



The Oconee Enterprise



BOE votes on teacher bonuses

Other workers also receive a raise. **A3**



Scouts complete Eagle projects

Teens build bridges, little libraries. **A6**



Lady Titans reach state final

NOHS girls to play for state title. **B1**

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We'll report on tire dumping in Farmington.

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Former OCS teacher pleads guilty to child porn

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

Former Malcom Bridge Middle School teacher Ira New III, 56, of Watkinsville, pleaded guilty last Wednesday to one count possession of child pornography before U.S. District Judge C. Ashley Royal.

New faces a maximum 20 years of imprisonment to be followed by at least five years of supervised release and a maximum fine of \$1 million. There is no parole in the federal system.

On Aug. 7, 2019, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation received a cyber tip from Yahoo investigators



New III

regarding 27 images of children at n u d i s t colonies. On Sept. 5 of that year, New consented to allow forensic agents to view his phone, which contained approximately 94 images of child pornography, including images of 12 to 14-year-old girls.

When officials asked when he started to take an interest in chil-

dren, New responded that it had been in the "past couple of years." New also stated that he never sent the photographs to anyone, but he emailed the them to himself.

New was employed by OCS from July 31, 2008 to March 26, 2018.

In March 2018, New resigned after accidentally displaying adult pornography in his classroom. Then-Malcom Bridge Middle School Principal Meri Blackburn said New self-reported the incident. A review by technology personnel found no other inappropriate images.

At the time of the incident, parent Tracey Wyatt shared a letter she addressed to Superintendent Jason Branch on a Facebook group called "Parents Improving Oconee Schools." Wyatt called for a school assembly to address sexism and the objectification of women.

New consented to a Professional Standards Commission sanction of reprimand regarding his teaching certificate.

This is not the first time in recent history a former employee of OCS has been accused of sex crimes or crimes of a lewd and sexual nature.

In 2009, a former teacher and coach surrendered his teaching and coaching certificate when a relationship with a 16-year-old student became public once said student was enrolled in college. The perpetrator was never charged with a crime, but he did resign.

In 2013, an Oconee County Superior Court jury found Jeremy Wetzel, a former special needs paraprofessional, guilty of transmitting obscene images to a minor via electronic transmission. Wetzel was acquitted of child molestation charges.

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Air National Guard officers combat the spread of COVID

BY JULIA FECHTER

Over the past year, Jeff Chambers and John Campbell have confronted the COVID-19 pandemic as physician assistants with the Urgent Care of Oconee clinic and as officers in the Air National Guard.

Lt. Chambers and Maj. Campbell have been deployed multiple times to Alabama to help administer the coronavirus vaccines.

Both Campbell and Chambers have extensive training through the chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and high yield explosives team. The three army units and two air force units that make up this team are primed to respond to the governor in mass injury or terroristic situations.

Chambers and Campbell began vaccine work as civilians first. Urgent Care of Oconee was one of the first facilities in the county to offer vaccinations in December 2020. Campbell believes that the volume at the Watkinsville urgent care clinic has doubled since the pandemic started.

As an Air Guardsman, Chambers has been the deputy commander of a medical division tasked with providing vaccinations for people through the Alabama Department of Health. The Pfizer vaccines were administered at mobile clinics set up around the state.

Campbell and Chambers each served as the medical provider for a military team of about 85 people tasked with administering vaccinations.

Chambers helped plan the framework for the mission, which started as an initiative to clean retirement centers and senior living facilities. In late March, their teams deployed around Alabama, while another team served civilians in Birmingham through a FEMA site.

So far, the two have traveled around southwestern Alabama.

Their teams intend to go through the rest of the state to provide vaccines to people in underserved rural areas. They're setting up vaccine sites at community and senior centers, businesses, jails and even parking lots.

Chambers was glad that Air and Army National Guard members have helped people by cleaning facilities, providing vaccinations and staffing overwhelmed hospitals.

"I think the most fulfilling part was being available for folks at the height of the pandemic when they were more scared than anything and to provide treatment and answer questions," he said.

His urgent care clinic was able to provide COVID-19 tests early during the pandemic because they purchased test kits before the brunt of the first wave hit. That put them in a prime position to offer in-house testing, since they had the same equipment as some of the bigger labs.

"We were open when other medical offices were not. We got orders from physicians around the county to do blood work and X-rays," he said. "It's about being the person who's there when nobody else is."

Some of the military personnel had been deployed on orders for over a year. Chambers served on one deployment from April 1 to the end of August 2020.

"I'd get home on the weekends and work shifts and see the family, but during the week, I'd be in Montgomery," he said.

Campbell is on orders now, and he will be gone from the Oconee area a lot until the end of June.

"There's a real balancing act between fulfilling your [National] Guard duty, fulfilling your civilian job and being with your family," Chambers added. "It's a tough job to ask people to do."

