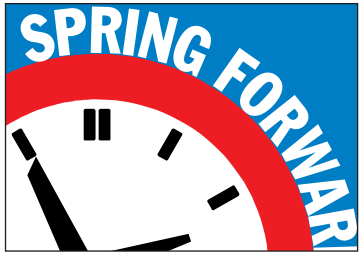




The Oconee Enterprise



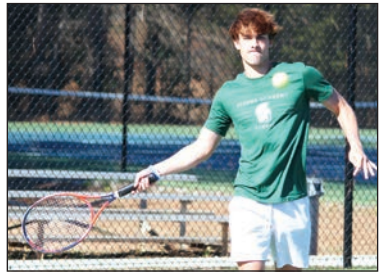
Lose an hour of sleep Sunday

Turn your clock forward one hour when you go to bed Saturday night. **2 a.m.**



Realtors talk market trends

Experts say it's a seller's market. Business, **B3**



Athens Academy wins tournament

Spartans finish first in Jekyll Jam. Sports, **B1**

Coming next week

We'll report on an upcoming murder trial.

Inside

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This issue was mailed Wednesday, March 10 from Watkinsville and Athens, GA. Please inform your post office if it arrives late.



Oconee County Middle School custodian Tammy Peters appreciated the flattering posters at the Oconee Health Campus. [Photo by Julia Fechter]

School employees vaccinated

BY JULIA FECHTER AND MICHAEL PROCHASKA

Festive décor adorned each curtained booth where about 750 school system employees were vaccinated on Monday. Signs were plastered to a wall declaring, "Teachers are awesome," and "We love our support staff." As they left, those school workers were met with familiar faces waving red pom-poms and proclaiming, "Congratulations!"

Employees of Oconee County Schools received their first Pfizer vaccine at the Piedmont Oconee Health Campus during the teacher workday. In earlier weeks, more than 50 staff members age 65 or older were vaccinated through a partnership with the Oconee County Health Department.

"Almost one year to the day, we're able to get the vaccine and hopefully get back to some normalcy," said Rocky Branch Elementary School Principal Laura Mason.

"We really wanted to make a point to do it on the first day it was available to show our teachers how special they are and how much that our community cares," said Student Services Director Dallas LeDuff.

With its new vaccination clinic, Piedmont has been able to vaccinate patients under the tier-one category from a 17-county service area, said Oconee Health Campus Executive Director Delena Brockmann.

Eligible Piedmont patients will be contacted about scheduling a vaccine appointment through their MyChart account.

The Oconee Board of Education on Monday approved making April 2 another teacher workday and student holiday so that school employees can receive their second vaccine shots. The calendar change will effectively extend spring break an extra day. OCS will not need to make this day up.

As of last Friday, OCS reported 16 active COVID-19 cases.

State of healthcare

The Oconee County Chamber of Commerce and Piedmont Athens Regional Medical Center hosted a "State of Healthcare" seminar last week. Keynote speaker Michael Burnett, CEO of Piedmont Athens Regional, said that the hospital system has come a long way over the past year.

He said the first COVID-19 wave was the most difficult, with issues such as lacking personal protective equipment, delayed testing and exposure concerns. Like many other hospitals, Piedmont initially shut down all elective procedures and restricted visitation.

Fortunately, Piedmont Athens Regional was one of the first hospitals in the state to get in-house COVID-19 testing. They also quickly created a COVID-only



OCMS social studies teacher Victor DeVine receives his first COVID-19 vaccine. [Photo by Julia Fechter]



OCS Student Services Director Dallas LeDuff, left, helped coordinate the mass vaccination effort. [Photo by Julia Fechter]

unit with special health and safety precautions.

Subsequently, Piedmont received federal funding to maintain its operations without any workforce reductions. In fact, the hospital attracted more nursing staff and gave them raises. Burnett was also grateful for the hospital's working relationship with Athens Technical College.

He noted how, unlike the flu, COVID-19 rates spiked during the summer. And around the holidays, positivity rates increased as people started gathering again. Like other places, Piedmont Athens saw its highest COVID-19 spike then. Extra capacity was created by rearranging equipment and opening up bed space.

Piedmont Athens became one of the first in the state to offer monoclonal antibody treatments via infusions.

"For certain types of patients that meet criteria that are positive for COVID-19, we can give them antibodies," said Burnett, "and the risk

of them being admitted to the hospital sharply declines. The risk of mortality does, too."

