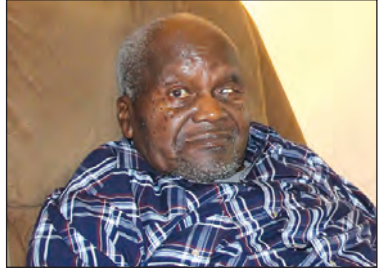




The Oconee Enterprise



Local man turns 96 years old

Henry Elder was a farmer till recently. Lifestyles, **A6**



Man gives tours of historic site

Ruins of old mill still stand. Business, **B3**



Warriors win Hog Mountain Bowl

Warriors roll past Titans in rivalry game. Sports, **B1**

Coming next week

We'll report on the House District 119 race.

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City to pay \$440K toward ESP's \$600K playground and budget an annual \$43K for replacement costs

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

During a Watkinsville City Council meeting last Thursday to discuss the playground portion of Extra Special People's Miracle League, Mayor Bob Smith said he was baffled how a playground could cost \$600,000.

"How big a playground is this?" he asked.

The playground is expected to take up about 0.35 acres, according to ESP's engineer.

The city has pledged \$440,000 toward the estimated \$600,000 cost of equipment, installation and synthetic turf.

ESP, a nonprofit that provides resources and recreational programs to children and adults with disabilities, will pay for a turf baseball field, a concession stand, a retaining wall and other storm water infrastructure.

The cost of all those amenities, including the playground, is estimated to be around \$2.443 million, according to ESP. Of those upfront costs, the city of Watkinsville is responsible for \$440,000. This earmark was voted on in 2019 before ESP decided not to do a splash pad.

Once construction on the playground is complete, the city will take ownership of it and will need to budget annually for eventual replacement costs.

City Manager Sharyn Dickerson said the city will earmark about \$43,000 annually toward the eventual replacement of playground



A slide at the Harris Shoals Park playground has been barricaded for about a year after a child was injured and required stitches in 2019. [File photo]

infrastructure. She based that estimate on a 25-year lifespan of the equipment, a 10-year lifespan of the turf and an assumption that costs will increase about 2 percent each year.

Additionally, the city expects to see an increase of up to \$900 in its insurance premium each year.

"This is the estimate provided by

the city's insurance provider if the city's blanket insurance coverage were to increase by \$600,000," Dickerson wrote in an email to The Oconee Enterprise. "Since some of this cost is installation (about \$95,000), the additional premium will likely be less."

"This is a big-ticket item," said Smith. "We have to be good stew-

ards of the town's money."

Members of the Watkinsville City Council emphasized that this will be a mutually beneficial project that will be enjoyed by local families, regardless of whether they have a child with special needs.

A representative with ESP told the city council that the equipment is "surprisingly expensive" and that

companies other than the one that ESP is considering doing business with would charge more.

Each piece of equipment will come with a warranty. In the case of vandalism, insurance would cover the repair or replacement of equipment.

Councilwoman Christine Tucker, who is heading up a committee on the restoration of Harris Shoals Park, said the future of the existing playground is yet to be decided. The newer equipment may be moved and the older, wooden structures may be repurposed.

"The field and playground are great for many other partners and organizations," according to a document in which ESP answered citizen questions. "ESP would work with different groups for field use."

The council-approved concept plan locates the Miracle League field directly behind ESP's main building at 189 VFW Drive on property that they have leased from the VFW and city. ESP believes existing parking will be sufficient to handle those using the facilities.

An ADA-accessible pathway will connect the lower, main area of the park to the upper area. Park visitors will have access to a concession stand that will be operated by ESP participants.

The Watkinsville City Council plans to vote Sept. 16 on a long-term lease agreement and a construction lease agreement.

In mass mailing, Watkinsville council defends fiscal record

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

The Watkinsville Post Office is getting a lot of business lately from elected officials.

In the same month that the Board of Education penned a critical letter on roundabouts, the Watkinsville City Council mailed to citizens a letter rebutting Mayor Bob Smith's negative appraisal of the council's budgeting decisions.

The three-page letter is dated Aug. 14 but was not received by many residents until last week. The letter is signed by all five council members—Brian Brodrick, Connie Massey, Marci Campbell, Christine Tucker and Dan Matthews—but states taxpayer dollars were not used.

The letter disputes the mayor's accusation that the council is not a good steward of taxpayer dollars.

"Our annual budget was \$1.973 million in 2020, and we held the line for 2021, including no property tax increases in 2021," according to the letter. "We are in this sound financial position due to many years of conservative financial management, and we continue to take that approach as we move forward."

In the letter, council members corrected the mayor's false claim that it was unlawful for the council to balance the budget using reserve funds.

"The Watkinsville fund balance functions as an insurance policy to ensure we can avoid dramatic cuts that might impact you directly due to COVID issues," the letter told taxpayers.

The letter explained that Smith failed to meet with Financial Director Julie Klein and City Manager Sharyn Dickerson after

they presented an initial budget several months before the final one was approved. Smith requested a 12 percent budget cut the day before the budget was to be voted on without providing any specific suggestions, council members wrote. Smith's 12 percent cut would have resulted in restricted access to the countywide 911 system, an elimination of funds for police training, closing a downtown restroom and the reduction of hours or firing of key employees, they claimed.

