

Next Door

Neighbors

Bluefield State University unveils strategic plan as enrollment growth continues

By CHARLES OWENS
BLUEFIELD DAILY TELEGRAPH

BLUEFIELD — Building on one of the strongest enrollment growth rates among West Virginia’s public four-year institutions, Bluefield State University has unveiled its new strategic plan, “Building the Future Together,” a roadmap that will guide the university’s continued growth and expansion of opportunity for students across southern West Virginia and the broader region through 2030.

Bluefield State recently recorded 7.8 percent overall enrollment growth, continuing a strong upward trend for the university. The institution also led all public four-year institutions in West Virginia in full-time equivalent

enrollment growth at 9.5 percent, while first-time freshman enrollment increased by 37 percent, reflecting growing interest among new students.

Bluefield State University President Dr. Darrin Martin said the strategic plan will help the university build on that progress while strengthening its long-term mission.

“Bluefield State is experiencing a period of renewed growth and optimism,” Martin said. “This strategic plan provides a clear direction for where we are headed and how we will continue expanding opportunity for students while serving the workforce and communities of our region.”

The strategic plan outlines several priorities that will guide the uni-

versity through 2030, including growing enrollment, strengthening student retention and success, enhancing the student experience, ensuring financial sustainability, advancing academic excellence, and investing in faculty and staff development.

University leaders said the plan will also focus on expanding career pathways, strengthening partnerships with employers and community organizations, and aligning academic programs with workforce needs in high-demand fields.

“Our responsibility is not only to educate students, but to prepare them for meaningful careers and leadership in their communities,” Martin said. “This plan ensures that Bluefield State continues to grow



File photo by Tara Wyatt

Bluefield State University has been named a Fulbright Historically Black College and University (HBCU) Institutional Leader for 2025, marking the fifth time the university has received the recognition from the U.S. Department of State.

while staying true to our mission of access, excellence, and student success.”

The plan was developed through a collaborative process involving a diverse committee of faculty, staff, and university leaders who worked together to identify priorities

while staying true to our mission of access, excellence, and student success.”

BSU, E-2

New housing projects underway across Mercer

By CHARLES OWENS
BLUEFIELD DAILY TELEGRAPH

BLUEFIELD — Efforts to develop new and affordable housing across the region are continuing.

Five projects are currently planned across Mercer County to address the region’s housing needs. The Bluefield Arts and Revitalization Corporation is serving as a co-developer on all five of the projects, which includes the ongoing efforts to convert the historic Hotel Thelma in Bluefield into a new 10-unit apartment complex for senior citizens in the city’s East End, as well as the creation of space for a new restaurant.

Work on the Hotel Thelma project got underway in January, and a formal groundbreaking ceremony was held last month.

Brian Tracey, who serves as director of real-estate development for the Bluefield Arts and Revitalization Commission, said U.S. Senator Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., was able to tour the Hotel Thelma construction project in February.

“She asked a lot of insightful questions,” Tracey said of Capito.



Contributed photograph

Ground was broken Feb. 26 on the Hotel Thelma project in Bluefield. Brian Tracey, who serves as director of real-estate development for the Bluefield Arts and Revitalization Commission, said U.S. Senator Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., also toured the Hotel Thelma construction project in February.

“Clearly she understood what we are doing at the property. We also had the opportunity to tell her what this project will bring to the community. Affordable housing for seniors, specifically designed for that age group. We

walked her through all of those design features. She was very impressed with the design that we’ve developed, and also spent some time in what used to be Thelma’s Cafe.”

The old Hotel Thelma is a historic landmark

in the city that served Black travelers during the days of segregation.

In all, 24 different funding sources are helping to transform the historic landmark into the new senior apartments, Tracey said. That’s up from

the original 19 funding sources when the project began in January.

In addition to Hotel Thelma, two other housing projects are planned in Bluefield, along with a fourth in Princeton and a fifth in Bramwell. Each project was

awarded a \$1.5 million grant from the Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh’s Affordable Housing Program.

Tracey said if all goes as planned, BARC and its co-developers are hoping to begin work on the remaining four

HOUSING, E-2



AMERICA'S 250 BEST HOSPITALS 2026

LEADING HEALTHCARE

in the Two Virginias

Princeton Community Hospital























BSU

Continued from E-1

that will guide Bluefield State's next phase of growth.

Amanda R. Matoushek, PhD, Dean of the College of Arts, Education, and Social Sciences and Professor of Psychology at Bluefield State University, served on the committee and said the document reflects the university's broader commitment to developing well-rounded graduates while strengthening the institution itself.

"This strategic plan reflects the true nature

of Bluefield State, supporting development of our students academically, civically, and ethically, preparing them to make impactful change locally and globally," Matoushek said. "All of the strategic priorities are interconnected, providing not only improved student outcomes, but a sustainable future for BSU by investing in faculty and staff development so we can continue innovating our methods to remain on the cutting edge of academic excellence."

The strategic plan also emphasizes collaboration across the uni-

versity and engagement with alumni, community partners, and industry leaders to support long-term institutional growth.

"Building the Future Together reflects exactly what this moment requires," Martin said. "It is a shared vision that calls on our entire campus community to work together as we strengthen Bluefield State University and help shape the future of our region."

University leaders said the plan is also designed to strengthen Bluefield State's role as an economic and

workforce partner for southern West Virginia and the surrounding Appalachian region. By aligning academic programs with emerging industries and expanding pathways for traditional and nontraditional students, the university aims to help meet workforce demand while creating new opportunities for students and families across the region.

The strategic plan focuses on six key priorities designed to guide the university's growth and impact:

- Grow Enrollment through expanded recruitment and new path-

ways for traditional and nontraditional students

- Strengthen Student Retention and Success with improved advising, first-year programs, and support services

- Enhance the Student Experience by increasing engagement opportunities and strengthening career readiness

- Ensure Financial Sustainability through diversified revenue, expanded fundraising, and responsible budgeting

- Advance Academic Excellence by aligning programs with workforce needs and supporting faculty innovation

- Invest in Faculty

and Staff Development through training, mentorship, and professional growth opportunities

Bluefield State University, founded in 1895, is dedicated to providing affordable and accessible pathways to higher education through certificate, associate, bachelor's, and master's degree programs while preparing students for meaningful careers and lives of service.

The full "Building the Future Together: Strategic Plan 2025-2030" can be viewed on the Bluefield State University website at www.bluefieldstate.edu.

HOUSING

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projects soon.

"It's possible that all four could start construction this year," Tracey said.

The largest of the four developments is a housing project planned on Duhring Street in Bluefield, not far from city hall, that calls for the construction of 10 new single-family homes. It is a home ownership project with the newly constructed houses then being sold to income qualified buyers. BARC is a co-developer on that project along with the Bluefield Land Bank, according to Tracey. BARC is still looking to raise additional funding for the project, but officials are hoping to start construction on the development this year.

Tracey said BARC and the Bluefield Land Bank are currently working to document all of the funding sources lined up for the Duhring Street project, including the Federal Home Loan Bank of Pittsburgh and the West Virginia Housing Development Fund.

"So all of that is pre-work before we really put the shovel in the ground," Tracey said. "And of course hiring a civil engineer to do soil tests. Everything preparing for the starting structure."

The second Bluefield project calls for the transformation of the former Traveler's Hotel

in Bluefield into an 11 unit affordable apartment complex while also providing space for retail and commercial development on the first floor of the structure. The old Travelers Hotel on Raleigh Street is located adjacent to the Raleigh Street Cinemas. The hotel was originally a Green Book property during the 1930s and 1940s. It was later converted into an office building and offered some dining in the 1980s. The structure is currently vacant.

Once completed, it will benefit people who work downtown, including employees of Alorica/Intuit, who may be looking for a place to live close to their job. Those living in the apartment complex also will be able to walk to the Raleigh Street Cinemas, the Granda Theater, the RailYard restaurant and other downtown attractions.

Tracey said officials are working to finalizing funding sources before construction begins on the Traveler's Hotel project.

