurricane impacts could still include down and fallen trees and limbs, loose rocks, soft shoulders and damaged or blocked trails.

For more information on Hurricane Helene closures, call the Southern Region Hurricane Hotline (404)-939-4485 or visit the Forest Service website (fs.usda.gov/nfsnc) or the Facebook page (facebook.com/nfsnc).

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'Nantahala National Forest reopens some areas', *Franklin Press, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 A11 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35DDEDA77D0



N.C. Forest Service urging the public to be careful with outdoor fire

October 16, 2024 | Franklin Press, The (NC)

Section: News 559 Words

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With the amount of storm debris brought on by Hurricane Helene and North Carolina on the cusp of fall wildfire season, the N.C. Forest Service is reminding the public to think ahead and be cautious when burning outdoors.

"Recent tropical weather, most notably Hurricane Helene, has left piles of debris in its wake. Once safe to do so, many people will have significant yard cleanup and may choose to dispose of leaves and other yard debris by way of burning," said Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler. "Outdoor fires left unattended can get out of hand quickly, becoming wildfires that threaten lives and property."

Typically, wildfires occur more frequently October through early December. In 2023, the N.C. Forest Service responded to nearly 2, 000 wildfires during those months, with response to more than 1, 200 of those fires taking place in November. Backyard debris burning, arson, escaped campfires and machine and vehicle use continue to be common ignition sources for human-caused wildfires.

Wildfire trends and causes in North Carolina are consistent with the rest of the Southern U.S. The American South experiences more wildfires each year than any other region in the U.S., with 87% of wildfires igniting on private property and being started by people. In North Carolina, human activity is responsible for 99% of wildfires.

The Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) - the area where structures and other human development blend with undeveloped wildland, forest or vegetation - is a notable threat for increased wildfire impacts due to rapid population growth and people moving into formerly rural areas, resulting in an increase in WUI acreage. This trend is significant as three of the top four states with the most homes near wildlands are in the South, including North Carolina. As of 2020, roughly more than half of North Carolina's citizens live in WUI areas.

"Before choosing to burn, folks need to obtain a valid burn permit and keep an eye on the weather. Never burn on dry, windy days and never leave your fire unattended," said Troxler. "Smokey Bear celebrated his 80th birthday back in August, and I think we owe it to him to uphold his message by remembering that we are the best defense against wildfires."

Tips for outdoor burning

For those who choose to burn, the N.C. Forest Service offers the following tips: · Make sure you have a valid permit. You can obtain a burn permit at any N.C. Forest Service office or authorized permitting agent, or online at ncforestservice.gov/burnpermit.

- · Check the weather. Never burn on dry, windy days.
- · Keep your fire small, not tall. · Be sure you are fully prepared before burning. To control the fire, you will need a water hose, bucket, steel rake and a shovel for tossing dirt on the fire. Keep a phone nearby, too. · Never use kerosene, gasoline, diesel fuel or other flammable liquids to speed up burning.
- · Douse burning charcoal briquettes or campfires thoroughly with water. Drown all embers, not just the red ones. When soaked, stir the coals and soak them again. Make sure everything is wet and that embers are cold to the touch. If you do not have water, mix enough dirt or sand with the embers to extinguish the fire, being careful not to bury the fire. Never dump hot ashes or coals into a wooded area.

 \cdot Never leave your fire. Stay with it until it is completely out.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

'N.C. Forest Service urging the public to be careful with outdoor fire', *Franklin Press, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 B8 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35E0A1ADE48



Schools examine stopping Facebook comments

October 16, 2024 | Franklin Press, The (NC) Author: Thomas Sherrill reporter@thefranklinpress.com| Section: News| 418 Words Page: A7 OpenURL Link

The Facebook comment sections for Macon County School and all individual school pages could soon be shut down as the Board of Education discussed the possibility at its Sept. 30 meeting. The item was on the agenda before Hurricane Helene, and board attorney John Henning said it's been a discussion point in the past.

Henning said you can't pick and choose comments, so you either allow everything or nothing, calling the latter "legally tenable." The Macon County Sheriff's Office doesn't allow comments on its Facebook posts. Henning said the board has its own speech rights and that people have the option to give public comment to the board at every regular monthly meeting. After the meeting, Henning clarified that people could share those Facebook posts on their own pages with their commentary.

Board clerk Renee Burt said MCS principals "across the board" want to shut down the Facebook comment sections, advising the board not to do it now during an emergency, which would give a bad impression.

"If the principals are in favor, I'm OK with it," board member Stephanie Laseter said.

Board member Diedre Breeden said that with Hilary Wilkes not present due to the hurricane's aftermath in Highlands, she wanted to delay a decision until the Oct. 14 meeting. (Coverage from that meeting will be in the Oct. 23 edition of The Franklin Press.)

Other news The board unanimously approved policies such as the Franklin High School "Lights, Camera Action" program, N.C. Prayer Certification and Single Set of Assurances, the Long Center memorandum of understanding, the HIGHTS memorandum of understanding, and provision of pre-employment transition services memorandum of understanding. The meeting took place in the MCS Central Office in Franklin. The meeting was originally scheduled for Highlands School, but the location was changed due to damage caused by Hurricane Helene. The school board will have a spring 2025 meeting in Highlands.

Breedlove noted that the Macon County Schools Board of Education is one of 20 in the state where all board members completed at least 12 hours of training.

As of Sept. 30, there were to be no field trips for Macon County students for two weeks through Oct. 14, with all corresponding trips on the overnight/out-of-district trip requests removed prior to unanimous approval of the rest.

All 19 fundraising requests were unanimously approved. A special meeting to discuss capital outlay projects will take place at noon on Friday, Oct. 18 at the Central Office. The board held a 13-minute closed session and afterward, approved the personnel reports before adjourning at 7:18 p.m.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Thomas Sherrill reporter@thefranklinpress.com, 'Schools examine stopping Facebook comments', *Franklin Press, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 A7 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35DCF8E2D80



Football routs North in Pit's last Homecoming

October 16, 2024 | Franklin Press, The (NC) Author: Will Woolever sports@thefranklinpress.com| Section: Sports | 914 Words Page: B4 OpenURL Link

The good times keep rolling for Panther football. Two weeks after Hurricane Helene and three weeks after their last game, on Oct. 11 they returned to Franklin for a Homecoming game with North Henderson. In a 45-6 rout of the Knights they improved to 5-0 overall and 2-0 in the Mountain Seven Conference.

Braydon Hervey shot out of the gate on the first play from scrimmage, following guards Bryson Gibbs and Maveric Waldroop to the right for a 44-yard carry. The senior gained the last 15 yards on three straight carries to the end zone just two minutes in.

Garrett Young gave his team the ball back on North's first drive, sacking their quarterback and forcing a fumble on third-and-6. Caryll Cook recovered the loose ball and returned it 18 yards to the 1, where Hervey punched it in two plays later to put Franklin up 14-0. The Panthers turned the ball over again a few plays later, when Lance Parker recovered a bad snap on a punt and returned it 33 yards for the score. Daniel Riddle's extra point put Franklin up 21-0 less than five minutes in.

North finally caught a break on their next drive, when a punt contacted a Panther and they recovered the ball past midfield. Hervey sacked the guarterback three plays later to nip the possession in the bud.

Quarterback Anderson Terrell started the second quarter with a bang, finding Parker on a beautiful 40-yard throw and catch to North's 17. The pair connected again for 15 yards on first-and-10, and Braylon Dezarn scored on a first-and-goal carry moments later.

Franklin's defensive front seven continued to dominate from there, getting a key tackle from Addix Sutton on fourthand-3 near midfield. The junior then gained 20 yards on Franklin's first two carries on offense, before Young and Hervey put Franklin in range for a 29-yard Riddle field goal.

The Panthers got one more good drive in before halftime, getting 32 yards from Hervey on a punt return and a seconddown carry. On second-and-7 from the 25, Terrell found Payton King for a wide-open touchdown to make it 38-0. Riddle nearly made Franklin's play of the night on the second-half kickoff, sprinting downfield to force a Knight fumble at the 35. North recovered the ball and mounted a good-looking drive into Franklin territory, but couldn't convert a fourth-and-10 at the Panther 40.

With punter Will Sinclair sidelined due to injury, Terrell took the field for a rare double-duty late in the third, looking right at home on a 53-yard punt back to the Knight 1. There North's returner touched the ball but didn't hang on, and King recovered the ball in the end zone for his second score of the night.

With their lead at 45-0, Franklin triggered the state's running clock mercy rule for the game's final 15 minutes. Facing fourth-and-1 from their own 43 to start the fourth, North gained some traction versus Franklin's second-team defense, carrying the ball 30 yards to the 27. They found the end zone minutes later for the final score in a 45-6 Panther win.

Following their fifth-straight blowout win to start the year, Franklin sat alone atop the Mountain Seven standings as one of just three teams to have played two conference games. They have now outscored their opponents 191-41, including just seven points allowed by their starting defense.

"I'm really pleased with our team. That was a focused football team tonight," said head coach Josh Brooks after the

game. "To have three weeks off and handle things the way we did with very few mistakes, I'm very proud of them...

Our kicking game has been supertough, our defense has just been outstanding, and offensively we're doing good enough stuff. One builds on the other."

After most teams across the region missed two weeks due to Hurricane Helene, the Panthers made some unique changes to their schedule to end the season. As Tuscola had not played a conference game when the storm hit, they were forced to reschedule their Sept. 27 game with Franklin to Oct. 15, to be played in Waynesville after press time. The game will be the second of Franklin's five conference games in a four-week span to end the year, after the N.C. High School Athletic Association extended the regular season by a week.

