



In Our 137th Year

Serving Oconee County



# The Oconee Enterprise

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THE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER OF *Marvene Parsley, Happy 94th Birthday!*

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## Police get out in the community

Local lawmen serve with honor. Lifestyles, **A6**



## Woman makes handmade soaps

Business opens in Market Center. Business, **B4**



## North Oconee wins region title

Lady Titans secure region championship. Sports, **B1**

## Coming next week

We'll report on Oconee's municipal elections.

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This issue was mailed Wednesday, Oct. 13, from Watkinsville and Athens, GA. Please inform your post office if it arrives late.



# Sales tax could increase from 7 to 8 percent

*If TSPLOST passes, millage rate will decrease*

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

If the transportation special purpose local options sales tax passes on Nov. 2, Oconee County will go from having 7 percent sales tax to 8 percent sales tax.

Board of Commissioners Chairman John Daniell said the millage rate will drop by one mill if voters approve TSPLOST.

At present, there is a collective 7-cent tax per dollar on retail items in Oconee. Four of those cents are imposed by the state. Then, there is a local option sales tax for and a special purpose local option sales tax for projects specific to Oconee County and its municipalities. On top of that, the school system collects another cent on every dollar from the education local option sales tax. Revenue from a proposed TSPLOST will be earmarked solely for transportation, road and pedestrian-access projects.



In order to maintain the integrity of roads, the county must increase the rate at which roads are repaved. [Submitted photo]

There are no county or state seats up for election this year, so the referendum is the sole item on the countywide election. However, there are contested council seats in Watkinsville, North High Shoals and Bogart.

If voters approve a TSPLOST, collections would start in April

2022 and run for five years. Gas purchase would be excluded from the tax.

The county anticipates TSPLOST to generate between \$37.9 million to \$48.1 million for the county. The municipalities of Watkinsville, Bishop, Bogart and North High Shoals will also use

TSPLOST revenue for transportation-specific projects.

The four categories of projects proposed by the county are multi-use paths, safety and intersection improvements and road paving.

Daniell gave the following considerations for multi-use paths:

- Hog Mountain Road from Butlers Crossing to Lake Welbrook Road
  - Daniels Bridge Road from Hog Mountain Road to the Oconee Connector
  - Union Church Road from Hog Mountain Road to High Shoals Road
  - Oconee Veterans Park to both high schools
- For safety and intersection improvements, he listed:
- Burr Harris Road at Hog Mountain Road
  - Colham Ferry Road at Astondale Road
  - Union Church Road at New High Shoals Road

For the aforementioned projects, the county will form a task force in which citizens can prioritize them.

The majority of funding will go toward paving roads, as there are 151.1 miles of roadways in Oconee County that are currently considered in poor-paving condition.

Daniell said 80 to 100 more miles could be paved if TSPLOST passes and that at present, the county is paving only half of what it would like to pave.

At a recent town hall meeting, Commissioner Chuck Horton said that if TSPLOST does not pass, "there would be a lot more patching, rather than paving."

Former State Rep. Chuck Williams asked whether the county would pave dirt and gravel roads. Daniell said there are not plans for paving dirt roads, because most residents who have dirt roads prefer them that way.

In fiscal year 2021, the county had funding to resurface about 11 miles of road. Oconee County has approximately 390 miles of paved road, and the average life cycle of a road is 15 to 20 years, depending on usage.

SEE TSPLOST PAGE A5



Spartan Carson Thieme is the Major League Baseball Pitch Hit Run Braves Team Champion for the 9/10 age group. [Submitted photo]

## Spartan ranks 10th in the U.S. in a youth MLB competition

BY MORGAN PHILLIPS

Athens Academy student Carson Thieme earned first place for the 9/10-age group in the Braves Team Championship as part of Major League Baseball's Pitch, Hit & Run competition.

His performance gained him 10th place in the country for the World Series Finals, where the top three finishers compete in the World Series.

There are three levels in the MLB Pitch, Hit & Run competition.

Student athletes get six pitches to hit a target, and they have to hit a ball off a tee straight across second base as far as possible.

Then there's the timed running portion in which points are awarded for speed.

For the Thieme family, baseball runs deep. Carson's grandfather and father played baseball.