The third project to receive a \$1.5 million Affordable Housing Program grant is located in Princeton and will be called the Easley Clark McConnell Apartments. BARC is partnering with Mountain Acres Properties, Inc., a church non-profit that comes out of the United Holy Church of America denomination on the development. The goal is to develop housing for senior



Contributed photograph

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citizens in the area.

The fourth project seeks to convert the former Pence Hotel in Bramwell into 10 affordable apartments to serve both senior citizens and those working in the ATV hospitality industry. BARC is partnering with the Bramwell Foundation on the Pence Hotel project.

"And of course BARC has partners on all but one of the projects," Tracey said. "The Traveler's is BARCs alone."

According to the individual project summaries, the Travelers Hotel Apartments project will preserve and renovate an historic Green Book hotel at 602 Raleigh Street in downtown Bluefield, adjacent to the recently reopened and restored historic Granada Theater. The project will create 11 affordable, healthy, and safe studio

and one-bedroom apartments targeting individuals working in downtown Bluefield and one commercial/retail bay on Raleigh Street. The project is designed to benefit low- and moderate-income residents of Bluefield, particularly individuals who work in the city's downtown.

The Duhring Street Homeownership project will use vacant land owned by the city of Bluefield's Land Bank to build 10 new single-family homes for sale to first-time homeowners and other income-qualified buyers. The homes will be built on city-owned parcels on Duhring Street and Mercer Street. The sites were chosen based on their proximity to services and amenities (grocery stores, pharmacies, health care, transportation,

churches, schools and entertainment); their suitability for development (topography and access to utilities); and readiness to proceed. The project is a short two-block walk from the site of Bluefield's largest employer, Alorica/Intuit, which has 350 employees. Two types of single-family homes will be built: seven two bedroom, two bathroom homes with 1,035 square feet of living space and three bedroom two bathroom homes with 1,435 square feet of living space.

According to the Easley Clark McConnell Apartments project summary, it will create 10 affordable apartments for seniors in Princeton. The project will consist of newly constructed one-story apartments, in multiple buildings, built on vacant land, which was previously the site of the historic Dunbar School. The project's location is nearby to grocery stores, restaurants, health care services, and opportunities for recreation and entertainment.

The Pence Hotel project will convert the historic Pence Hotel on Main Street in Bramwell to 10 affordable studio and one-bedroom apartments. The Pence building will also include a first floor retail/commercial bay, with a medical clinic identified as the desired use for the space. The apartments will target seniors as well as workers in the ATV-related hospitality business.

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Courtesy photo/Mercer County CVB

Top: Brush Creek Falls. Bottom: Tourism continues to be a major economic driver in Mercer County, generating more than \$219.56 million in visitor spending and supporting more than 1,656 jobs, according to data recently released by the Visit Mercer County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Tourism growth continues in Mercer County with record visitor spending

BLUEFIELD — Tourism continues to be a major economic driver in Mercer County, generating more than \$219.56 million in visitor spending and supporting more than 1,656 jobs, according to data recently released by the Visit Mercer County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The figures highlight continued growth in the county's tourism sector and ongoing marketing efforts by the Visit Mercer County Convention and Visitors Bureau to attract travelers to southern West Virginia.

Visitor spending in Mercer County has increased by more than 50% since 2019. Officials say travelers now bring more than \$600,000 into the local economy each day. The industry also generated \$20.19 million in com-

bined state and local tax revenue, which officials estimate saves local households about \$827 annually in taxes.

"Our mission is to create economic growth by promoting Mercer County as a destination," said Jamie Null, executive director of Visit Mercer County CVB. "Tourism continues to strengthen our communities, support local businesses, and highlight the natural beauty and culture that make Mercer County uniquely Appalachian."

Investments aimed at improving visitor experience

The Visit Mercer County CVB has also continued investing in projects aimed at improving the visitor experience and strengthening local tourism assets.

Recent projects include restoration of the

Almost Heaven Swing at East River Mountain Overlook, a popular scenic attraction frequently photographed by visitors, and development of a new visitor center intended to help travelers plan trips and explore local attractions.

Officials say the improvements are intended to enhance access to the county's scenic overlooks, outdoor recreation opportunities and small-town attractions.

Website redesign boosts trip planning tools

Tourism officials also point to growth in digital engagement following the redesign of the Visit Mercer County website, which focuses on accessibility and trip planning resources.

The site recorded more than 317,000 active users and more than 360,000 sessions,



Courtesy photo/Mercer County CVB

Tourism continues to be a major economic driver in Mercer County, generating more than \$219.56 million in visitor spending and supporting more than 1,656 jobs, according to data recently released by the Visit Mercer County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

according to the CVB. Improvements included accessibility features for users with assistive technologies, along with mobile performance upgrades and improved navigation.

Data from the bureau shows the website generated 4,986 travel guide requests, 633 newsletter subscriptions and 43,932 referrals to local tourism partners and businesses.

National exposure increases through media and social platforms

Visit Mercer County's digital marketing and social media campaigns also expanded the county's national reach. Tourism videos and social media posts highlighting outdoor recreation, waterfalls and local attractions generated more than 4.5 million views across platforms.

Public relations efforts resulted in 231

media placements across more than 75 outlets, generating an estimated \$331 million in editorial value, according to the CVB.

Mercer County tourism was featured in publications including Southern Living, Forbes, Blue Ridge Outdoors, Matador Network, WV Living and Only In Your State, along with other travel and lifestyle publications.

Work underway on key projects across area

By CHARLES OWENS
BLUEFIELD DAILY TELEGRAPH

PRINCETON — Work is now well underway on a number of key projects for the region, including Princeton's new wave pool and Bluefield's transformative Safe Streets for All transportation project, among various other regional developments.

In Princeton, the bath house and mechanical room that will serve the wave pool are now under roof. Warm weather, including several days of 70 degree readings earlier this month, allowed construction crews to make significant progress on the project.

The wave pool and aquatic facility project are on schedule with officials still eyeing a grand opening date to coincide with the Fourth of July, Princeton City Manager Mike Webb said.

In the meantime, work continues on the bathhouse, concession area and mechanical room, all of which are being handled by Swope Construction Company of Bluefield. A second contract was awarded for the actual wave pool, which is being built by Aquatic Builders Ltd of New York.

"The main thing is that again they're on schedule," Webb said. "It is going to be something that not only Princeton can enjoy but Mercer County, the surrounding counties and really the region. Whether it'd be from Blacksburg over or Wytheville up you've got a true regional tourism draw type of product that is coming together here, and that's why we want to make sure that everybody has a chance to enjoy it. Families can come in, you can have food while you're there. You can get drinks while you are there. You can enjoy the sunshine as we build out the dog park and the walking trail and the other amenities around it. It really makes it a full day of things you can do in Princeton."

The wave pool project is being funded through a \$4 million bond issue, which is being matched with an additional \$475,000 in city funds.