While two games in four days was certainly a challenge for the Panthers, the team's hardships paled in comparison to those suffered by their Henderson County opponents in recent weeks. Following the storm's rampage through WNC Sept. 27, Brooks highlighted his team's efforts to help those in areas hard-hit by the storm.

"I know multiple coaches, multiple faculty members that have helped, and they're still helping and volunteering," said Brooks when reached for comment Oct. 7. "When you can sacrifice a little bit of your own for the benefit of others, everybody benefits. And when you work and do things for others with nothing expected in return, that's sacrifice and that's what it's about. They're big teams and you've got to sacrifice personal wants for the best of the team, so they're willing to do that. And we've had a lot of guys spend a lot of hours out there and they're going to continue to work."

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Will Woolever sports@thefranklinpress.com, 'Football routs North in Pit's last Homecoming', *Franklin Press, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 B4 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35DF1944A90



Nantahala wastewater project proposal receives no interest, again

October 16, 2024 | Franklin Press, The (NC) Author: Thomas Sherrill reporter@thefranklinpress.com| Section: News| 759 Words Page: A7 OpenURL Link

Despite advertising to a larger area, the Nantahala wastewater replacement project received no responses to another request for qualifications. According to Macon County Schools Grounds and Facilities Director Todd Gibbs, the latest request for qualifications expired Friday, Sept. 27 with zero responses, despite advertising in several larger cities.

At the request of the Macon County Board of Commissioners, the school system wanted to see qualifications from contractors to build an underground septic system to replace the current one that discharges treated water into nearby waterways.

However, two requests for qualifications yielded no interest. Gibbs said contractors he talked to had concerns about the driving distance to Nantahala School.

Board of Education Chair Jim Breedlove said he was at a loss since they've tried to follow the commissioners' mandate. Board member Missy Evans joked they can dig it themselves.

After expressing frustration, the school board voted to issue a request for qualifications for a straight replacement of the current system. Board attorney John Henning said there's controversy about design and build requests being packaged together, suggesting maybe breaking the process up to attract companies.

The county and school system have debated solutions and spoken with potential contractors and consultants since December 2022, when the school board declared the Nantahala wastewater system an emergency. Gibbs and MCS Maintenance Supervisor Tracy Tallent said the current wastewater system is "running on borrowed time."

In September 2023, the school board got a quote from Harper General Construction for \$657, 864.50 for a wastewater treatment system that discharges treated water into the nearby waterways and approved sending the bid to the commissioners. Afterward, the school liaison committee declined to have the commissioners vote on the bid. Commissioner Paul Higdon, who at the time was on the school liaison committee, stated his desire for an underground septic system on the property.

FHS, Highlands groundbreakings, project updates The new Franklin High School groundbreaking will be on Friday, Oct. 18, starting at 10 a.m. in The Pit. Macon County Schools Superintendent Josh Lynch said there will be lots of guest speakers and the current students will be involved. Lynch said it'll be a monumental event and called it multiple years in the making. The backup plan in case of rain will be holding the groundbreaking in the FHS gym. Fulltime site work is expected to begin in mid-November.

The Highlands School renovation groundbreaking will take place on Oct. 23 at 9:30 a.m. Lynch said Vannoy, the Construction Manager At Risk for the project, will be mobilizing on Oct. 28 to begin work. Plans call for the Highlands School project to be completed by the start of the 2025-26 school year next August.

Gibbs said they have a proposal from Wade Trim for \$46, 450 to design a complete underground muck removal from the Highlands soccer field. An old lakebed sits several feet before the field, which has clogged up the drainage system, causing the field to frequently flood. Breedlove said he previously talked with Wilkes about the next steps and said, "people up [in Highlands] have some interesting ideas." The board postponed a decision. Gibbs said they are waiting on the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality to decide on how to mitigate the leaking underground fuel tank at Highlands School.

The Macon Middle School track completion has been pushed back into November. Gibbs told the board that amazingly, the track didn't become a swimming pool during Helene. Before the rain, the subcontractor had a concrete dust mixture in the ground as a base for the asphalt. After the asphalt is poured, it'll be 30 days before the polyurethane track surface can be put on top.

Gibbs said that delays associated with the rain and the finding of organic materials beneath the track pushed completion from mid-October until November. Gibbs said there needs to be a certain outdoor temperature for laying down polyurethane, so he's concerned with the project now stretching into November.

Sports flexibility Macon County fall athletic teams can now practice and play on days with no school, per a temporary policy passed on Sept. 30 by the Macon County Board of Education.

The board unanimously voted to give Lynch temporary authority to allow flexibility for practices and competitions. The late addition to the agenda was necessitated by the postponements in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, according to Breedlove.

MCS policy states no school athletics team can practice or play on a day with no school. The temporary authorization is only for this fall's sports teams whose schedules are impacted and continue to be changed by Hurricane Helene, the board decided. Henning gave the legal OK to the temporary authorization.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Thomas Sherrill reporter@thefranklinpress.com, 'Nantahala wastewater project proposal receives no interest, again', *Franklin Press, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 A7 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35DCC454BEO>



News Briefs

October 16, 2024 | Franklin Press, The (NC) Section: News Briefs | 494 Words Page: A2 OpenURL Link

Public Meetings The Macon County Board of Education will hold a work session starting at 12 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 18, following the 10 a.m. groundbreaking for the new Franklin High School. The work session will be held at the Central Office on Old Murphy Road and focus on capital outlay projects.

The Franklin Planning Board will meet at 4 p.m. Monday, Oct. 21 in the board room on the lower level of Town Hall. The postponed Macon County Library Board of Trustees meeting originally scheduled for Oct. 1 has been rescheduled for 4 p.m. Tuesday, Oct. 29 at the Hudson Library, located at 554 Main St., Highlands.

FHS groundbreaking The groundbreaking for the new Franklin High School will be held at 10 a.m. Friday, Oct. 18 at 100 Panther Drive.

"This new high school represents a tremendous leap forward for our community," said Macon County Schools Superintendent Josh Lynch. "We are thrilled to break ground on a project that will provide our students with the tools and opportunities they need to succeed and thrive in an ever-evolving world."

The ceremony will include remarks from key stakeholders, a symbolic groundbreaking event, and an opportunity for attendees to learn more about the project and its impact.

The backup location in case of weather is in the Franklin High gym.

Highlands School groundbreaking The groundbreaking for the Highlands School renovation project will take place at 9:30 a.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 23, at the Highlands School, located at 545 Pierson Dr.

Early dismissal for Macon County Schools Macon County Schools will hold a mandatory staff development session on Wednesday, Oct. 30. Franklin area schools will dismiss at 11:30 a.m. If childcare is needed, there will be several childcare options offered throughout the county. Information is available at macon.k12.nc.us.

General Assembly approves disaster relief funding The North Carolina General Assembly returned to Raleigh on Wednesday, Oct. 9 and passed a \$273 million disaster relief package following Hurricane Helene's devastation of western North Carolina. House Bill 149, Disaster Recovery Act of 2024, is an initial appropriation with additional and more extensive disaster relief funding to follow in the coming weeks.

"The passage of this disaster recovery aid is just the first step in the state's response to Hurricane Helene," stated Rep. Karl Gillespie. "The state legislature will be appropriating additional funds in the weeks ahead as we remain fully committed to the long-term recovery of western North Carolina. I ask that you continue to keep the victims of this storm, along with those who have lost loved ones, in your thoughts and prayers.

Distribution Center remains open The Macon County Hurricane Helene Donation and Distribution Center will remain open until further notice. The center is in the vacant Ingles in Holly Springs Shopping Center and will be open 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Some of the items needed are toothbrushes, toothpaste, grab-andgo non-perishable food, infant food, cleaning wipes, work gloves, flashlights, batteries, first aid kits, garbage bags, personal hygiene products and cleaning products. Clothing and bottled water are not needed.

• Citation (aglc Style)

'News Briefs', *Franklin Press, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 A2 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35DA06EDF28>



MAHEC clinic reopens

October 16, 2024 | Franklin Press, The (NC)

Section: News | 147 Words

Page: A6 OpenURL Link

The MAHEC OB/Gyn Specialist clinic in Franklin has reopened and is seeing patients by appointment from 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Thursday. MAHEC's various clinics throughout Western North Carolina are operating with varied schedules and some remain closed due to the hurricane damage. For information, visit mahec.net.

"Hurricane Helene has deeply impacted our community and staff and we are incredibly grateful for the outpouring of support we've received," said MAHEC CEO William R. Hathaway. Two funds have been established to assist with Helene recovery efforts: the MAHEC Employee Assistance Fund and the MAHEC Annual Fund.

Hathaway said contributions to the annual fund are "essential to sustaining patient care and clinical services, helping us rebuild and preparing for future challenges. Your support enables us to remain a vital resource for our community, even in times of crisis." Donations may be made at mahec.net/donate. MAHEC is a 501 (c) 3 nonprofit organization.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

'MAHEC clinic reopens', *Franklin Press, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 A6 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35DC255AFD0>



Phillips, Angel win M7 title

October 16, 2024 | Franklin Press, The (NC) Author: Will Woolever sports@thefranklinpress.com| Section: Sports | 1047 Words Page: B4 OpenURL Link

Panther women's tennis has secured their third straight conference title. On the week of Oct. 7 Heather Bell's team faced a busy slate of matches, playing their last match of the regular season and the Mountain Seven Conference Tournament. With strong showings versus Smoky Mountain and at Western Carolina University, Franklin capped their third-straight unbeaten season and their third straight doubles title in the conference.

