



The Oconee Enterprise



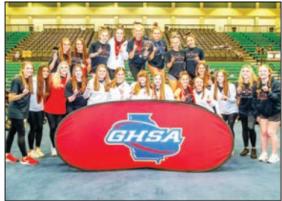
Kayakers learn about history

Oconee Joe leads river tours. **Lifestyles, A6**



Eagle Scout builds bridge

Student enhances school nature trails. **Lifestyles, A8**



North Oconee wins gym title

Lady Titans gymnastics wins at state. **Sports, B1**

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We'll report an update on the RaceTrac murder.

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The Harden Hill pedestrian bridge will honor the late Gus Verner, who was an avid walker in Watkinsville. [File photo]

City bridge named after Gus Verner

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

The city of Watkinsville will name the Harden Hill pedestrian bridge after the late Augusta "Gus" Verner, who died March 2014 at the age of 93.

Acting Mayor Brian Brodrick said Verner was a legendary figure in Watkinsville. In addition to creating the first special education classes in Oconee County, Verner was named Outstanding Elementary Teacher of America in 1972. She was also instrumental in bringing the Head Start program to Oconee County. Around the turn of the century, she was the recipient of the Retired Educator of the Year Award for Clarke-Oconee.

Outside of teaching, Verner was a member of the Civil Air Patrol, a member of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, a foster parent, one of the first grand marshals of the Watkinsville Christmas Parade and an avid walker.

For about 15 years, she walked five miles around Watkinsville daily, frequently accompanied by a black dog wearing a red bandana.

Her granddaughter, Rebecca Verner Holcomb, shared with Brodrick that Verner would even walk to and from Brack Rowe Chevrolet in Athens when her car was in the shop.

Daughter Becky Verner Baxter said that after her mother lost her leg due to cancer, she would still travel around Watkinsville every day in her wheelchair. Once, her caregiver pushed her up Harden Hill Road to visit a friend. "I remarked that was a tough hill," recalled Baxter. "Mama, in her chair, said she didn't think it so bad."

"Miss Gus got her wings seven years ago, but her footprints remain all over our community," said Brodrick.

A sign and dedication for the Verner family will be held at a later date.



During her life, Verner was also affectionately known as "the hug lady." [File photo]

In other news, the city of Watkinsville approved a beer and wine license for Mama Ning's restaurant.

Also, construction on Extra Special People's Miracle League complex is underway on the eastern side of Harris Shoals Park.

In addition to a baseball field and handicap-friendly playground, there will be new public restrooms and a concession stand that ESP will manage on most days. Construction is expected to finish by November. There will be a detour mulch path for Christian Lake residents who walk to the park.

When finished, park visitors can also enjoy a handicap-accessible path connecting the existing areas of the park to the new Miracle League area.

For the next several months, families will not be able to access the existing playground from the City Hall parking lot. Grading and construction of the baseball field and playground area will begin in June.

Ex mayor disturbed by body cam while getting a summons

Smith's residential site plan approved

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

In late March, a Watkinsville police officer walked into Bob Smith's office, exchanged pleasantries and gave him a citation for a relocated house that needed a building permit.

"And as he was leaving, I saw a red light. What appeared to be a body cam was on in my private office," Smith said, adding that he was shocked by this action, as well as the "seven secret cameras scattered around Watkinsville."

"I'm shocked at how Watkinsville has changed," said Smith. "This isn't the Watkinsville I grew up in."

The "secret cameras" to which Smith referred are license-plate-reader cameras that will catch Amber alert offenses and also lesser offenses like expired tags and suspended registrations.

Those cameras, which were approved by the council last year, have not yet been installed. However, there are new cameras



Former Mayor Bob Smith was issued a citation for a house that didn't have a valid building permit. [Photo by Michael Prochaska]

that the Georgia Department of Transportation has installed at various intersections to monitor traffic backup, Watkinsville Police Chief Shannon Brock told The Oconee

Enterprise. Brock said that when the license-plate-reader cameras go up, the city will be transparent about their location.

The citation Smith received was for a house that he relocated from Morton Avenue in Athens to 105 McRee Street in Watkinsville. The house has been sitting on blocks and unfinished for several years.