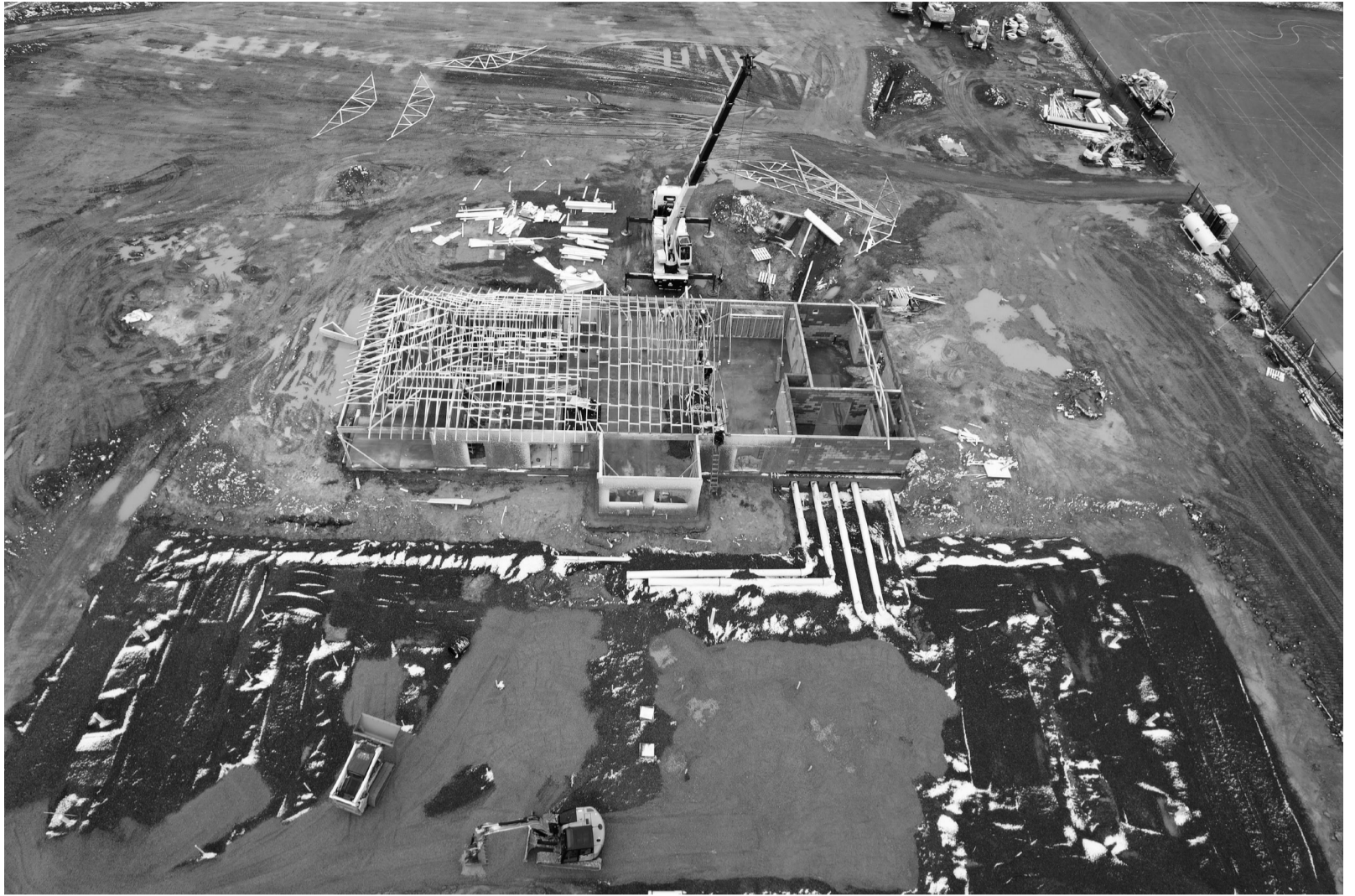
Wave pools are swimming pools which create artificial waves. The aquatic facility is being constructed in the field behind the Princeton Towers, not far from the existing city hall complex off Bee Street.

Work got underway on the new wave pool and aquatic center last fall, and the two contracts on the project called for a 160 day construction schedule. While the snow, ice and cold temperatures in January and February did impact the ongoing work, Webb said construction crews were able to make significant progress once temperatures warmed up.

The city is hoping to have the wave pool open in time for the Fourth of July, which is always a big day in Princeton with a variety of musical shows and activities, as well as fireworks.

But this year's Fourth of July gathering will be even bigger since it coincides with the U.S. Semiquincentennial celebration observing America's 250th anniversary.

Already a number of events are being planned in the city to coincide with the expanded patriotic celebration this year, including a performance by "Slippery When Wet – The Ultimate Bon Vib Tribute" show that will perform at 8 p.m. on the evening of July 4th along with three opening acts, the city announced earlier



Staff photo by Charles Owens
The unseasonably warm weather the region experienced earlier this month has allowed construction crews to make significant progress on Princeton's new wave pool and bath house project with both the walls and roofing on the bath house now going iup.

this month.

The wave pool and aquatic facility are being developed along a 11-acre tract of land that was donated to the city of Princeton by the Preservati family. In addition to the wave pool and bath house, several multi-purpose fields also are being developed at the site along with a new dog park.

The first multi purpose field will be ready for the public, and area schools, to utilize later this spring, according to Webb.

Hydroseeding and grading work was completed last fall at the site of that first multi-purpose athletic field, which Webb said will be available for area schools, community groups, organized leagues and the general public to use.

Work on a second multi-purpose athletic field — at the same 11 acre site — is expected to begin later this summer.

In the neighboring city of Bluefield, design and engineering work got underway in early March on the \$31 million Safe Streets for All project, a federally funded initiative that has been more than two years in the making.

City Manager Cecil Marson announced during the March 10 meeting of the Bluefield Board of Directors that engineers were now on the ground in Bluefield working on design plans as well as right-of-way assessments for the Safe Streets for All project.

The transportation improvement plan for the city is being funded through \$25 million in federal dollars and \$6 million in state funds.

"We're just excited to finally get it under way, and I think it will be really great," Marson told the Daily Telegraph after the March 10 meeting. "As we get through the summer folks will start seeing some renderings, and some real designs of what the roads are going to look like, and the sidewalks and the streetscapes, which I think everyone will be really excited about. It's going to really change the way these streets look, and the way folks have access in the bike lanes and things like that. So I'm really, really excited to get this thing rolling."

The actual construction probably won't start until next spring, according to Marson.

"You're not going to see shovels and grounds being torn until spring



Staff photo by Charles Owens
The unseasonably warm weather the region experienced earlier this month has allowed construction crews to make significant progress on Princeton's new wave pool and bath house project with both the walls and roofing on the bath house now going iup.

of next year," Marson said. "So right now, a lot of the engineering and work with utilities and the environmental is underway as we speak."

Engineers with CTL engineering and AECOM engineering are working with the city on the Safe Streets for All project, which focuses on College Avenue, Stadium Drive and U.S. Route 52.

The project will specifically convert four of Bluefield's key intersections to roundabouts, create pedestrian and bicycle accommodations through a strategic mountain gap, and make safety improvements that include implementing traffic-calming strategies and installing sidewalks, crosswalks, rectangular rapid-flashing beacons, and street lighting on selected corridors, according to the project's description. Locations for Safe Street projects range from College Avenue, Stadium Drive, Cumberland Road, Princeton Avenue, U.S. Route 52 and other roads in the city along with the intersection connecting Cherry Street, Maryland Avenue and Stadium Drive.

As for the planned roundabouts, two of them will be on College Avenue and one at U.S. Route 52 near Hill Avenue and the entrance to Bluefield State University.

The Safe Streets for All project isn't to be confused with the \$1.25 million federally-funded Reconnecting Communities project, a

similar transportation improvement initiative that calls for an overhaul of roads and sidewalks in the city's East End area.

The Reconnecting Communities plan focuses on an area of the city that begins near the entrance of Bluefield State University and from there extends through the northeast end of Bluefield past the Grant Street Bridge and toward Hotel Thelma, a local historic landmark that is currently being converted into apartments for senior citizens with room for a restaurant.

The planned pedestrian sidewalks for Bluefield State University students traveling from the former Bluefield Regional Medical Center site to the main university campus is also a part of the Reconnecting Communities project.

In addition to the Safe Streets for All and the Reconnecting Communities projects in Bluefield, planning also is continuing for a \$13.4 million transportation project in the city that will allow for the replacement of the archaic Midway Tunnel and the construction of a new overpass bridge and pedestrian and bicycle walkway above the flood-prone tunnel.

In 2023, U.S. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va. announced a \$13,480,000 award for the city of Bluefield through the Rural Surface Transportation Grant Program, a component of the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act leg-

islation, which will allow for the replacement of the Midway Tunnel and the construction of the new overpass bridge and pedestrian and bicycle walkway above the tunnel.

Marson said planning for the Midway Tunnel project is continuing.

Another project envisioned by Bluefield also is in the planning stages, and will actually be developed outside of the city limits on land owned by Bluefield near Kee Dam and the King Coal Highway construction site.

Marson also announced at the March 10 city board meeting that a boundary survey of the land owned by the city near Kee Dam had been completed.

The project planned on that property is expected to be connected to the region's ATV tourism industry, and may include a housing component for ATV tourists.

In the neighboring town of Bluefield, Va., remediation work will be getting underway soon on two downtown properties that are being renovated for new business use.

