



The Oconee Enterprise

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OCMS science team wins big

Team places third at state contest. Lifestyles, **A6**



Woman starts lavender farm

She sells soap and other products. Business, **B3**



OCHS, NOHS track teams win

Titans and Warriors earn region titles. Sports, **B1**

Coming next week

We'll report on the Oconee Farmers Market.

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Dozens of people interviewed in killing of RaceTrac clerk

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

Dozens of potential suspects in the March 19 murder of RaceTrac clerk Elijah Wood have been called in through tip lines, according to Oconee Sheriff James Hale.

Many of them have been ruled out due to their alibis, and investigators are digging into some people's lives more than others, said Hale.

To protect the integrity of the case, the Sheriff's Office has not released some evidence that only the suspect would know. Investigators watched surveillance video from every business in the area, and the footage hasn't produced anything of value, he said. However, law enforcement officials are waiting on some forensic evidence that will assist in the case.

The murder appears to be a botched armed robbery, based on the totality of evidence, Hale said. Search warrants have been issued and information is being analyzed.

"We want to make sure it's the right person," said Hale. "We will

continue to work this until we come up with a suspect."

Anyone with information about the crime should call the Oconee County Sheriff's Office at (706) 769-3945. A \$25,000 reward is being offered for information leading to an arrest.

Wood's brother-in-law, James Tripp Lemmonds, sent investigators information on two suspects.

Lemmonds told The Oconee Enterprise that law enforcement officials have asked him not to publicly share details about potential suspects.

People can contact Lemmonds about flyers and fundraisers under the Facebook page "Family and Friends of #Justice for Elijah." This is a new Facebook group after a rift between Lemmonds and another citizen led to the dissolution of an original "Justice for Elijah" page.

Lemmonds has accused Janelle Gamble, whose son was friends with Woods, of pocketing money from a fundraiser to pay for a billboard.

"Her intentions were not for

Elijah," said Lemmonds, claiming that Gamble "saw the opportunity to make money."

Gamble, who organized a vigil after the murder, vehemently denies those allegations and even contacted the Oglethorpe County Sheriff's Office to report that Lemmonds was harassing her.

Gamble said she paid for a billboard in advance with her own money and was reimbursed by donors at a later date. She also said that one of the suspects Lemmonds believes was involved in the killing was incarcerated at the Walton County jail at the time of the murder.

"I am innocent and will gladly sit down with you or anyone [to] show you my bank accounts..." she said.

Despite the schism between the two citizens seeking justice for Wood, Lemmonds is hopeful that an arrest will be made soon.

"Prayer is another big thing we need," he said. "That means a lot to us."

Officer trained in de-escalation

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

Last month, Watkinsville Police Officer Kevin "Chappy" Hynes responded to a 911 call of a woman who had fallen. She was a frail cancer patient whose husband was shouting inflammatory things.

It was chaotic, Hynes acknowledged, but nothing criminal was happening.

"This lady is in crisis," Hynes said to himself. "I'm going to handle this."

When asked to pray with the family, Hynes held their hands and said a prayer.

"It was pretty powerful," said Hynes, who has served as the chaplain for University of Georgia athletics.

Hynes completed a 40-hour course through the regional Crisis Intervention Response Team, which teaches officers how to identify mental illness and the methods of handling a person in crisis using de-escalation techniques.

All of Watkinsville's officers will go through the same training this year. Instructor Robie Cochran of the Athens-Clarke County Police Department facilitates community partnerships so that people with



Watkinsville police officer Chappy Hynes learned how to handle people showing signs of a mental health crisis. [Photo by Michael Prochaska]

mental health issues get the help they need.

For example, Advantage Behavioral Health Systems, which provides treatment and recovery services in a 10-county radius, will send clinicians out to a call of someone showing signs of a mental illness.

Hynes said that if a drunk driver is pulled over, he will arrest the offender to keep the community safe. But if a pedestrian is wander-

ing onto the road shouting nonsense or experiencing delusions, that's a situation in which incarceration may not be the best option.

"I'm still going to enforce the law," said Hynes. "But we need to show compassion while still keeping ourselves alive and everybody else alive."

The course covered suicide, case law, citizens' rights and dozens of scenarios in which officers re-enacted a person suffering from a mental health crisis.

Cochran said he's had testimonies from civilians who say they would have been dead had officers not de-escalated the situation and sought help from mental health experts.

According to Cochran's research, one out of five people have a mental diagnosis, and one out of 25 people have a severe mental diagnosis. He said he's proud of the fact that through the Crisis Intervention Response Team, he hasn't made an arrest in five years.

In fact, the Crisis Intervention Response Team training has resulted in an 80 percent reduction of officer injuries during mental health crisis calls in Memphis, where it originated.

Teacher, coach battles breast cancer

BY JULIA FECHTER

Cancer can afflict even the most accomplished athletes. Nine weeks ago, teacher and swimming coach Laura Thomas was diagnosed with stage 2B invasive breast cancer.

The Oconee resident has since taken unpaid leave from her Morgan County teaching job, trading classroom time with her students for afternoons getting chemotherapy through a chest port.

Thomas found out that each of her treatments can cost \$435, and that's with insurance. In response to the sticker shock, friend Tammy Lynn Nance started a "For the love of Laura Thomas" GoFundMe to help with expenses.

Although Thomas prefers keeping her personal life private, she found herself in urgent financial need.

Nance, Thomas's friend for 33 years, emphasized how Thomas has given selflessly to others.

"She's given time, money and more to friends, families, students, athletes and organizations throughout her life," said Nance. "Let's give back now."

Friend E.J. Hovell said Thomas is an avid swimmer and has always enjoyed an active lifestyle.

