



The Sweetest Strawberries this side of Heaven

Bradford County Telegraph

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Thursday, Feb. 13, 2025

146th year, 31st Issue — \$1

Bradford Fair Association facing foreclosure

BY DAN HILDEBRAN
dan@bctelegraph.com

James L. Gissy has filed a public notice indicating that his trust, the James Gissy Revocable Trust, intends to foreclose on the Bradford County Fairgrounds.

The Notice of Lis Pendens is intended to notify potential buyers of the 20-acre parcel near the intersection of Market Road and U.S. 301 that litigation is pending that may cloud a potential buyer's title to the property.

Around 2018, the fair association received a \$1.5 million state grant to construct a \$3 million 10,000-square-foot arena. The arena would be hardened to meet state codes, allowing it to serve as a hurricane shelter.

In 2019, the organization borrowed \$1.5 million from Community State Bank (now DLP Bank) in anticipation of receiving a second \$1.5 million state grant.

However, the 2018 Parkland high school shooting and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic upended the state budget for two consecutive years, resulting in Tallahassee lawmakers failing to provide the second grant.

That left the fair association facing foreclosure on its mortgage with the bank in January 2024, and Gissy's trust took on the promissory note.

Fair association President Bob Milner said he asked Gissy to delay legal action after the association failed to make an annual mortgage payment of \$189,000 to the trust. However, Gissy elected to proceed with the lawsuit.

The fair association leader added that he has been in constant contact with Gissy to resolve the pending litigation.

Milner also said his board recently met with State Senator Jennifer Bradley and Rep. Chuck Brannan to discuss state funding, essentially asking lawmakers to follow through on their original commitment for the second grant.

The former Bradford County Sheriff and current Starke City Commissioner said his board is talking to other private investors to organize a financing package that would pay off the trust.

Workshop presents fire assessment in detail

BY MARK J. CRAWFORD
mark@bctelegraph.com

Bradford County's first fire assessment workshop included lots of background and information about what property owners could be asked to pay for and why.

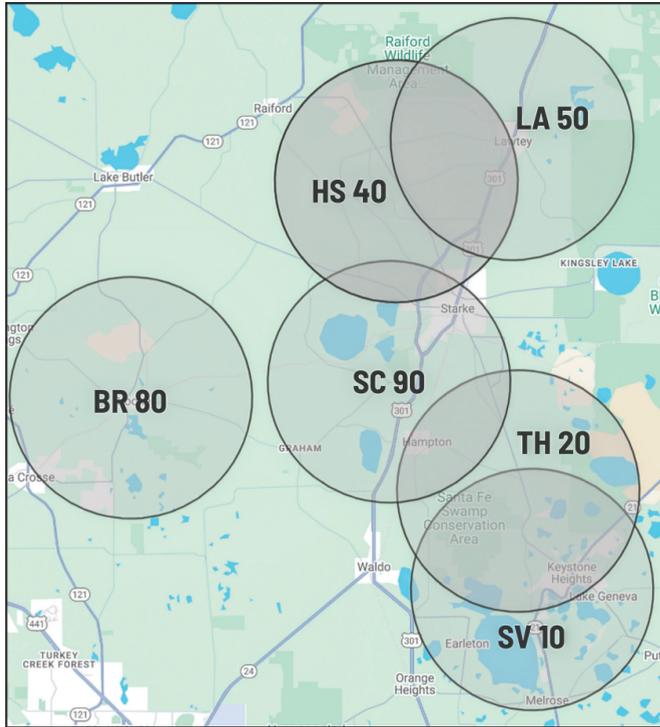
Last year, county commissioners came close to passing an assessment to finally provide a recurring source of funding for fire protection services. They stopped short of imposing the \$167 fee per household, opting instead to allow more time for discussion and questions.

Fire Chief Ben Carter made the case for the fire assessment during the Feb. 4 workshop before answering questions.

History and status of department

Carter dove into a little history to begin, pointing out that concerns over funding fire protection services has been an ongoing concern long before necessity — i.e., the dwindling number of volunteer firefighters — resulted in the county founding a paid professional department. There was even a failed public referendum for a \$75 fire assessment in 2001 that would have supported the volunteer departments with equipment and training.

Advanced training requirements are considered a major cause for the disappearance of the volunteers (more than 200 hours of training and more than \$1,000 in fees), and Carter said some former members of that system, like the late Percy and Rusty Sullivan, had supported the county starting a paid department. Carter said the county had been blessed for years with an "incredible" volunteer



The five mile radius around each Bradford fire station: Station 10 in Speedville, 20 in Theressa, 40 in Heilbronn Springs, 50 in Lawley, 80 in Brooker and 90 in Sampson City. The Brooker station hasn't been built yet.

system, one which helped train him and many of those who work for him. Higher standards and reduced volunteerism changed that.

After the county commission chose not to move forward with another proposed fire assessment in 2018, oversight of the department passed from the former chief, Chip Ware, to Sheriff Gordon Smith in 2019. Ware

had worked with a committee to propose a hybrid paid and volunteer fire department. Under Smith and his fire director, D.K. Bennett, the various fire departments were merged into a single Bradford County Fire Department, although there was still not a dedicated funding source to pay for it other than the county's reserves.

See FIRE, page 5

Lake meeting focus on rising water levels

BY JENN SAMSEL
Special to the Monitor

On Jan. 30, Save Our Lakes hosted a community meeting at Trinity Baptist Church in Keystone Heights to discuss the Lake Geneva Restoration Project.

The attendance, both in person and virtually, was quite successful.

Members of Save Our Lakes and local leaders addressed residents' concerns regarding the restoration efforts.

During the meeting, the guest speaker, Col. James Booth, an Army officer, shared his insights. Booth previously worked with the Jacksonville District of the United States Army Corps of Engineers and is now retiring from the military. He expressed his honor in collaborating with the Save Our Lakes initiative.

Booth provided detailed information thoroughly throughout

the presentation and answered as many questions as possible. His efforts were exceptional.

Vivian Katz-James also mentioned that Save Our Lakes hired Jeff Littlejohn, a consultant from Adams & Reese, who previously served as the deputy secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

He is well-versed in acquiring permits and has accelerated the progress of the Lake Geneva Restoration Project.

"The state does recognize, and they invested almost \$120 million, that the purpose of this project is to restore that lake to historic levels, and at those levels, the trees that have been allowed to grow up there in the last multiple decades are going to get inundated, and they're going to die, and they'll die in place, and you'll have a lake full of dead trees,

or you can have a nice lake that's back to its original condition," said Jeff Littlejohn Consultant.

"So the state has agreed that this is in the public interest; I've met with senior leadership in Tallahassee about getting this through. We think it won't take very long at all, and we'll be very pleased to see this project permitting," he said.

Lake Geneva has historically been a popular tourist destination for its abundant water and recreational boating. However, it began losing significant water levels in the late 1980s. At one point, Lake Lake's water level dropped to 80 feet.

Currently, the water level of Lake Geneva stands at 94 feet. Once the restoration project is completed, it is estimated that the Lake will be filled to 102.9 feet. Following this, any additional water from storms or

See LAKE, page 7



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WORTH NOTING

Players, sponsors needed for golf tourney

Madison Street Student Ministry is planning golf tournament Saturday, Feb. 15. Enjoy the challenging Quail Heights Country Club golf course in Lake City and support the students of Madison Street Baptist Church as they head to camp this summer. Registration for the four-person team scramble begins at 7:30 a.m. and the tournament begins at 8:30. Lunch and prizes are at 1:30 p.m.

Registration is \$300 per team of four (\$75 per person), which includes fees, carts and lunch. Team and tournament sponsorships are appreciated. For more information, please call 904-964-7557.

Fairgrounds food distribution

A communitywide food distribution hosted by Feeding Northeast Florida and True Vine Ministry will take Tuesday, Feb. 18, at 9 a.m. at the Bradford County Fairgrounds.

Food boxes often include fresh produce, deli and bakery items, dairy and some meats. Inventory is subject to availability. This institution is an equal opportunity provider.

Soil and water conservation board meets

The Bradford Soil and Water Conservation District will meet at 10:30 a.m. on Tuesday, Feb. 18, at the Bradford County Extensions Office, 2266 N. Temple Ave. (U.S. 301) in Starke. Meetings are open to the public and can be attended in person or by Zoom. Contact Paul Still at 904-368-0291 or stillpe@aol.com for more information and the Zoom link.



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selection and placement trees can provide a host of benefits and even increase property value.

If you are interested in the benefits of trees but unsure where to start, help is available. Get guidance on which trees are a good fit for your property and other important things to

consider when you're planning to plant.

To learn more about the benefits of trees, get a free slash pine and info on tree planting, or just have fun with family activities then come on out for the 2025 Tree Giveaway for Bradford County!

Bradford Soil and Water Conservation District, UF/IFAS Extension Bradford County and the Alligator Creek Garden Club are hosting this afternoon of learning and fun on Wednesday, Feb. 19, from 2-6 p.m. at the UF/IFAS Extension Office, 2266 North Temple Avenue in Starke.

For more info, call 904-966-6224.

Revival at Bradford Baptist

Bradford Baptist Church (1640 S. Water St.) welcomes

evangelist Matt Downs for revival services, which run through Friday, Feb. 14.

Services begin at 7 p.m. For more information, please call Bradford Baptist Church Pastor Rick Jackson at 904-964-3708.



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We would love to hear stories or memories you have about Mrs. Stan. Please submit them at www.weremember.com under Peggy Stanwix-Hay or email to jane.wiggins06@gmail.com.

Dear Friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.
-1 John 4:7



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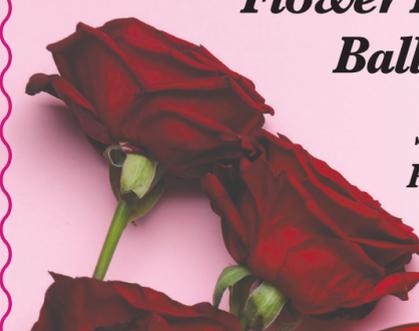
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Pop-Up Museum

Chautauqua

A Chautauqua is an adult education and social movement in the United States that peaked in popularity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Chautauqua assemblies expanded and spread throughout rural America until the mid-1920s. The Chautauqua brought entertainment and culture for the whole community, with speakers, teachers, musicians, showmen, preachers, and specialists of the day. The first Keystone Heights Chautauqua was held Winter of 1926.

History of Keystone

Founded in 1925, Keystone Heights has a rich history. Enjoy the Pop-Up Museum in the Historic Keystone Pavilion or listen to guest speakers share the stories of the past.

Guest Speakers

Speakers for across generations, topics, and prospective will present and the audience will be able to ask questions.

Art

Local Artists will engage with the community, fostering insightful discussions and offering unique opportunities for attendees to gain valuable insights into the world of contemporary.

Music

Local musicians will perform under shady oaks and guest can enjoy the cool breeze from the lake as they enjoy food from fabulous food trucks.

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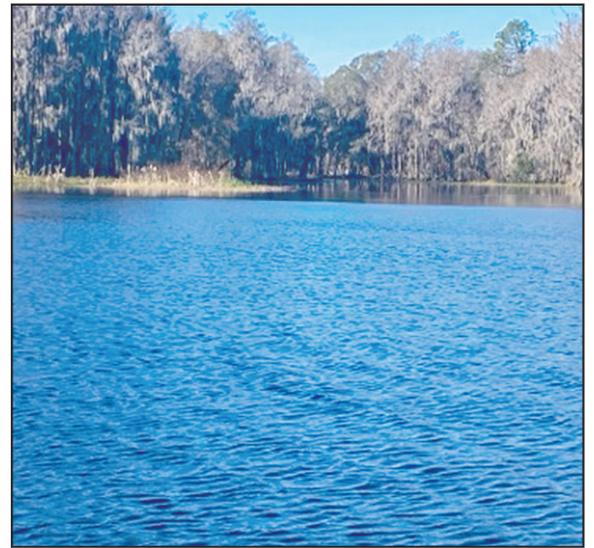
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Flood mitigation project completed

Bradford County officials recently announced the completion of a mitigation project on Lake Sampson. In a joint effort involving the Bradford County Board of County Commissioners, the Bradford County Manager's Office, Bradford County Public Works, the Bradford Soil and Water Conservation District, and the Bradford County Sheriff's Office Emergency Management Division, a cleanout was conducted of the mouth of the canal leading from Lake Sampson to the Lake Sampson Water Control Structure, locally

known as "Three Pipes." Over recent years, extensive overgrowth has crowded the canal. The cleanout is expected to enhance the efficiency of Three Pipes by increasing water flow to the gates. In a joint effort, Bradford County Commissioners and Soil and Water Conservation District Supervisors funded the \$8,000 project, which cleaned out approximately 2.33 acres of vegetation at the lake's outflow. The project was completed by using special equipment that shreds the material and was conducted on Jan. 9.



Lawtey pressed about economic and strategic planning

BY MELISSA PYLE
Special to the Telegraph

February's Lawtey City Council meeting was business as usual with discussions of financials, road repairs and the possibility of a future agreement with the county over utility costs for the fire department, but it was the involvement of citizens at the meeting that put a spotlight on several pressing topics.

During public comments, John Mercier, a regular at the monthly meetings and a former member of the recreation committee, wanted to review several previously discussed proposals by the city. He asked Mayor Jimmie Scott if he had ever worked on getting the proper paperwork together for the creation of an economic development committee. Scott said he had not done that yet and referred to the county having problems of their own with economic development.

"We always talk about that, but if you look around, what economic development can we approve here in Lawtey?" Scott asked.

Mercier said he didn't have an answer to that, but said the

city needs to have an economic development team to pursue new ideas or ask for help from the county. Mercier also told the council there were supposed to be updates to the city's comprehensive plan, which members agreed was a need.

Finally, regarding a strategic planning board, Scott told Mercier that there has been no movement on it, although the idea had been discussed in October.

Another topic of concern was the city's trash collection charges. Mercier presented each council member with a copy of Ordinance 10-01, signed in July of 2010. The ordinance states that there is to be an increase of 3% each year to the garbage collection fees and Mercier said this hasn't been done in almost 15 years, causing the city to lose potential revenue. Council member Amy Blom thanked Mercier for the copy because she has been wanting to investigate the issue further.

Road repaired

Trash collection was a later



Citizen John Mercier presents the Lawtey City Council with copies of an ordinance that he felt needed review to help with city finances.

topic of discussion when the council voted to reinstate trash collection on Brandon Road after residents paid for lime rock repairs. Sheri Wilson, a Brandon Road resident, and other neighbors organized to get these private road repairs completed at their own cost. Residents

are to have garbage collection reinstated on Feb. 18.

This road has been a topic of much debate in the past, but once the city clarified that the road was private, residents had to act or the dangerous conditions of the road would limit access to garbage collection and, more

importantly, emergency rescue services.