"[Baseball] is definitely a family thing," said Carson's mother, Katie Thieme.

Carson has been playing baseball since he could walk. His favorite part is getting to hit and catching pop-flys.

This year was Carson's third year competing in the MLB Pitch, Hit & Run competition. Becoming Team Champion for his age group was special for Carson.

"I kind of feel proud that I have one of the best hits in the state," Carson said.

Rich Thieme, Carson's father,



At 10 years old, Thieme already has his sights at college baseball. [Submitted photo]

said, "The first time he competed, he was just happy to be there."

"But," Rich continued, "going back the second time, I think in his mind he was like, 'Okay, I won this when I was 8, so I'm coming here to win it at 10 as well.'"

Because the competition was during football season, Carson

found time throughout the week to play football and stay in "baseball shape."

"I want to try to make it to college baseball," Carson said. "And [then] see if I can go farther than that."

No doubt Carson will keep his eye on the ball and continue to make headlines in his athletic career.

## ADA resignations slowed down caseload catch-up

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

The resignations and vacancies in the Western Judicial Circuit District Attorney's Office has "slowed down the process of 'catching up' from the backlog of cases," according to the Grand Jury report, which was presented to Superior Court Chief Judge Eric Norris on Sept. 7.

The full Grand Jury report will be published in the legals section of The Oconee Enterprise next week.

Gonzalez inherited a backlog of cases that accumulated during the pandemic when the state mandated a judicial hiatus. During the employee shortage, Gonzalez asked for help from the State DA's Office. The two trials associated with the murder of Joey Jackson were prosecuted by Sheila Ross of the Prosecuting Attorneys' Council of Georgia.

Since the beginning of the year when many assistant district attorneys resigned, Gonzalez has hired a number of replacements.

"One thing that stands out about the personnel within the DA's Office is the amount of diversity within the staff," according to the Grand Jury report, which states that Gonzalez has been "implementing a new vision for her office."

This includes looking at reforms within the judicial system and bringing more transparency to the office. Additionally, she hired a new community outreach staff member who serves as a grant writer for federal, state and foundation grants.

Gonzalez told the Grand Jury that money for resources is one of her greatest needs. During a tour of the



Gonzalez

Hale

Oconee facilities, the office staff "expressed a need for a full-time administrative assistant."

"We have to make do with victim advocates to answer the phones and other administrative tasks," Gonzalez said in a public statement earlier this year.

"[Gonzalez] said that she recognized the difference in culture between Oconee County and Clarke County," according to the Grand Jury report. "It appears there has been a lot of change in the DA's Office over the past eight months, both physically and philosophically."

Members of the Grand Jury toured the jail for an hour-and-a-half over the summer. The jail, they wrote, operates under a no-contact visit policy.

Instead, inmates are afforded the opportunity to have video visitation. The only contact, face-to-face visitation allowed is with their attorneys.

"The committee was impressed with the overall state of the jail as it relates to cleanliness, security and safety," according to the report. "The jail tour committee was greatly impressed with the execution of policies put into place to mitigate COVID-19, as the sheriff stated no inmates had contracted the virus."

## Early voting has started

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

Advanced voting for the Nov. 2 election began earlier this week and continues through Friday, Oct. 29 at the Oconee County Civic Center on weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Saturday voting will be this weekend, as well as Oct. 23 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. On Election Day, Nov. 2, all polling locations will be open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

The only item that all Oconee residents will be voting on is a transportation special purpose local option sales tax referendum.

However, there are contested seats in the municipalities of Watkinsville, North High Shoals and Bogart.

For Watkinsville, Rebecca Billings is running against incum-

bent Brian Brodrick for mayor, Churck Garrett is running unopposed for Post 1 and Carolyn Maultsby is challenging incumbent Connie Massey for Post 2.

For North High Shoals, Eric Wright and Hilda Kurtz are running unopposed for Post 3 and 4, respectively, while Post 5 is contested between Meagan Cundiff and Jared Strickland.

The town of Bogart, which manages its own elections, has two seats open and three people who qualified. Because the town does not have posts, the two people with the most votes win those seats. The three candidates are incumbents David Kilpatrick and Jenny Bridges, as well as challenger Greg Maddox.