

City of Athens holds grand reopening of Ingleside courts

The return of the tennis courts and emergence of pickleball courts at the Ingleside Recreation Complex were celebrated recently in the City of Athens.

Athens Parks & Recreation officials held a grand re-opening ceremony for the tennis and pickleball courts, after they had been closed earlier in 2024 for renovations.

The ceremony took place to show the newly renovated courts that featured six dedicated pickleball courts and six tennis courts.

"For those that had been closely watching the demolition, construction and final touches on this newly renovated facility you can attest that we have come a long way," Athens Parks & Recreation Director Matt Siniard said. "It looks so much different than it did a few months ago and we hope that this facility renovation will help the tennis and pickleball communities throughout the City of Athens, the county and the surrounding area to thrive and continue to grow.'

Siniard stated that this was a very important time in history where the tennis and pickleball communities could come together.

"We are able to have both communities come together to this location today, on Tuesday, Sept. 17, 2024, and it's good to have everyone out here today," Siniard expressed. "The middle school will have their tennis match, there will be a lot of foot traffic and I feel that this is a great time for the city. the parks and recreation department, and McMinn County in gen-

He expressed his gratitude to the com-



DPA File Photo

Shown here are pickleball players on the new courts at the Ingleside Recreation Complex during the grand reopening.

munity for their continued support.

"I've said this before and I'll say it again. For those who have supported us, we couldn't have done it without you and we can't thank you enough," Siniard said. "Everyone that has supported our department, a big thanks is in order for all of you."

Siniard then gave thanks to City of Athens Project Manager Kevin Helm, the entire Athens City Council, the recreation advisory board and many others for all of the contributions they have made to the project.

"Their positivity throughout this process has overshadowed the negativity that has come our way," he said. "I can't thank them enough for keeping me strong, our department strong and just keeping us in good spirits throughout all of this."



DPA File Photo

Local pickleball players try out the new courts at Ingleside Recreation Complex.



DPA File Photo

New home found for McMinn County Health Department

A new home has been found for the McMinn County Health Department building.

During a 2024
McMinn County
Commission meeting,
two votes were held —
one during the properties committee and
then another by the
full commission — on
entering into a sales
agreement for a new
location for the health
department.

The property agreed upon is located on Elizabeth Street in Athens beside the former theater that is now a church. Both votes to approve that location were unanimous.

During the properties committee meeting, McMinn County Mayor John Gentry noted that the process in finding a new building was collaborative with health department officials.

"We talked to them to find out where they wanted to be," he said. "They did a study based on the people that use the system the most. They also wanted to be on city sewage."

All that led them

to the property on Elizabeth Street, which is near where the Athens Fire Department is considering putting a new fire hall. "The only open

"The only open spot we saw was on Elizabeth Street," Gentry said.

He noted it will be a two acre tract priced at \$75,000 per acre and the sales price goes toward the required match for the state funding the county is receiving.

"We knew what land is doing here now — which is great, we like that," Gentry said. "McMinn County and the Athens area is a hot commodity. We see commercial land going well above this per acre."

The new building

will be connected to Elizabeth Street by a new city road so that traffic won't pile up as much on the main road. Gentry said the state approved a new road out to it.

"We told (the state) we'll build something nice that will help build up the area," Gentry said.

Jewell outlines planned work at Meigs Courthouse

The Meigs County Board of Commissioners recently discussed their continuing efforts to renovate the Meigs County Courthouse.

During a previous monthly workshop, the commission discussed a motion to hire Upland Design Group to oversee phase III of the courthouse renovation project.

According to Commission Chairman Rick Vaughn, the renovation project is being paid for by a grant the county has been awarded. "We got a \$500,000 grant with a

\$150,000 match that we are going to take from the fund balance," Vaughn noted. According to Meigs County Finance Director Lesley Lyle, the

State of Tennessee requires an architect on projects that are over \$50,000 or change the "footprint" of the building.

"That is why we have to go back

now and have architect services,"
Lyle said.

Commissioner Zach England

questioned what all work would encompass phase III of the project.

"Shoring up the corner of (an employee's) office, redoing the steps and columns that are breaking away from the building, re-sanding the floors, refinishing the original hardwood floors of the courtroom and repainting all of the common areas," said Meigs County Mayor Eddie Jewell of the planned work on the building.

One of the commissioners expressed their confusion, believing the items listed were not originally found during a past inspection.

"Did we not hire Upland Design Group to come and tell us everything they see is wrong," asked Commissioner Jerry Harris.

Lyle stated that the current information was a part of the company's original inspection.

"This is still a part of those original issues," Lyle expressed. "When we brought them in, we showed them where the wall was separating and all of that."

Fowler named new executive director of Etowah chamber, Main Street

New leadership is in place for a pair of organizations in Etowah.

The Etowah Chamber of Commerce and Etowah Main Street have announced the hiring of their new executive director. The boards of each organization have tapped Lebron Fowler as their new director.

Fowler began his duties Jan. 2 and has already hit the ground running.