"Chlorine and saltwater run through her veins," Hovell quipped of her friend.

As a freshman at the University of Georgia, Thomas participated in the trials for the 1984 Summer



A GoFundMe has been set up for former Oconee teacher and swim coach Laura Thomas. [Submitted photo]

Olympics. When she graduated, she was the university's record holder in the 200-meter butterfly.

Thomas worked at Oconee County Middle School for about six years, beginning in 2006. She taught social studies and math, as well several subjects to English-language learners. Thomas also served as Oconee County High School's swimming and diving coach and founded the Swim Oconee Aquatic Club.

After her time with Oconee County Schools, Thomas coached at Northern Arizona University and Georgia Southern University.

When she went to the doctor for a routine mammogram last May, Thomas noticed pain in her breasts. She thought it was strange, but nothing showed up on the imaging.

By February 2021, Thomas's pain was still lingering, and her gynecologist urged her not to wait to find out what was wrong. She got a diagnostic ultrasound and mammogram a week later and then a breast tissue biopsy.

On March 9, Thomas received a clear answer: the pain was coming from a breast tumor. She had stage 2B invasive breast cancer that had spread to a lymph node.

In order to treat the lime-sized tumor, she started the first of five months' worth of aggressive chemotherapy at the beginning of April. After that, she will have surgery to remove the tumor and receive some additional radiation treatment.

While the first two treatments have tired Thomas, she considers herself "very, very lucky" for friends and family who have surrounded her with love and prayer.

So far, the GoFundMe campaign has raised over \$12,000 of the \$20,000 goal. She finds encouragement in handwritten notes and get-well cards. Her students mailed a big basket of snacks, cards and blankets. One card in particular gave her a chuckle. It said, "I know you are going to kick cancer's booty."



At the BOC meeting, concept renderings were unveiled for a two-lane roundabout that would benefit a proposed shopping center. [Submitted rendering]

BOC denies new shopping center

Ken Beall suggests a roundabout

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

In a 3-1 vote, the Oconee Board of Commissioners on Tuesday denied a rezone request for a proposed shopping center at the intersection of the Oconee Connector and Mars Hill Road.

Commissioners Chuck Horton, Mark Saxon and Amrey Harden cast the votes to reject the rezone. Commissioner Mark Thomas voted against the denial.

"I'm kind of shocked," said property owner Maxie Price. "I really don't have anything to say about it. I'm disappointed."

The anchor tenant for the three-parcel, 47-acre site would have been a 48,387-square-foot Publix to be developed by Sembler out of Florida. The development would have also included two hotels, an auto dealership, a bank and other retail businesses.

Representing Price, land planner Ken Beall presented to the BOC new ingress/egress plans that included a two-lane roundabout at the Oconee Connector where the median break is currently located. At previous Planning Commission meetings, Sembler had asked for a full-access intersection and traffic signal on the Oconee Connector to serve as the primary entrance. Oconee County Planning Department staff recommended that the entrance be restricted to a right-in, right-out opening.

At first, the Georgia Department of Transportation agreed with the county's assessment. Later, a top GDOT official overruled the first engineer's opinion after State Transportation Board representative Jamie Boswell presented documents showing prior commitments regarding a median cut. Those agreements were made to previous property owners and before the construction of the Oconee Connector. Boswell, a licensed real estate broker, owns a firm that is listing the subject property.

"GDOT did not do a good job of research," said Beall. "Had they done their research correctly, they wouldn't have made that [original] recommendation."

BOC Chairman John Daniell noted that the median break that was built on the Oconee Connector was meant to assist a now de-commissioned fire station. When Mars Hill Road was widened several years ago, GDOT had rejected Price's appeal for a cut to his property, whose multiple parcels had been rezoned under different owners—once in 1988 and twice in 1992.

Two of those rezones were for smaller shopping centers and another for a subdivision. The Oconee Connector, which is one of the busiest roads today, was not even contemplated at the time of



Ken Beall of Beall & Company provided historical context to the property and the county's prior commitments. [Photo by Michael Prochaska]

those rezones.

In fact, Beall acknowledged that when Ga. 316 was under construction, one concept plan showed the interchange at the intersection of Jennings Mill Road and what was then Epps Bridge Road.

Opponents of the Oconee Connector development argue that the residential parcel is economically viable and that Publix could still locate a store on the business-zoned parcel, albeit the density and scope of the shopping center would be scaled down.

"It doesn't work for them to try to scale down the development and try to make it fit on a piece of property that has immense engineering costs," said Beall. "So now I don't know what the decision is on their part."

Publix Regional Property Manager Dalton Locke hasn't returned The Oconee Enterprise's request for comment. Price has about a month to appeal the rezone denial and 12 months to reapply for the same zoning change.

A flyover bridge at the Oconee Connector is tentatively scheduled to begin construction in 2024. Beall said the roundabout would not interfere with the flyover. He also said that a roundabout would help traffic flow and would be pedestrian and bike friendly. Opponents of the development argued that it would cause traffic congestion.

Horton expressed concern about trucks using secondary entrances on Mars Hill Road. Beall had made several changes to the ingress/egress design along that corridor after meeting with neighbors and representatives of Mars Hill Baptist Church.

"I really appreciate his efforts in trying to accommodate our neighborhood," said Jennifer Walker of the citizen activist group Mars Hill Responsible Development. "It was a gracious gesture on his part."

Walker, who spoke at Tuesday's meeting, said her presentation was a collective effort by local citizens.

"It was the emails and conversations made by the community at large that made a difference," she said.

This issue was mailed Wednesday, May 4 from Watkinsville and Athens, GA. Please inform your post office if it arrives late.