The town sought bids for remediation work earlier this year on the former Bank of Graham building and the former Graham Jewelry building.

Both structures are currently owned by the town, but the building that once housed the former Bank of Graham is being sold by the town. It is located at the corner of Spruce Avenue and Virginia Street. As its name implies, the

two-story structure was once a bank, but it is currently vacant.

The Bank of Graham will be sold by the town to a private entity once the remediation and renovation work on the two-story structure is completed, according to Bluefield, Va. Town Manager Andrew Hanson.

The former New Graham Jewelry building will undergo remediation work and then renovations with help from a \$245,000 Industrial Revitalization Award from the state and a \$250,000 grant award from the Virginia Tobacco Commission. The Bluefield, Va. Industrial Development Authority is working to restore the 4,000-square-foot building into a modern commercial space capable of supporting two new businesses. The first floor of the building will be designed for retail or dining use, while the second floor will be converted into a communications lab.

Hanson said discussions are continuing with Bluefield University for the second floor of the structure and the search for a restaurant for the first floor continues.

"On the Graham Jewelry building, we would like to partner with Bluefield University for them to have space for their students on the second floor," Hanson said in an earlier interview. "We are still hoping for a restaurant (on the first floor)."

Contact Charles Owens at
cownens@bdtonline.com

Beaver, W.Va. teen wins state's first-ever "I Voted!" Sticker Contest

By Eric Cravey
BLUEFIELD DAILY TELEGRAPH

BECKLEY — It's not often that a middle schooler's artwork ends up on thousands of pieces of clothing, but that is the new reality for Reese Childers, of Beaver.

The Shady Spring Middle School eighth grader is the winner of the West Virginia Secretary of State's first-ever "I Voted!" Sticker Contest. Reese's work was selected from art submitted by more than 1,100 eighth grade students from 42 West Virginia counties. The 42 first-place winners were separated into four regional contests. On Feb. 17, Secretary of State Kris Warner named Childers one of four Regional Winners who would then also serve as finalists for the statewide award.

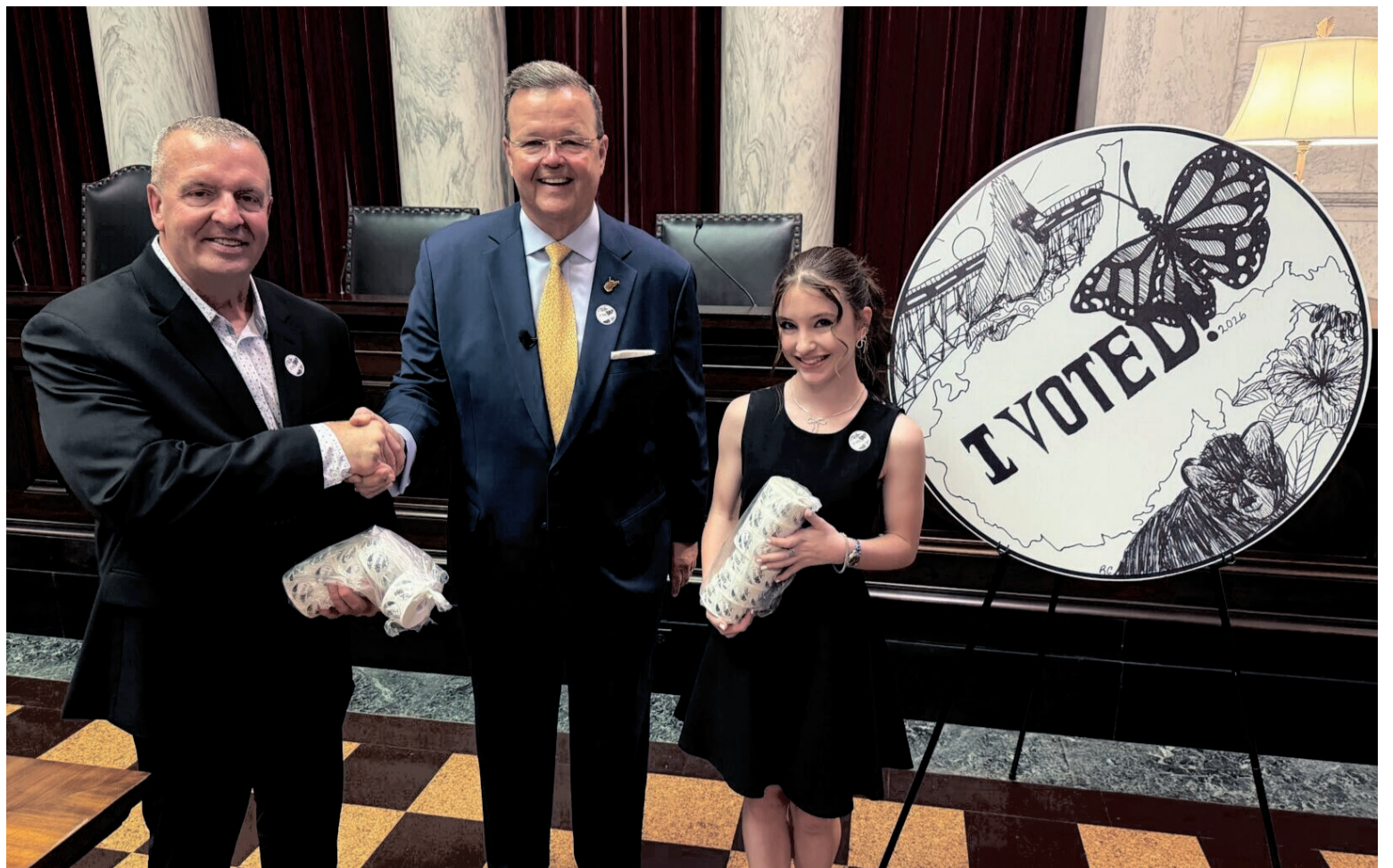
Reese learned about the contest in her West Virginia Studies class and, having been an accomplished artist whose award-winning work was displayed at Tamarack in 2025, she knew immediately what she wanted to draw for her contest entry.

"Typically when I set my mind to something, my brain just rushes with, like images or ideas of what I usually want to do, and it's hard for me to change from that," she said. "So, I knew right there on the spot what I was going to put in the sticker drawing. And I rushed home, and I started doodling and sketching it out."

Childers has been exposed to art and creative pursuits since she was born as her mother, Crista Childers, teaches art at Shady Spring Elementary. She was also Reese's fifth grade art teacher.

"She just has such a natural gift for it. She's very talented, and it's just something she's always doing," Crista Childers said. "And she's always like, doodling on her hand, doodling in her binder, drawing in a sketchbook. You know, just everything is just like, she said, in pictures to her."

Contestants were limit-



From left, Raleigh County Clerk of Court Scott Van Meter, W.Va. Secretary of State Kris Warner and Reese Childers, winner of the first-ever "I Voted!" Sticker Contest held by Warner's office. Van Meter and Childers are holding rolls of "I Voted!" stickers made with her original artwork.

W.Va. Secretary of State Office

ed to using three colors, but Reese chose to use black. The sticker, which will be given to voters statewide in the May Primary, could be placed on lapels all over West Virginia. After all, she used some of the Mountain State's most precious icons to promote the civic duty of voting.

"Well, my sticker showcases all of the state symbols for West Virginia, like the black bear, the monarch butterfly, the state outline, New River Gorge Bridge, the red Cardinal, the Rhododendron and the honey bee," Reese said. "So really, it's just, it's kind of some of them have bright, vibrant colors, but a lot of them also have lots of black in them."

Even though Reese's West Virginia Studies class included a lesson on civics and why it is important to vote in a democratic society, she has had

similar lessons in such duties previously. Her grandfather Sam Suttle, of Beckley, has served for years as an election poll worker. When he found out she was a finalist for the contest, he became her biggest cheerleader.

"I put it on Facebook. I told everyone I knew," Suttle said. "I worked in the public for years, and I knew a lot of people, so anyone I saw, I would show the artwork and say, 'She's in this contest. And these are 'I Voted!' stickers. So if you would look for I'd appreciate it.'"