"The boards are excited to have Lebron join these amazing organizations and believe Lebron will bring great enthusiasm and excellent ideas for the future of Etowah," stated a news release from the organizations about his hire. "The City of Etowah is moving in an exciting direction with revitalization of the downtown area and the boards believe that Lebron can help continue and build upon the successes that Etowah has seen over the past two years."

Fowler reiterated the excitement of the boards as

he discussed the new position.

"I am very excited for this wonderful opportunity with the Etowah Chamber of Commerce and Etowah Main Street program," he said. "I hope to utilize my years of experience in business ownership, retail management and corporate training to promote and support Etowah's amazing local business owners. My priorities also include fostering new businesses and industries as well as partnering with city leadership to increase tourism in Etowah. Etowah is a beautiful city with a rich history, a revitalized downtown and a bright and promising future. A place I am fortunate to call home. To be able to both live in and work to promote Etowah is a dream come true."

For information about the Etowah Chamber of Commerce or Etowah Main Street, contact the office at director@etowahcoc.org or 423-920-5659.



Fowler



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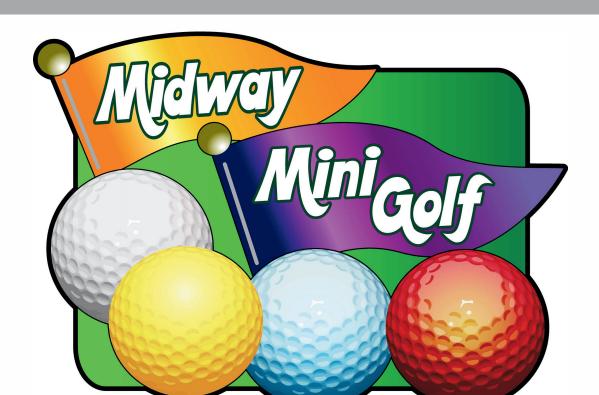
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Mullins named 2023 J. Neal **Ensminger Man of the Year**

A man who has been heavily involved in the Athens community for decades was rewarded for his contributions with the 2023 J. Neal Ensminger Man of the Year award.

Randy Mullins received the honor during the Athens Årea Chamber of Commerce's annual meeting. Mullins has been an integral part of the com-

According to award presenter Carter Runyan, since the 1980s, Mullins raised funds for needed facilities at McMinn County High School such as the current football and baseball fields, served on the board of the United Way of McMinn & Meigs Counties and has won awards for his service to them, and served on the board of the Athens-McMinn Family YMCA and chaired a capital campaign. He currently serves on the Tennessee Wesleyan University Board of Trustees.

"Tonight's recipient has similarities to Mr. E (J. Neal Ensminger), to (former Man of the Year winner) Frank Buttram and to (former Man of the Year winner) Hal (Buttram)," Runyan said. "He loves people, he loves this community and ... he prefers to work behind the scenes. My friend truly couldn't care if he got any credit."

Current YMCA Executive Director Bradi Sewell also had good words to say about Mullins, writing a letter in his support that Runyan read off during

"I learned quickly that I could always turn to him for guidance and direction," she wrote. "He was going to challenge me to consider new things, to stretch myself as a leader and then step back and let me make my choice. Randy's passion is a deep love and a big heart for this community and the people and causes he loves the most. Athens is a better place to live and work because of Randy

Mullins grew up in Athens in the City Park area. "I am very, very honored," Mullins said. "During my career, I got to visit literally hundreds of small communities throughout the southeast, midwest, southwest and I can tell you I never visited one community our size that has what we have. We do have more than most communities this size — we have a top rated university, we have a first rate YMCA, we have the museum, we have the library, we have great schools. What's more important than that, though, is we have great people who care about this community. I haven't got the words to say thank you for thinking of me.



Randy Mullins (right) was the 2023 J. Neal Ensminger Man of the Year. He received the award during the Athens Area Chamber of Commerce's annual meeting at The Barn at Faith Farms. Presenting the award to him was 2018 Man of the Year Carter Runyan.

McMinn County creates tourism director position

There is now a dedicated person to promote tourism within McMinn County.

During a previous McMinn County Commission meeting, the board unanimously approved the creation of a tourism director position. The new post will report to the McMinn County Economic Development Authority (EDA) with funding coming from the county's hotel/motel tax and each town.

Brianna Baker, who previously served as the communications coordinator for the City of Athens, was named to the new position.

The idea of a tourism director position has been percolating within the commission since early in 2024 when, during the county commission strategic planning summit, they took part in a tourism presentation by ChandlerThinks' Director of Research and Community Engagement Greg

At the time, Fuson advised the commissioners that "you've got to have somebody responsible and you've got to have the funding

Fuson.



Baker

for it. That's important ... somebody who gets up every morning and says how can I promote tourism in McMinn County. We have to have a tourism culture and that's what this person does."

Now, Baker is in place and Gentry noted that she reports to the EDA and Director Lindsey Ferguson.

"Some counties put it under the mayor, but I said 'guys, mayors come and go,'" Gentry told the commission. "We were trying to give it a little bit of continuity going forward."