Fire agreement on hold

Continuing the topic of increasing costs to residents, the council discussed not signing the memorandum of understanding for with the county fire department until details of the county commission's fire assessment have been finalized. Members said this would give them a better idea of cost to each city resident, which, if too much, might have members asking the county to pay the utilities for the firehouse in Lawtey.

Although Blom suggested another workshop to finalize the MOU agreement, Councilwoman Virginia Warner said she thought the city had agreed to "table the discussion" until county fire assessments were complete, which was the consensus by the council.

Financial reports for the city were \$32,103 surplus in the general fund, \$12,548 surplus for October-December water fund.

More repairs and upgrades

Lawtey has been making much needed improvements at the recreation center in Tatum Bros. Park with the installation of gutter guards, motion activated security lights on the buildings and repairs to the tennis courts. Court lights will be installed soon, providing an updated, safe facility for residents to enjoy.

The council also approved a request for lime rock to repair roads on Lawtey's eastside. Blom presented and council approved \$1,425 for the repair costs.

In other business: —the quarterly Community Health & Wellness Resource Hub will be Feb. 13 from 10 a.m.-noon at the recreation building.

—there is a Recreation Board meeting on Feb. 24 at 6 p.m. at city hall.

—the next council meeting is scheduled for March 3 at 7 p.m.

—the special election to fill the vacant council seat has been set for April 1.

Graham Post Office closed for repairs

BY CAROL MOSLEY
Special to the Telegraph

The Graham Post Office has been closed since before Christmas due to a mold problem. The mail that is destined for the town of Graham is being sent to the Brooker Post Office. Box owners should go to Brooker to collect their mail.

According to Starke Postmaster, Brandi Spratlin, plans are in the works to remediate the mold problem, but contractors are waiting for materials to arrive before commencing with the cleanup. There is no set date for a reopening, but Spratlin said there are no plans for a permanent closure.

About 15 years ago the Graham

Post Office was considered, among thousands of other rural post offices, for permanent closure. The residents banded together to fight to keep their small but important local post office. At that time, it operated as a regular post office, open full time and with a full-time postmaster on site.

The small town of Graham has no governing body, no mayor, no town council. The post office, with its own 32042 Graham zip code, is considered to be the only government entity that keeps the town on the map. Home delivery is, and has been for decades, delivered through the Hampton Post Office and uses that town's name and zip code as the residence address.

Many residents want their address to say Graham, not Hampton, and use the post office as their only address. If the post were shut down, there would

be nothing that indicates the town even exists except a small roadside sign on County Road 18 at either end.

Closing a post office comes with specific federal regulations and USPS rules that require notification to the public, a 60-day comment period, and a public meeting. If a decision by USPS is then made to close

a post office, there is a 30-day option for an appeal to be made. The final decision for the Graham Post Office was that it would be a branch with no postmaster on site and reduced hours of half days weekly and closed on weekends. But it remained open, which allowed the town of Graham to secure its zip code that puts it on the map.

Black History service

The community is invited to attend True Vine Ministry's Black History Month service, which will take place at 11 a.m. on Sunday, Feb. 23. The church is located at 422 N. Saint Clair St. in Starke.

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Letters

The Gulf of America?

Dear Editor: Our country, the United States, is the only country in the world that claims an entire continent as part of its country. No one says Germany of Europe or Brazil of America. Just us. When, in actuality, there are one billion people living in the American continents. One billion Americans. But they don't have the temerity to claim an entire continent as "theirs." Just us.

North America claims 27 countries, yet many of them we would consider to be Central America or even Caribbean Islands, but the countries of Canada, the U.S., Mexico, Honduras, Panama and even Cuba and the Bahamas are part of the North American continent. South America contains 12 countries including Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia and Peru. Yet none of them claim to

be the American people. Just us. The reality? Mexico claims 2,046 miles of Gulf shoreline, the U.S. claims 1,632 miles. The percentage of accessible water usage (i.e. exploitation) goes slightly to the U.S. with 40% of the Gulf water access. Mexico claims 38%. The remaining 12% may surprise you; Cuba lays claim to the water.

So, Gulf of America? Which one? In my opinion, a better choice would be Gulf of the Americas. The U.S. does not own that body of water. We use it, we access it from our shores just as thousands of other Americans do. Generally changing the name of an entity, even a street, takes a vote by the people who use it. Not a mandate.

Gulf of the Americas. It has a nice ring to it. Unless, of course, you think American means just the people who live in the United States.

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Digging deeper to answer questions about fire assessment

BY MARK J. CRAWFORD
mark@bctelegraph.com

Bradford Fire Chief Ben Carter closed his presentation on the proposed fire assessment Feb. 4 by breaking down the annual fee into bite-sized pieces.

The \$167 fee would cost homeowners around \$13 a month, he said, comparing that to the cost of a quarter-pounder meal from McDonalds.

Questions began with commissioners asking about homeowners insurance. Commissioner Chris Dougherty asked about what it would take to receive a higher rating if you're not within 1,000 feet of a fire hydrant. Carter said the department would have to prove it could shuttle 250 gallons of water per minute for up to two hours. They took that test and failed because the spot selected by evaluators was in the Brooker area. Carter said they would try again once a Brooker station is staffed.

Brooker is nowhere close to having the coverage needed for the ISO ratings much of the rest of the county enjoys, Commissioner Diane Andrews said. Looking at the map that removed the Heilbronn Springs and Theresa stations, Andrews said that appeared to be enough to cover the county.

Carter reminded everyone that with the completion of the living quarters in Speedville, the firefighters from Theresa had been moved. The EMS crew remains in Theresa to spread out the coverage. If Theresa is staffed with dual certified firefighter-paramedics, one can jump in a brush truck the other in an ambulance, and they could meet on the scene of an emergency.

"We have the opportunity to benefit both areas by splitting that coverage up," he said.

As for Heilbronn Springs, a lieutenant is stationed there with

a truck carrying 450 gallons of water, providing homeowners in that area a lower ISO rating, he said.

The savings realized by closing the stations wouldn't match what homeowners would pay in increased insurance costs. The juice isn't worth the squeeze, Carter said, adding the closures would cost the county those buildings, which would revert to the original owners.

"I hope that there'll be a day where we could afford to have everything that that we have and more because I do know the need is great," Andrews said. "But when we start looking at doing the assessment, I think we have to look at the cost, and we have to look at whether or not there are things that we can do to cut the cost, to make a good decision on what the fire assessment [is] because, of course, we want it to be as low as possible. ... We want our citizens to be able to afford it, and we want good coverage."

The strategic placement of the stations should be considered, she said.

From Carter's perspective, that has been considered, looking at call volume in those areas. (See related story.) Brooker, where they want to locate a station, does not have the call volume, he said, although it does have the long response time to justify a station.

"I think we have very well-placed stations as it stands," he said. "I think that it's important to look at the fact that if we lose those stations, and they close down, in 10 years from now, somebody's going to be standing here going, 'What in the world? Why did we let those stations go?'"

Carter also warned about the public perception of asking citizens to pay a fire assessment while stations are being closed, reducing service and increasing insurance costs.

"We split our resources as

much as we possibly can, and I think we do a lot with a little," he said, explaining with two firefighters per station instead of four, one jumps in a fire engine and one in a tanker to respond to calls. It can cause issues. "You don't hear about it, because I think our men and women that are out there do a really good job of mitigating the problem before it ever gets to your level. And I think they bust their tails to do a great job to make sure that y'all don't hear about it."

Commissioner Carolyn Spooner questioned how much ISO ratings were truly helping residents considering she lives within two miles of a fire station and her bill tripled. Carter said her bill might have been higher without that fire protection, citing the nearly 30% difference in a quote he obtained for a home with and without it.

While Spooner wasn't convinced the county needed every station on Carter's map, she did say there was no question that the county needed a fire assessment to fund the service. She asked him if there was anything they could do without, and he said absolutely not.

"I think we have good coverage for this community and what's right for our citizens, especially if they're going to be paying for the service," he said.

Spooner also asked about the growing budget for the department since 2020. Carter attributed most of that to a Florida Medicaid mandate that responders be paid a \$15 minimum wage. It has been good for recruitment and retention of employees, he said, but it was a big increase in the budget.

Chief Deputy Clerk Rachel Rhoden asked if hiring more employees wouldn't result in a cost savings by reducing the department's overtime costs. Carter said it would. At minimum staffing, if someone is out, someone from another shift

must be called to fill in, resulting in a lot of paid overtime. Part-timers — and they have 16 they can contact — cannot always be relied on. They have jobs with other departments and overtime opportunities at those departments if they want the extra income. He said he would be bringing a proposal for three additional employees, one per day, to cut his department's overtime costs.

Citizen Kate Ellison asked about the fairness of charging every homeowner a flat rate, while nonresidential buildings are valued per square foot. Attorney Rob Bradley responded that, unlike property tax bills, which are based on the value of the property, an assessment is based on the value of service received. For Ellison, the answer did not clarify why residences were charged per building and businesses were charged by size.

Carter explained because there is a large difference between a small business and a big box store like Walmart, which incorporates retail, grocery, a pharmacy, car service, a restaurant and more. Whether a house is 1,000 or 3,000 square feet, it would receive essentially the same response, so homeowners pay the same fee. The difference between a 10,000 and a 100,000 square-foot business would be an \$1,100 assessment versus a \$11,000 assessment.

Vyunda Strong asked why the county was opting for a fire assessment instead of an additional sales tax that everyone, including noncounty residents, would pay. Rhoden said the county is at the maximum discretionary sales tax levy. The county could pass a tax to fund specific project like a new jail or hospital, she said, and the tax would end at the completion of that project. There is also an emergency fire surcharge tax, but it is a cost neutral tax. That means whatever the sales tax

levy, the county would have to lower property taxes an equivalent amount, resulting in no additional revenue. A single county has implemented it and wants out, she said, because of the management nightmare of ensuring revenue neutrality. If too much revenue was raised, the county would be issuing refunds.

Carter did say the proposed assessment amount only generates 50% of the firefighting budget, leaving the remainder to continue coming from the general fund. If that is going to change, he suggested the commission continue looking at alternative revenue sources such as franchise fees.

Bradford Fire Rescue's Bethany Hunsinger said she's lived in multiple counties and experienced the difference ISO ratings make on insurance costs. She agreed with Carter that the annual cost of an assessment on homeowners does not compare to the amount their insurance would increase without adequate fire protection.

"I'm sorry, I'm not even really sure what we're debating this," she said. "I haven't always understood why my chief put the resources where he did, but I had a light bulb go off when he put up that map with the radius, the five-mile radius, and it drops the best coverage to the most citizens with what he has."

She described a Brooker fire shortly after the fire department and EMS merged. Response from EMS took 25 minutes to reach Brooker. Firefighters from Sampson City arrived within 10 minutes to get water on the fire. A supervisor on the road was there in 15 minutes to begin triaging the two patients.

"She gave me information within one minute of being on the scene that helped me choose right treatment plan for my patient. It saved her life. That patient was my friend. I want Brooker covered. I want

Hampton covered. I want all the areas covered. I've been here for 20 years. I have friends and loved ones all over this county. This is our starting point, and I think we just need to keep that in mind," Hunsinger said.

"We know that if we call you, you're going to do the best for us, and that's what we want," Commissioner Andrews said. "But ... we have to take all of the factors and look at the whole thing, because all of the people in the county are looking at us, and when we put that \$167 on them, they're not going to break it down into 12 payments. They're going to be upset about it."

Speakers also commented on training volunteers, the lack of interest in volunteering, the importance of fire services to economic development and more. Dougherty picked up on a comment from Charles Baker about the potential for the assessment to increase to \$300 in 10 years. He agreed that could happen, but said such increases would be reflected in every budget.

"I don't want to wear your badge, but I don't want to wear the badge of not being able to provide for public safety," Dougherty told Carter, saying the commissioners will be the first blamed when something goes wrong and there is an inadequate emergency response.

Carter said he feels the responsibility of being a good steward of public funds, while protecting the community and looking out for the needs of those who work for him.

"Yes, obviously, I'm going to be conscious of our money. I'm going to be, again, a good steward of our money, but my job and my role and my first priority will always be taking care of the people in this community," he said.

Lake Butler recovering from financial mismanagement

BY TRACY LEE TATE
Special to the Times

The city of Lake Butler is holding steady financially, staying on track and strictly adhering to its budget.

At the Jan. 21 meeting, the Lake Butler City Commission received the financial position statement for the first quarter of fiscal year 2024-25 and were pleased to find a positive balance on all funds and reviewed an amended budget that would allow them to move some funds around to cover some items that had been left out of the original budget but still were desired to be done.

Lake Butler Finance Director Dave Mecusker told commissioners that the continuing effort to recover from the mismanagement of a

previous city manager was going well. Revenue is exceeding expenditures by almost \$175,000 for the first quarter and, barring any unexpected crises, should continue along the same path, according to Mecusker. Commissioners discussed the need to remain cautious in all spending, just in case an unexpected expense occurred, such as the water main break.

City Manager Kimberly Hayes reported the details on this incident, which left the city without water for about a day. She said a break in the main water line, near the water tower, for the city occurred as a result of improper excavation. Public works employees quickly responded, and it was decided to call W.W. Gay for assistance as the firm has worked for

the city before under similar circumstances two years ago. As is common in Lake Butler, and in Union County as a whole, private citizens and businesses people who had the means to help came out to do so.

Bart Andrews, owner of Andrews Site Prep, brought equipment and provided the sand/fill dirt needed when it came time to fill in around the repairs. Welch's Land Clearing also came to help, also bringing equipment and able bodies to help as needed. City Hall workers showed up late, as the repair project ran into the early hours bringing coffee and chicken wings, even loaning a jacket to Hayes since it was getting cold. City workers remained on site until about 4 a.m. to get the job finished. Even Lake Butler

Mayor Melissa Hendrix worked on getting things right, fielding multiple phone calls from city residents with questions ranging from when will the water be back on? To do you have to boil water for bathing as well as cooking/drinking? She said she did her best to answer all the questions, despite the fact she was out of town visiting family.

In other board discussion and action, the board heard a report from City Engineers Mittauer and Associates concerning the bids received for a new ground storage water tank. The new tank was slated to be installed as part of the new wastewater treatment plant project and is largely funded by a grant from DEP for \$875,000. Unfortunately, due to delays in the project due to insufficient funds during the early days of the city's recent financial constraints and the work of the commission to pare expense from the original plans and still provided the same projected service, costs have gone up. Greg Lange, from Mittauer told the board that the

bids had been opened (on which the commission will receive a report at the next meeting so as to select the lowest-best bidder) and that all were in the range of \$1 million. This leaves a \$278,000 shortfall.

Mittauer had contacted the DEP and requested that a change of scope be approved for the grant funds, allowing the city to have the existing tank refurbished and rehabilitated rather than purchasing a new one. The existing tank is not in bad shape and this process should make it usable for a number of years and the cost of the process will fall well within the grant amount, with some funds possibly left over to help address other facets of the project.