Having postponed their Sept. 30 match with Smoky due to Hurricane Helene, on Oct. 7 the team welcomed the Mustangs to Franklin for a joint Senior Night match. After honoring both teams' seniors including Franklin's top four players, the rivals rehashed Franklin's 9-0 win over the Mustangs in Sylva Sept. 4. The rematch looked much the same as the teams' first meeting, with Franklin cruising to easy wins in five of their six singles matches. At Nos. 2, 3 and 6, Abigail Angel, Maci Stork and Marlee Barnes each beat their opponents 6-0, 6-0, while Kate Phillips (#1), Caroline Deal (#4) and Clara Stork (#5) also won in straight sets.

In doubles Franklin's four seniors made quick work of the Mustangs once again, with Phillips/Angel winning 8-2 at #1 and Deal/Maci Stork winning 8-3 at #2. At #3 Barnes and Clara Stork faced Franklin's toughest match of the day, but prevailed 8-5 to complete a 9-0 rout. With their tenth 9-0 win of the season, Franklin improved to 12-1 overall and 11-0 in the Mountain Seven, claiming their third straight conference regular season title. An Oct. 2 rematch of Franklin's Sept. 9 home win over West Henderson was cancelled due to damage from Helene in Henderson County. The Falcons dealt Franklin their last regularseason conference loss Oct. 9, 2021. With the conference regular-season title in hand, two days later the Panthers traveled to WCU for the Mountain Seven Individual Tournament. There Franklin's four seniors entered the tournament's doubles bracket, with Barnes and Clara Stork taking part in singles.

With their teammates earning first-round byes as the top-seeded pairs in the conference, Barnes and Stork took the court first for Franklin, winning convincingly 6-1, 6-3; and 6-1, 6-0, respectively.

In Round 2 Barnes drew a tough opponent in Tuscola's Sierra Sellars, the singles tournament's top seed and reigning Conference Champion. There Sellars prevailed 6-2, 6-1."Marlee played her heart out till the very last point but had a tough draw," said Bell of the junior following the tournament. "She has improved so much this year and look forward to watching her continue growing."

On the other side of the bracket Stork drew Pisgah's Ella Tiller, the tournament's third seed and Pisgah's top player in singles. After winning a hard-fought first set 6-4, the junior cruised to a surprising 6-0 win in the second to advance to the semifinals. As a top-four finisher in the conference, she earned a berth to the 3A West Region Individual Tournament, to be played at Hickory City Park Oct. 18-19.

As the only two pairs to earn first-round byes in doubles, Phillips/Angel and Maci Stork/Deal made quick work of their Round 2 opponents, winning 6-0, 6-0 and 6-1, 6-1, respectively to advance to the semis.

The next morning the team returned to WCU for the tourney's second day, where Clara Stork met West Henderson's top player, Shea Sullivan. There Sullivan prevailed 6-2, 6-3 to advance to the final. Stork then met Sellars in the third-place match, and fell 6-0, 6-2 to earn the conference's fourth seed at regionals.

"Clara pulled off a pretty big upset to secure her spot in the singles draw," said Bell of Stork's win over Tiller. "She handled herself with confidence and class throughout the tournament no matter what level of opponent was across the net from her."

In doubles Phillips and Angel also met West in the semifinals, routing Amani Moraga-Pizarro and Jaden Suttles 6-0, 6-1. On the other side Maci Stork and Deal met Smoky Mountain's Braelyn Mulligan and Kailey Broom, and won 6-2, 6-0 to advance to an all-Panther doubles final. The win marked the second straight year two Panther pairs have met in the final, after Laura and Lydia Holland defeated Maci Stork and Logan Guynn last fall.

There Phillips and Angel prevailed 6-2, 6-4, earning Franklin's third Mountain Seven doubles title in three years. Phillips will graduate this summer as a two-time tournament champion, after helping Alyssa Smith win the doubles title in 2022. As topthree finishers in the conference, both doubles pairs also earned regional tournament berths.

"All the girls handled their nerves quite well and did a good job staying in the moment. I am proud of the level of play they brought to the tournament but even more proud of the quality of sportsmen they were to their opponents," said Bell of her team's play at the tournament. "Abigail and Kate showed up with some of the best doubles I've seen them play, stepping up their communication as a team. Caroline and Maci have proven to be smart and steady while continuing to hone their abilities. I look forward to seeing what all these girls will be able to accomplish in the coming weeks."

While normally the Panthers would have played their first dual team playoff match the next week, on Oct. 9 the N.C. High School Athletic Association extended the fall sports season by a week due to damage from Helene. While regional individual tournament dates were unchanged, the Panthers will now play their first dual team state playoff match Oct. 21, with tournament brackets to be released Oct. 18. As of press time Oct. 14, Franklin was the ninth-ranked team in the 3A West Region, just ahead of #10 West Henderson.

"With the postponement of playoffs by a week it's important to keep the girls refreshed and focused," said Bell of the team's preparation for the state playoffs. "At this point in the season the focus becomes one practice at a time, and with everything going forward being single elimination, it becomes one match at a time. This team has so much potential and each of them has great work ethic as well as a competitive spirit, so I look forward to what we will be able to accomplish, as a team and for them individually."

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Will Woolever sports@thefranklinpress.com, 'Phillips, Angel win M7 title', *Franklin Press, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 B4 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35DEF114160



Honoring Jim Lau

October 16, 2024 | Franklin Press, The (NC) Section: News 64 Words Page: A7 OpenURL Link

Ladder engines from Franklin and Highlands display the American flag for the funeral procession of Macon County Sheriff's Office Deputy Jim Lau, who died Sept. 28 after his truck ended up in the Cullasaja River during Hurricane Helene. Dozens of law enforcement, fire and EMS vehicles took part in the procession, which went to Holly Springs Baptist Church for the service.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

'Honoring Jim Lau', *Franklin Press, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 A7 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35DC7FC20E0>



Mainspring Conservation Trust events

October 16, 2024 | Franklin Press, The (NC)

Section: News 115 Words

Page: B8 OpenURL Link

Mainspring volunteer workdays through the month of October are canceled so priority can be given to Helene relief. For more information about volunteer and upcoming events, visit mainspringconserves.org.

Other upcoming events: Rooted yoga - connecting to the change and autumn, Oct. 17 from 4:30-6 p.m. at Tessentee Bottomland Preserve, Otto.

Fall foliage and feathered friends hike has been postponed. New date and location TBD.Out in WNC: LGBTQIA+ Adventure Club - fall colors hike, Oct. 19. New location and activity TBD Needmore Nature and Trivia, Oct. 23 from 6:30-7:30 p.m. at Lazy Hiker in Franklin. Valley River Cleanup: Oct. 25 from 10 a.m.-1 p.m., in Marble Jackson County Greenway Workday: Oct. 25 from 1-4 p.m., in Sylva

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• Citation (aglc Style)

'Mainspring Conservation Trust events', Franklin Press, The (online), 16 Oct 2024 B8 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35E086FED68



Volleyball falls to Rabun Gap

October 16, 2024 | Franklin Press, The (NC) Author: Will Woolever sports@thefranklinpress.com| Section: Sports | 182 Words Page: B4 OpenURL Link

Panther volleyball has suffered a rare loss. Nearing the end of the regular season, on the week of Oct. 7 the team had just one match on the schedule, an Oct. 9 trip to Rabun Gap-Nacoochee. In a 3-2 loss to the Eagles Franklin dropped to 18-2 on the season, with just one match remaining in the regular season.

In a rematch of their 3-0 home win over the Eagles Sept. 12, Franklin seemed headed for a season sweep early on, winning the first two sets 25-19, 25-10. With their backs against the wall Rabun Gap regrouped however, winning the final three sets 25-16, 26-24, 15-8. After falling in Georgia, Franklin turned their attention to the biggest match of their regular season, an Oct. 16 trip to Mountain Seven Conference rival West Henderson. There the firstplace (11-0) Falcons and second-place (10-1) Panthers will play a de facto conference title game, in a rematch of West's 3-0 win in Franklin Sept. 10. The conference's coaches have agreed to forgo this year's conference tournament due to lost games in ther aftermath of Hurricane Helene.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Will Woolever sports@thefranklinpress.com, 'Volleyball falls to Rabun Gap', *Franklin Press, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 B4 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35DEC514A88>



Bit by bit we reach our goals

October 16, 2024 \mid Franklin Press, The (NC)

Section: News 343 Words

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I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus. -Philippians 3:14Some people can stride uphill like it was nothing. There were times when I could do that, but now my steps are slower and more deliberate. My legs are willing, but my lungs aren't. Sometimes I question our decision to retire to a home on the side of a mountain from a fairly flat city terrain. Walking in nature has always been one of my favorite activities, and I was determined to meet the challenge. Thankfully, years ago, I developed a helpful system. I look for some object or mark in the road or path about five feet ahead and tell myself I can walk to that. Then I choose another and another until I reach my goal. Strangely if I look too far ahead, the going is more difficult.

Sometimes in life we get discouraged; we don't feel our life with God is what it should be, or we face tasks that seem insurmountable. Life can throw us many types of curve balls. We may lose a spouse, or a job, or face unexpected expenses, and we wonder how we will move forward. I am still praying each day for those working towards recovery after Helene. Some of the tasks seem unsurmountable when we look at photos of all the roads washed away and homes destroyed. The old adage, "Rome wasn't built in a day" holds true. We can accomplish much by taking steps bit by bit. In ways similar to my walking, while we keep our ultimate goal in mind, we can do better by focusing on next steps. It will hold off discouragement as we move forward.