Campbell explained that addressing some people's preconceived notions or conspiracy theo-



Lt. Jeff Chambers, left and Maj. John Campbell, right, both serve as medical officers in Alabama's Air National Guard and physician assistants with Urgent Care of Oconee. [Submitted photo]



Campbell gives an Alabama man a dose of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine during a recent drive-up clinic. [Submitted photo]



Lt. Jeff Chambers checks a man's vitals at one of Alabama's mass vaccination clinics. [Submitted photo]

ries about the vaccine makes their charge to vaccinate even tougher. However, he understands some people's concern around the vaccines only having FDA emergency authorization and not full-on approval.

"We let them know, 'Hey, we're here for you if you decide to do it,'" he said of vaccination.

"It's not my job to talk them into it but to be there for them if they decide to have it."

"I think vaccination is really the only way to get out of this pandemic issue," Chamber said. "Even though it's slowed down, I still think it's critical that people get vaccinated to help us get back to a normal way of life."

Lightning leads to a sewer spill

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

Lightning damage to the Calls Creek Water Reclamation Facility led to a sewer spill of 40,800 gallons of treated wastewater on Wednesday, May 5 between the hours of 4 a.m. and 8 a.m.

The county immediately notified the Georgia Environmental Protection Division and the Oconee County Environmental Health Department. Officials began testing for upstream and downstream water quality the same day of the spill. Lab results for water quality are forthcoming.

The plant's alarm and communication system was damaged, said Communications Manager Diane Baggett.

The Oconee County Water Resources Department has launched a new automated daily verification of the system, she said.

In other county news, the open burning ban is in effect through Sept. 30. Citizens are prohibited from burning yard and land-clearing debris, as well as household garbage. Recreational activities such as campfires and grilling are exempt from the open burning ban. Burning of vegetative materials at agricultural operations is also exempt.

■ The Board of Commissioners last week approved a temporary mobile unit at Westminster Christian Academy.

■ Retiring County Clerk Kathy Hayes was recognized for her service to the county.

■ Oconee resident Holly Stephenson was appointed county clerk, effective May 24. She has served as the risk and liability specialist for the Walton County Board of Commissioners since 2013. The Oconee Enterprise will have a more in-depth profile of Stephenson the first week of June.

■ The BOC approved the annual Parks and Recreation concessionaire services contracts with Oconee Futbol Club and Oconee County Little League.

Assisted living proposed off Moreland Heights

Project unrelated to city's Water Street proposal

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

The Board of Commissioners will vote Tuesday, June 1 on a rezone request for a 100-bed assisted living facility on the north side of Moreland Heights Road backing up to Macon Highway. The site is near the county's future administrative building.

This project is unrelated to the proposed 60-unit senior living complex that the city of Watkinsville will vote on at its May 19 meeting.

However, if it does get approved, the development will

directly compete with Presbyterian Village Athens, which is only about 1.5 miles north on Macon Highway.

A number of senior living or assisted living developments have emerged in Oconee over the last 10 years.

Land off Virgil Langford Drive was rezoned in September 2014 for a retirement community that has yet to be built.

Thrive Assisted Living off Resurgence Drive opened in the summer of 2016 before changing company hands and its name to St. Gabriel of Athens in 2019.

The Landing Senior Living off U.S. 78 opened last year, along with Presbyterian Village Athens.

In February 2020, the Board of Commissioners approved a rezone

for a continuing-care retirement facility called Celebration Village to be built at the end of the Oconee Connector adjacent to Home Depot.

In February of this year, the BOC approved a rezone to allow The Landing to add independent living cottages behind its assisted living facility.

The most recent proposed assisted living facility sits on about 8.4 acres. The property owner, Rhino Mini-Storage LLC, also wants to build out 20,000 square feet of general office space on the site.

Unlike Presbyterian Village Athens, this assisted living facility will be a for-profit company.

According to the Institute of Transportation Engineers, the proposed development does not gen-

erate the 1,000 trips per day that is required to trigger a traffic-impact analysis.

The assisted living portion is expected to add 260 additional daily trips. The general office component will add 219 additional daily trips.

Total trips per day will be 479. The estimated water and sewer usage is 18,200 gallons per day.

Before the BOC votes, the Oconee Planning Commission will hold a hearing Monday, May 17.

If the zoning is approved, the site development plans will be created and permitted to begin construction at the end of this year.

The project will be built in a single phase and is valued at about \$10 million at buildout.



A 100-bed assisted living facility is proposed only 1.4 miles down the road from Presbyterian Village near downtown Watkinsville. [Photo by Michael Prochaska]

This issue was mailed Wednesday, May 12 from Watkinsville and Athens, GA. Please inform your post office if it arrives late.