After Smith attempted to veto the fiscal year budget, he sent out a mass mailing dated July 9 that was highly critical of the council's leadership.

"I am met with incredible resistance from those who spend money with no regard...It's time for our elected officials and city manager to learn to spend the people's



Brodrick



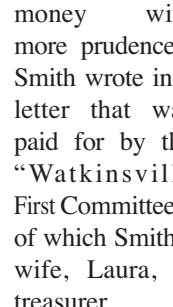
Campbell



Massey



Matthews



Tucker

money with more prudence," Smith wrote in a letter that was paid for by the "Watkinsville First Committee," of which Smith's wife, Laura, is treasurer.

SEE COUNCIL PAGE A2

OCS names Teachers of the Year

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

In announcing Oconee County Schools' eleven Teachers of the Year, Superintendent Jason Branch said each educator makes a "significant impact in their classrooms, schools and community every single day."

The following are this year's Teachers of the Year:

- CFES: Lea Pacut
- DCES: Heather Bragg
- HSES: Jessica Tiller
- MBES: Julie Payne
- OCES: Keri Halleck
- OPCS: Jamie Evans
- RBES: Stephanie Dickson
- MBMS: Shannon Giddens
- OCMS Daniela McLean
- NOHS: Jade Paustian
- OCHS: Sandy Palmer

Sex offender uses Facebook to attack city council

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

In response to the city council's recent letter to citizens, resident Harold Buck Henderson, a convicted sex offender who manages a Facebook page called "Make Watkinsville Liveable," falsely accused the council of meeting in secret "for the discussion to take official political action against Watkinsville's Mayor Bob Smith."

Councilman Brian Brodrick told The Oconee Enterprise that the document was passed to each council member individually and that it was not discussed in a public meeting.

"You five remember this: Mayor Bob Smith won. And we the people are going to make sure those replacing you this election doesn't [sic] continue to destroy our town with your liberalism," Henderson wrote on Facebook.

Henderson was convicted of child molestation in 1995 and was sentenced to 20 years, serving 12 of those years incarcerated and the remaining eight on probation. When he was released from prison

in 2007, Henderson was listed on the sex offender registry. According to court documents, Henderson took the hand of an 8-year-old child and placed the hand on his exposed penis "with the intent to arouse and satisfy his sexual desire."

When petitioning the court to be removed from the sex offender registry, Henderson's attorney stated that Henderson had complied with all his probation requirements and committed no further violations. Henderson's October 2010 probation status report described his level of risk as "low."

In August 2017, Henderson was taken off the sex offender registry by order of Western Judicial Circuit Judge Robert W. Adamson.

Facebook's terms of service state that convicted sex offenders aren't allowed to use the online social media platform. However, the company does not specify whether a sex offender who successfully petitioned to be removed from the registry is allowed to use the website.

Facebook allows minors age 13 and older to use its service. Online, Henderson regularly makes politically charged attacks against city officials and has even scrutinized the writings of local teenagers.

On July 29 of this year, Henderson created a fake Facebook profile under the pseudonym "Tony Stone" to disparage Councilman Brian Brodrick on a Facebook group comprised of more than 400 members.

"Brodrick and his city council clones continue to run our local government as if the residents' individual incomes was their own," he wrote.

In an earlier post, Henderson said the "Watkinsville City Hall swamp needs to be drained this November."

Henderson uses his "Make Watkinsville Liveable" Facebook page to spread unsubstantiated conspiracy theories, such as China manufacturing the novel virus to wreak havoc on the world.

"They need more room to expand, so how can they reach that

goal? Extermination of the non-Chinese population through a pandemic disease," he wrote in March.

In August 2019, Henderson wrote, "The New World Order is a secretive power elite... conspiring to eventually rule the world through the authoritarian world government of the United Nations, which will replace sovereign nation-states."

On the website "Nextdoor," an online forum for local neighborhoods, Henderson wrote that the non-partisan vigil organized by Watkinsville's Black community, City Council and Police Department was "racist" and is one of the "Communist 45 goals for the takeover of America."

On his "Make Watkinsville Liveable" Facebook page, Henderson typically does not identify himself as a convicted sex offender, even when he writes about other sex offenders.

"U.S. Border Patrol Agents continue apprehending previously convicted sex offenders," he wrote in September 2019. "How well is the

Democrats' open-door policy working for you? If Democrats get back into power, [a sex offender] could be your next door neighbor."

Henderson also used the "Make Watkinsville Liveable" Facebook page to identify a resident with left-leaning political signs and encouraged people to file a complaint with the city. Last Thursday, he posted pictures of the political signs in the front yard of Alice Woodruff, whom he identified but misspelled her name. Woodruff lives directly across from Mayor Bob Smith. Earlier this year, Smith investigated whether multiple building permits for Woodruff's property had ever resulted in a code violation.

Henderson did not respond to The Enterprise's request for comment, but he did criticize The Enterprise on his Facebook page for pursuing the story.

"What Editor [Michael] Prochaska won't tell you in his slanted story is I'm a disabled veteran of 25 years' service," he wrote, adding that he is also a born-again Christian.

This issue was mailed Wednesday, Sept. 9, from Watkinsville and Athens, GA. Please inform your post office if it arrives late.