Psalm 37:23 says, "A person's steps are made secure by the Lord when they delight in his way." Whatever you may be facing, hang in there; God will be with you. Lord, sometimes we are faced with hard things. Help us to see small steps we can take towards success. Amen. Paige Pritchard can be reached at paigepritchard@icloud.com.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

'Bit by bit we reach our goals', Franklin Press, The (online), 16 Oct 2024 B3 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35DE5CF65C8>



Storm brings neighbors together

October 16, 2024 | Franklin Press, The (NC) Author: Brenda Elliott 828-342-1511 | Section: News | 476 Words Page: B2 OpenURL Link

Two weeks ago, I sat at home writing this column, anticipating the storm heading our way, and hoping the internet would work long enough to send this column off to the Press. Well, my internet didn't work that Friday; nor did it work the next. And that storm came in with a vengeance!

In Carson Community, Helene took down power lines and trees, blocking many residents in their homes. Neighbors were checking on neighbors, using side-bysides and four-wheel vehicles when necessary. It was a time when folks came together to offer hope and help. It was a time that brought out the true mountain spirit - folks working together, utilizing old time ways, and proving the strength of community. And now we have entered a time of rebuilding. We in Macon County have been blessed to have so little damage. Yet some of those around us have been devastated. Now is the time to reach out to those who have lost everything, who must rebuild, must start over. There is much information on Facebook concerning needs and how you can help. Donations are being take at a number of places, including Discover Church in Franklin. With cold weather arriving soon, there is a need for warm coats, blankets, socks - all manner of supplies. We will not be collecting at the community center. However, if you have items and don't know where to donate, please get in touch with us. We'll connect you with those who are helping supply these areas.

We were scheduled to celebrate our WNC communities in Asheville in November, bringing us together from across the area to enjoy a good time and sing the praises of those who work hard to give back to their communities, to help build or restore, implement new ideas and activities, make folks aware of services available to them - all the things to make life in your community better. And while we will not be going to Asheville to celebrate, we want everyone to know that each of these communities were created for you. From Carson to Clark's Chapel, Upper Cartoogechaye to Nantahala, Otto to Cowee, Cullasaja to Holly Springs - we're all here for you. It's just another way our small town reaches out, welcomes you, and offers activities and support for those in each of our areas.

Contact the Extension Office at 828-349-2046 to find out when your community meets. Those of you west of Franklin, Old Murphy Road, including all the roads and developments off of it, Wayah Road, and 64 West, come join our meetings. Held at 5:30 p.m. on the first Tuesday of each month at our community center, 3001 Old Murphy Rd near the recycling center, this is the time we make plans for all of our events. Hope to see you there soon! Brenda Elliott can be reached at beejayelliott@aol. com

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Brenda Elliott 828-342-1511, 'Storm brings neighbors together', *Franklin Press, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 B2 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35DE0DA5EB0



Locals criticize emergency management plan

October 16, 2024 | Franklin Press, The (NC) Author: Thomas Sherrill reporter@thefranklinpress.com| Section: News| 723 Words Page: A1 OpenURL Link

Criticism over the emergency management plan at the Macon County Board of Commissioners meeting led to an audience member ejected for verbally lashing out after a commissioner chided their public comment.

During public comment at the Oct. 8 meeting, four speakers spoke about the lack of transparency from Emergency Management during Tropical Storm Helene. Heather Johnson from Otto challenged the county to produce an emergency management plan and said fewer regulations would make the county more resilient.

Local business owner Rick Tarleton talked about how many people used the WiFi at his downtown gym and complimented the people's response to the storm and their needs. Tarleton also wanted to see more robust and transparent policies, and consideration of opening shelters, saying a lot of people were left wondering when help would arrive.

Sarah Johnson from Coweeta said many lives were saved due to the actions of linemen, first responders, guardsmen, and others. Johnson also asked the commissioners to abandon the plan to allow a certain amount of outside fill dirt in the floodplain, saying this area funnels water to the hollers and causes flash floods. Johnson also called for updating the county's topography and floodplain maps. Betsy Baste agreed with what Johnson said and asked the commissioners to keep the floodplain ordinances in place.

After Baste's public comment, Commissioner John Shearl defended emergency services.

"You have to look at these people and say, 'job well done,'" Shearl said, before saying that instead of criticism, people should give a positive response to first responders.

At this, Heather Johnson yelled at Shearl, accusing him of misconstruing their arguments. Board Chair Gary Shields then asked the sheriff to eject Johnson. Right before leaving, Johnson yelled a phrase containing a clear expletive at Shearl. After which, Shearl said they needed to talk to Emergency Services first and give them a pat on the back.

Shields then told the sheriff that Johnson was banned from all future meetings, saying that kind of language belongs in the streets.

Typically, board members are discouraged from responding directly to public comments, and many local governments have that written in their ordinances.

Later in the meeting, Emergency Services Director Warren Cabe acknowledged they could improve and will have an open dialogue.

Shields thanked Cabe for having him in Emergency Services every day during the storm and complimented the team for the work they do.

Cabe gave a full update to the board about the damage. There were between 10 and 15 inches of rain in Macon County. Cabe said since the county was in a severe drought, there was more space for holding water compared to places like Hendersonville and Asheville which had much more damage. Peak winds were around 50 mph on the Highlands plateau.

In total, 57 structures were damaged. Of which, 27 are damaged extensively, "on the edge of unrepairable." Cabe

said there could be more once second homeowners check on their residences.

There were nine water rescues, with six adults and four kids displaced. Downtown Door, operated by the nonprofit No Wrong Door, was open Thursday and Friday nights, housing 19 people on Sept. 26 and 12 people on Sept. 27.

There were six known slope movements, none that caused structural damage. There was one small dam failure, but with minimal impacts and checked out. The height of power outages was around 10, 000 in Macon County, including all 3, 300 people in Highlands, but Cabe said those were cut down pretty rapidly.

There was one death, Macon County Sheriff's Deputy Jim Lau, but no other known injuries.

Cabe said there were 150 pallets of food and 30 pallets of water distributed. Cabe said the Unmet Needs Committee is working to point people affected to the right agencies.

Communication was the major issue, due to both fiber systems running into Macon County being cut. Cabe said both run through different areas and should never be affected concurrently. Cabe said AT&T doesn't know how both were affected, which impacted all WNC counties.

Cabe said the Viper Radio System worked, which he admitted he would have been wrong about when they first bought the radios. "We tried every way in the world to break it," Cabe said of the system.

He said it would have been nearly impossible to communicate with first responders using their legacy system. Overall, Cabe said sometimes it takes bad events for a community to come together and complimented how WNC is stepping up.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Thomas Sherrill reporter@thefranklinpress.com, 'Locals criticize emergency management plan', *Franklin Press, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 A1 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35D9D08E838



New conspiracy theories blow in with storm

October 16, 2024 \mid Franklin Press, The (NC) Section: Opinions \mid 933 Words

Page: A5
OpenURL Link

On a dark Friday night, black helicopters were hovering over Franklin. As the helicopters appeared the sky turned red. "They," (the government) doesn't want the public to know the truth about why the helicopters were circling Franklin nor why the sky was red. "They" know the red sky was not the Northern Lights as scientists claimed. If they were really the Northern Lights, why were they seen in the south? And another conspiracy theory is birthed.

Birds are not real. They are government surveillance drones. The buzzards that roost beginning about 6 in the afternoon in pine trees on a hill behind old Ingles are drones. They circle down to roost and recharge their batteries. "They" want you to believe they are real birds.

Bigfoot, Sasquatch, call it what you will, has convinced people the elusive creature exists. For years people have tried to track it down. Efforts resulting in videos and images emerge of a tall, hairy animal walking upright who left footprints in snow. Several years back in Macon County, some local boys made big feet out of plywood and stomped around the neighborhood with them strapped to their feet. To this day it was proof to some who will always believe it was Bigfoot who lives somewhere off the Appalachian Trail. Back in my home of South Carolina we have the Lizard Man. In the Dark Corner of Greenville County, the "Devil Beast." All this goes along with conspiracy theories which are rampant in the United States and growing wilder the closer we get to the election.

Macon County has had its share of conspiracies. Back in the 1980s there were some folks in the south of Macon County who got it in their minds that the strange markings on the back of traffic signs and the orange circles with blue dots on trees were the directions for United Nations troops coming to invade Macon County. It turned out that the writing on the signs was the date the sign was posted and the orange markings on the trees was the boundaries of a bird study in the National Forest. To this day no one has explained why the United Nations wanted to invade Macon County.

I ran into trouble with the top editor of the Asheville Citizen over a conspiracy story involving black fourengine airplanes spraying something into clouds to create a drought. My role in it began when John Parris, the paper's long-time columnist, told me to go interview a man in Macon County who had told Parris he had seen black airplanes spraying the clouds. I told Parris I was not going to write such a story. Parris told me if I liked working for the paper I would. So, I wrote it.

I found the man sober and living in an isolated hollow. He told me the story. He said that anytime rain clouds appeared these black airplanes would fly over them, spray something and the clouds would disappear. He was convinced the airplanes belonged to the CIA who wanted a drought. If you notice, all machines in conspiracy theories are painted black and belong to secret government outfits.

I wrote the story. It ran on the front page. The next morning, I got a call from the executive editor bellowing "what were you thinking!" After I explained to the editor why I wrote the story I was never again told by Parris to do a story. The front page, however, made the storyteller a community celebrity.

A current conspiracy theory floating around Western North Carolina about Hurricane Helene is that FEMA "geoengineered" the hurricane to grab land to expand lithium mining in Western North Carolina. This made national news stories about conspiracy theories floating around the internet.

Flat Earth believers (there is a Flat Earth Society,) say the line between Earth and sky looks flat. So, they believe the earth is flat. Scientific evidence to the contrary is ignored. Flat-Earthers spend their time inventing weird physics to try to explain how things like gravity and lunar eclipses work because Earth is a flat disk. Many are motivated by religious belief or the desire to see the universe as a more caring, human-centered place.