Hendricks noted that, in the past, this option had been discussed to save costs and, according to her research on the option, it would serve the city as well as a new tank. The board agreed and voted to accept the change should DEP allow it and get the work done as soon as possible.

In another wastewater replated issue, Hayes reported that FDOC had responded to the letter from the city working towards getting a new contract in place for the provision of wastewater services to the prison. She said that she had received a letter of proposal from FDOC for contract terms. She said the letter suggested that FDOC pay 135% of the current city rate, at a base figure of 12 million gallons per month. Also included in the proposal of \$2,500 per month for readiness to serve (for items such as repairs to the lines). The rates suggested reflect in part an earlier agreement that DOC would fund a new position required for the operation of the new plant. This figure is included in the proposal but the cost of benefits for the position was not included. Hayes said she would respond to the proposal but thought it might be better to ask for 146% rate. The board unanimously agreed.

At the meeting the city also presented the awards from the

See BUDGET, page 5

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FIRE

Continued from page 1

When Smith and Bennett presented their proposed budget for the following year, the county commission returned oversight for fire services to the county manager's office. But they kept the plan for the paid department. The fire department and emergency medical services were united under former Director Allen Parrish as Bradford County Fire Rescue. Parrish told the commission a quality department would require investing in people. Under Parrish were two division chiefs, including Carter, an operations captain and a training captain, two daily roaming lieutenants and staff for five ambulances and three fire engines. That was a total of 59 employees, 22 working each day.

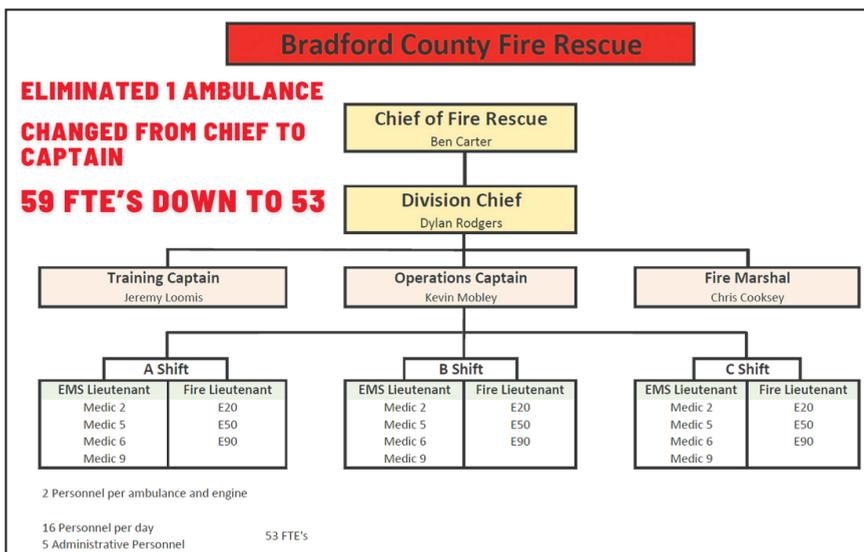
The vision of a full-time staff of dual-certified firefighter-paramedics and EMTs continues under Fire Chief Carter, who was appointed in 2022, with Dylan Rodgers serving as division chief.

A reduced call volume and a countywide hiring freeze had resulted in pulling a fifth ambulance from the road, reducing the number of personnel to 53. This includes Carter and Rodgers, Training Capt. Jeremy Loomis, Operations Capt. Kevin Mobley, Fire Marshal Chris Cooksey, an EMS lieutenant and a fire lieutenant for each of the three shifts, and two personnel for each fire engine and ambulance per shift (three engines, four ambulances).

Carter echoed Sheriff Smith said from 2020, saying the men and women responding to calls need to know whether the board is going to fund the fire department and what they can expect in the future.

Addressing misconceptions

Carter compared the fire department to standards published by the National Fire



Bradford County Fire Rescue's current staffing, not including part-time staff.

Protection Association, which recommends a minimum of 16 firefighters respond to a 2,000 square-foot home fire. Bradford can provide seven. For a small strip mall, 27 are recommended. Again, Bradford can provide seven. Those national standards say the first firefighters on scene should arrive within 4 minutes of a call. Bradford County Fire Rescue's average response time is 9 minutes and 18 seconds.

"I know that this is Bradford County, and we're not ever going to meet NFPA standards. I understand that, but I think that we should strive to get to that point," Carter said.

With reduced staffing, Carter countered claims he had been trying to build and "empire." To further address misconceptions, he detailed the origins and costs of the department's truck fleet, including his own, a 2021 F-150 obtained by a grant and which cost taxpayers \$7,600 in matching funds.

Rodgers 2023 F-150 cost \$45,000 but was paid for out of unspent grant matching funds. The operations captain's 2021 F-150 involved trading a truck transferred from the county clerk's office. As with all the vehicles, upfitting was completed in house. Taxpayer cost was

\$9,884. The fire marshal's 2011 F-150 is a transfer from the sheriff's office. It cost \$650 to update the graphics.

The training captain and community paramedic drive 2024 Expeditions paid for with opioid settlement funds with \$0 cost to county taxpayers. Similarly, the 2019 F-150 driven by the EMS lieutenants came from 2020 CARES Act funding. The 2016 F-150 driven by the fire lieutenants is a repurposed brush truck with low mileage paired with a grant-funded squad body from 2006. Total taxpayer cost was \$650.

In addition, Carter listed 11 vehicles fire rescue had transferred to county public works since 2020, saving taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars, he said.

Against closing stations

While commissioners have briefly discussed whether one or more stations could be closed to save money, Carter said property owners would pay more for insurance by reducing station coverage.

Using maps showing the five-mile radius around each station and how they overlap, Carter

showed how much of Bradford County is covered, particularly if Brooker succeeds in its state funding request to construct a fire station there. He said within each circle, homeowners should have a Class 5 ISO rating if they are also within 1,000 feet of a fire hydrant, a 5X rating if they are not. Eliminating circles from the map would drop ISO in those areas to Class 10, which is considered no fire protection.

Based on a quote he obtained for a \$400,000 wood-frame home with a \$1,000 insurance deductible, the premium would be nearly \$6,800 a year for ISO of 5, he said. An ISO of 10 would increase that nearly 29% to more than \$8,745 a year, if the homeowner was able to get coverage at all.

More numbers — calls and response

Calls for service averaged 21 per day in 2024. Of the 7,536 total, 1,223 were fire department related. These were not all structure fires, of course. Of that number, there were 32 structure fires with one fatality. There were also 22 vehicle fires, 63 brush fires, burning 422 acres, and 259 vehicle collisions. Being dual certified, firefighters

also respond to medical calls. While they cannot transport a patient, they carry advanced life support gear and can treat and stabilize a patient until an ambulance arrives. Medical calls included 74 heart attacks. Out of 57 resuscitation attempts, 29 were successful. Bradford's resuscitation rate was 39% compared to the 24% state average.

In 2024, the fire engine crews were stationed in Theresa, Lawtey and Sampson City. The crew rolled from Theresa 872 times, from Lawtey 1,050 times and from Sampson City 1,154 times.

The proposed assessment

The number most have focused on is the amount of the annual fire assessment. Carter detailed the most recent plan before the commission last year. To fully fund the fire department's budget, the consultant's study placed the cost per household above \$300 while businesses would have been charged 20 cents per square foot. Commissioners would not consider fees that high, so a resolution providing for 50% funding was presented last August but defeated so there could be more time for questions and discussion. The current series of workshops is meant to serve that purpose.

Per that resolution, households would have paid a \$167 fire assessment on their annual tax bill, businesses would have been charged 11 cents per square foot, and nonagricultural vacant properties would have paid \$47. This would have raised \$1.66 million toward the fire department's budget.

The resolution would have created exemptions for religious, nonprofit and government-owned properties. Fully disabled veterans would have been exempt as well, as would any household whose members who could show they were living at or below the poverty level. Vacant agricultural land is exempt by statute.

It would also have set up a grievance process for people

who felt they were being unfairly assessed. He used one of the commissioners as an example. Commissioner Danny Riddick has a property with two dwellings, but one of those is stripped and uninhabitable. If it was shown on the property appraiser's records as a dwelling unit, the assessment would have doubled for that property. That is why there would be a grievance process.

Carter showed how easy it is to go online to www.bradfordappraiser.com and search for a property by the owner's name. The results retrieved show a lot, but most importantly, the number of buildings and outbuildings on the property and their characteristics.

Only the nonexempt buildings, residential or otherwise, would be charged a fire assessment. Those extra features or outbuildings listed would not be charged. That could include a free-standing garage, shed, barn, chicken coop, etc. If it is not a dwelling unit, the homeowner will not be charged an assessment.

During past discussions, Tatum Brothers Lumber expressed concerns about whether it would be charged separately for the number of sheds on its property. All of those, however, are listed as outbuildings and would not be assessed.

Anyone with questions about their property can contact 904-966-6228 or fireassessment@bradfordcountyfl.gov.

Chief Carter's presentation covered many of the details people need to understand what is being proposed again this year, but there was a question-and-answer period following the presentation for commissioners and the public. (See related story.) Upcoming workshops will take place at 5:30 p.m. on March 18 (the fire assessment consultant will be present) and May 6 at 10:30 a.m. If the commission moves forward, public hearings to adopt the fire assessment resolution would take place in May and June.

BUDGET

Continued from page 1

Christmas float judging at the Christmas parade and one other. The awards were presented to the top three floats: Lake Butler Hospital in first place, Andrews Site Prep in second place (although the judging between the two was very close) and Union County Soccer Club in third. Also recognized at the meeting was Andrews Site Prep. The plaque read in part, "In recognition for our ongoing commitment and selfless contributions to our community." Andrews has donated both his time and money to helping the city. He helped to get the Splash Park online for the July 4 celebration and has provided the funds to purchase the toys for the city toy distribution after the Christmas parade for the past two years.

Twenty-three homes Union homes permitted in 2024

BY TRACY LEE TATE
Special to the Times

Growth was down in Union County in 2024, with only 23 residential single-family homes permitted for the year. As has been normal for the county, mobile homes permitted outnumbered site-built homes, with a total of 36 for the year, the majority of which were new doublewides.

The increase in the tax rolls is also down. New homes and improvements permitted in 2024 added only \$46,000 to county tax assessments, having a taxable value of only \$2,873,991. In 2023, new construction increased the tax rolls by \$184,734 for properties with a total taxable

value of \$11,393,101. This is less than 1% of last year's increase in total taxable value in the county, which was \$354,093,325 (although this figure did include the increase from the new solar farm).

Lake Butler changes direction on ground water tank

BY DAN HILDEBRAN
dan@bctelegraph.com

Lake Butler City Council members voted to abandon their efforts to replace the city's aging groundwater storage tank and instead pursue refurbishing the existing tank.

The action comes after the lowest bid submitted by contractors was \$278,000 over

the amount of a state grant awarded to the city.

Representatives from Mittauer and Associates, which has been working with the city on the project, told commissioners they have contacted Florida's Department of Environmental Protection about the change in scope. However, the state agency has not responded to the city's proposal.

Mittauer's Greg Lang told council members that if successful, the rehabbed tank would be inspected every five years and give the city decades of service.

"Also, the rehab they inspect will come in significantly less than a full replacement," Lang said, "which means some other items related to the water system will be able to be rehabbed or replaced."

Lang added that during the rehab, the city's water system would bypass the tank, continuing service to water customers.

Saving Florida's springs

This month, Alligator Creek Garden Club will host Ryan Smart, executive director of Florida Springs Council, who will speak on a topic everyone has a stake in: the health of Florida's springs and what we can do about it.

The public is invited to attend Thursday, Feb. 20, at 2 p.m. at the Bradford County Senior Center, located at 1805 N. Temple Ave. (north U.S. 301 in front of the health department). There will be refreshments, a door prize drawing and plant exchange.

For more information, call Tracy Meadows at 904-585-6692 or Pat Caren at 352-339-3673.

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Business leaders honored at chamber banquet

BY DAN HILDEBRAN
dan@bctelegraph.com

The North Florida Regional Chamber of Commerce honored three business and community leaders during its annual banquet at the Gov. Charley E. Johns Conference Center on Saturday, February 8.

Outgoing Chamber Chair Jeff Oody emceed the event, the Bradford County Education Foundation held a silent auction and other fundraisers, and the band Faster than Flash closed out the evening.

Award winners

Oody said the chamber's business of the year, Lawtey-based Exact Spray Solutions, launched in 2022 with a skeleton crew and one spray system. He added that in two years, the firm has tripled its headcount and doubled the number of systems it uses.

"They have completed over 300 projects in just two years," Oody said. "Most providers of this service are not certified, which sets them apart from the companies in the area."

The outgoing chair attested to the company's sprayed-in-place polyurethane foam by saying the company sprayed his house.

"It works," he added. "It's a great product."

Oody said owners Clint and Jill Walding do not cut corners and "support children in Bradford and Union Counties through contributions (and) hard work."

The J.E. Tomlinson Businessperson of the Year is Lorie Riley of Nicki's Beauty Bar.

Oody said Riley leads a team



Incoming Chamber Board Chairman Col. Brad Smith of the Bradford County Sheriff's Office.



(L-r) Clint and Jill Walding of Lawtey-based Exact Spray Solutions, the chamber's Business of the Year, Chamber Chair Jeff Oody and President Pam Whittle.



The J.E. Tomlinson Businessperson of the Year, (center) Lorie Riley of Nicki's Beauty Bar. Also pictured are Chamber Chair Jeff Oody and President Pam Whittle.

of 25 employees, fostering innovation and a culture of empowerment.

"Most recently," Oody explained, "she expanded her skills as a project manager for a local theatrical production, showcasing her talent for fostering teamwork and creativity. She spends a lot of her time with the Florida Gateway College Cosmetology Board, the Downtown Merchants Association, and the Woman's Club, where she champions growth and community uplift."

Oody and Chamber President Pam Whittle awarded the Judy Becker Volunteer of the Year award to Edrick Hamilton of 12G Mentoring.

Oody called Hamilton an educator, volunteer, mentor, and role model.

"He loves young people with diversity from all walks of life," Oody said, "and he has a motto that background has no bearing. He sees the good in all."

The chamber chair asserted that volunteering is not merely a task for the honoree but rather his life.

"From his work with True Vine Ministries to his community involvement, from his summer STEM camp for elementary ages to his pride and joy: 12 Guys in Bow Ties and 12 Girls in Pearls... he's worked tirelessly to provide mentoring community service opportunities, fundraising opportunities for young people."

2025 leadership

Oody also recognized outgoing chamber board member Chris Page and introduced incoming Chamber Chair Brad Smith.