So far, Piedmont Athens has given that treatment to over 750 patients. For the vaccines, Piedmont has offered mainly Pfizer and Moderna to patients. Through its urgent care clinic in Watkinsville, Piedmont began vaccinating people 65 and over in January. Clarke County Schools teachers were vaccinated this week, and employees at Athens Academy and Westminster Christian Academy will also be vaccinated soon.

"By working with Dallas [LeDuff] and Superintendent [Jason] Branch, we were able to make this reproducible for any county to follow the same process, just to make it super easy," Brockmann said.

"For us, we love giving the vaccine because this is how we get out of this and end COVID-19," Burnett said. "Let's get a shot in every arm we can."

ELOST, Bogart election Tuesday

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA
Early voting for March 16 countywide ELOST election continues through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the Oconee County Civic Center.

All precincts will be open on election day, Tuesday, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Polling places are the same as the November 2020 election. Location changes last year were permanent, according to election officials.

For a map of precincts, click on the Elections and Registration tab at the county website, oconeecounty.com.

The only thing on the ballot for this special election is a referendum for an educational local option sales tax, which is a 1 percent tax on retail goods that goes toward the school system. If approved, this will be a continuation of the existing amount of sales tax that residents and visitors contribute toward. State, county and school sales tax add up to 7 cents per dollar in Oconee County.

The existing ELOST, which was renewed in 2016, will expire at the end of 2022. OCS intends to sell bonds that would be issued in the amount of \$42.95 million, with the raising of not more than \$48.5 million in ELOST collections from 2023-2027.

During that time, OCS would fund the following projects with ELOST revenue:

- Construction of Dove Creek

- Classroom additions to Colham Ferry, High Shoals and Malcom Bridge elementary schools

- Renovations to Oconee County Primary School and Malcom Bridge, Oconee County and Rocky Branch elementary schools

- More buses and updates to servers and wireless networks

- An instructional support center
- The anticipated instructional support center will house school district offices that are currently at the end of School Street next to the Oconee Cultural Arts Foundation.

OCS has already purchased the land for both Dove Creek Middle School, which will be adjacent to Dove Creek Elementary, and the future instructional support center. The latter development will be on 6.67 acres off North Main Street behind the Oconee County Library and Watkinsville Post Office.

The city of Bogart will also hold an election Tuesday to fill the vacancy of a councilwoman who resigned before her term expired.

Candidates are Joe Craft, Jenny Bridges and Maggie Collins. The city of Bogart is the only municipality in the county whose elections are self-run, rather than managed through the Oconee Elections Office.



The new water tower off U.S. 441 near Watkinsville is 141 feet tall and holds 750,000 gallons of water. [Photo by Michael Prochaska]

New water tower almost complete

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA
Although not fully operational, the exterior is mostly complete on the new Oconee County water tower off U.S. 441 at the south entrance to Watkinsville.

County Administrator Justin Kirouac said there's still some interior work to do, including disinfecting the inside. Once operational, the elevated tank will hold 750,000 gallons of water. The 141-foot water tower was constructed because the Bishop's Vineyard tower has been at or near capacity during certain months of the year.

While the new tower was under construction, the tank rested at the bottom of the cylinder base up until Wednesday, March 3, when it was raised to the top of the structure.

The water tower has a greater capacity and is less costly to maintain than the traditional water tower design, Kirouac previously told The Enterprise. The tower is comprised of over 160 tons of steel. The general contractor was Caldwell Tanks out of Louisville, Kentucky. That company used the

following subcontractors: Ozark Mountain Construction, Brothers Electric Company, L.G. Barcus and Sons and Southeastern Tank and Tower.

Walton EMC donated the land for the project, said Community and Public Relations Director Greg Brooks.

In other news, the BOC last week approved a 199-foot wireless telecommunications tower at 1290 Jones Road near Lord and Stephens Funeral Home. The BOC also appointed Trey Downs and Danny Mobley to the Board of Tax Assessors.

The BOC will hold a town hall Wednesday, March 24 at 6 p.m. at the Oconee Civic Center. The meeting will be open for both in-person attendance and virtual attendance via Zoom. For details about connecting to the meeting via Zoom, visit oconeecounty.com.

The State of the County luncheon will be held at the Oconee Civic Center March 31 in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce.