

# 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 say 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

to identify priorities

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

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**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](http://www.bluefieldstate.edu).

**HOUSING**

Continued from E-1

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

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.

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.

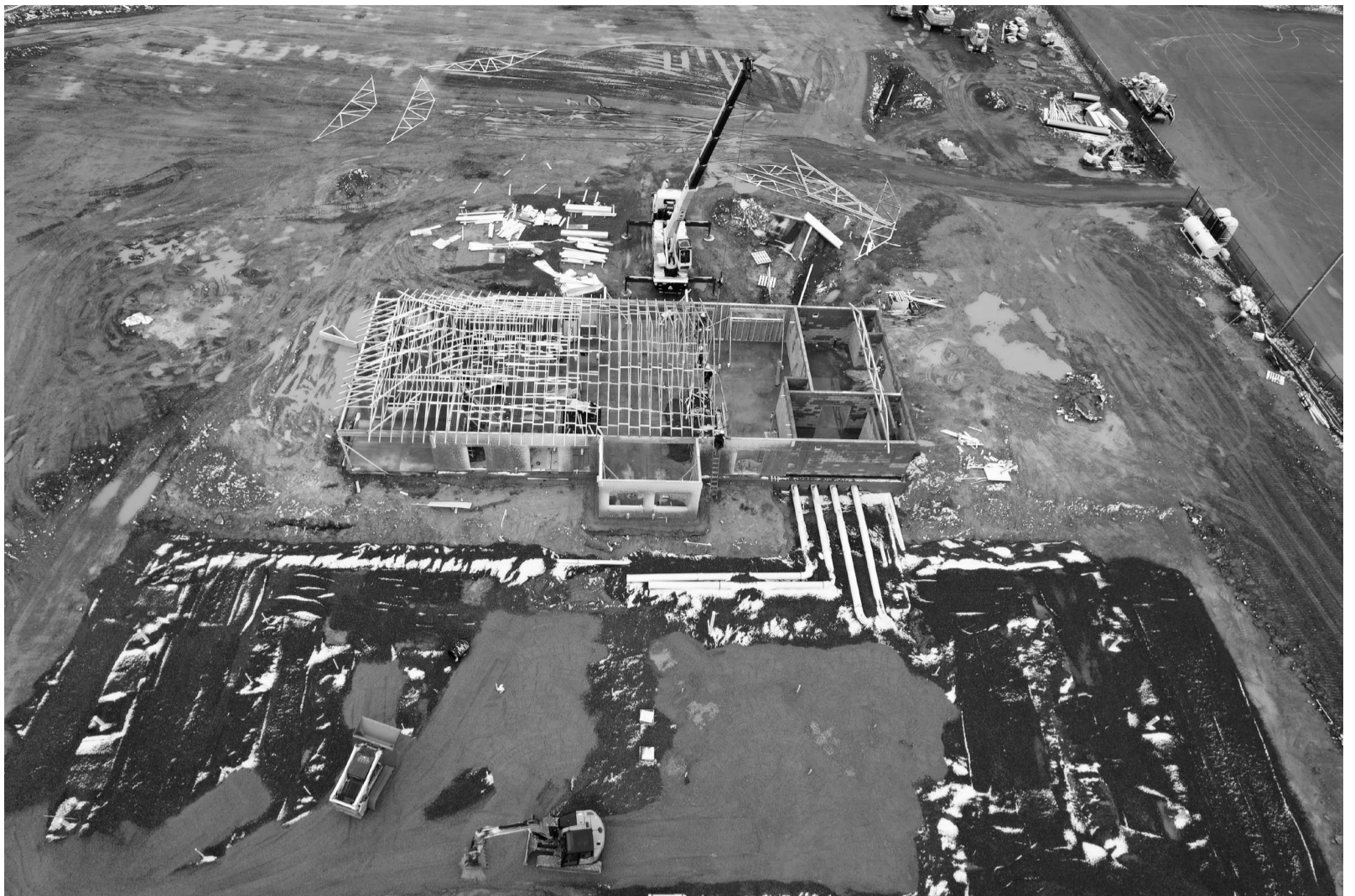
Wave pools are swimming pools which create artificial waves. The aquatic facility is being constructed in the field behind the Princeton Towers, not far from the existing city hall complex off Bee Street.

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  
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# 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.

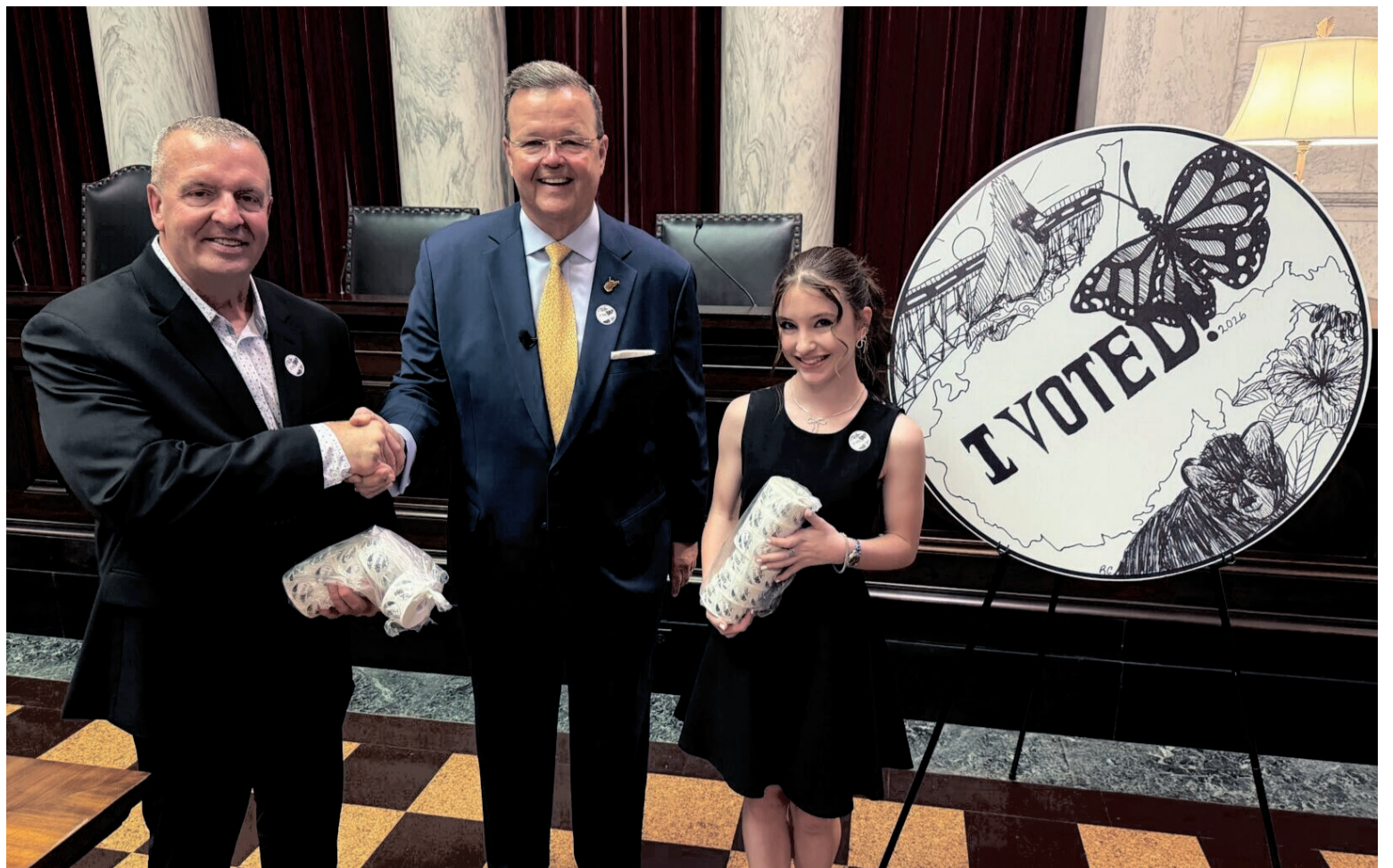
Reese learned about the contest in her West Virginia Studies class and, having been an accomplished artist whose award-winning work was displayed at Tamarack in 2025, she knew immediately what she wanted to draw for her contest entry.