Smith told the crowd he was "voluntold" for the Chamber board six years ago by his boss, Sheriff Gordon Smith. The Sheriff's Office Colonel added that he raised his hand last

year for the vice chair position, not realizing the officeholder automatically promoted to chair the following year.

"The Chamber is so important to our community in bringing other businesses here, and I truly feel, and I think most of you guys in this room feel that growth is coming," Smith told the audience. "We need to have the right type of growth and the right type of businesses coming to our community, and we need to be ready for them."

Smith then introduced the 2025 chamber's board of governors, which are Oody of First Federal Bank, Northeast Florida Economic Development Corporation President Amber Shepherd, Bradford County Fair Association Manager Dale Woodruff, Bradford County Clerk of the Court Denny Thompson, new board member Grace Johns, DLP Bank President



Edrick Hamilton (center) of 12G Mentoring, the Judy Becker Volunteer of the Year. Also pictured are Chamber Chair Jeff Oody and President Pam Whittle.

Harry Gunsallus, Justis Smith Manager Scott Kornegay, and of Southland Realty, Rhonda Steve Futch of Jones-Gallagher Hamilton of Lake Area Physical Funeral Home. Therapy, Bradford County



Pictured above are Union County High School band members (front row, l-r) Natalie Campbell, Madison Andrews, Braden Adams, Alexis Wills, Josie Regar, Marlee Trowell, (back) Nadia Norman, Eli Hendricks, Nolan Beighley, Carmyn Barringer, Irmarhi Green, Reese Harrison, Adrian Tucker, Donald West, Barry Andersen-Davis and Matthew Ring.

The mission statement for the North Florida Honor Band is "to provide a consistent source of camaraderie for Baker, Bradford, Columbia, Gilchrist, Suwannee and Union counties through promoting and celebrating band students on their individual musical achievements in an honor band setting to further their growth as a musician." Each county sends middle and high school students who have successfully audition for the honor. They rehearse together in preparation for a stellar concert performance with guest conductors. This year, the middle school band was under the direction of Eddie Steadman, a retired director from Crestview, Florida. He is an elected member of the Florida Bandmasters Association Hall of Fame. The high school band was under the direction of Dr. David Plack. He is currently the director of all athletic bands at the Florida State University, including the FSU Marching Chiefs. According to Honor Band coordinator Kelly Dorsey, the program was advanced, exciting and fulfilling for the students. The performances were outstanding she said.

Pictured above are Lake Butler Middle School band members (front row, l-r) : Kara Bagley, Dawson Ellis, Caleb Davis, Nathaniel Hart, Miles Andersen-Davis, (back) Andrea Smith, Kylie Harrison, Chayce Varnes, Riddhi Patel, Charlie Burroughs and Farrah Summers. Not pictured: Lillyan Gaskin and Trenton Lawless.



Bradford Middle School Students selected for the North Florida Honor Band were Christin Wilkes, Aashna Patel, Serenity Thayer and Sophia Cooper.



Bradford High School students selected for the North Florida Honor Band were Leskai Padilla, Lily Barksdale, Blake Lanier, Sevon Smart, Adan Urrutia, Wyatt Canipe and Zachary Wells.

An Honor to Perform

Crime

Recent arrests in Bradford, Union and Clay

The following individuals were arrested recently by local law enforcement officers in Bradford, Union or Clay (Keystone Heights-area) counties. All defendants are considered innocent until convicted in a court or until pleading guilty or no contest. Information in this report is from law enforcement agencies and court documents, which are public records.

Bradford

Willie Berry, 74, of Lawley, was arrested on February 7 by Bradford deputies for a probation violation.

Emanuel Brown, 40, of Gainesville, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 6 for possession of cocaine and possession of drug equipment.

Lamar Bryant, 41, of Macclenny, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 5 for being an out-of-state fugitive.

Ronald Crum, 50, of Palatka, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 4 for a probation violation.

Shalonda Davis, 35, of Gainesville, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 6 for an out-of-county warrant.

Alicia Deese, 46, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 3 for driving with a suspended or revoked license.

James Gibbs, 63, of Starke, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 7 for possession of drugs.

John Ginniman, 53, of Port Richey, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 2 for trespassing and resisting an officer.

William Hall, 25, of Keystone Heights, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 1 for an out-of-county warrant.

Troy Jackson, 28, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 1 for DUI.

Kiara Jones, 35, of Starke, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 2 for failure to appear and criminal mischief with property damage.

Judy Lee, 66, of Starke, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 3 for child neglect and aggravated assault with a deadly weapon.

Michael Lee, 46, of Starke, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 3 for child neglect, possession of drugs, possession of drug equipment, possession of a weapon by a convicted felon, and a conditional release violation.

Robert Lovett, 39, of Hampton, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 3 for out-of-county warrants.

Mario McLain, 45, of Gainesville, was arrested by FHP troopers on February 6 for fraud-impersonation, driving with a suspended or revoked license, vehicle theft, and an out-of-county warrant.

Katrina McSpadden, 53, of Lake Butler, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 1 for probation violations.

Shelby Miller, 29, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 6 for an out-of-county warrant.

Maurice Paige, 51, of Starke, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 4 for possession of cocaine, possession of marijuana, possession of drug equipment, disorderly intoxication, and selling cocaine.

Zachary Perkins, 20, of Hampton, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 4 for resisting an officer and battery.

Thomas Porter, 51, of Gainesville, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 1 for disorderly intoxication.

Jimmy Pugh, 64, of Jacksonville, was arrested by

Bradford deputies on February 3 for a probation violation.

Carol Sanders, 47, of Starke, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 7 for battery.

Cody Varnes, 28, of Starke, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 7 for a probation violation.

Joshua Weeks, 32, of Starke, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 7 for battery and resisting an officer.

Gregory Williams, 47, of Starke, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 5 for an out-of-county warrant.

Union

Purcell Brinson, 32, of Lake City, was arrested by Union deputies on February 10 for failure to appear.

Ronald Dampier, 60, of Lake Butler, was arrested by Union deputies on February 8 for trespassing.

John Keen, 42, of Palestine, was arrested by Union deputies on February 9 for fleeing and eluding.

Travis Kiehl, 50, of Chiefland, was arrested by Union deputies on February 10 for grand theft of a firearm, burglary, and grand theft.

Robert Kingsbury, 18, of Lake Butler, was arrested by Union deputies on January 28 for petit theft and a probation violation.

Tony Knight, 38, of Cedar Key, was arrested by Union deputies on January 28 for grand theft of a firearm, grand theft, vehicle theft, and burglary.

Bryant Northington, 23, of Tampa, was arrested by Union deputies on January 30 for possession of drug equipment, possession of over 20 grams of marijuana, violating driver's license restrictions, and carrying a concealed weapon.

Lance O'Steen, 63, of High Springs, was arrested by Union

deputies on February 4 for grand theft.

Daniel Shuler, 21, of Lake Butler, was arrested by Union deputies on January 28 for vehicle theft.

Albert Smith, 30, of Lake Butler, was arrested by Union deputies on February 9 for resisting an officer without violence, possession of drug equipment, and assault on an officer or firefighter.

Amarion Spencer-Jones, 24, of Lake Butler, was arrested by Union deputies on January 30 for a probation violation.

Zayshawn Webb, 18, was arrested by Union deputies on February 3 for an out-of-county warrant.

Casey Williams, 49, of Lake Butler, was arrested by Union deputies on January 31 for driving with a suspended or revoked license, resisting an officer without violence, possession of counterfeit license plates, and failing to register a motor vehicle.

Clay

Gary Boyd, 44, of Keystone Heights, was arrested by Clay deputies on February 5 for a writ of bodily attachment, and on February 6 for domestic battery, and violating an injunction for protection against domestic violence.

George Crews, 34, of Keystone Heights, was arrested by Clay deputies on February 5 for possession of not more than 20 grams of marijuana.

Darielle Dixon, 22, of Starke, was arrested by Clay deputies on February 6 for simple battery.

Melvin Durden, 56, of Keystone Heights, was arrested by Clay deputies on February 4 for DUI.

Lucinda Griffin, 20, of Keystone Heights, was arrested by Bradford deputies on February 1 for domestic battery.

Joseph Horwat, 58, of Keystone Heights, was arrested by Clay deputies on February 4 for aggravated assault with a deadly weapon and disorderly intoxication.

Thomas Sellars, 62, of Keystone Heights, was arrested by Clay deputies on February 7 for domestic battery.

Tamara Sprinkle, 40, of Keystone Heights, was arrested by Clay deputies on February 4 for petit theft.

Dilyn Webb-Kerr, 21, of Keystone Heights, was arrested by Clay deputies on February 1 for domestic battery.

Victim confronts sexual predator

BY DAN HILDEBRAN
dan@bctelegraph.com

A 52-year-old Bradford County man was sentenced to 20 years in prison after pleading to sexual battery and lewd and lascivious behavior.

Thomas Lee Mackey will also be designated as a sexual predator for molesting children over 100 times, according to a Bradford County Sheriff's Office investigation.

But before leaving a Starke courtroom on February 5, the former West Coast resident stood before a judge while one of his victims described the pain he inflicted on her.

According to an arrest report, Mackey victimized multiple children while he lived in another state and continued abusing minors after moving to Bradford County.

His crimes came to light in June 2024 after one of his victims confided in a summer camp counselor.

Under Florida law, victims are entitled to address the court before sentencing.

One of the defendant's victims read from a statement as she faced the 52-year-old.

The victim told Mackey that she did not plan to come forward with her story "until you were gone and buried."

"I thought I could carry this weight in silence," the victim added. "But then this thought of— who else might be hurt... That's when I knew I had to say (something) to protect others from going through what I did."

The woman told Mackey that he forced her to grow up when she was just a girl, and he stole



Thomas Lee Mackey leaves a Starke courtroom after being sentenced to 20 years in prison for sexual battery and lewd and lascivious behavior.

her childhood.

"I felt guilt, shame, hopelessness, depression," the young woman told Mackey. I have suffered sleepless nights because of the trauma you (caused). I've lived in fear."

The victim told Mackey that he betrayed the trust she placed in him and that because of that betrayal, she sometimes questions the intentions of other people in her life.

"You took so much from me," she added, "but today, I'm standing up for myself. I'm not just a victim of what you did. I'm someone who refuses to be silent any longer. I am a testament of hope for others. I'm encouraging people to talk because my wounds are starting to heal."

The victim then told Mackey that his wounds could also be healed.

"But only if you're willing to face what you've done to understand the damage you've caused and to acknowledge where it all began," she said. "I hope you find peace and forgiveness. What you did will never be okay, but I forgive you."

Church of God food distribution

Starke Church of God by Faith and Farm Share's upcoming food distribution is Thursday, Feb. 20, from 10–11:30 a.m. This is a drive-thru distribution. The church is located at 730 Old Lawley Road in Starke. (Distribution times depend on delivery times.)

LAKE

Continued from page 1

hurricanes could raise the lake level to 104 feet.

While some topics were addressed in detail during the meeting, others could not be discussed fully at this time and will remain open for future discussions.

Water Levels

Records of Lake Brooklyn and Lake Geneva in the 1950s, Lake Brooklyn reached a high of 115 feet and a low of 85 feet. However, after 1995, the Lake began to deteriorate. Fortunately, in recent years, Lake Brooklyn has shown an upward trend and is now on its way to normalizing.

Lake Geneva recorded a highest point of 105 feet and a lowest point of 80 feet. By 2012, it had reached its lowest level. Since then, Lake Geneva has improved and is expected to reach 102.9 feet within the next year or two.

These figures are based on data from the Department of Environmental Protection (D.E.P.), which records the highest and lowest levels of Lake Brooklyn and Lake Geneva and predictions for their future levels.

The water tables are influenced by inflow from Black Creek Point. An extra 2 feet may also be considered for rain events like storms and hurricanes.

For Lake Geneva, specifically regarding the Black Creek Project, the normal low water level is 99.1 ft, the mean water level is 100.9 ft, and the usual high water level is 102.9 ft. The current water level is 94 ft. (Source: CDM Smith Memo, dated March 16, 2022 - Save Our Lakes Presentation)

Residents are encouraged to consider the Lakes' highest peak when moving structures like sheds or boat docks.



Col. James Booth

Additionally, there are trees on residential properties that are not governed by state sovereignty.

In that case, those trees should be evaluated for removal, as they are likely to fall and die in the water. Trees submerged in several feet of water will not survive.

Water will begin flowing from State Road 16 into the treatment plant on Treat Road, then into Lake Brooklyn and Lake Geneva. As these lakes rise, other lakes will also be affected.

In the presentation, two main topics were discussed. The first was the surface water and its flow from one Lake to another. The second topic covered how water would move through the underground pipes. Many canals in the area are currently dry, but once the lakes fill, these canals will no longer be dry.

Katz-James mentioned in the meeting that these two lakes are critical, as aquifers provide drinking water to residents in northeast Florida, with the next aquifer in Valdosta, Georgia.

Numerous questions were sent via email, and a few residents approached at the end of the meeting to ask questions in person.

One question from a Lake Geneva resident raised a question regarding a small section of the Lake where some trees have

already submerged; they were inquiring if it would be possible to remove those trees or enclose the area with submerged trees using PVC or another material to prevent boaters from entering that area. This would help protect boats from potential damage caused by propellers and ensure that anyone who falls into the water would not get hurt.

According to city officials, there is currently no plan to remove the submerged trees in that area, but they are considering options for the future.

Scott Slater, Save Our Lakes board member, pointed out, "So in talking with one of the timber companies and trying to draw up the scope of work, we talked about at what depth of water trees can be harvested."

As for once the trees are cut, Slater also mentions, "There's no value for biomass, no value for the trees, and the only option for dead vegetation that has already occurred is to landfill it."

Currently, the landfill is not included in the budget, but there may be consideration for it in the future, particularly for already submerged and dead trees.

Additionally, it is important to note that neither the timber company nor anyone else can disturb the lakebeds or uproot any trees. Trees may only be cut down to the extent that they can be reached.

Clay County Commissioner Betsy Condon and board members from Save Our Lakes are delighted to announce that they have successfully made progress on their project and are now working to have the Department of Environmental Protection (D.E.P.) fully onboard.

While the D.E.P. does not favor cutting down trees for the project, to ensure its success, the city and the county leaders have proposed specific areas where tree removal will be permitted to restore Lake Geneva effectively.

The boat ramp and Nelson's

Point are two areas proposed for complete tree removal, along with three other locations under consideration for this project.

The John's River Water Management District with Clay County will sponsor this process and permit.

Additionally, when the St. John's River Water Management District or the Florida Department of Environmental Protection issues the permit in April, there will be a mandatory 21-day advertisement in the local newspaper for public comment.

For those interested in removing weeds or lily pads from the area, a permit must be filed with the Fish and Wildlife Service to authorize removal.