During the COVID outbreak many in Macon County believed the COVID vaccines contained 5G chips. Some sincerely believed that the very drugs that can be used to treat COVID-19 laced with the 5G chips are transmitting everything we do to "they." Some believe this was spread by COVID deniers. Same with climate change deniers. Many conspiracy believers see the government as the root cause of anything that has gone wrong, and science is not to be believed.

On Christmas Day 2020 a man detonated a bomb in downtown Nashville, Tennessee. He had written a friend about his belief that lizard people walked the planet, disguised as humans. He killed himself, damaged 41 buildings, and injured three in the bombing. He heard a conspiracy theory that lizards had infiltrated human DNA. Sociologists try to explain why so many people believe conspiracy theories. Some say as much as 6% from both Republicans and Democrats believe them. Conspiracy theories can be defined as stories that explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events by means of secret plots between two or more powerful actors. Usually involving a secret government agency.

While actual conspiracies do - and have occurred - conspiracy theories lack any realistic support. Most often, they are built on a foundation of misinformation and misinterpretations of actual happenings and couched to be unfalsifiable. Or so "they" say. Bob Scott is a Franklin writer and photographer. He can be reached at scoopscott79@gmail.com

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• Citation (aglc Style)

'New conspiracy theories blow in with storm', *Franklin Press, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 A5 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35DB4A94ED8



Three in running for Macon County school board seat

October 16, 2024 | Franklin Press, The (NC) Author: Thomas Sherrill reporter@thefranklinpress.com| Section: News| 7976 Words Page: A3 OpenURL Link

Three candidates are vying for the District 4 (at-large) seat on the Macon County Board of Education with incumbent Jim Breedlove facing challengers John deVille and Danny Reitmeier. The Franklin Press conducted inperson interviews with each candidate, asking each one the same questions. Interviews have been edited for brevity and clarity. What should the school board do over the next few years other than the FHS and Highlands projects as they get underway and are completed? Breedlove (interviewed Oct. 14): You always have to look at continuing to improve student achievement, which we have done, I think, in the 16 years I've been there. You continue to expand your programs to benefit the students, such as our CTE (career technical education) program, which we've expanded, our CE (continuing education) program, our EC (exceptional children) program, which is really advanced, and those type things. We continue to take the steps necessary to improve the educational process for our children. East Franklin Elementary can't be built upon per a Macon County Schools site analysis. What do you think the future of East Franklin Elementary should be? What's going on is there's some structural problems with the current existing building. However, if we were able to acquire additional properties, like beside it or other type things, there is still a possibility that you could reconstruct the school on the existing site with that additional property. You're correct right now as far as the inherent problems that we have with the building itself. As you well know, there's a sewer pipe that runs underneath the main hallway and those type things. As it is now, we would not be doing it without the acquisition of additional property. So, we'd have to look at it at some point, work with the commissioners to find another piece of property to look at that school, because it is a growing school. I think it's our second largest one in the county right now as far as elementary school goes. What do you bring to the Board of Education

that will be different? My motto right now is "Experience Counts." So, what I brought to the board now, and if you think of what our current makeup, we have two board members who have less than two years experience. We also have a superintendent that has been on less than two years. I think what I bring is experience to help guide both the board and in collaboration with our superintendent to move the schools forward, and visions of trying to improve the academic success of our students, and look in our system for what truly is in the best interest of the students. What do you think could be changed or improved in the schools' curriculum? If we had the funds and other things where we could break out smarter classes, specialization type classes and more advanced. For example, we have at the high school the advanced classes but there's such a low demand and lack of funds you really can't capitalize and offer the different students other things, shall we say. We do religiously follow the curriculum that state gives us. If we had the funding and other things, I think there'd be ways to offer a larger CTE program, to expand our academic resources at the elementary school, like we have the AG (academically gifted) program there now. And at the high school level also just simply to offer other advanced classes that might help them, especially for those students that are looking to go on to the next level for higher education. What do you think needs to be done to retain and/or recruit teachers in Macon County? The state needs to come up with funding. I think as far as our structure, with our leadership group, with our superintendent, our principals are all excellent, but it still comes down to, money talks in today's world. And as you well know, currently where the state of North Carolina lies in relation to the nation with school salaries or teacher salaries. It's kind of pathetic, to be honest, and much lower than across the board. I think there's a couple of things: you have to, hopefully, raise the pay, and then continue, which I think Mr. Lynch, our superintendent, is doing, to install a mentor program. So as our young teachers come in, you have experienced teachers that can step up and help them learn through that learning curve, especially as a new teacher, which I think would help them understand and be more committed to the system, and hopefully stay with us longer. What do you think about the school budget and are there areas that need to be better funded or areas that could see cuts? I don't really see areas that need cuts. We work within limited budgets now, and so every year we have to sit down for example, on [Oct.] 18th, we're having our capital outlay meeting where we have to go through based on the funding we get and prioritize and decide where those funds would go. So as far as cuts, we

have the smallest central office, I think, for a school system of our size, in the state of North Carolina. We look very zealously at our memberships in schools, make sure we have the adequate teachers we have, but do not overstaff

because we have other areas. So that's one of the things we're talking about with additional funding. We could expand those things. All the way around, it's just money is always an issue. And if the funding comes in, that's one of the reasons for the quarter-cent sales tax, to help us with improvements on capital outlay needs. With improved funding, every school system takes steps forward to better educate the children. How would you go about helping to set the budget and addressing budgetary requests? We go through that budgetary process every year. What you have to do is set the budget, and we don't know until the state, which still uses its formula called ADM as far as funding, but we never really know what that figure is going to be until almost at the beginning of school. We never know for sure exactly what the funding would be from our county commissioners to also help plan ahead for the budget. So, we have to react budgetarily once we actually get an idea of what funding we will have. There's been some talk in the legislature about coming up with a different formula, which I think would be lovely, where the schools would know, like you'd have a percentage. Some of the commissioners talked about where we would have a certain percentage of the commissioners' budget; we get a certain percentage of that for the school each year. We would know exactly what we're going to be getting. So, in the budgetary process, we try to be proactive, but unfortunately, sometimes you have to be reactive based on finding out what the funding amounts we have will be for the coming year. So, budgeting is tough. We have a lot of requests for arts, music and those things. We have to sit and look; we have to address the basic core needs of our students first in our budgetary process, and then based on the other funds, and then we can look at the other auxiliary type programs that we'll hopefully be able to fund and keep moving forward with. Are there policies that need to be addressed or changed? I think policies are always under constant review. Right now we've been going through a very comprehensive review of policies. [Board attorney] Mr. [John] Henning has been bringing changes of policies, especially for the past year. Policies are constantly under review. We're open to requests to review policies. For example, if we have teachers that would come to us and question the policy, the door is open. Come to us and tell us what you'd like for us to reconsider and look at possibly changing. Policies are always in the mix of being reviewed, possible changes, especially in today's changing environment in the educational world. Could you expand on your top three priorities for 2025 through 2028? The first priority is our high school. To me, that was one of my priorities when I first started, when I first was elected back in 2008, and we're finally there. So, I think the high school, looking at all the ramifications of that, has to be one of our top priorities, along with other capital outlay priorities, such as Highlands and other things.

Number one is upgrading our facilities so that we offer the first-class education to our students. The second is continuing to expand through different programming, like our CTE program, our EC programs, all those type things. We have some very capable people in positions, such as our directors, Mr. [Mickey] Noe, Brooke Keener. So, the second part of it is we have to constantly be looking at ways to just make sure that we're continuing to offer the best possible education to the students. And finally, the third one, it's a good one. The third one would be teacher retention. Continuing to look at it, because whenever you're training new teachers, that is a very hard process. There's a lot of money that goes into that, and if you lose them, then you have to start fresh. Look at ways through mentoring and other programs that we continue to retain the teachers that come, and they, in turn, they attain the level, which we have through our system of just excellent, excellent teachers throughout. What should the school board do over the next few years (other than) the FHS and Highlands projects get underway and are completed? deVille (interviewed Oct. 7): First of all, we have got to focus on teacher retention. When I have talked to administrators and I've talked to community stakeholders that's the absolute number one concern. As a county we have done OK relative to Western North Carolina and relative to a lot of the state. But you know the statewide teacher pipeline is horrifically broken and you can go to Western, you can go to Appalachian State, you can go to UNC Asheville and their pipelines have just about dried up. We're going to have to work on affordable housing partnerships with the county and the town and anybody else. We're going to have to improve our work environment. We're going to have to have, if you look at the teacher working survey, we are way down relative to the rest of the state on inclusive decision making, and I would say we're going to have to fight for more money. Now there's two places that you can go for more money. You can go to the county commissioners for money. That's a possibility. My intention would be to lobby the [N.C.] General Assembly harder than what we have currently done. I authored the very first anti-voucher resolution in the state in in 2013. Back then, the voucher was a \$10 million a year proposition. This year it's \$500 million. Voucher expenditures have grown by 5, 000%. We've gone from \$10

million to a half a billion [dollars]. That's money that is being directly funneled out of public education in North Carolina. We're the most unaccountable state when it comes to vouchers, so we need to be going after that money and pushing that money towards our teachers, our teacher assistants, our custodians, our bus drivers and our cafeteria staff. We're going to have to come up with a better prioritization of our capital outlay and current operating expense budget. The Board of Education, in this past budget cycle, handed a capital outlay budget to the county commissioners and the current