Once they decided not to have the person report to the county mayor, the EDA became the

most logical choice,

"The EDA is the only countywide board, so it kind of fit," he noted. "The chambers are laser focused on businesses and, even moreso, their mem-

bers." While the tourism director reports directly to the EDA, Gentry added that there is a board as

well. "They'll have a tourism advisory committee made up of these other entities that are kind of involved in tourism," he said. "We're bringing them together as kind of a tourism council to provide guidance. All the cities and the county are repre-

sented on the EDA." Ferguson also noted that the EDA has received a ThreeStar grant to fund the building of a tourism website.

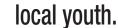
Gentry added that the City of Athens has budgeted \$30,000 toward the county's tourism efforts and it's not the only town to do

"The other cities are looking to match that with smaller amounts to go to the EDA (for tourism promotion) as well," he said.

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Officials, citizens celebrate Arts Center expansion



DPA File Photo

Shown here is the front of the newly-expanded Athens Arts Center.

The Arts Center of Athens celebrated growth recently, putting the spotlight on the recently-opened building expansion.

Center officials hosted a self-guided tour of the new area upon its opening, followed by a program with speakers talking about the importance of the new expan-

The arts center first opened on North White Street in 2005 to house the Athens Area Council for the Arts organization that was originally founded in 1979.

Plans were announced in early 2020 for the expansion into three newly-acquired buildings next to the original structure. After the project was slowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, construction began in

AACA Board of Directors President Jim Bagley noted that the largest contribution to the project fulfilled 13% of the \$1.5 million cost, so the project was completed with numerous smaller donations.

"The first thing they will tell you is crowd funding doesn't work,' Bagley said, noting that advice he's heard in the past is that any major project needs to start with a donation that covers 40% of the total cost. "We here in McMinn County proved that we could do it. I'm really pleased to say we were successful at doing something people told us couldn't be done."

Bagley added that he's very happy with the way the expansion turned out for the organization.

'It's a gorgeous facility," he said. "It's visible to people coming in on Highway 11 or leaving Athens. I'm really pleased to be a part of this little piece of revitalization in downtown Athens."

The three new buildings are split, in order from south to north, into a visual arts wing, a music wing and a performance wing.

The entire arts center stretch is bookended on one side by the original structure and on the other by the Peggy Dow Performing Arts

Center.

Lauren Brown, who has served as executive director for AACA since 2013, spoke about the meaning of this expansion to her.

"I'm a child of Athens and an undeniable product of this organization," she said. "I've lived my whole life in a community with a thriving arts council because so many of you in this room make it happen and keep it going. This space has been brought to life by our dreams — yours and mine."

She also thanked several people, all who have made major impacts on the growth of the AACA and the arts center.

Athens Mayor Steve Sherlin spoke to those in attendance about the importance of the AACA and the arts center on the town.

"As many of you know, the arts center is not just a building," he said. "It is a vibrant center of creativity, culture and community. First and foremost, the arts center serves as a beacon of artistic freedom. It provides a platform for local artists, musicians and performers to showcase their talent.'

He also encouraged more investment into the arts community in the

"By supporting the arts center, we are, in essence, investing in the cultural fabric of our community,"

McMinn County Mayor John Gentry added that the entire county is "blessed" to have a thriving arts community. "Art is an extension of God's gift of

talent," he said. "How blessed we are to have a facility that allows people to put that talent on display. The program was closed out by AACA Board Member Scottie

Mayfield who thanked everyone in attendance at the event and who gave to the capital campaign to make the new expansion a reality. "Thank you for what you've done

here. Thank you for what you've done in our community," he said. "This is truly a community effort."

New spay and neuter clinic opens up in Athens

The McMinn Regional Humane Society's Spay and Neuter Clinic has officially opened for business in their new location.

The new building is at 320 South Jackson Street in Athens, the former location of The Daily Post-

According to Dr. Ronnie DeForrest, the new clinic location provides more convenient animal transportation with it now connected to the animal

"We are extremely excited to be here," DeForrest said. "We outgrew our old office, so this is the perfect opportunity for us to get on the same campus as the animal shelter so they won't have to cart dogs and cats back and forth, which also allows us the opportunity to grow the clinic a little bit."

The clinic took all of a couple of days to move into their new building before resuming their normal business operations. The clinic now inhabits the northern side of

their new building.

"We do have a sign by the road that is temporary and we do plan to improve the signage in the future," he said. "We will be the very first door that you will come to once you enter the parking lot." Looking ahead, DeForrest believes the new loca-

tion will provide a variety of benefits to the clinic. "Our lobby was so small at the other clinic that

people would be standing on top of each other but, here, there is a lot more space in the lobby," he stated. "We have more room for storage, we have an extra exam room, a bigger surgery room and to me the biggest thing is that we now have the space to potentially expand with another doctor, if that time ever comes."

DeForrest encouraged community members to spay and neuter their animals.

"If people would spay and neuter their animals it would help not only the shelter but the community as a whole," he expressed. "The shelter is completely full and that has been pretty consistent for the last couple of years." He noted that the phone number for the clinic

will remain the same at 423-649-0370.



DPA File Photo

Shown here are some of the pens for dogs in the new McMinn Regional Spay and **Neuter Clinic.**

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