



In Our 137th Year

Serving Oconee County



The Oconee Enterprise

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THE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER OF Harrison Mullis

THURSDAY • 5 AUGUST 2021



BOC approves several rezones

Office park, restaurant move ahead. Business, **B3**



Lady Titans play at Pinehurst

NOHS golf team plays at national event. **B1**



Volleyball to begin soon

Area volleyball teams prep for season. Sports, **B1**

Coming next week

We'll report on a teenage Paralympic athlete.

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TSPLOST will be on the ballot

Local millage rates approved

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

The Board of Commissioners on Tuesday approved an intergovernmental agreement with Oconee's municipalities to place a transportation special purpose local option sales tax referendum on the Nov. 2 ballot.

There are no county or state seats up for election this year, so the referendum will be the sole item on the countywide election.

If voters approve a TSPLOST, collections would start in April 2022 and run for five years. Sales tax would go from 7 cents per dollar to 8 cents per dollar on retail items. Gas purchase would be excluded.

Oconee County and its municipalities could collect no more than \$56 million during the five-year levy. Of that, the county could collect about \$48.15 million, and the remainder would go to Watkinsville (about \$4.83 million), Bogart (about \$1.52 million), North High Shoals (about \$1.1 million) and Bishop (about \$380,800).

Funds for both SPLOST and TSPLOST are divided up among municipalities based on population percentages.

BOC Chairman John Daniell said the new funding source of road and pedestrian projects will allow the county to drop the millage rate by one mill next year.

On Tuesday, the BOC adopted a 6.65 millage rate for unincorporated parts of the county. The millage rate for incorporated areas is 7.59 mills. The Board of Education has set its millage rate at 16.5 mills.

Daniell said 53.9 percent of the county's earmark of TSPLOST revenue will go toward paving projects.

"Right now, we are doing about half of what we should be," said Daniell, explaining that the county should be paving between 15-20 miles per year.

"We paved 10.92 miles this past year at approximately \$3.5 million," County Administrator Justin Kirouac told The Oconee Enterprise, calculating the cost of paving at \$320,500 per mile. ("This included extra money pulled from fund balance over our normal SPLOST/General fund allocation," he explained.)

"We are currently in the process of contracting with a firm to run a laser truck over the entirety of the road network to get an objective analysis of the pavement quality as well as the recommended resurfacing method for the road segment," said Kirouac. "Right now we are focused on maintaining our current inventory."

Kirouac added, "We'd like to place all the roads on a Pavement Quality Index so that there's an unbiased assessment of the road priority list that provides more visibility on when a particular road segment would expect to be resurfaced, pending funding levels."

In other news, the BOC is making headway with a new administrative building by selling \$12.5 million in bonds as allowed by the approved Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax.

The building will be located at the intersection of North Main Street and Macon Highway.

Oconee County recently received a bond rating upgrade from Aa2 to Aa1, according to Moody's Investors Service.

"Oconee County is the smallest county in Georgia to receive a Aa1 bond rating," states a press release from the county.

Also at Tuesday's meeting, the BOC gave approval for Watkinsville Clipper Cuts to soon operate out of the house of its owner, Mae Rivera, at 1021 Greenbriar Court.

Rivera said that now that her lease is due to be renewed, "financially, it's a better decision for me to try to locate it at my own [home]."



The Oconee Enterprise staff earned 13 state journalism awards, including First Place General Excellence. Front row from left, newly hired Administrative Assistant Amanda Prochaska, Publisher Maridee Williams and Advertising Representative Tracy Harmon. Back row, from left, Graphic Designer George Windate, Editor Michael Prochaska and Sports Editor Justin Hubbard. [Photo by George Windate]

Enterprise top of its class

STAFF REPORTS

Capturing 13 editorial awards, including nine first-place honors, The Oconee Enterprise last week earned First Place General Excellence for its circulation division with the Georgia Press Association Better Newspaper Contest. The awards were for stories, photographs and cartoons published in 2020.

"We had a great staff last year," said The Enterprise Publisher Maridee Williams. "Jeremy Johnson, who has since moved on to another job, did a wonderful job growing as our sports editor."

Williams said she was impressed with current Sports

Editor Justin Hubbard, who earned first place Sports Feature Photo and several other awards with less than three months on the job during the award eligibility period.

"[The] photographer had great timing and position to capture the emotion of hitting the game-winning shot," wrote a judge.

Williams also gave special recognition to Advertising Representative Tracy Harmon, who makes the engine of the newspaper run, as well as Graphic Designer George Windate, who puts the paper together every week.