"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 limited



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

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.

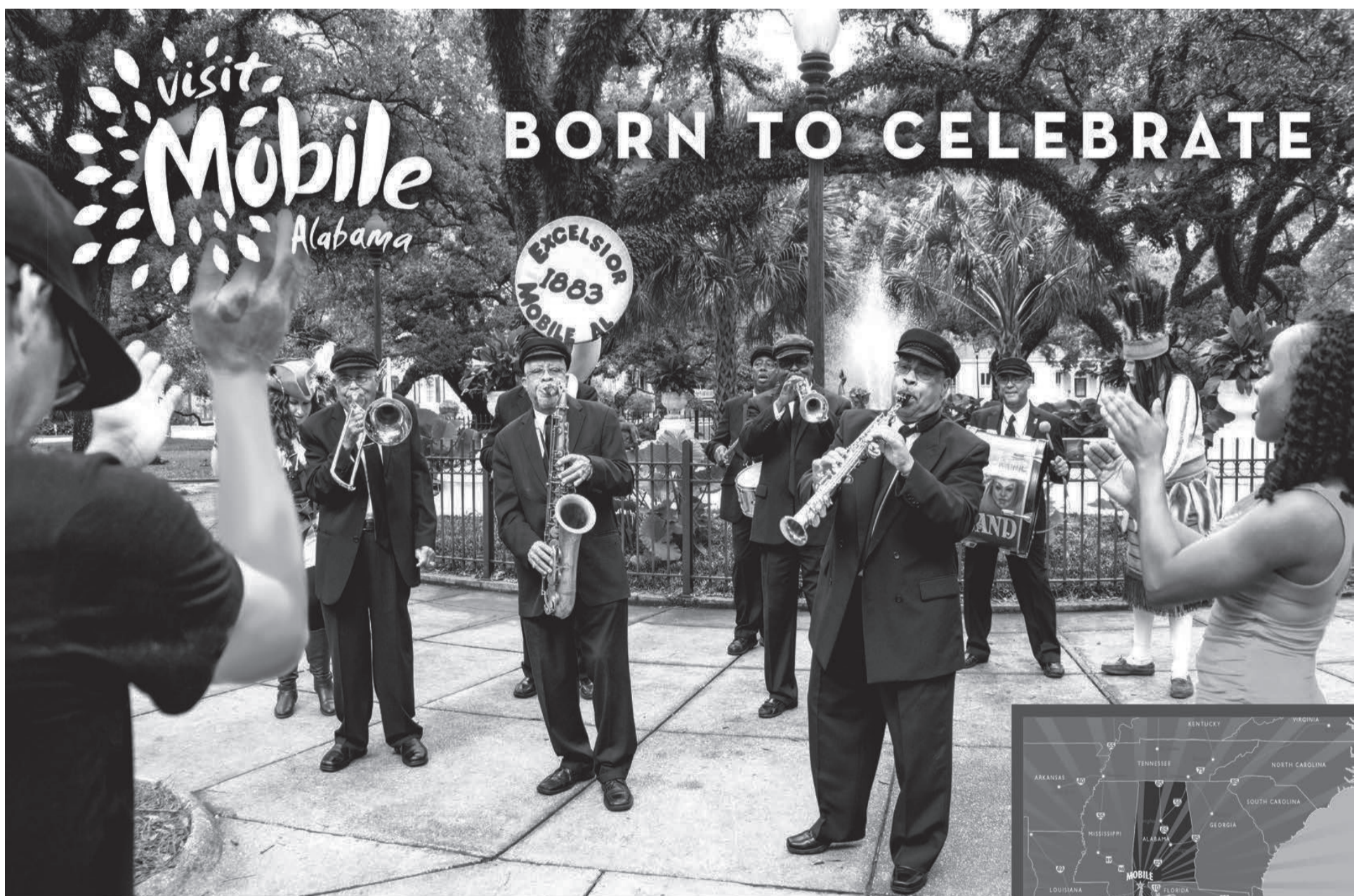
"Oh, that was a highlight for me that day. I mean, to think that I got the very first sticker that was to go on people's lapels after they voted, a symbol that, you know, saying, 'I voted in a West Virginia election,'" Suttle said. "I mean, it was very flattering."

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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