From Feb. 17 until 4:30 p.m. on Feb. 27, the general public was allowed to vote online for their favorite of the four designs. Warner's office said 15,947 votes came in during the 10-day period.

As the winner of the contest, Reese took home a plaque featuring her artwork, while

Raleigh County Clerk Scott Van Meter took home 11,000 stickers featuring Reese's design.

Warner presented Reese the award on March 11 after his office hosted a forum dubbed "Civic Learning for a Stronger West Virginia." The forum and the press conference were held in the Chambers of the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals at the State Capitol.

During the ceremony, Reese became the first person to use one of the stickers she designed as she placed it on her grandfather's lapel.

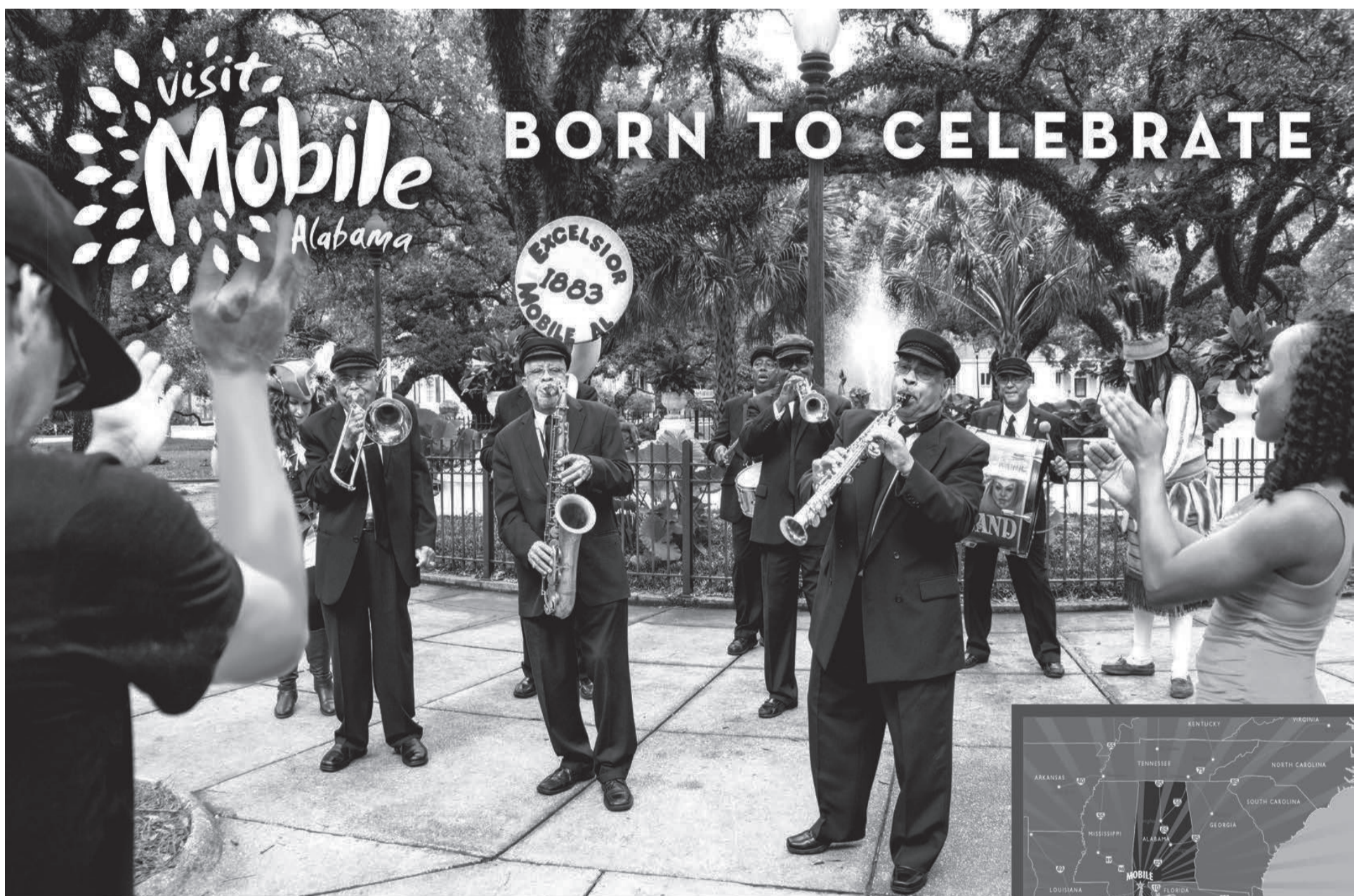
"Oh, that was a highlight for me that day. I mean, to think that I got the very first sticker that was to go on people's lapels after they voted, a symbol that, you know, saying, 'I voted in a West Virginia election,'" Suttle said. "I mean, it was very flattering."

Suttle characterized Raleigh County voters as committed and said the County Clerk's Voter Registration staff takes a lot of pride in increasing the number of voters each year.

"I mean, they're very, very excited about the fact that the winner of this contest is from Raleigh County," Suttle said. "And I think the people that vote in Raleigh County will be excited to know that they're wearing a sticker that was created by someone from this area."

And while art and civic duty are not often paired together, Reese hopes her sticker design will make people think differently.

"And, judging by my sticker, it may change people's minds, to maybe get out more and do more hikes and see the natural beauties we have out here," she said.



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Neighbors

Up Country Roads

Folklore and art unite in Fayetteville

By Riley McCoy
CNHI WEST VIRGINIA

FAYETTEVILLE — Cryptid Weekend shrouded the gorge in mystery March 7-8 as folklore, art and downtown businesses united around West Virginia's legendary creatures.

Cryptid Weekend, organized and operated by the Visit Fayetteville visitors center, served as a community-wide folklore event centered in downtown Fayetteville. The festival used familiar figures such as Bigfoot and Mothman as a cultural framework to pay homage to the history of hill-inspired folklore.

Local shops, galleries and restaurants participated in a themed art walk and festival crawl, while additional programs included a cryptid art exhibition, scavenger hunt, youth cryptozoology activities and guided tours connected to local history.

Stories of that history, like those shared over the weekend, have long circulated across Appalachian communities. Les O'Dell of Appalachian Ghost Tours recalled one such ac-

count connected to Bigfoot sightings in West Virginia.

"One story from the 1970s involved a man watching his nephew cross the yard to a cellar when an arm covered in red hair reached around the house like it was going to grab the boy," O'Dell said. "The uncle ran outside with a shotgun, but whatever it was disappeared before he reached the corner."

Regional paranormal groups also participated in the event — including Appalachian Ghost Tours, which organizes paranormal and storytelling experiences throughout southern West Virginia.

Founder Pamela Huff said the organization began as a way to preserve local legends that might otherwise fade from memory.

"We started Appalachian Ghost Tours because there was so much history here and so many stories that people didn't know about," Huff said. "At first it was just small walking tours and storytelling. Over time it grew as more people became interested in the paranor-



Mandy Petry and Trina French were two of the many cryptozoology enthusiasts who dressed up to pay tribute to the region's folklore and history.

mal and local legends."

Visitors joined in the folklore celebration as well. Mandy Petry of Cannelton arrived dressed as another legendary West Virginia creature.

"I am dressed as the Flatwoods Monster, or the Braxton County Monster, or as people call it, Braxy," Mandy Petry said. "Around about the '60s in Braxton County, some people started seeing what they thought was some kind of being with a red

spade-shaped head and a green kind of almost dress-like metal."

Petry added that "they didn't know if it was aliens or if it was military" and that the Flatwoods Monster "has become one of West Virginia's classic cryptids."

Karen Douglas, a visitor center associate with Visit Fayetteville, said the event marked the beginning of a new local festival.

"This is our first one," Douglas said.

"We're always looking for good ideas for what we call the offseason when there aren't as many outdoor visitors."

The original concept focused on a single creature before expanding into a broader folklore theme.

"Someone suggested doing a Bigfoot festival, but we already have one fairly close by, so we decided to open it up to all the cryptids," Douglas said. "We thought it was going to be a smaller event, but after we

announced it we got so much interest."

Douglas said organizers are already considering how the event could grow in future years.

"If it continues to grow, we might eventually have to close down part of downtown for it," Douglas said. "We're hoping this becomes something we can do every year."

Reach Riley McCoy at 304-254-2080 or email at rmc-coy@register-herald.com.



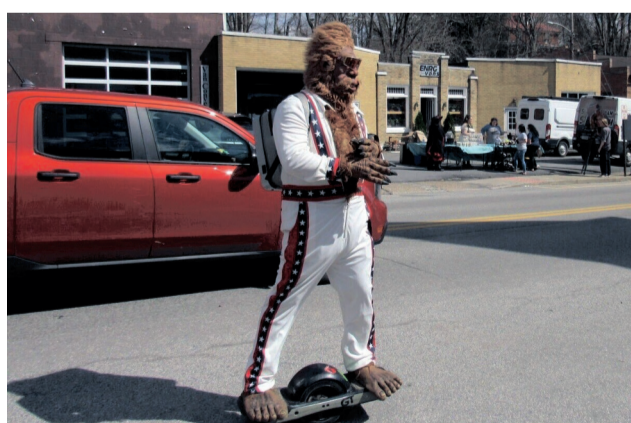
Madison Yancy, of Twisted Willow in Beckley, poses next to Logan Broysals at Dr. Jekyll's Institute of Monster Studies, founded by Greg Popovich.



Donner and Burson Seyffer of Conjure Dust Designs show off their wares as one of the many vendor booths that lined the sidewalk last weekend.



Karen Douglas from Visit Fayetteville shows off the Ogua, an Appalachian cryptid with reported sightings along the Monongahela River.



Big Foot, or Sasquatch, rolled down main street in Fayetteville on Saturday at the Cryptid Weekend hosted by Visit Fayetteville.



The staff from Appalachian Ghost Tours, left to right: Pamela Huff, Skyelin Walls, Les O'Dell, Morgan Lambert, Theresa Racer and Eric Lambert.



Bethany Hildebrand dressed up as the Mothman Saturday where she said the event reflected the region's deep connection to folklore.

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Recreational opportunities blossom in Oak Hill

By Steve Keenan
CNHI WEST VIRGINIA

OAK HILL — Venture outside, play and explore.

Oak Hill is offering myriad opportunities for citizens and the general public to do just that, and the city has been recognized for its efforts.

At the inaugural West Virginia Outdoor Economy Summit staged in February at the Charleston Coliseum and Convention Center by the Charleston CVB and hosted by The Nature Conservancy and the WVU Brad & Alys Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative, the City of Oak Hill was recognized for its work on the development of Needleseye Park, a 281-acre park which features mountain biking and hiking trails, numerous bouldering and rock climbing opportunities, a disc golf course and other amenities.

During the summit, the city was awarded the 2026 Outdoor Recreation Project Achievement Award to recognize the work that has been completed by the city and its partners for the Needleseye Park endeavor.

According to the summit website, the well-received gathering marked the state's first cross-sector effort to harness the momentum of a \$2.1 billion outdoor economy. Leaders from the tourism, conservation, recreation, entrepreneurship and community development sectors convened to share ideas and make plans expected to steer West Virginia's outdoor future.



The City of Oak Hill, New River Gorge Regional Development Authority, New River Alliance of Climbers, Fayette Trail Coalition and the WVU Brad and Alys Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative welcomed visitors to a special opening celebration event on Oct. 21, 2025 for Needleseye Park. Various stakeholders helped cut the ribbon that day.

Josh Sapio, Oak Hill's parks and recreation director since 2024, said the award was a team effort.

"It was a great recognition of the hard work that we did to make Needleseye Park a reality," says Sapio. "It was certainly a culmination of effort between several individual organizations, so it was not just us."

"Within the City of Oak Hill, everybody was involved," he added. "The street department, sanitary department, parks and recreation, city council, GIS department — all of these different departments came together to create

and accomplish all the work that had to be done.

"It really was a lot of work and effort, and it was a great recognition within that statewide summit."

The Needleseye project so far has been wide-ranging, including trailhead development and construction of 7.5 miles of smooth surface, multi-use trails, a secondary gravel parking area, ADA accessibility, a timber guardrail encompassing the entire trailhead area, drainage work, a two-stall restroom facility and informational kiosks. A popular 18-hole disc golf course, not



Steve Keenan/The Fayette Tribune
Josh Sapio, the director of Oak Hill's parks and recreation department, stands in front of some of the new playground equipment at Oak Hill City Park.

OAK HILL, H-3

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OAK HILL

Continued from H-2

part of the federally-funded work, is also thriving onsite.

The large tract is protected under a conservation easement by the West Virginia Land Trust on land previously owned by Berwind Land Company. “We wouldn’t have Needleseye Park without the West Virginia Land Trust,” Sapio said.

The \$900,000 project was funded by Congressionally Directed Spending secured by United States Sen. Shelley Moore Capito and her former Senate colleague, Joe Manchin, with the New River Gorge Regional Development Authority operating as the fiscal agent and supporting infrastructure development.

Trailhead development and the trail construction were made possible by the Department of Interior grant funding secured via the Fayette County Soft Surface Trail Plan, a strategic initiative led by the Fayette Trail Coalition and involving the WVOEDC, Sapio said last fall.

A larger overall project included two phases for Needleseye (new trails and trailhead improvements) and two phases for neighboring Fayetteville (a pump track and a bike skills area).

What’s up next for Needleseye?

“Right now, we are actively working through Appalachian Regional Commission funding with Region 4 (planning and development council) for Phase 2 of the trailhead development,” Sapio said. “The majority of that funding is going towards the Fayette County Park (for several miles of trails). They’re going through the active phase of that now with flagging, trailhead, etc.”

“For us, (Phase 2) will simply bring some landscaping in between the upper parking area and the restroom facility, with a winding walkway, as well as a bioswale, or rain garden, for some of the stormwater runoff that’s happening there that’s not necessarily being managed right now.” That portion of the project will run about \$115,000.

The City of Oak Hill, New River Gorge Regional Development Authority, New River Alliance of Climbers, Fayette Trail Coalition and the WVU Brad and Alys Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative welcomed visitors to a special opening celebration event on Oct. 21, 2025 for the park.

“I say to all of you in Oak Hill and Fayette County, what a gem we have here,” Manchin said at the time. “You all are basically the face of our state. You’re showing them what West Virginia has to offer, the hospitality, just the way we embrace people when they come in. To be able to come here and bring your family and to do a little bit of everything, what is it going to do for the town?”

“And the tourists will come in.”

Borrowing from the “if you build it, they will come” concept, Sapio says Needleseye Park has proven popular. “We really are (expecting major increase of usage),” he said. “We have seen increased activity since the opening of Needleseye all through the winter.”

The 18-hole disc golf course onsite is “very popular.”

“The climbers are active all winter long because Needleseye Cliff and borders are south-facing, so even in winter conditions, it’s relatively warm,” Sapio added. “We’re seeing a tremendous amount of mountain biking activity, as well as hikers, dog walkers, ...



File photo/The Fayette Tribune

New informational kiosks help visitors to Needleseye Park plan their excursion.

“We are seeing a huge boost in visitor ship at Needleseye, and we are definitely expecting to see it increase this summer.”

“We certainly hope it brings some economic benefits to the City of Oak Hill. They are here and they are present. There’s some lodging in Oak Hill, there’s some restaurants. We certainly hope to see those economic benefits to the city.”

... In recent years, the city has created new recreational opportunities for residents and visitors or spruced up offerings already in place, including a new skateboard park and refurbishments at baseball fields at Oak Hill City Park.

Most recently, Sapio said, “We just completed the Land and Water Conservation Fund grant for the new playground, and that brought us the new playground equipment, as well as the new walkway that goes around it, and two ADA parking spots.”

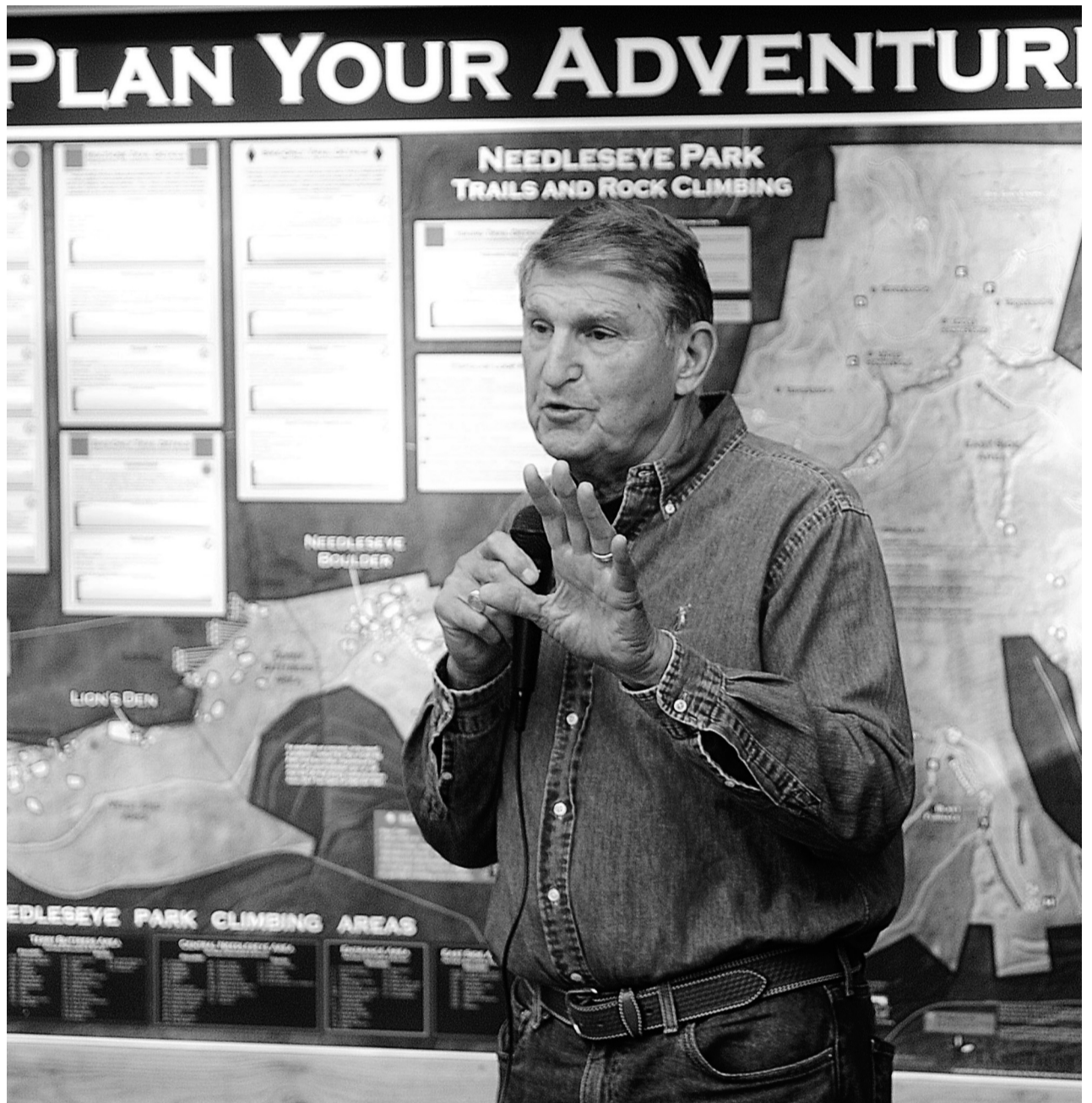
The LWCF playground project total was \$400,000, with a 50 percent match of \$200,000 from the city. “It’s been well-received by the community. It was a much-needed addition to city park. We’re seeing a lot of people benefit from that already.”

“We personally without any grants are spending some time and effort to work on our baseball fields to improve the drainage in hopes that the baseball season this year will benefit from that,” Sapio added. Other smaller projects within the parks and recreation sphere are aimed at repainting parking lines and remodeling restrooms.

“The skate park is still pretty popular and it’s doing well, holding up well, and seeing a lot of visitor ship,” he said.

Additionally, he noted that a private donor has opted to help the city procure a new pickleball court on a lot adjacent to the skate park. When completed, it will feature two courts on the same footprint, and it will be fenced in and be available for public use. The city has prepared the ground for development and a contractor is currently being hired, and some of the site amenities have already been bought.

“Once it goes under construction, it will take about a month for the build to happen,” said Sapio. Construction is expected to start this



File photo/The Fayette Tribune

Former U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin, delivered remarks at the 2025 ribbon-cutting ceremony.

summer. “It will be funded by the donor and handed over to the city, so that’s really exciting,” he noted.

Also, city is involved in a Rails to Trails Conservancy grant process in which the parks and recreation department was awarded a \$10,000 grant from the Rails to Trails Conservancy to be utilized within a trailhead setting. “What we’re using the money for is conceptual drawings of a trailhead around the White Oak Depot.”

... “The City of Oak Hill administration has made an effort to increase its recreational assets within the city,” Sapio concluded. “We have six parks here (with highlights being the city park and Needleseye).”

“The city has invested time and energy to try to improve the quality of living for the folks in Oak Hill, as well as the community in Fayette County. That time we’ve invested is really paying off. It seems like the community is really turning out and showing up to enjoy the assets.”

Email: skeenan@register-herald.com



Steve Keenan/The Fayette Tribune

New playground equipment at Oak Hill City Park has been a big boost to the community, said Josh Sapio, the director of Oak Hill’s parks and recreation department.



2026 WVU Mine Rescue Team group photo.

WVU

WVU Mine Rescue Team Shines at competition

WVU TODAY

MORGANTOWN — The West Virginia University Mine Rescue Team from the WVU Benjamin M. Statler College of Engineering and Mineral Resources secured second place overall at this year's international competition while earning a first-place finish in the Confined Space Challenge.

Competing at the 2026 North American University Mine Rescue Competition held Feb. 16-21 in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada, WVU finished just behind overall champion Laurentian University Mine Rescue, with Colorado School of Mines placing third. Additional participating institutions included the University of Alberta, the University of British Columbia, Montana Technological University, the University of Arizona and Queen's University.

Throughout the competition, teams were evaluated across five categories designed to simulate real-world emergency response scenarios: First Aid Mass Casualty Incident, Technicians Challenge, Confined Space Challenge, Underground Mine Problem and Rope Rescue.

For WVU students, however, the week represented far more than final standings. Each competition category

demanded precise communication, technical execution and the ability to remain composed in rapidly changing conditions.

"As Tail Captain, I serve as the link between the underground team and the Briefing Officer on the surface," said Dylan Shilling, an engineering technology major. "My responsibility is to maintain clear communication and ensure updates and critical information are relayed accurately so the team can operate safely and effectively."

That responsibility was tested early in the competition when the team faced an unexpected communication breakdown.

"We lost radio communication early in the scenario," Shilling said. "Since communication is my main responsibility, I had to adapt quickly and find alternative ways to stay connected. It challenged me to stay calm under pressure and lead through an unexpected setback."

When the radios failed, Shilling immediately informed the team and coordinated an alternative communication method through their tablet system. Once the team reached a refuge station, he was able to reestablish direct contact with the Briefing Officer.

"It required quick thinking, but by staying

composed and working together, we continued the scenario effectively," he said.

The team's preparation played a critical role in navigating that challenge. WVU secured first place in the Confined Space Challenge and third in High Angle Ropes, two technically demanding events that test both physical endurance and precision decision-making in high-risk environments.

"Our training prepared us for moments like that," Shilling said. "We practice different scenarios regularly, which builds trust and strong communication within the team. Because of that preparation, I was able to stay focused and help lead the team through the challenge."

For Connor Keddie, the team's briefing officer, the international competition marked his first experience competing at that level and exposed him to the intensity of real-world emergency response simulations.

"Competing at this level was a lot of fun. The challenge was tough, but I think we handled it really well as a team," said Keddie, a mining engineering major.

Keddie described the scenarios as far more intense than anything he had experienced in training.



Justin Waybright competing in the Rope Rescue challenge during the 2026 North American University Mine Rescue Competition.