The Enterprise swept the Local News Coverage category, taking home first, second and third

place. Staff won First Place Editorial Page for "great design and interesting content focused on the community."

Editor Michael Prochaska was awarded second place for Editorial Writing.

Former news reporter Julia Fechter was presented with first place in Feature Writing. Johnson and Hubbard were honored with second place headline writing. For the second consecutive year, Cartoonist Chuck Cunningham took home the first place Editorial Cartoonist award.

First place in Sports Feature Story went to Johnson.

SEE THE ENTERPRISE PAGE A2



Vaughn Carlson gives a stuffed animal to his teacher, Jamie Lee McClung. [Photo by Michael Prochaska]

Public schools welcome future Warriors and Titans

Masks are optional

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

With a stuffed Dalmatian in one hand and the loving clasp of his mother's palm in the other, Vaughn Carlson explored the hallways of Oconee County Primary School with an exuberant jaunt.

When the kindergartener approached his classroom, he held out the plush animal and joyfully dropped it into the hands of his smiling teacher, Jamie Lee McClung.

The magic of Meet the Teacher was visible in the wide-eyed wonder of thousands of children this week.

And on Wednesday, students returned to the classroom ready to learn and have fun.

OCPs Paraprofessional Lauren Hammond, who is a product of the school system, said what makes OCS special is the sense of community and support.

The school system is allowing students the flexibility to wear or not wear a mask this school year. Vaccinations are also not manda-



Twins Mina and Sidney Cohen meet their second grade teacher, Anna Gentry. [Photo by Michael Prochaska]

tory. Anticipating opposition from some parents, other families in support of the OCS' decision have led a complimentary letter-writing campaign to the Board of Education.

OCS is taking a number of precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Those policies and protocols are outlined at oconeeschools.org. OCS Director of Communications

Anisa Sullivan Jimenez said schools will continue to contact parents about positive cases in a student's classroom. Positive cases will also be reported to the Department of Public Health to assist with contact tracing.

In other news, adults wishing to mentor school children through the Oconee Area Resource Council can contact OARC director Amanda Davis at (706) 769-4974 or visit oconeeconnection.org.

Boswell cleared by state

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

The Office of the State Inspector General has concluded that Georgia Transportation Board Congressional District 10 representative Jamie Boswell did not violate the Code of Ethics when he supplied information to state officials about road work relevant to an Oconee rezone.



Had the Oconee County Board of Commissioners approved the rezone for a shopping center anchored by Publix earlier this spring, Boswell would have financially benefited as the commercial real estate broker for the property owner.

The administrative inquiry began after the Atlanta Journal-Constitution published a story explaining that Boswell communicated to Georgia Department of Transportation officials about a potential median opening for proposed shopping center at the Oconee Connector for which Boswell's company was the listing agency.

The AJC story was published April 30, three months after The Oconee Enterprise published a story about Boswell's business interest in the property. The Enterprise published a follow-up story April 22. Both stories quoted Boswell saying that he's not an engineer and that he didn't see his involvement as a conflict of interest.

The latter Enterprise story also quoted Ken Beall, a private-sector land planner who represented the property owner in the unsuccessful rezone, defending Boswell.

In a July 29 letter to Gov. Brian Kemp, Georgia Inspector General Scott McAfee refers only to the AJC story, not the stories published in The Enterprise or the local news website oconeeobservations.org run by retired journalism professor Lee Becker.

"The published AJC article scrutinized a decision made by GDOT's Chief Engineer Meg Pirkle to preserve a particular median break on the Oconee Connector," McAfee wrote.

According to McAfee's letter, Pirkle was "never aware of Mr. Boswell's connection to the property owner until the approximate time of the AJC article's publication."

SEE BOSWELL PAGE A3

NHS will vote on a mayor

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

Following the July 11 death of North High Shoals Mayor Toby Bradberry, the town will hold a special election to fill the vacancy.

Qualifying will be Aug. 16, 17 and 18 from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Oconee Elections Office, located at 10 Court Street in downtown Watkinsville.

The election will correspond with an existing election on Tuesday, Nov. 2 for North High Shoals Council Posts 3, 4 and 5. Qualifying for those seats are also Aug. 16, 17 and 18.

Bradberry was elected mayor in 2016 and was re-elected in 2020. The Oconee Enterprise will report more next week on qualifying for other municipal elections.

The only item on the countywide ballot is a transportation special purpose local option sales tax.

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