operating expense bud- get and they did not prioritize anything. They just said "here's a mess, you sort it out." That is totally unfair to the county commissioners. That is totally unfair to the Macon County taxpayers. The Franklin Press has called for, several county commissioners this year, and county commissioners over the past 20 years have called for quarterly meetings with the Board of Education. I will fight to make that happen. The two bodies, the Board of Education and the county commissioners, have got to work hand in glove. We have got to put all our budget information on the web. So, every single salary, every single dollar that's spent for current operating expense, every single dollar that's spent on capital outlay, that needs to be put on the web so everybody can see it. That fosters trust between the Board of Education and the county commissioners. It fosters essential trust between the Board of Education and the taxpayers. We have got to get rid of these memoranda of understanding that are just gobbledygook. The county has to hire a construction building specialist. When we made the plans to build a new Franklin High School, we had professional people, and it was bloody expensive, but it was money well worth it, to look at each single building and see what was right and what was wrong with every single building. This is how many more years of life it's got and this is the maintenance you're going to have to do in order to prolong that life. We need to go through every single building that is currently under the supervision of Macon County Schools and we need to do that same sort of survey. And when we do smaller construction projects, like the track out at Macon Middle School or the weight room out at Macon Middle School, we need a specialist. I cannot believe that the Board of Education has had to go back to the county commissioners, not once but twice, hat in hand saying "We don't really have our act together here, can you please bail [us] out of this mess." We have not been able to successfully build a track and a weight room, and we are struggling, we are spinning our wheels. Both the Board of Education and the county commissioners are spinning into dirt, pointing fingers at each other on how we're going to do the sewage project at Nantahala, and these are relatively small-scale projects, so we've got to hire an expert to do that. There is a plan to close Bartram Academy and fold that into Franklin High School. I think that is absolutely one of the worst ideas I have heard in 30 years. Those kids are out there for a reason. They need special attention. They need one-on-one. There is, I would call it, a delusion that we can put them back into the building at the new high school and that they are going to be just fine. We've already run this experiment. When we first started Union Academy (now Bartram), we had those kids on campus at Franklin High School and they had to wait for the bus in the morning and they had to come back in the afternoon, and they got into all kinds of mischief. So I would not close Bartram. I would keep it open. The stipulations of the grant for \$62 million that we got says that we've got to close the school. I would strongly advocate to the rest of the board that we close Macon Early

College as a number. The campus can stay open, but the number ceases to exist. That campus exists as a satellite campus of Franklin High School. We can keep MEC. You want to matriculate to more SCC classes out there? Fine, we can accommodate you. We will have to fold those students, that Average Daily Membership (ADM) will have to be folded into Franklin High School's ADM and that will swell our size in terms of an athletic conference. But the same exact thing is going to happen if we close Bartram and we fold them back. The campuses are almost identical in the size of their population. So deVille's plan, you keep Bartram open, you close MEC as a number, but you keep the campus open. We hire an extra administrator for 60 grand a year, we get to have our cake and eat it too. I would have a community mentorship program where we would leverage the community and have mentors from kindergarten going forward. We used to have mentors for all the seniors that were in an English class. We have the resources in this county. We simply have to do the coordination. We can basically create surrogate parents, surrogate grandparents, surrogate aunts and uncles for children who need that type of guidance starting in age five. I want to develop that program. I want to have a mental health program. Almost every single politician in Macon County has provided a tremendous amount of lip service and almost no action on mental health. We're not going to kick the can down the road. We are by God going to do something. And the good news is, is that the model that we need is on the other side of Cowee Mountain. There is a current project, it's called Project AWARE and also called Project ACTIVATE. AWARE stands for Advancing Wellness And Resiliency in Education; ACTIVATE, Advancing Coordinated And Timely Interventions, Awareness, Training, and Education. There is a fantastic working model in

Jackson County. All the kinks have been worked out of the system. Macon County Schools has not done the Youth Risk Assessment Survey since 2014. If we do the Youth Risk Assessment Survey, we will have the data that we need to either go after \$10 million that's sitting untapped in a bank account in Raleigh, or we can go to the opioid fund that's sitting here untapped in Macon County. If we can get the county commissioners to pick Option B for the opioid funds, I've been working with Elke Kennedy and Gracie Parker, and I think we can get that money and we can actually start to fund the five, six, seven mental health professionals that we desperately need that Elke and Gracie have been fighting for, for two years. We had a mental health specialist at the high school, that person doesn't exist. So when we have a kid in crisis, we're not allowed to even treat them. East Franklin Elementary School cannot be built upon per a Macon County Schools site analysis. What do you think the future of East Franklin Elementary School should be? deVille: I don't know. When I don't know, you hire an expert like [LS3P]. You

bring in an architect. If we can't build it on that site, then we work with the county and we identify possible sites for a new school. That's one thing. Or, is there an existing site where we might add on to either South Macon or Cartoogechaye? That's a possibility. You put all your plots of land where you might be able to build, and you get a professional architect to help develop a portfolio of possibilities. What's the most cost effective path to take? And does that possibly intersect with providing the best possible educational opportunities for the students? What do you bring to the Board of Education that will be different? deVille: My slogan has been, "It's time for a teacher." I bring 30 years experience in the classroom. But it's not just, you know, 30 years, but 30 years experience. We just had Helene come through Western North Carolina. And I would argue that teachers are first responders and teachers are the first ones to see the pain. And teachers, like any first responders, we do three things: We assess, we listen, and we figure out problems and then we take action. Teaching is very simple and very hard. It's not complicated, it's just hard. Teaching is getting off screens and working with students in this sort of format. One-onone, oneon-four, one-on-25. So I bring to the table a capacity to vet. I bring to the table a sense of urgency. I had the flashing red light. That's how I see Macon County Schools: in an emergency situation. A lot of people who are currently in office, they don't see it that way because we're better off than, let's say, Swain County or Clay County or Graham County. I don't look around for the lowest common denominator and say that's what we're going to compare ourselves to and we're going to be comfortable with that. I want Macon County Schools to be the best in the state, we set the bar. I bring 30 years as a public education advocate. I'm 2006 Teacher of the Year. You saw me firsthand push for an attendance policy and get it. I started pushing for that attendance policy 15 years ago. Current board leadership did not see urgency. I did. I fought for this high school. I successfully fought with several other people outside the General Assembly in a freezing cold in 2018: the small class size legislation, which would have decimated arts, PE, music and foreign language instruction for elementary kids. I fought unsuccessfully to keep the school tax holiday. I authored the first anti-tax voucher resolution and got it passed here in 2013. I successfully sued the state of North Carolina; there are not a lot of people who can say that. But me and three other people successfully sued the state of North Carolina in 2015 to returning career status. I did that. In the spring of 2018, we were facing massive budget cuts. I said, "Let me have a shot. Just give me the data and give me a shot." And we took the data, put together a really strong organization, and we lobbied the hell out of the county commissioners. And we got them to cough up an extra \$1.1 million in current operating expense. I'm a professional teacher, which means I can professionally educate the public, the taxpayers, the press as to what the issue is. I know how to communicate one-on-one. I know how to stand up in front of a group. I know how to create a website.

I know how to do an infographic. I know how to author and publish a podcast. I know how to create video. So, I bring that to the table. So I bring 30 years in the classroom and 30 years of public education, activism, knowledge, knowing how local government works, how Raleigh works, and how to communicate. What do you think could be changed or improved in the schools' curriculum? deVille: The curriculum is basically set by Raleigh. If the [Macon] Board of Education is being faithful to its mission, as handed to it by the State Board of Education, the state superintendent and the General Assembly, the curriculum is not something that's supposed to be monkeyed with at a local level. I could modify your question and say, how do you better deliver that? And I would say, we have absolutely no mentorship of teachers going on. It's all ad hoc, seat of the pants, winging. We could better deliver curriculum through creating what we had 25 years ago, which was a professional mentorship program. When the state caught all the funding for it back in 2009-2010, it basically evaporated in almost all the LEAs. It wouldn't change the curriculum but modify how we might deliver it. What do you think needs to be done to retain and or recruit teachers in Macon County? deVille: Better work environment, more inclusion in decision making, not just token decision making, and more money. Relative to a lot of counties, I don't think Macon County has a lot of

central office bloat. It might have a little bit. I think that we're probably spending some money on outside programs that we probably don't need. Every single dollar that we spend, I should be able to see that somehow in the classroom. If it's being spent at the central office or being spent anywhere, and there's a way to divert it to the classroom, that's a way to retain teachers. The Board of Education went to the county commissioners back in August or so and said, "Can we have \$200, 000 to provide free lunches for Franklin High School and Highlands?" And the county commissioners gave them that \$200, 000. I'm all in favor of feeding kids. We didn't need to do that though. There's something called the Community Eligibility Provision. It's a federal program, CEP. That program started back in 2014, 2015. If we had started pushing for more breakfast participation the way we currently are this year at Franklin High School, guess what? We wouldn't have had to go hat in hand and ask for that \$200, 000. All those kids at Franklin High School, not Highlands, but all the kids at Franklin High School would have had that and the feds would have picked up that tab, not the Macon County Commissioners. Now, the plan is for next year, because we've got a fantastic assistant principal, Dan Gibson, who is pushing breakfast participation and we've rejiggered our first period schedule, our breakfast participation is through the roof. The high school asked the central office last year, "What can we do to get these kids fed?" And we kept getting different answers and moving goalposts. We never got a clear answer from the central office. If we had had our eye on the ball and a sense of urgency, there's \$200, 000 that we could have either spent for teacher supplements, bus driver supplements, or custodial supplements. What do you think about the school's budget? And are there areas that need to be better funded or areas that could see cuts? deVille: The first thing I'm going to ask for is [for the budget] to be published, let's put all the expenditures. In the past, I've looked at the school budget. It is so arcane. If you look at the budget codes, you can't tell what the money was really spent for because

