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rwillett@newsobserver.com



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State treasurer candidates lay out their financial visions

BY LUCIANA PEREZ URIBE GUINASSI
lperez@newsobserver.com

The two candidates vying to become North Carolina’s next state treasurer debated Tuesday night at Greensboro College,

laying out their vision on how the state’s health plan, pension plan and billions in state taxpayer funds should be managed and invested.

Republican Brad Briner laid out a vision that was more narrowly focused on cutting liabil-

ities and growing investments. Meanwhile, Democrat Wesley Harris also called for focusing on economic policy, in addition to the treasurer taking on a more active role advocating for state employees and laying out an economic vision for the state.

This race should matter to “every taxpayer,” because “the treasurer’s office consumes a large and growing share of our state budget every year, a number that continues to accelerate as we deal with the unfunded liabilities of our state pension

plan and our state Health Plan,” Briner said.

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

Briner is a retired financial investor who previously managed the philanthropic assets of former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. He also serves on the UNC-Chapel Hill Board of Trustees. He has a

SEE DEBATE, 14A



ROBERT WILLETT rwillett@newsobserver.com

Property owner David Smyrl and his friend Derrick Greene use a tractor to navigate the devastated Green River Cove on Monday, October 7, 2024, near Saluda, N.C. Flooding from Hurricane Helene destroyed numerous homes and the road in the popular white water recreational area.

Helene rattles the faith of some while others vow to rebuild

BY ADAM WAGNER
awagner@newsobserver.com

SALUDA
Margie Derwort’s friends told her to flee her home during Tropical Storm Helene, worried that the two-story red house the 81-year-old has lived in for almost five decades would be inundated by the heavy rains.

But Derwort and her son, Michael, stayed. They watched as muddy water ran down the steep slope behind the house, running around both sides of it into the front yard.

Then came the knock at the door. It was one of their neighbors, Michael Derwort recalled, clad only in sweatpants. The man was soaking wet and distraught, saying he couldn’t

reach his wife.

It quickly became clear that the home next door, set some ways back from the road, had collapsed in a landslide. The man, who had been downstairs, had somehow been bounced out of a window. After drying off and being given a hoodie, Margie Derwort said, the man quickly moved on to check in on other neighbors.

His wife, who had been upstairs, was killed. A Polk County spokeswoman confirmed the woman’s death to The News & Observer but did not identify her.

Everyone in Western North Carolina has a story about how they fared during Helene, which wreaked devastation

SEE HELENE, 14A

Cooper describes ‘all hands on deck’ Helene response

BY ADAM WAGNER
awagner@newsobserver.com

Gov. Roy Cooper vowed Wednesday that the state government will continue to provide the resources Western North Carolina communities need to recover from Tropical Storm Helene.

“This is a true all-hands-on-deck moment,” Cooper said.

In a wide-ranging briefing, officials touched on a number of topics related to the Helene response.

Notably, Cooper called out the effects of wide-reaching disinformation that has been spreading in Helene’s wake; FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell vowed to keep significant assets in North Carolina even as the agency responds to Hurricane Milton’s impending landfall in Florida; and Cooper called for direct assistance for small businesses impacted by the storm.

“This is a historic disaster, the magnitude of which we have never experienced before in our state. The road to recovery will be long, but North Carolinians are strong and resilient and together we will recover,” said NC Emergency Management Director Will Ray.

Ray described the response to Helene — including other states, the federal government, the

SEE COOPER, 5A

Work begins to restore I-40 through Pigeon River Gorge

BY RICHARD STRADLING
rstradling@newsobserver.com

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

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

The eastbound lanes of I-40 washed out in several places on both sides of the state line.

During a visit to the gorge on Monday, Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee told reporters that work had begun to convert the westbound lanes to two-way traffic while long-term repairs are made.

“We’ll have the road moving in another week or so,” Lee said.

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

That work will take a few

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

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

SEE I-40, 5A



NCDOT

The Pigeon River damaged or destroyed the eastbound lanes of Interstate 40 in several places after the remnants of Hurricane Helene dropped historic amounts of rain on Western North Carolina. This photo was taken about four miles from the Tennessee line.



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