Property Taxes

Concerning citizens now question what will happen once the Lake rises. Does it mean I'll be paying more taxes? Property taxes were another hot topic of discussion. As the lake returns to its original level, many residents are concerned about the potential impact on property taxes.

According to the Clay County Property Appraiser Tracy Drake, "Since 2012, the market value of all the homes in Clay County has increased 165%. That's about 13% per year, including your homes. But your assessed value

cannot increase more than 3% per year, or less, whatever the cost of living is."

"The good news is property values will increase. So if you don't have a homestead, even without homestead, you're capped at no more than 10% of the assessed value per year," he said.

Docks

Docks were also a central topic of conversation. It is important to note that the current docks may not be suitable for the anticipated water level. Consequently, many residents must apply for a permit to remove or renovate their docks.

Some docks have been in the Lake since its early days, while others were established when water levels were low. It's important to note that if these docks do not comply with the new water standards, they may sink, creating dangerous conditions and liability issues for swimmers and boaters in the Lake.

Another resident's question was, "If there was a pre-existing dock on our property that was removed because the water retreated for so long, can we go ahead and rebuild it, or do we need to get a new permit?"

Booth said, "If you need help

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Seasons end in districts for KHHS, UCHS hoops teams

BY CLIFF SMELLEY
cliff@bctelegraph.com

Basketball season ended for the Keystone Heights High School girls team and the Union County boys and girls teams in their respective district tournaments, though the Union boys team was close to qualifying for the regional playoffs.

Union ended the boys season with a 14-4 record after a 46-43 loss to Trenton in the semifinals of the District 6-Rural tournament

on Feb. 5. The two district champs in Region 3 qualified for regional play, while the two highest non-district champs in the Florida High School Athletic Association MaxPreps Region 3-Rural power rankings earned at-large berths. Union was the third-highest ranked non-district champ.

The girls season for the Tigers ended in the quarterfinals of the District 6-Rural tournament with a 59-40 loss to Bell on Feb. 4. Union finished with a 9-16 record.

The quarterfinals of the District 3-3A girls tournament saw Keystone lose 46-35 to Baldwin on Feb. 4. Keystone finished with a 5-18 record.

BHS, KHHS, UCHS softball teams set to start regular-season play

BY CLIFF SMELLEY
cliff@bctelegraph.com

Softball's regular season for Bradford, Keystone Heights and Union County high schools begins the week of Feb. 17, with the Tigers taking the field first with a road game against Hilliard on Monday, Feb. 17, at 7 p.m.

Bradford plays its first game when it hosts Clay on Tuesday, Feb. 18, at 7 p.m. The Tornadoes

travel to play North Marion on Friday, Feb. 21, at 7 p.m. and return home for games against P.K. Yonge on Monday, Feb. 24, at 7 p.m. and Bishop Snyder on Wednesday, Feb. 26, at 6:30 p.m. Keystone takes the field on Friday, Feb. 21, with a home game against Baker County at 7 p.m. The Indians travel to play Toccoi Creek on Tuesday, Feb. 25, at 7 p.m.

After opening its season on the road against Hilliard, Union returns home to play Bronson on Tuesday, Feb. 18, at 7 p.m. The Tigers travel to play Branford on Friday, Feb. 21, at 7 p.m. and then host Lafayette on Tuesday, Feb. 25, at 6 p.m.

BHS baseball team drops opener 11-9 to Middleburg

BY CLIFF SMELLEY
cliff@bctelegraph.com

Bradford High School's baseball team gave up three runs in the sixth inning in an 11-9 season-opening loss to host Middleburg on Feb. 10.

The Tornadoes held a 9-8 lead, but the Broncos took advantage of a walk, a single and a double to score what would be their winning runs.

Bradford fell in a 7-1 hole after the first two innings, but climbed

back into it with a four-run third inning. Ryland Rike was hit by a pitch, followed by Patrick Pendarvis hitting a single. After a one-out single by Cannon Sapp, Rike and Pendarvis both scored on steals of home. Sapp also scored on a steal of home following an Avery Burgin single. Matthew Stafford later hit a sacrifice fly to plate another run and make it a 7-5 game.

Kaedan Parks hit an RBI single in the fourth to pull Bradford to within 7-6. The Tornadoes then took a lead with a three-run fifth. Bradford loaded the bases with Stafford drawing a walk, Jaron Hale getting hit by a pitch and Rike hitting a single. Pendarvis

See BHS, page 10

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Bradford Head Football Coach Jamie Rodgers (center) is pictured with his program's latest college signees (l-r): Zack Paulk, Jeremiah Hill, Duke Lewis and Brian Cliffin.

4 BHS football players sign with colleges at Feb. 5 ceremony

BY CLIFF SMELLEY
cliff@bctelegraph.com

"Not too many people get the opportunity to play college football."

Those were the words of Demarius "Duke" Lewis, who earned the chance to be one of those few. He and three of his Bradford High School teammates participated in a Feb. 5 signing ceremony in the BHS auditorium.

Lewis and Jeremiah Hill, who are both defensive ends, are going to the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, a Division II school. Quarterback Zack Paulk also signed with a Division II school — Erskine College in Due West, South Carolina — while linebacker/running back Brian Cliffin will go to Cuthbert, Georgia's Andrew College, which competes in Division I in the National Junior College Athletic Association.

"It feels really good," Cliffin said. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime thing. To sit up there (on stage) and sign and be the first person in my family to go (to college) is good."

Hill said, "It feels real good knowing that everybody can't do this. It just feels real good. Hard work and dedication have finally paid off."

"I'm extremely grateful for the opportunity," Paulk said. "I thank God. I thank my family for motivating me and pushing me and helping me throughout the wait. I'm excited to get to the next level and start competing."

UNC Pembroke's newest Braves

Hill said one of the reasons he likes UNC Pembroke is because of its business school.

When it comes to football, he likes the 4-2-5 defense the Braves operate out of. He believes it'll give him a chance to be versatile.

"They do a lot of good things, especially for my position," Hill

said. "I'm not just playing one position. I'm all over the field. It'll be a great experience."

Lewis said he likes the UNC Pembroke coaches and the fact they're really interested in helping prepare young men for life after college.

UNC Pembroke also feels like a place he can be comfortable at. "It feels like home," Lewis said.

Lewis was the third-leading tackler for Bradford in 2023 with 104. He was second on the team in tackles for loss with 22.

That was supposed to be Lewis' final year of high school football, but he was granted an extra year of eligibility by the Florida High School Athletic Association due to time missed because of an injury sustained in an automobile crash. Lewis returned in 2024 and had 38 tackles, but the dropoff was due to an injury.

"Duke, obviously, gave us a shot in the arm a couple of years ago when we made the run to the state-championship game," Bradford Head Coach Jamie Rodgers said. "This year, in all fairness to him, he tried to battle through a hamstring injury the entire season. He wanted to play. We would say, 'Hey, man. Maybe we need to sit this one out this week,' but he always wanted to play. He always wanted to be out there for his teammates."

Though the injury hampered his play, the extra year of high school ball better prepared him to transition to college. Rodgers said Lewis, who's 6-3, played at 210-215 pounds in 2023. In 2024, he was up to around 235.

"Physically, he's more of a college-ready guy now, for sure," Rodgers said. "He'll have no problem stepping in."

Agreeing that the extra year was beneficial, Lewis said, "The time helped me grow as a man — mature a little bit and get my head on straight."

Rodgers said a 100-percent healthy Lewis will "be as

physically gifted as all those guys he'll be going against" at UNC Pembroke. In fact, in borrowing an NFL term, Rodgers said UNC Pembroke got "the steal of the draft."

"There's a good chance he won't be around (UNC Pembroke) very long," Rodgers said.

Lewis said what he'll give UNC Pembroke is someone with a good "motor" on the field as well as someone who enjoys watching video so that he's prepared for every game.

"I usually know what's coming before it gets to me," Lewis said.

Rodgers agreed that Lewis has a "super-high motor." He also said that Lewis has a lot of upside on the field.

"He's so long, and he can run," Rodgers said. "He can really line up off the edge and go rush the passer. We also had a few packages where he would drop and cover the flats. He almost had a couple of interceptions. He can just do it all. He can walk off the line and be an outside linebacker in the 3-4."

"He's so versatile because he's such a good athlete."

As for transitioning to the college game, Lewis said "football is football." All he has to do, he said, is to keep working hard.

"Stick to the basics, and I believe you'll get to where you want to be," he said.

Hill is coming off a season in which he recorded 39 tackles and three sacks. Rodgers believes Hill can improve upon those numbers in college.

"If he'll learn to play every single play like it's his last and play full speed all the time, the sky's the limit for him," Rodgers said. "He's got to learn to fall in love with the weight room. If he does that, he'll have the chance to be a really good college football player."

Rodgers describes Hill as an

See SIGN, page 13

Starke's Taylor to play football at Jacksonville State University

BY CLIFF SMELLEY
cliff@bctelegraph.com

Timothy Taylor Jr. is taking his athletic ability and a strong work ethic with him to Jacksonville State University in Alabama, but a gathering at Starke's R.J.E. Center on Feb. 5 showed that he'll be taking something else with him as well — love.

Taylor, a defensive lineman, played at Williston High School his junior and senior seasons, but he and his family held a signing ceremony in Starke, where he lives. It allowed the people who know him best to show their support and offer words of encouragement. Almost everyone at the event was given a chance to speak.

If one thing came through more than anything else, it was that Taylor won't be alone on the next step of his journey. One person told him, "You've got everybody behind you," while another said, "We've got your back."

People described him as one who loves God and reminded him to continue to lean on the Lord. One person said, "You come from a God-fearing family. Keep God first, and I see great things for you."

Taylor has already received one great thing — the chance to keep playing football after high school.

"It feels amazing," he said.



Timothy Taylor Jr. (right) shakes hands with his position coach at Williston High School, Gerard "Big Money" Warren, at his Feb. 5 signing ceremony at Starke's R.J.E. Center.

"I've been dreaming of this since I was a child. It's all coming true."

Taylor, who played at Bradford High School as a freshman and at Union County High School as a sophomore, led Williston in tackles this past season with 80, while he was second on the team in tackles for loss with 10.

As a junior, Taylor had 48 tackles, which tied him for third on the team. His 12 tackles for loss led the team.

Taylor said his decision on colleges came down to Jacksonville State and Western Carolina. He chose Jacksonville State because of its new coaching staff, which includes

Head Coach Charles Kelly. Kelly was most recently the co-defensive coordinator at Auburn and was a defensive coordinator at Colorado and associate defensive coordinator at Alabama under Nick Saban. Kelly has had coaching stops at schools such as FSU, Georgia Tech and Tennessee.

Jacksonville's new defensive line coach, Xavier Garcia, has coached at such schools as Duke, Georgia Tech, SMU and Temple.

"I picked Jacksonville State because Coach Charles Kelly is a man of his word," Taylor said. "I like the history he has of

See TAYLOR, page 11

Bradford girls lose 53-47 to Newberry in district-title game

BY CLIFF SMELLEY
cliff@bctelegraph.com

Bradford High School had a big advantage in field-goal percentage, but turnovers hurt the Tornadoes' effort in a 53-47 loss to host Newberry in the District 3-3A girls basketball championship game on Feb. 8.

The second seed Tornadoes (14-8), who went 0-3 against Newberry this season, shot almost 60 percent from the field, while the Panthers shot less than 30 percent. However, approximately 30 turnovers limited Bradford's scoring opportunities.

Top seed Newberry (16-6) also helped itself by making eight three-pointers.

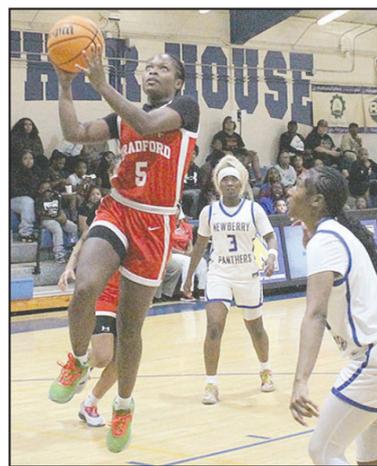
Bradford's season will continue as the Tornadoes earned an at-large berth in the Region 1 playoffs. The Tornadoes are seeded seventh out of eight teams and will travel to Panama City to play second seed Rutherford (20-3) in a quarterfinal game on Thursday, Feb. 13, at 7 p.m. local time. If Bradford wins, it will travel to play either Newberry or Jackson in a Tuesday, Feb. 18, semifinal game at 7 p.m.

A three-pointer by Bradford's Cherish Bing left the Tornadoes trailing 10-9 in the first quarter of the district-title game. Newberry's Jada Brown scored off an offensive rebound following a turnover, but the Tornadoes got a basket from Nichelle Brown off a Kailyn Teal steal, sending Bradford into the second quarter down 12-11.

Bradford turned the ball over on its first four possessions of the second quarter, but Panthers were only able to turn them into two points. The Tornadoes tied it a 15-15 when Bing scored off a Brown assist and Teal scored off an Ar'Nayshia Griffin assist. Jada Brown put Newberry back on top when she sank a three-point shot.

Griffin grabbed a rebound on the defensive end and dribbled the length of the court

Nichelle Brown glides to the basket for a second-half score in Bradford's 53-47 loss to Newberry in the District 3-3A championship game. The Tornadoes' season will continue in the Region 1 playoffs. They'll travel to Panama City to play Rutherford on Feb. 13.



for a basket, making it 18-17. Bradford then took a 19-18 lead when Griffin, after grabbing another defensive rebound, passed the ball downcourt to Ky'lee Johnson for a layup.

The Panthers responded with a 7-0 run to close out the half. Brandy Whitfield knocked down a jump shot and then had a steal that led to a short jumper by Sarah Beaulieu. Beaulieu came away with a backcourt steal following her basket and made a three-pointer that sent Newberry into the break leading 25-19.

Newberry scored six of the first eight points of the third quarter, but Bradford then outscored the Panthers 13-5. Griffin had a free throw and a basket before Bing made a free throw. Griffin added another basket, while the Panthers' Whitfield scored to make it 33-25 in favor of Newberry. After Nichelle Brown knocked down a jump shot, Griffin had a steal that led to her own three-point basket, pulling Bradford to within 33-32.

Jada Brown answered with her own three-pointer, but Griffin scored off an inbounds pass from Bing with four seconds on the clock to send the Tornadoes into the fourth quarter trailing 36-34.

The Panthers got a three-pointer from Beaulieu that helped them go up 41-37. Nichelle

Brown scored on a drive to the basket before Griffin, after a turnover, scored off an offensive rebound, tying the score at 41-41.

Newberry took a 45-41 lead with a basket and two free throws, but the Tornadoes tied it again with baskets by Bing and Brown with less than three minutes to play.

Bradford then turned the ball over eight times the rest of the way, including three times on its final four possessions. The Tornadoes didn't score again until Griffin's rebound putback with less than 30 seconds to play.