Smith applied for a building permit for the house in June 2018. At the time, Smith was told by the city that the house had to be used for business purposes and that the permit was conditional on storm water and sewer approval. Within weeks, Oconee Board of Commissioners Chairman John Daniell informed the city that residential sewer was currently not available.

"While we expect the new sewer plant to be operational by the end of August, residential capacity remains in question due to on-going litigation and existing capacity reservations," Daniell wrote to the city Aug. 10, 2018. "We look forward to receiving capacity growth projects from Watkinsville as we work on the water resources master plan."

SEE BOB SMITH PAGE A5

Watkinsville considers bike lanes

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

The Watkinsville City Council will vote in the near future on whether to stripe six-foot-wide bicycle lanes along a 3,300-foot portion of Barnett Shoals Road from First Street to the entrance of Wire Park.

The bicycle lanes would be on both sides of the road.

Lee Morgan, president of the Oconee County Cycling Organization, emailed the city March 24 requesting bicycle lanes and thanking the city for lowering speed limits. Coming into Watkinsville, the speed limit on Barnett Shoals Road lowers to 35 mph approaching Wire Park and 25 mph from LAD Trucking through downtown.

Watkinsville Police Chief Shannon Brock has also proposed a right-hand turn lane heading westbound into Wire Park and a full center left-turn lane heading east to allow traffic to flow. If the council does not want to do that, he recommends allowing a vehicle passing lane on the right.

At a council meeting last week, Morgan said bicycle lanes on Barnett Shoals Road would "signal to the community that we care about cyclists. We care about pedestrians. We are trying to improve quality of life."

"It's just one road," he said, "but it's a step."

The council discussed the financial cost of physical signs and road emblems before



Cyclists are excited about the potential for bicycle lanes along Barnett Shoals Road. [Photo by Michael Prochaska]

tabling the matter for another meeting.

Councilman Brett Thomas said he'd rather pay for more emblems than signs, as signs are less aesthetically pleasing.

"Sign clutter is real," said Acting Mayor Brian Brodrick. "It's almost exhausting driving down the road and seeing it."

In October 2019, the council adopted a transportation plan that promotes a multi-use pedestrian network throughout the city. The Oconee Board of Commissioners recently approved restriping and adding raised pavement markers to Barnett Shoals Road. City staff has reached out to the county to see if the bicycle lanes could be

incorporated into their existing work.

In other news, the Oconee County Cycling Organization has erected "share-the-road" signs throughout the county and has asked the Bishop Council to put one up where Karen Tinsley was killed in 2018 while riding her bike.

"Unfortunately, infrastructure of bike lanes is sparse in Oconee County and public education regarding cycling road safety is limited," according to a statement from the Oconee County Cycling Organization.

The Oconee Enterprise will report more on this initiative this month.

PACS breaks ground on a new middle school

BY JULIA FECHTER

Standing in front of an excavator, Prince Avenue Christian School Headmaster Col. Seth Hathaway thanked the community for raising funds for a new middle school building.

"This really serves as a visual reminder of what can be accomplished when a dedicated community of believers joins together to make a vision a reality," Hathaway said at last Thursday's groundbreaking ceremony.

"It's just a blessing that this was able to happen in such a short amount of time," said PACS Director of Development Kim Brannon. "I'm just overwhelmed. God is so faithful."

Through its capital campaign, PACS raised \$3.715 million for

the forthcoming building and additional land between its campus and U.S. 78. When the campaign began early last fall, an initial group of donors gave \$3.2 million. Then, after the campaign opened to the public in September, over 200 more people contributed.

Brannon and Hathaway thanked donors for their sacrificial giving and unity of purpose, as well as the school's board of trustees and other people who served in various committees.

"That we'd be able to raise enough resources for a project of this magnitude right on the heels of this pandemic...it's really unprecedented," Hathaway said.



Prince Avenue Christian School administrators broke ground on the new middle school last week. From left, Brian Elrod, Wendi Milner, Chad Milner, Don Bennett, Josh Smith, Seth Hathaway, Jeff Carter and Kim Brannon. [Photo by Julia Fechter]

SEE PACS PAGE A8