it's got some arcane code next to it. So I would have to get all of it in front of me. And then I got to sit down with Josh Lynch and Mickey Noe and Todd Gibbs and the other four board members and say "What do we really have to have? What's absolutely mission critical?" Because if it's not mission critical, we need to cut it, OK? Because Raleigh right now has shown no signs of helping us. If it's not mission critical, we need to cut it and we need to put it into teacher assistance, custodian pay, bus driver pay or cafeteria worker pay. How would you go about helping to set the budget and addressing budgetary requests? deVille: It's got to be done collectively. So I sat for over 10 years on the Macon County Academic Foundation. The Macon County Academic Foundation funds small grant requests to classroom teachers. We would get the craziest budget requests, like just for super basic stuff, like construction paper or other things that elementary teachers typically burn through, or a class set of paperbacks. And we would always sit around that table asking ourselves, "Why is that teacher coming to us? How come this very reasonable request, how come it's not already funded?" At the high school there is collaboration between the building principal and teachers. We get typically \$400 a year to figure out how we want to as individuals spend that. And we get asked about, "What do you think as a department or as a school?" My sense is that those same kinds of conversations aren't happening. So more conversations with the teachers. The budget requests should start there. Those conversations are not happening anywhere near the level they should be happening. We should be having those conversations with community members. If you can get more teacher buy-in. If you get more parent buy-in, if you get more business owner buyin, you can get the money. So you sit down with everybody, you figure out what's going to get maximum buy-in, what do the teachers need, and then you make that request. Are there policies that need to be addressed and or changed? deVille: My number one, we have got to change how we hire and provide performance review for coaches. For 30 years, I have seen this county treat coaches in the most shabby manner. It's disgusting. We have got to come up with a way. What are we looking for, as a community, in an athletic coach? How much of it is sportsmanship? How much of it's character development? How much of it is development of athletic prowess? How much of it is development of a particular student athlete so they can be recruited for a scholarship? How much of it is wins and losses? Let's develop a policy for that and then let's do performance reviews. But right now, I just see it all seat-of-thepants politics. Could you expand on your top three priorities for 2025 through 2028? deVille: Teacher retention. I don't know what else I can say there, really. And I don't know what else I can say about prioritization of capital outlay and current operating expense budgets. Other than having these aforementioned quarterly meetings with the county commissioners. We've got to sit down and figure out what's wrong with these MOUs. I can't believe that the two liaison members from the Board of Education and the two board members from the county commission, I didn't know until y'all published the editorial that those meetings hadn't been publicized. Because here's the deal. When there was the same kind of body that was set up to create [Mountain View Intermediate School]. It was a two and two. And they all met in secret. So again, transparency there, more meetings quarterly with

the county commissioners. The community mentorship program. We've got all these seniors that are out there who desperately want to give. We got a lot of retirees who desperately want to give. I think if we create a vetting process, they're going to have to have the background checks, and we're going to have to properly match the mentor with the student. I saw the magic that happened for so many years. Kathy Graham, who was an English teacher at Franklin High School, started the Senior English Project. And if you had been over there on Senior English Project night, which was two nights out of the year, and the mentors are over there and the kids are doing their presentations to a totally outside group, and they're all nervous, nervous, nervous. And when they are done with that presentation, they can walk through fire. Their confidence, their self-esteem, they're floating on air. And what I always thought, this is the last thing that they've done as a student in Macon County Schools. I'm finally in a position to advocate for it. Wouldn't it be cool to start that kind of a program when they're five and six and seven years old, where it's non-competitive, it looks like a science fair, it looks like a history fair, it looks like an English fair, but it's noncompetitive, and it's just giving a kid who's not an athlete a chance to shine? I think Macon County Schools does a damn good job of taking care of its top students. I think Macon County Schools does a damn good job of taking care of a lot of students who struggle. I think Macon County Schools does a fine job of taking care of its athletes. It's the 85% of the kids that are in the middle who don't have that noisy parent out there advocating for them. I want to be that advocate. I want to lead that charge and advocate for that middle 85% that we're doing an OK job with, a mediocre job with, but I really think we could challenge those kids, lift them up, and with the mentorship program, in terms of community mentors and a better professional mentorship, and just challenges to the building administrators and having more community fairs, I think we can lift up that middle 85% and make them feel to be the special kids that they are. There's too many diamonds in a rough that we're letting stay in the rough. What should the school board do over the next few years [other than] the FHS and Highlands projects as they get underway and are completed? Reitmeier (interviewed Oct. 9): I know those are the current ones and those obviously are the big ticket items, but I know there's other needs. I have been doing a tour with all the principals to find the needs of each school, and several capital things have been brought to my attention. So, we have some big ones that you just mentioned that have to be done, completed first, but we can't think that we do those and then we're safe. There are things that at pretty much every school in our county that need attention. So, I think it would be our job to prioritize and then set about taking those. There's a lot to do still. So, we can't just rest on our laurels.

There are other things still waiting in the wings and it's our job to make sure that they get done as well. East Franklin Elementary can't be built upon per a Macon County Schools site analysis. What do you think the future of East Franklin Elementary should be? Reitmeier: So, along with the previous question, I have met with Crystal Parker and she was relaying their needs, which turned into capital needs, of course, space. It's an old building like the high school, had lots of repairs. It's probably tapped out for that. So, again, that comes to us as a board as, all right, let's start figuring out how do we make this work? Another piece of property, where would it be, cost? A lot like they did with the high school. It wasn't, we're going to build the high school on the old spot and nothing else was considered. It wasn't that. It would have to be the same thing with East Franklin. We would have to look at what is the best route, buying another piece of land or whatever the route is. We would have to weigh a lot of options and pick the best one for the school system, for the county, and then move forward with it like we did with the high school. What do you bring to the Board of Education that will be different? Reitmeier: To my knowledge, I'm the only military veteran. That is a unique thing in that some of that training, and I also happened to serve in a combat arena back during Desert Storm over in Saudi Arabia. That prepares you for things in life that everyday life, most people don't get. You are in a very stressful environment. You have to make hard decisions. You have to make quick decisions sometimes, and obviously some can be lifechanging, and it hardens you and prepares you for tough situations. So I think that in itself would be a difference than anybody else in the race. I also know that I'm a people person. I don't meet a stranger. It doesn't matter. I don't care what your race is, what your political affiliation is. It doesn't matter. I can usually connect with you, and I think that's going to help me be a good problem solver. I feel like I'm a fixer, and that personality trait of mine has allowed me to be that in life in a lot of situations, and I think it would play perfectly right into this role. What do you think could be changed or improved in the schools' curriculum? Reitmeier: One of the things I'm talking about is trying to raise the school report card average. I've talked to each principal about it and have vowed that if I get on that board, we're going to attack that and see what we can do to help. And they have committed back to me that if that happens, that we will sit down and we will try to figure out what we can do to improve that. Everybody's not an A student. I know that. I wasn't. Not everybody's A, but I feel like we can improve, everybody should have room for improvement, and I'm willing to put the work in to do whatever it is to

give the teachers the resources they need and the students the resources they need, be it books, computers, time, what we can do to help them. That's our job. What do you think needs to be done to retain and or recruit

teachers in Macon County? Reitmeier: That is a big concern of all the principals. We are all aware, those of us that at least are in this arena, that we have lost teachers, and we're not able to recruit as well as we'd like. I have said that I would commit to coming up with a plan to recruit better. What can we do to attract them? One of the things is going to be that high school. Not everybody's going to come teach at the high school, but it's going to show a commitment that we're willing to do what we have to do for our county, our kids, to give them the best resources, and also those teachers are going to look at that and know that we're committed to doing the best. So, that's one thing. Make sure our schools are in good shape and attractive to come to, but we also have to talk about money. We don't set the money. I know that we as the board do not, but I think it's our job to keep pushing the button and being that squeaky wheel. We're losing them because of pay. Some because of pay. It's not all pay-based, but I know some are leaving because you can go not far away and make a big jump in pay, and we have to be the people that push commissioners and then push the state if we have to. We have to do better. What do you think about the school's budget, and are there areas that need to be better funded or areas that could see cuts? Reitmeier: I understand the structure, but I wish it was more in our hands alone. We go to the commissioners, we present our needs, and they approve or disapprove. I think one thing we would have to do within the budget, and this is another one of my talking points, is there's a real problem with bus drivers, and if we don't get bus drivers to sit in those seats and run those routes, some kids just don't come to school. That's not good, and it's not acceptable. So that is one thing within the budget I think we have to look at. What do we have to do to, again, you talk about recruiting teachers, we need to do the same thing with bus drivers, because we're keeping kids from getting an education. Some people don't have an extra car, or they live too far out, or can't afford the gas, you name it. If they don't get on that bus, they're not coming to school. So that's one thing for sure what I think we need to look at inside that budget, is how do we get and keep good bus drivers, for sure. How would you go about helping to set the budget and addressing budgetary requests? Reitmeier: I would take input from all the schools. I've been to each of the schools, talked to each of the principals, asking "What are your needs?" I think we should revisit them. I think monthly, that may be too much for some people, but things change, you know. I mean, it can change in a blink of an eye. I think we should have monthly meetings with our principals, and ask, "Hey, what's going on currently in your school? Is there anything else that has come up?" And that should help us form our budget needs for the upcoming year. They're coming to us and saying this is what is necessary now, or what has become necessary, and then it's up to us