The Panthers, meanwhile, added all of their final points at the foul line.

Griffin finished with a game-high 18 points, while Nichelle Brown had 17. The Tornadoes also got eight points from Bing and two each from Johnson and Teal.

Beaulieu, Whitfield and Jada Brown all scored in double figures for Newberry.

BHS beats Palatka in semifinal game

The Tornadoes went on an 18-0 third-quarter run to take the lead for good and pull away from

See DISTRICT, page 11

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- Household cleaners
- Used oil/lubricants
- TVs/Computers
- Aerosol cans
- Used cooking oil
- Insecticides
- Pesticides

Trinity's late rally results in loss for UCHS baseball team

BY CLIFF SMELLEY
cliff@bctelegraph.com

Visiting Trinity Catholic overcame seven errors and scored seven runs in the seventh

inning to hand the Union County High School baseball team a 10-6 loss in the teams' season opener on Feb. 10.

Jeffrey Brugh and Erick Lasseter each had an RBI to help the Tigers take a 3-0 lead, but the Celtics tied the score with three runs in the top of the fifth.

Ayden Androlevich led off Union's half of the fifth by reaching on an error. Devin

Diggs, who entered to run for Androlevich, advanced to third on an error and scored on a wild pitch.

The Tigers added a run in the sixth to go up 5-3. Kacen Thomassen reached on an error, which allowed Foster Smith, who was hit by a pitch, to score.

Trinity, a Class 2A team that was a playoff qualifier in Class 3A last season, took advantage of

four singles, a fly ball, two walks and two errors to score its seven runs in the top of the seventh.

Brugh was the only Union batter with multiple hits, going 2 for 4.

The Tigers played Baker County this past Tuesday and will travel to play Dixie County on Thursday, Feb. 13, at 7 p.m.

On Tuesday, Feb. 18, Union travels to play Nease at 6:30 p.m.

BHS Continued from page 8

drew a bases-loaded walk, followed by a two-run single by Ryder Thompson.

Sapp finished 2 for 3, while Rike and Thompson each went 2 for 4.

Thompson had three of Bradford's six RBIs. Parks, Pendarvis and Stafford each had

one RBI.

The Tornadoes host Parker on Thursday, Feb. 13, at 6 p.m. Bradford remains at home on Friday, Feb. 14, when it hosts Covenant School of Jacksonville at 7 p.m.

Bradford then plays two straight road games: at Gainesville on Tuesday, Feb. 18, at 7 p.m., and at Yulee on Wednesday, Feb. 19, at 6:30 p.m.



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Class Ads 2/13/25

40 Notices

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at 1-800-669-9777, the toll-free telephone number for the hearing impaired is 1-800-927-9275. For further information call Florida Commission on Human Relations, Lisa Sutherland.850-488-7082 ext. #1005

44 Boats and ATV's

LOOKING to buy a good used 8'-12' aluminum fishing boat w/no trailer. 904-796-9867

47 Commercial Property (Rent, Lease, Sale)

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48 Homes for Sale

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Tri-County Classifieds

Bradford County Telegraph Lake Region Monitor UNION COUNTY TIMES



INDEX

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 40 Notice | 57 For Sale |
| 41 Vehicles Accessories | 58 Building Materials |
| 42 Motor Vehicles | 59 Personal Services |
| 43 Rv's & Campers | 60 Secretarial Services |
| 44 Boats | 61 Scriptures |
| 45 Land for Sale | 62 Vacation/Travel |
| 46 Real Estate Out of Area | 63 Love Lines |
| 47 Commercial Property Rent, Lease, Sell | 64 Business Opportunity |
| 48 Homes for Sale | 65 Help Wanted |
| 49 Mobile Homes for Sale | 66 Investment Opportunity |
| 50 For Rent | 67 Hunting Land for Rent |
| 51 Lost/Found | 68 Rent to Own |
| 52 Animals & Pets | 69 Food Supplements |
| 53 Yard Sales | 70 Money to Lend |
| 54 Keystone Yard Sales | 72 Sporting Goods |
| 55 Wanted | 74 Computers & Computer Accessories |
| 56 Trade or Swap | |

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BHS boys basketball season ends with district runner-up trophy

BY CLIFF SMELLEY
cliff@bctelegraph.com

Second seed Bradford High School became the latest team to lose by at least 30 points to host Newberry, which defeated the Tornadoes 75-38 in the District 3-3A boys basketball championship game on Feb. 7.

The top seed Panthers (23-0) are beating teams by an average of 24 points per game and won their sixth straight game by at least 30 points. They earned the number-two seed in the Region 1 playoffs.

The region's four district champions qualified for regional play, while the four highest non-district champion teams in the Florida High School Athletic Association/MaxPreps Region 1-3A power rankings earned at-large berths. Bradford (16-5) was the fifth-highest ranked team that wasn't a district champ and thus was the first team left out of the playoffs.

Despite the Panthers' depth advantage — Newberry

sometimes subs out all five players on the court at one time — the Tornadoes hung with them in the first quarter, making 6 of their first 9 field-goal attempts. Breion Johnson scored Bradford's first points on a layup off a K.J. Taylor assist. Jordan Cason scored off an offensive rebound, while Taylor and Maliki Cobarris each had a basket to put the Tornadoes ahead 8-7.

Newberry's Henry Matthias knocked down a three-point shot, but Cobarris answered by scoring on a drive to the basket and drawing a foul. Cobarris made the awarded free-throw attempt to give Bradford an 11-10 advantage.

Another three-pointer — this time by Juwan Scippio — put the Panthers up by two, but the Tornadoes tied it up when a Taylor steal led to a Cason basket off a Jy'Quez Cason assist.

The Panthers scored the final nine points of the first quarter to take a 22-13 lead. During that span, the Tornadoes went 0 for

4 from the field and committed three turnovers.

Cobarris sank a three-point shot to start the second quarter, but the Panthers then scored seven straight. The Panthers' Collin Dunmore missed a layup after a Darius Debose steal, but redeemed himself by dunking the ball following another Debose steal. After Newberry's Kaleb Woods made two free throws, Matthias missed a three-pointer. Jacob Green rebounded the miss, however, and Matthias got the ball back for another three-point attempt, which was successful and put the Panthers ahead 29-16.

Bradford made 5 of 7 field-goal attempts in the second quarter, but hurt itself with 11 turnovers.

The Panthers closed the second quarter with a 10-4 run and went into halftime leading 39-24.

Both teams struggled shooting to start the second half, with their only points in the first 3.5 minutes coming at the foul line, with

Jordan Cason making one free throw and the Panthers' Matthias and Scippio each making two.

Bradford's Jy'Quez Cason made the first field goal of the third quarter, but his basket was answered by a Scippio three-pointer.

Newberry put together a 13-2 run that sent them into the fourth quarter leading 56-29.

Jordan Cason led Bradford with 18 points, while Cobarris had 10. The Tornadoes also got four points from Taylor and two each from Johnson, Caiden Carn and Jy'Quez Cason.

Four players scored in double figures for the Panthers: Scippio with 18, Matthias with 12 and Dunmore and Kai Washington each with 10.

BHS wins semifinal against Palatka

The Tornadoes had no trouble dispatching of third seed Palatka, defeating the visiting Panthers

52-30 in a District 3 semifinal game on Feb. 5.

Bradford never trailed against Palatka (7-20), which turned the ball over 10 times in a first half in which it shot just 5 of 19 from the field.

Cobarris opened the game with a three-pointer and scored the Tornadoes' first five points. His offensive rebound led to a basket by Johnson that put Bradford up 7-0.

Taylor scored off his own steal, while Johnson had a basket off a Jy'Quez Cason assist for an 11-4 Bradford lead.

The Tornadoes scored eight of the first nine points of the second quarter. Jy'Quez Cason scored off his own steal, while Jordan Cason drove to the basket for a score following another turnover. Cobarris grabbed a rebound on the defensive end and dribbled the length of the court for a basket, while Taylor drove the baseline for a score and a 19-5 lead.

After Palatka got its first field

goal of the quarter, Cobarris knocked down a three-point shot.

Jordan Cason then scored off his own steal, making it a 25-7 game.

Bradford, which led 25-12 at halftime, opened the third quarter with a 14-2 run. Johnson had the first basket, followed by Jordan Cason and Kyren Green scoring off offensive rebounds. A Green steal led to a Cobarris basket and a 33-14 lead.

The run continued with a Jordan Cason basket, while Cobarris scored off his own steal. Taylor then made two free throws, pushing the Tornadoes' lead to 39-14.

Cobarris went 6 for 8 from the foul line in the fourth quarter and finished with 17 points. Jordan Cason added nine points, while the Tornadoes also got six points each from Johnson and Taylor, five from Steven Carter, three from Green, two each from Carn and Jy'Quez Cason and one each from Jackson Parmeter and Bryston Williams.

TAYLOR

Continued from page 9

developing players.

"I just like a new coaching staff and new opportunities."

Taylor also likes the fact that Jacksonville State is a program "on the rise" after its recent move up from the Football Championship Subdivision to the Football Bowl Subdivision.

"They won Conference USA last year," Taylor said. "The standards are high. I'm definitely ready to get there and work."

If anyone can attest to Taylor's work ethic and desire to get better, it's his position coach at Williston — Gerard "Big Money" Warren, the former University of Florida and NFL player who was a member of Union County High School's three state-championship teams

in 1994, 1995 and 1996.

"I knew he came from an athletic family, so the genetics were already there," Warren said. "What blew me away was his work ethic and his attention to detail and his hunger to learn more. When I talked to these college coaches, I told them, 'You'll be inheriting a sponge. This is a guy who truly loves the game of football, and he yearns for more knowledge, always trying to get better.'"

In assessing his game, Taylor believes what he does best is "fly around and make plays." As he put it, "I play see ball-get ball."

Warren agreed, saying, "He's a guy who plays for four quarters. He's always giving effort in giving chase and trying to get to the football. A lot of big guys tend to take plays off here and there, but this guy has a motor, and he continues to go and go." Taylor said he knows the game

speed will be at another level in college, so he believes what he does before the season starts will help him make the transition from high-school ball.

"I feel like what I'm going to do in the offseason is going to pay off," he said.

Warren said Taylor, who's 6-1, 280, will need to get stronger and perhaps a little quicker, but he has the fundamentals down, which is a big plus.

"He's got all the tools to be successful," Warren said.

It'll be a special moment when Taylor steps onto the field for the first time as a college player, but so, too, was the signing ceremony he got to participate in at R.J.E.

"I grew up here as a kid," he said. "I always wanted to do this when I got older and made my decision to go to college. I feel like they're the people who raised me. They raised me right. I'm thankful for them."

DISTRICT

Continued from page 9

visiting Palatka for a 66-54 win in a District 3-3A tournament semifinal girls basketball game on Feb. 6.

Bradford struggled with Palatka's defensive pressure in the first quarter, turning the ball over 11 times. A three-pointer by the Tornadoes' Bing tied the score at 8-8, but third seed Palatka (10-12) closed the quarter with six straight points to take a 14-8 lead.

Palatka threatened to go up by nine in the second quarter, but the Panthers missed a layup after a backcourt steal. The Tornadoes' Griffin then sank a three-point shot, followed by Brown scoring off her own steal, pulling Bradford to within 20-18.

A three-pointer by Griffin and

a basket by Brown, who dribbled the length of the court after grabbing a defensive rebound, tied the score at 27-27. The Panthers went back up by two, but Brown added another basket to make it 29-29.

Bradford took its first lead of the game when Nyasia Lopey made a free throw, putting the Tornadoes up 30-29. Palatka, though, took advantage of a turnover and scored before the halftime buzzer to go into the locker room leading 31-30.

Each team had two baskets at the start of the third quarter, with a three-pointer by Palatka putting the Panthers ahead 36-34. The Tornadoes then scored 18 straight points.

Brown got the run started on a drive to the basket for two. Brown then had a steal, which led to a score by Griffin, which gave Bradford a lead it never relinquished. Griffin later added

two free throws, while Teal scored following a turnover to make it 42-36.

The run continued with Brown scoring off her own steal. Teal had a basket off an offensive rebound, while Griffin scored on a Brown assist. Brown then had another steal, which she scored off of to put the Tornadoes up 50-36.

Bradford outscored Palatka 23-7 in the third quarter, getting eight points from Brown, seven from Griffin and six from Teal.

The Tornadoes scored six of the first seven points of the fourth quarter to build a 59-39 lead, getting baskets from Bing, Brown and Griffin.

Griffin finished with a game-high 23 points, while Brown and Bing added 18 and 16, respectively. The Tornadoes also got six points from Teal, two from Johnson and one Lopey.

Legal Notices

Legals for the week of Feb. 13, 2025

BRADFORD

IN THE CIRCUIT COURT FOR BRADFORD COUNTY, FLORIDA PROBATE DIVISION Case No. 25000006CPAXMX Probate Division

IN RE: ESTATE OF PAUL T. STENSON, Deceased.

NOTICE TO CREDITORS

The administration of the estate of Paul T. Stenson, deceased, whose date of death was September 6, 2024, and the last four digits of whose social security number are -7696, is pending in the Circuit Court for Bradford County, Florida, Probate Division, the address of which is 945 N. Temple Avenue, Starke, FL 32091. The names and addresses of the personal representative and the personal representative's attorney are set forth below.

All creditors of the decedent and other persons having claims or demands against decedent's estate on whom a copy of this notice is required to be served must file their claims with this court WITHIN THE LATER OF 3 MONTHS AFTER THE TIME OF THE FIRST PUBLICATION OF THIS NOTICE OR 30 DAYS AFTER THE DATE OF SERVICE OF A COPY OF THIS NOTICE ON THEM.

All other creditors of the decedent and other persons having claims or demands against decedent's estate must file their claims with this court WITHIN 3 MONTHS AFTER THE DATE OF THE FIRST PUBLICATION OF THIS NOTICE.

ALL CLAIMS NOT FILED WITHIN THE TIME PERIODS SET FORTH IN SECTION 733.702 OF THE FLORIDA PROBATE CODE WILL BE FOREVER BARRED.

NOTWITHSTANDING THE TIME PERIODS SET FORTH ABOVE, ANY CLAIM FILED TWO (2) YEARS OR MORE AFTER THE DECEDENT'S DATE OF DEATH IS BARRED.

The personal representative or curator has no duty to discover whether any property held at the time of the decedent's death by the decedent or the decedent's surviving spouse is property to which the Florida Uniform Disposition of Community Property

Rights at Death Act as described in Sections 732.216-732.228 applies, or may apply, unless a written demand is made by the surviving spouse or a beneficiary as specified under Section 732.2211.

The date of first publication of this notice is February 6, 2025.

