

FOUNDATIONS

COMMUNITY

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 general.”

He expressed his gratitude to the community for their continued support.



DPA File Photo

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

community 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

The Athens City Middle School tennis team was one group of several in attendance for the grand reopening of the Ingleside Recreation Complex’ tennis and pickleball courts.

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 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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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 Area Chamber of Commerce's annual meeting. Mullins has been an integral part of the community his entire life.

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 the presentation.

"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."

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."



DPA File Photo

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 Fuson.

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



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, he said.

"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 members."

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 represented 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 so.

"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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A wide-angle photograph of the Leggett Center building. The building is a single-story structure with a modern design, featuring large glass windows and a prominent sign that reads "Leggett Center" in a stylized font. The building is surrounded by landscaping, including bushes and trees. A paved area in the foreground shows a few people walking. The sky is clear and blue.

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

"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."

A photograph of two metal cages with glass doors. The cage on the left contains a brown dog standing. The cage on the right contains a large, fluffy yellow and black dog lying down. Red leashes are hanging from the top of the cages.

He noted that the phone number for the clinic will remain the same at 423-649-0370.

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



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