to go and say, "OK, well we need to present this to the commissioners for our budget." Teacher, staff, parent input is also a talking point in my campaign. Those are the people on the ground. I mean, those are the ones. It's the parents, kids, until they take them to school, and then it becomes the school's kid during the day, and they know what's needed. So I think that's how we have to do it. We have to talk to them on a regular basis, take their input more heavily, more seriously, and then put it into action. Are there policies that need to be addressed and or changed? Reitmeier: There are a lot of policies, I'll say that. And they are currently in a review. I know they've been reviewing them chunks at a time recently, and so they are currently doing that. I'm sure anything can be tweaked. Even though they're doing it now, again, life changes. Something could change tomorrow in a policy they may have just changed or improved or whatever could be changing again. I think that should be a constant motion. They should always be being reviewed, particularly the ones that are brought to us. If somebody brings you, "Hey, what's going on with this policy? I don't agree with it." Again, back to public, staff, parent input, then we should take that seriously and say, "OK, let's take a look at it. Let's talk it out and come up with a plan on how to make it better." Could you expand on your top three priorities for 2025 through 2028? Reitmeier: I have more than three. My priorities are, and there's more, but I will say these. Parent, teacher, staff input. They are the people with the boots on the ground in the trenches every day, and I feel like we have to take them more, not more seriously, but more to heart. They're the ones that know what's going on. We are a board, and we are elected to do a job and make decisions, but we should take their input very seriously and encourage it. One thing I want to say before I go any further, this is not maybe a priority, but didn't come up in question, is I'm a Christian. I believe in God. I believe that Jesus died on the cross for my sins. No question. When I make a decision, I try my very best to feel like he is sitting or standing next to me, and is he going to give me a pat on the back, or is he going to give me a nod of the head like, "You shouldn't have done that." It's very important to me that I am led by that. I don't feel like I fail if I think I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing for Jesus. So that's important. We have to

finish these capital projects. That's a priority. They're out there. Some are being worked on. The groundbreaking is getting ready to happen on the high school. We have to see those through to completion. We have to make sure that they happen, and then, we have to look at the next ones because there's several out there, the things that need to be happening in almost every school, and we have to address those and make it safe, secure, a good place for learning so the kids don't have to worry about any of that stuff, and neither do the teachers and staff. That's two. So three, I would say personnel issues are always going to be an issue, for lack of a better way of saying that, going back to recruiting and retaining teachers. Part of raising the school report card average, like I referred to, is making sure we have good teachers in place. I think all the teachers we have currently are good, good teachers. I think we need to make sure that we give them everything they need. I don't know exactly those requirements, but I'm going to find out and make sure if they say we're lacking in this, that, or the other, let's get that for them. Let's find a way to get that for them. We have got to make our students our top priority. They are, they should be, and in doing that, it's providing them a good place to come to school and give them the best chance to succeed, the best, not average, the best. One of those things I'll say, I met with the CTE instructors, Colleen Strickland and Josh Brooks, a couple weeks ago, and [I'm] very big on that program. That allows students to walk out the door of our high school, trained, certified, to go to work in lots of career fields, because not everybody's going to go to even a two-year school, much less a four-year, for any multitude of reasons. But what they're doing in that program is wonderful, I was blown away. What we're doing to allow them to walk out the door and into career fields is huge. That's serving those kids correctly, and I'm a big fan of that. I'm a big supporter of that and will continue to be. Incumbents Hilary Wilkes (District 1) and Melissa Evans (District 3) are running unopposed to retain their seats on the Macon County Board of Education. District 1 Hilary Wilkes Why do you want to serve on the Macon County Board of Education? (100 words): Serving on the Macon County Board of Education is one of the greatest privileges of my life. We have an outstanding school system, and I'm very

excited about the monumental capital projects we have in the works for our schools. I am eager to continue to serve as a liaison with our county commissioners as we strengthen our partnership and work together to fund critical needs like bridging the gap of state funding for teacher pay and the upkeep of our school structures. What are the top three issues you want to address? (100 words): This funding gap is one of the biggest issues we face as we are consistently underfunded, and resources are being diverted outside of our public school systems. I'd like to continue to work with our representatives in the General Assembly to bridge this gap and 100% fund our system needs. We must work to recruit and retain our teachers and administration, particularly as we compete with nearby counties for talented staff. This involves providing time and resources for professional development, and ensuring our county's supplement for teachers is competitive with those in our region. We have critical infrastructure needs, and this will be an ongoing conversation with our board and the commissioners. District 3 Melissa Evans Why do you want to serve on the Macon County Board of Education? (100 words): It has been a very rewarding experience serving the teachers and children in Macon County. My goal is to make Macon County Schools the best in the state. What are the top three issues you want to address? (100 words): The issues that concern me most are funding for more counselors, arts and music programs. More funds to improve our buildings and security. And incentives to keep teachers in our county.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Thomas Sherrill reporter@thefranklinpress.com, 'Three in running for Macon County school board seat', *Franklin Press, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 A3 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3D35DB00CA0F0>



Fundraising could affect FEMA payouts - Crowdfunding benefits may not be duplicated

October 16, 2024 | Gaston Gazette, The (Gastonia, NC) Author: Lianna Norman; USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA Section: News 891 Words Page: A9 OpenURL Link

For those who lost their homes or belongings as a result of Hurricane Milton or Hurricane Helene, rebuilding and replacing can be daunting.

And there are plenty of rumors flying around about FEMA disaster assistance, which can add a whole other layer of confusion on top of the stress of rebuilding.

Some people affected by hurricanes have made or are considering making a GoFundMe or online fundraiser to help pay for the cost of any damages they have to their home or property. They might be wondering if that interferes with their FEMA eligibility.

The answer: It might. If a person uses crowdfunding or GoFundMe, it isn't likely that they'll be able to receive disaster assistance from FEMA. However, there's still a chance.

According to FEMA's site for mitigating rumors in the wake of Hurricane Helene and Hurricane Milton, FEMA cannot duplicate benefits or funds disaster victims receive from another source. But it depends on the situation.

"If you receive money from a GoFundMe page for a specific disaster-related expense – such as home repairs, funeral expenses or other emergency needs – you may not be able to receive FEMA aid for the same expense," FEMA's website says.

"For example, if you receive donations to clean up storm damage to your home, FEMA may not be able to also grant you financial assistance for home clean up."

FEMA adds, "We encourage all survivors to apply for assistance regardless so we can review your specific case."

There are a wide variety of post-disaster needs that FEMA can help cover – like temporary housing, purchasing a generator or covering costs related to funerals and reburials caused by a storm. Here's a nonexhaustive list of what FEMA money may be used for, provided by the Asheville Citizen Times.

Home repairs

General repairs: Even if there was a preexisting issue with a home, if it receives major damage from Milton, FEMA can provide funds to repair.

Accessibility: Whether a person has a preexisting disability and the accessibility features of their home were damaged, or they suffer a disability caused by Milton, FEMA can fund the repair or installation of features such as ramps, grab bars, paved paths and more.

Privately owned roads, bridges, docks: FEMA will fund these repairs if they are the only access to the home.

Replacement: "Limited funds may be available under rare conditions to replace a disaster-destroyed home," as per the FEMA website.

Housing expenses

Direct temporary housing: Temporary housing units, multi-family lease and repair or direct lease are available to those who have been displaced by flooding.

Displacement: This money helps those displaced by flooding seek immediate housing needs while looking for a longer-term rental.

Personal property: These funds are allocated for replacing essentials lost in flooding, such as kitchen appliances, computers and furnishings, as well as books, uniforms and tools required for school or work.

Moving and storage expenses: If those affected by a disaster wish to store their possessions in a safe place like a storage unit while looking for a rental property, FEMA may assist.

Group flood insurance: If a home suffered flood damage in a Special Flood Hazard Area, FEMA can purchase a group flood insurance policy on the homeowner's behalf. This policy gives three years of coverage.

Clean and sanitize: This pays for minor damages to a home if the FEMA inspector decides that the home remains livable.

Miscellaneous

Serious needs: Funds cover immediate needs like water, food, first aid, prescriptions, infant formula, breastfeeding equipment, diapers, personal hygiene items and fuel.

Funeral: FEMA can assist with payments for funerals and reburials.

Transport: Repairs for a personal vehicle, if there is no other feasible way to get around.

Child care: FEMA can help with new child care expenses caused by the disaster.

It's important to note that "some disaster aid does not have to be paid back, while other types of help may come in the form of loans. The FEMA representative will explain the details to you when you call," FEMA says.

FEMA money can't be used to go to the movies or buy a lottery ticket. FEMA recommends that disaster survivors keep their Hurricane Helene- or Hurricane Milton-related receipts for about three years "to show how you spent FEMA grants and document how your disaster funds were used."

For people who want to use crowdfunding, GoFundMe has set up a general fundraiser with the money going to people impacted by any hurricane. GoFundMe delivers cash grants from this fundraiser directly to those impacted by domestic hurricanes.

The money goes to "verified individuals who qualify and are fundraising for themselves or on behalf of someone else. We may also provide grants to fundraisers benefiting small businesses and community relief efforts, or to vetted nonprofits coordinating long-term recovery," according to the website. Find information at gofundme.com/f/enxh8-hurricane-relief-fund.

GoFundMe also has a landing page for verified nonprofits that are supporting victims of Hurricane Milton, including Team Rubicon, Feeding Tampa Bay, The Red Cross and Americanes at gofundme.com/c/act/hurricane-milton.

Dozens of families impacted by Milton have set up their own accounts on GoFundMe to raise money. GoFundMe has a page for verified fundraisers for people asking for help with replacing and restoring their houses and belongings. Find them at gofundme.com/c/act/hurricane-relief/florida.

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• Citation (aglc Style)

Lianna Norman, USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA, 'Fundraising could affect FEMA payouts - Crowdfunding benefits may not be duplicated', *Gaston Gazette, The* (online), 16 Oct 2024 A9 https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view? p=AMNEWS&docref=news/19C3E25477EE2550>