Attorney for Personal Representative: Amy C. Kelley, Esq. Fla. Bar No. 119148 Kelley & Kelley, P.L. 700 Plantation Island Dr. S. Suite 206 St. Augustine, FL 32080 Tel: (904) 819-9706 Fax: (904) 819-9707 amy@kelleyandkelley.com sean@kelleyandkelley.com pleadings@kelleyandkelley.com Personal Representative: Michael Stenson 64 Seasons Court Elmhurst, Illinois 60126 2/6 2tchg 2/13-BCT

IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF THE EIGHTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT, IN AND FOR BRADFORD COUNTY, FLORIDA Case No.: 24000358CAAXMX Division: Civil

PNC Bank, National Association Plaintiff,

vs. Erica Hall, et al. Defendants.

NOTICE OF ACTION AGAINST DEFENDANT ERICA HALL, UNKNOWN SPOUSE (1), BY VIRTUE OF BEING THE SPOUSE OF ERICA HALL AND ANY POTENTIAL HOMESTEAD RIGHTS AND/OR INTEREST THEY MAY HAVE IN THE SUBJECT PROPERTY AND KERRY BRENT PAGE, JR., AS POSSIBLE SPOUSE OF ERICA HALL To: ERICA HALL 5342 COUNTY ROAD 214 KEYSTONE HEIGHTS, FL 32656 UNITED STATES OF AMERICA UNKNOWN SPOUSE (1), BY VIRTUE OF BEING THE SPOUSE OF ERICA HALL AND ANY POTENTIAL HOMESTEAD RIGHTS AND/OR INTEREST THEY MAY HAVE IN THE SUBJECT PROPERTY 5342 COUNTY ROAD 214 KEYSTONE HEIGHTS, FL 32656 UNITED STATES OF AMERICA KERRY BRENT PAGE, JR., AS POSSIBLE SPOUSE OF ERICA HALL

5342 COUNTY ROAD 214 KEYSTONE HEIGHTS, FL 32656 UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND all parties claiming interest by, through, under or against Defendant(s) ERICA HALL UNKNOWN SPOUSE (1), BY VIRTUE OF BEING THE SPOUSE OF ERICA HALL AND ANY POTENTIAL HOMESTEAD RIGHTS AND/OR INTEREST THEY MAY HAVE IN THE SUBJECT PROPERTY AND KERRY BRENT PAGE, JR., AS POSSIBLE SPOUSE OF ERICA HALL, and all parties having or claiming to have any right, title or interest in the property herein described; YOU ARE NOTIFIED that an action to foreclose a mortgage on the following described property in Bradford County, Florida: Real property located in the County of Bradford, State of Florida, to-wit: The East half (50 feet) of Lot 2, Block B, in that certain subdivision known as Mount Pleasant on Silver Lake, as the same appears of record in Plat Book 2, Page 45, public records of Bradford County, Florida, has been filed against you; and you are required to serve a copy of your written defenses, if any, to it on MICHAEL E. CARLETON, Plaintiff's attorney, P. O. Box 165028, Columbus, OH 43216-5028, within thirty (30) days after the first publication of this Notice and file the original with the Clerk of this Court either before service on Plaintiff's attorney or immediately thereafter; otherwise a default will be entered against you for the relief demanded in the Complaint. WITNESS my hand and seal of this Court on the 27th day of January 2025. DENNY THOMPSON CLERK OF THE CIRCUIT COURT BRADFORD COUNTY, FLORIDA By: Kanetra Jenkins Deputy Clerk

NOTICE TO PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES If you are a person with a disability who needs any accommodation in order to participate in this proceeding, you are entitled, at no cost to you, to the provision of certain assistance. Please contact ADA Coordinator, Alachua County Family and Civil Justice Center, 201 East University Avenue, Gainesville, FL, 32601, Phone: (352)337-6236, at least 7 days before your scheduled court appearance, or immediately upon

receiving this notification if the time before the scheduled appearance is less than 7 days; if you are hearing or voice-impaired, call 1-800-955-8770 via Florida Relay Service. 2/6 2tchg 2/13-BCT

PUBLIC AUCTION

Ron Denmark Mini Storage will hold a public auction on February 14, 2025 10:00am at 2117 N. Temple Ave. Starke, FL on the following units containing personal items: Unit 60 - Belonging to N. McCutchen Unit 39 - Belonging to M. McDuffie Unit 49 & 58 - Belonging to K. Noble 2/6 2tchg 2/13-BCT

NOTICE OF SALE

Notice is hereby given that pursuant to the Florida Self Storage Facility Act Statutes (Section 83.801 - 83.809); Santa Fe Storage of Starke will sell for cash to the highest bidder on storageauctions.net for location at 1630 North Temple Ave, Starke, County of Bradford, FL, at 2:00 pm on Wednesday, the 26th day of February; 2025 and continuing day to day thereafter until sold: the household goods and misc. contents of the following: Tania Evans Linda Santiago Darsha Fuqua Shawn Lindemuth Terri Wileman Hope Crosby 2/13 2tchg 2/20-BCT

COMMISSION MEETING

THE PUBLIC IS HEREBY NOTIFIED that the Bradford County Board of County Commissioners will have a board meeting on February 20, 2025, at 6:30 PM inside the county commission meeting room, located in the north wing section of the Bradford County Courthouse, 945 N. Temple, Avenue, Starke, FL. A copy of the meeting agenda may be obtained from the Bradford County website: www.bradfordcountyfl.gov. Said meeting location is secured - no firearms or weapons are permitted. 2/13 1tchg-BCT

NOTICE OF SALE

Notice is hereby given that pursuant to the Florida Self Storage Facility Act Statutes (Section 83.801 - 83.809);

Santa Fe Storage of Waldo. Will sell for CASH to the highest bidder on Storageauctions.net

For location at 15540 NE HWY 301, Waldo, County of Alachua, Florida; ending at 2:00 PM on Wednesday, the 26th day of February; 2025, and continuing day to day thereafter until sold: the household goods and misc. contents of the following: OA011 Jamal Maultsby OB008 Tisha Butler OD013 Kayla Wiseman 2/13 2tchg 2/20-BCT

IN THE CIRCUIT COURT FOR BRADFORD COUNTY, FLORIDA PROBATE DIVISION IN RE: ESTATE OF CALIN MARIE COATES, Deceased.

NOTICE TO CREDITORS

The administration of the estate of CALIN MARIE COATES, deceased, whose date of death was SEPTEMBER 24, 2024, is pending in the Circuit Court for BRADFORD County, Florida, Probate Division, the address of which is 945 N. TEMPLE AVE, STARKE, FL 32091. The names and addresses of the personal representative and the personal representative's attorney are set forth below.

All creditors of the decedent and other persons having claims or demands against decedent's estate, on whom a copy of this notice is required to be served, must file their claims with this court ON OR BEFORE THE LATER OF 3 MONTHS AFTER THE TIME OF THE FIRST PUBLICATION OF THIS NOTICE OR 30 DAYS AFTER THE DATE OF SERVICE OF A COPY OF THIS NOTICE ON THEM.

All other creditors of the decedent and other persons having claims or demands against decedent's estate must file their claims with this court WITHIN 3 MONTHS AFTER THE DATE OF THE FIRST PUBLICATION OF THIS NOTICE. ALL CLAIMS NOT FILED WITHIN THE TIME PERIODS SET FORTH IN FLORIDA STATUTES SECTION 733.702 WILL BE FOREVER BARRED. NOTWITHSTANDING THE TIME PERIOD SET FORTH ABOVE, ANY CLAIM FILED TWO (2) YEARS OR MORE AFTER THE DECEDENT'S DATE OF DEATH IS BARRED. A Personal Representative or curator

has no duty to discover whether any property held at the time of the decedent's death by the decedent or the decedent's surviving spouse is property to which the Florida Uniform Disposition of Community Property Rights at Death Act as described in ss. 732.216-732.228, applies, or may apply, unless a written demand is made by a creditor as specified under s.732.2211.

The date of first publication of this notice is: February 13, 2025. MATTHEW MCCONNELL, Esq. Florida Bar No. 126161 Attorney for Personal Representative Dickman Law Firm Post Office Box 111868 Naples, FL 34108 T: 239-434-0840 F : 239-434-0940 matthew@dickmanlawfirm.org STEPHEN COATES Personal Representative 104 SE 28th St Melrose, FL 32666 2/13 2tchg 2/20-BCT

NOTICE UNDER FICTITIOUS NAME

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: Undersigned pursuant to the "Fictitious Name Statute", Chapter 865.09, Florida Statutes, will register with the Division of Corporations, Department of State, State of Florida upon receipt of proof of the publication of this notice, the fictitious name, to-wit: FEARCRAFT Under which we are engaged in business at 1680 NW 246th St, Lawtely, FL 32058 That the party interested in said business enterprise is as follows: MODERN WIGGSCRAFT LLC, Shawn Wiggins, Owner 2/13 1tchg-BCT

UNION

FICTITIOUS NAME

Notice Is Hereby Given that Warren Averett Staffing and Recruiting, LLC, 2500 Action Rd, Birmingham, AL 35243, desiring to engage in business under the fictitious name of Warren Averett Executive Search and Recruiting, with its principal place of business in the State of Florida in the County of Union, intends to file an Application for Registration of Fictitious Name with the Florida Department of State. 2/13 1tchg-BCT

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Obituaries

Starke Golf: family run, family fun

Mary Lou Gainey

Mary Lou Gainey, 79, passed away on Saturday, Feb. 8, 2025, at her home surrounded by her loving family. She was born June 12, 1945, in Washington, DC, to the late Blake and Mary Edna Rosenthal. After graduation, she worked in the Pentagon under Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, where she met and fell in love with a young sailor, Rodger Gainey, who was stationed there at the time. Prior to Rodger being shipped to Southeast Asia in 1968 they were married on Valentine's Day. The two enjoyed 57 amazing years together. After several moves during their navel career, they settled back in Rodger's hometown of Starke. Mary Lou had a wonderful career in the legal field. She was a paralegal with J. Nickolas Alexander, Esq., in Orange Park, for 32 years. She was preceded in death by her sister, Diane Hooper; and brothers, Joseph and Tommy Rosenthal.



She is survived by her husband, Rodger; two wonderful children, Todd (Regina); Mary Frances (Owen); three grandchildren, Kaitlyn (Noah), Tanner and Abby; her brother, Johnny; and several nieces, nephews and cousins. This beautiful tribute was prepared by her husband, Rodger Gainey. At her request, there will be no services, only a gathering of family and friends at a later date.

Arrangements are under the care and direction of V. Todd Ferreira Funeral Services and Archie Tanner Memorial Chapel, Starke. 904-964-5757.

PAID OBITUARY

David Parrish

David Eugene Parrish, 61, passed away peacefully at his home in Starke on Friday, Jan. 31, 2025. Born on Nov. 18, 1963, in Lake Butler, he lived a life with warmth and generosity, embodying a quiet strength that touched the lives of all who knew him. After attending Union County High School, he began working at Southern Precast concrete plant. He worked diligently running the grinder machine until an accident left him impaired. He had a passion for racing; he cherished moments spent racing his red Corvette and attending the GatorNationals, reveling in the thrill and camaraderie that these events brought. In his younger years, he found great joy in carpentry, where his creativity and craftsmanship shone brightly. He was quiet, big-hearted, and ever generous. He left an indelible mark on his family and friends. He was especially beloved by his friend, Guy Adams and his grandchildren, who affectionately referred to him as "DD." His life was enriched by his relationships, and he treasured the bonds he formed with those around him. He was preceded in death by his parents, Joe and Jean Hart Parrish.



He is survived by his sisters, Sandy Varnes and Toni Barrick; aunt and uncle, Kenneth and Linda Parrish; as well as numerous nieces, nephews, and cousins.

A visitation in his honor was held Tuesday, Feb. 11, at Archer-Milton Funeral Home in Lake Butler. He was laid to rest immediately following the service at Elzey Chapel Cemetery.

It is the pleasure of Archer-Milton Funeral Home to serve David's family during this difficult time. 386-496-2008 www.archerfuneralhome.com

PAID OBITUARY

Lillian Stallings

Mrs. Lillian M. Stallings, 62, of Keystone Heights passed away Friday, Jan. 31, 2025, at Haven Hospice in Gainesville. She was born Aug. 31, 1962, in Santiago, Cuba to Dr. Julio and Lillian (Grimany) Martinez. She earned her BSN Degree from Florida State University, where she met the love of her life, Carey, and began her nursing career in labor and delivery. She was a longtime member of Trinity Baptist Church and ALWAYS put GOD first, and she instilled that in her children as they grew into adults. Memories of family vacations to the beach or the Georgia mountains can be found in many of the photo books she enjoyed making. Family was her pride and joy, whether it was taking the grandchildren to the park, playing in the lake, as long as she was making everlasting memories with them. Her mother, Lillian Carmen (Grimany) Martinez preceded her in death.



Left behind to cherish her memory is her loving and very devoted husband of nearly 42 years, Carey K. Stallings of Keystone Heights; and their children, Ryan Stallings of Arkansas, Jarrod Stallings of Keystone Heights, Rachel Stallings of Gainesville, Josiah Stallings of Keystone Heights, and Carolyn (Ben) Foster of Hampton. Also left behind is her father, Dr. Julio Martinez Sr.; and her second mother, Isabel Conde; brother, Julio Martinez Jr.; and sister, Marcia Martinez, all of Orlando; and mother-in-law, Carolyn Stallings of Keystone Heights. Lillian was a loving "Mimi" to Isabella Cicio, Charlotte Foster, Josephine Stallings and Henry Foster. There are also a host of extended family members, nieces, nephews, and friends that will miss her contagious bright and beautiful smile every day.

A Celebration of Life will be held at 11 a.m. on Saturday, Feb. 15, at Trinity Baptist Church. Visitation will be held one hour prior to the services. The family is requesting that you wear Lillian's favorite color, purple, and dress casually. In lieu of flowers, memorial donations can be made to Lake Area Ministry, 131 N.E. Commercial Circle, Keystone Heights 32656 in her memory.

Arrangements are under the care of Milam Funeral Home, Inc., 311 S. Main St., Gainesville 32601. 352-376-5361. www.milamfh.com

BY CLIFF SMELLEY
cliff@bctelegraph.com

Golfers can tee it up in Starke once again, thanks to the Tatum family taking the management reins again at the Starke Golf and Country Club course, which had been closed for approximately four months.

The course re-opened on Jan. 8 and has had steady business most days when the weather has been decent.

"Everyone has told me the course is in the best shape they've seen it in years," said Tammy Jo Montford, the daughter of Charles and Sylvia Tatum.

Charles and Sylvia formed the ownership group Tatum Golf Enterprises with Charles' brother, Tom (now deceased), and his wife, Linda, when the family bought the course in 2004.

A lot of work went into making improvements for the course to re-open. However, the work hasn't stopped.

"We hope to keep on doing anything we can to provide something for people in Bradford County," said Thomas Tatum, the grandson of Tom and Linda Tatum. He added, "We're going to continue to make it better."