MINE, H-5

Hampshire County 4-H'er earns prestigious opportunity

WVU TODAY

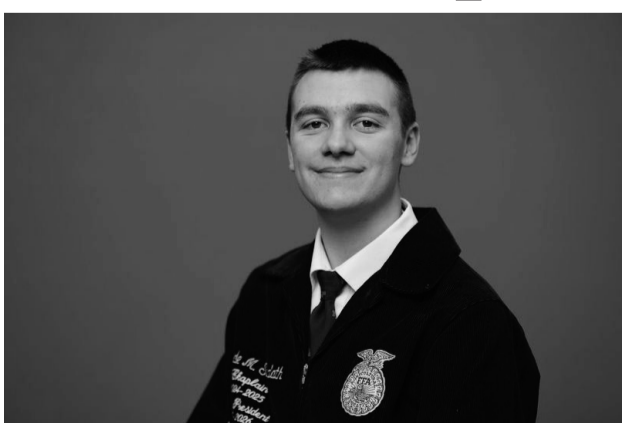
MORGANTOWN — Kade Suddath, a 4-H'er from Hampshire County, will serve on the 2026 National 4-H Congress Design Team, making him only the third representative from West Virginia to be selected for this committee in the last 20 years.

For the second year in a row, a West Virginia University Extension 4-H member has earned a spot on the esteemed National 4-H Congress design team, a rare honor that only eight 4-H'ers across the country receive each year.

The design team is a prestigious small group

of exceptional 4-H members who are responsible for planning and leading National 4-H Congress—a five-day conference that brings together young leaders for workshops, networking and personal growth.

"I went to 4-H Congress last year and it was amazing. It's my favorite 4-H event I've ever been to," Suddath said. "The conference focuses on leadership and service, so we got to do a community service project in Atlanta, attend workshops, and make connections from across the country. We really focused on how to be better leaders and take that back to our home



Kade Suddath, a 4-H'er from Hampshire County, will serve on the 2026 National 4-H Congress Design Team.

states."

Students can only attend National 4-H Congress once, unless they are part of the design team the following year.

Suddath knew immediately that this was an opportunity he needed to take.

"As soon as I left, I knew I wanted to go

back. I'm the type of person who learns about an opportunity that I'm interested in, and I take it as an assignment. So, I worked really hard on putting together the best application I could," Suddath said.

The application process is quite the undertaking. Applicants must write an introduction letter about themselves, include a two-page resume of their 4-H background, a one-page statement on their leadership philosophy, two letters of recommendation, and make a creative video introducing themselves to the committee.

But to Kelly Hicks, WVU Extension 4-H

agent in Hampshire County, it was no surprise that Suddath put together a great application and was selected for the committee.

"I am so proud of Kade, but it doesn't surprise me at all that he was selected because he is just so focused, so positive, and so engaging with everyone he interacts with. You just can't help but to like him," Hicks said.

Another reason Suddath was selected for this honor was his extensive extracurricular resume. Within 4-H, he is a member of the Augusta Trailblazers club, a Teen Leader, and attends many local 4-H

4-H, H-5

4-H

Continued from H-4

events and camps each year. Beyond that, he is also an officer in his FFA Chapter, a part of the National Honor Society, the National Technical Honor Society, Link Crew, student council, ASL Club, and even plays the fiddle in his family's bluegrass band.

While National 4-H Congress doesn't take place until November 2026, Suddath has already started the planning process. He traveled to Atlanta for the first Design Team meeting in February and will regularly meet with the team to finalize plans for the conference.

As part of their duties, Suddath and the rest of the design team will arrive early to help set up, lead workshops, speak to large crowds, fill in wherever they're needed and work to recruit next year's design team members.

"We work together to figure out what worked and what didn't at Congress last year. We really want to make the whole experience even better for the next delegation and make sure to keep evolving to fit the needs of the conference," Suddath said. "I already love getting to work with this team. We've basically become best friends already, and I'm really excited for that week of Congress when we can see our work come together in real life and have a great week with everyone."

"This is a rare opportunity, but Suddath is perfect for the job. As Hicks says, he is always eager to make the best better and live life by the 4-H values.

"Kade is very well-rounded, and he is looking for the next activity that he can be engaged in, learn from and help out with, and I know he's going to do a great job on the design team," Hicks said. "He embodies the four H's: head, heart, hands and health, and living a life of four-fold development."

If other West Virginia youth are interested in applying for National 4-H Congress, visit the West Virginia 4-H website to learn more and apply.

Fairmont resident joins WV Music Hall of Fame

FAIRMONT — A music teacher who residents in Fairmont is one of the newest members of the West Virginia Music Educators Association Hall of Fame.

The Association presented the honor to Neil L. King last past week during an event in Charleston, W.Va. Hall of Fame induction is the organization's highest honor that recognizes outstanding service and dedication to music education in the state.

King has spent decades teaching and mentoring young musicians in West Virginia where he has helped generations of students develop their musical abilities and their appreciation for the arts. Throughout his career, he has been widely respected for building strong band programs, he is largely recognized

as "The Dean of Jazz Education" supporting student performance opportunities, and advocating for music education in public schools.

In addition to his work in the classroom, King has been active in regional and state music education initiatives and has contributed to the professional community of music educators across West Virginia.

The Hall of Fame recognition honors educators whose careers have made a lasting impact on music education in the state.

King currently serves as the director of bands at Suncrest Middle School in Morgantown as well as the Monongalia County Instrumental Music Coordinator. Neil is also an adjunct professor at Fairmont State University where he teaches jazz.



Submitted Photo
Neil King, of Fairmont, left, accepts the award from Matt Jennings, president of the West Virginia Music Educators Association conference in in Charleston, W.Va.

MINE

Continued from H-4

"The realism of the situations surprised me," he said. "During the first aid scenario, I even slipped in fake blood. It felt very real and was unlike anything I had experienced in training."

Despite moments that pushed him beyond his comfort zone, Keddie credited the team's veteran members with helping him stay focused and composed.

"When we first entered the medical scenario, I felt out of my comfort zone," Keddie said. "But the confidence of my teammates helped me focus and remember that we were prepared for anything."

The experience has already influenced his long-term career aspirations.

"This competition helped me realize my passion for a career in safety and mine rescue," he said.

Justin Waybright, under-

ground captain, a recent mining engineering graduate and now a master's student pursuing a Master of Business Administration, led a team of students across multiple disciplines. The 2026 WVU Mine Rescue Team included:

Waybright, underground captain and MBA student; Evan Rice, rope captain, mechanical engineering; Alex Cavendish, map man, mining engineering; Tristen Kucera, underground team, civil and mining engineering; Cameron Speaker, medical captain, bachelor's degree in biomedical engineering and current master's student in nutrition and food science; Shilling; Keddie;

Brendan Del Coro, confined space team, environmental land management; Samantha Roark, mining engineering; and Cathee Walters, mining and petroleum and natural gas engineering.

Preparation for the international event began months

in advance, with early morning practices at the WVU Mining Extension training facility.

"We are proud of the continued success of the WVU Mine Rescue Team," said Josh Brady, director of the Department of Mining and Industrial Extension. "They showed up every morning at 6 a.m. with a positive attitude, ready to be coached to our standard. Competing in Canada presented significant challenges, including differences in rules, judging, atmosphere and overall outcomes. Being the top team from the United States in adapting to those challenges should be encouraging to each team member."

Beyond competition rankings, Brady emphasized the professional value of the experience.

"Providing students the opportunity to interact with one of the largest mine rescue organizations in the world,

Ontario Mine Rescue, international competitors and connect with event sponsors supports their professional development at the highest level," he said.

For students, the lessons extend far beyond the simulated emergency scenarios.

"Leadership in high-risk environments starts with staying calm under pressure," Shilling said. "Everyone understands their responsibilities and trusts one another to carry them out. When that trust is in place, the team can adapt quickly and operate safely, even in the most difficult situations."

Brady also credited the WVU Mining Extension agents, including John Helmick, Sean Rhodes, Randy Clark, Tyler Klein, John Handy, Adam Carrico and Arron Holstead, for designing practice problems and coaching the team in preparation for the event.

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