The Tatum family announced in November 2016 that it was giving up management of the golf course, with a family spokesperson at the time saying that the Tatum Golf Enterprises members were getting older and finding it difficult to manage the course and stay involved with the family's main business, which is Tatum Brothers Lumber Company in Lawtey.

Tammy Jo said when the family discussed the course during its most recent closure, two of its younger members expressed an interest in stepping in to manage it again: Thomas Tatum and Montford's daughter, Lucy Montford.

"They said, 'Don't lease it again. We want to do something with it.' When we managed



The Starke Golf and Country Club is open once again, thanks to members of the Tatum family, which owns and now manages the course. Pictured (l-r) are Sylvia Tatum, Lucy Montford, Charles Tatum, Thomas Tatum and Linda Tatum.

it before, (Thomas and Lucy) were too young to do anything with it," Tammy Jo said, adding, "They are so excited about it. They've got all these ideas."

Thomas Tatum admitted his goal is for the course to become known as "Florida's best-kept secret. The cost to play is \$10 per person (nine or 18 holes). Carts can be rented for \$20.

"There's not much in the community for the younger generation and the older generation (to do together)," Thomas said.

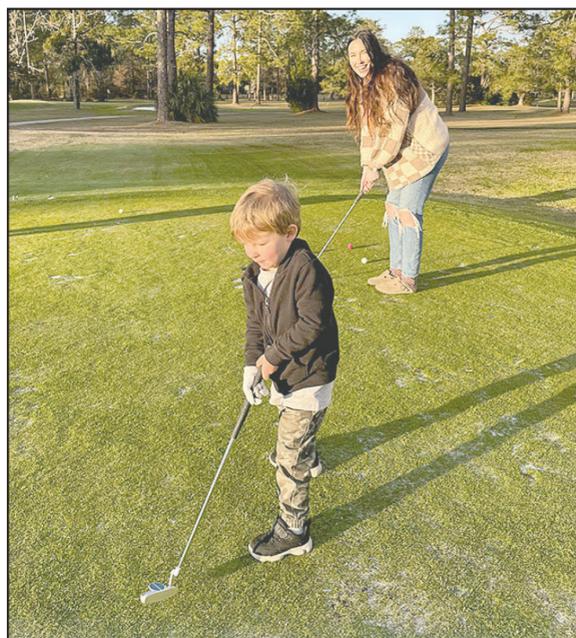
He hopes the Starke course can provide that full family fun, with a welcoming, come-as-you-are atmosphere.

"We're trying to give it a mom-and-pop vibe. We welcome just about anybody," Thomas said, adding, "It's not like your standard golf course, where you've got to wear this or wear that or be some sort of way."

Working to re-open

Thomas Tatum spent a lot of time getting the course into playing shape. He said the entire course had become overgrown — so much so that when he cleared it, he discovered numerous balls and clubs.

"I probably found 5,000 golf



You'll find various generations of the Tatum family at the Starke Golf and Country Club. One of the family's youngest members, Huck Tatum (foreground), works on his swing along with cousin Charlee Montford.

balls just after bush hogging," Tatum said. "It took about a month's work of bush hogging."

Bunkers, which had become filled with grass, had to be dug

out, while the greens had to be fertilized and overseeded to promote new growth and make

See GOLF, page 13

'Apology' is a win for BMS speller Lilly

BY CLIFF SMELLEY
cliff@bctelegraph.com

Bradford Middle School eighth-grader Nathaniel Lilly didn't have to make an apology — he just needed to be able to spell it.

Spell it, he did, which resulted him being the champion of the Bradford County School District Spelling Bee, which was held Jan. 30 at the Bradford County School District boardroom.

It was quite the battle between Lilly and runner-up Jayden Goodman, a sixth-grader at Starke Elementary School. After everyone else was eliminated, the two went head-to-head for nine rounds before Lilly earned the win and a chance to compete in the 81st annual First Coast Regional Spelling Championship on Friday, March 7, at Jacksonville's LaVilla School of the Arts.

The Bradford County Education Foundation, which sponsors the district spelling bee as well as the spelling bees at each individual school, will cover the cost for Lilly and his family to attend the First Coast Regional Spelling Championship.

Winning the First Coast Regional Spelling Championship earns a student the right to compete at Scripps National Spelling Bee in Washington, D.C.

Bradford County Education Foundation members Cheryl Canova (president), Vorease Jones (secretary) and Lila Sellars (vice president) served as judges at the Bradford School District

bee, which consisted of 12 students who placed in the top three at spelling bees at their schools. School-level bee results were:

—Bradford Elementary: champion Jacianna Brown (fifth grade), runner-up Branton Clements (sixth grade) and second runner-up Audrina Johnson (fifth grade).

—Bradford Middle: champion Aashna Patel (eighth grade), runner-up Lilly and second runner-up Marie Karinen (seventh grade).

—Lawtey Elementary: champion Logan Scarberry (fifth grade), runner-up Jaxon Castellese (sixth grade) and second runner-up Dava Devore (fifth grade).

—Starke Elementary: champion Emma Atkins (sixth grade), runner-up Londyn Harris (fifth grade) and second runner-up Goodman.

Atkins and Castellese also competed in last year's district bee, with Castellese winning it.

After receiving the rules from pronouncer Troy Appling, participants got to do a practice round before starting the district bee in earnest. Atkins, Brown, Castellese, Clements, Devore, Goodman, Harris, Lilly, Patel and Scarberry all advanced past the first two rounds, with Atkins, Brown, Castellese, Devore, Goodman, Harris, Lilly, Patel and Scarberry all getting to round four.

Round five consisted of Atkins, Brown, Castellese, Goodman, Harris, Lilly, Patel



Bradford Middle School's Nathaniel Lilly (right) won the Bradford County School District Spelling Bee, while Starke Elementary's Jayden Goodman was runner-up.

and Scarberry, with Castellese, Goodman, Harris and Lilly moving onto round six.

All four successfully made it to round seven, but by round eight, it was down to Goodman and Lilly.

Up to that point, Goodman had successfully spelled the following words: "hopscootch," "hurricane," "gargoyles," "straightforward," "hurly burly," "artificial" and "barista." Lilly spelled "Wednesday," "ointment," "onyx," "feisty," "karma," "rancid" and "algebraic."

With the bee down to two, a student had to spell two words correctly after an opponent's misspelling to win. Otherwise, the bee kept going.

Goodman and Lilly both misspelled their words in round eight, which led to round nine. Lilly put himself in position to win in round nine by successfully spelling "Louis d'or," but he

misspelled his next word. Next came four straight rounds in which both students correctly spelled every word. Goodman spelled "blink," "sword," "delta" and "abolish," while Lilly spelled "cactus," "bleat," "onion" and "literally."

Each student misspelled his word in round 14, but they were both successful in round 15, with Goodman spelling "bristle" and Lilly spelling "carriage."

In round 16, Lilly successfully spelled "gaggle," setting up his win by spelling "apology."

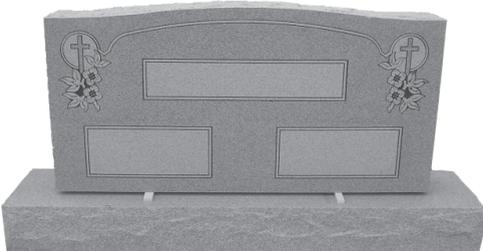
Lilly and Goodman were each presented with trophies, while all participants received gift bags.

Trophies and gift bags were provided by the Bradford County Education Foundation.

The Bradford County Education Foundation is a nonprofit organization that was established in 1990 by citizens to support the county's schools. It consists solely of volunteers.

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GOLF

Continued from page 12

the course more playable.

Thomas said he had numerous people helping him, such as Eddie Akridge, Charlie Baker, Jeffrey Crawford, David Tew and Richie Wheeler.

Wheeler, in particular, was a tremendous resource due to his experience with golf courses, Tatum said.

"We used to race together," Thomas said of Wheeler. "He's been working in the business for 20-something years. I had the chance to have him mentor me and get him involved out here."

The response to the condition of the course has been positive.

"It's not perfect yet, but compared to what we started with, it's a huge difference," Thomas said, adding, "With the community supporting us and us getting lots of play, we're going to continue to work on the course to make it better for the consumer."

While Thomas focused his efforts on the outside, Lucy Montford turned hers toward the pro shop. She said it wasn't cleaned out when the family bought the course in 2004, so work began on what was an overdue project.

"It's the first thing you see," she said of the pro shop, adding, "It was just really important to us to take everything out and start fresh."

The process involved such things as painting and installing new carpet after hauling off "trailers and trailers of junk," Lucy said.

Lucy said every person who walks in the door says, "It smells so nice."

"It really has made a difference," she said of the pro shop work.

Like Thomas, Lucy has had people assisting her with her work — people she said she "begged to come help me." They include Wyatt Barber, Harrison Cunningham and Calli Morrow as well as sisters Bobbie Jo Montford and Charlee Montford.

Lucy said her father, Bob Montford, has been pitching in, too.

"He kind of got dragged into it," she said. "It started with me calling him and asking, 'How should we do this?' Now, somehow, he's out here every afternoon helping with something."

Fully committed

Tatum Brothers Lumber Company has been in existence

in Lawtey since 1963 (though the company was founded in 1930). It may always be what comes to most people's minds first when they think of the Tatum family.

It's impressive for a family to have one successful business, but the Tatum family is striving for two. That can only happen with everyone being on the same page as to how to move past disagreements and get to the task at hand.

What Charles and his brother, Tom, accomplished at Tatum Brothers Lumber Company serves as an example.

"My brother and I partnered 55 years together," Charles said.

You can be sure the brothers probably didn't see eye to eye on everything during all those years, but the key is to focus on what's important. As Tammy Jo put it, "We were taught, 'Look at the big picture. You've got to make it work. Hush, make it work and get along.'"

"It's tough to not butt heads," Thomas said. "That's what I think separates the ones who keep success rolling from the ones who don't keep success — at some point, you've got to have enough sense to give a little and take a little and work together. If you don't work together, it'll fall apart a lot faster than it was put together."

Unfortunately, one of the

family members wasn't involved in the process of taking over the management of the course again as Tom Tatum passed away June 9, 2017. However, it's not hard for his family to imagine that he's pleased with their involvement.

"I'd say when we first got the golf course (in 2004), Tom probably loved it more than anybody," Thomas said. "This was his little getaway from the sawmill. He loved talking to the community up here."

Tammy Jo said, "He would be glad, I think, that we've taken it back."

Though they're "sawmillers at the end of the day," Thomas said he and his family members can "give people a nice course to play on."

And to do that, the family is open to ideas.

"If any golfers have any suggestions of what they'd like to see, we're definitely open to them," Thomas said. "If we get enough of the same suggestion, that would tell us it's definitely something to look into."

One thing the family wants to do is to host tournaments throughout the year. The Starke course is already hosting a Valentine's tournament, which will be played Sunday, Feb. 16. There are also plans to bring back the Strawberry Invitational, which was an annual event that



Bobbie Jo Montford (left) and Calli Morrow display one of the Starke Golf and Country Club T-shirts. The design is by Camee Morrow.

hasn't taken place since 2017.

So far, it seems as if the family's efforts are paying off. For example, several Facebook posts have bragged on the golf course. Landon Robert Wyckoff wrote: "The improvements and upgrades made so far are amazing. Y'all definitely need to check it out!" Matt Stucky posted: "The course is in great shape, and the greens are rolling great!" Richard Gaines wrote: "I

had heard that Starke GCC was in good shape, so Tuesday (Feb. 4) I went out there and walked around and am happy to say it is by far in the best shape it has been since 1990s or before!"

In the end, a successful family business is a gift to the community.

"We want it to be something they're proud of," Linda Tatum said.

SIGN

Continued from page 9

"exceptional athlete" who can disrupt opposing offenses.

"Quarterbacks really can't run away from him," Rodgers said. "Offensive linemen have a tough time with his speed and quickness."

Rodgers believes that Hill, at 6-4, 230, could potentially find himself playing on offense at tight end, noting that "he would be a nightmare matchup." If Hill stays on defense, Rodgers could see him possibly adding 20-30 pounds, move inside the line and still be able to rush the passer.

"He's got that ability to get a lot bigger and go inside, or he can stay outside and rush off the 5-technique, where the tackles have a tough time with him," Rodgers said.

Wherever he lines up, Hill said he knows it'll be an adjustment for him.

"Conditioning is going to be way different in college than it is in high school," he said, adding that he must "get in the weight room and just stay focused."

Hill and Lewis both said that they imagine stepping onto the field for the first time as a college player will feel just like the first time they played football.

"It's square one all over again," Hill said.

Lewis said, "It'll feel good."

Throwing passes for The Flying Fleet

Paulk said he chose Erskine College because of "how much the coaching staff loved me when I went on a visit about two weeks ago."

He also liked hearing that he'll immediately be in the mix to start.

"The offensive coordinator was telling me how I had the ability to start year one," Paulk

said. "I'm just ready to get up there and compete."

Outside of the football program, Paulk said that Erskine appealed to him because of its location in a town with a population of 1,216.

"I like the atmosphere," he said. "It's in a small town, so there aren't too many distractions. That allows me to go up there on a mission — to get ready to play some college ball."

In Paulk, the Erskine Flying Fleet are getting someone who completed 93 of 149 passes in 2024 for 1,347 yards and 14 touchdowns. Not bad for someone who was playing at a new school his senior year of high school. Rodgers said BHS coaches "threw a lot at him in a hurry and noted that Paulk went from alternating time with other players at Columbia High School to being the full-time starter for a BHS team coming off a season in which it was the state runner-up."

"All those things add a lot of pressure," Rodgers said. "I thought he handled it great. I thought he handled tough coaching. I thought he handled adversity. There were a lot of times where we didn't play very well as we have in the past on defense, and we had to score more this year. I thought Zack did a great job of handling all that with the utmost character."

Paulk, who describes himself as "a very coachable player," said he's able to handle whatever's thrown at him and said his experience at BHS will be a plus moving forward.

"Coach (David) May emphasized my ability to understand things quickly," Paulk said of the Tornadoes' offensive coordinator. "I've got a good memory. I can understand concepts quickly. That's something that's going to help me excel."

Rodgers said, "He needs to progress in reading coverages and things like that, but that'll

come because he's disciplined, and he's going to put in the work."

Paulk said something he plans to work on in transitioning to the next level is his speed, adding another aspect to his game.

"I know I'm primarily a pro-style passer," Paulk said, "but I want to get faster and be able to make plays with my feet."

"Other than that, it just comes to understanding defenses and certain schemes that collegiate defenses may try to trick you with."

When thinking about stepping onto the field for the first time in college, Paulk said, "I think it's going to feel surreal. There are going to be a lot of emotions."

He's sure he'll be nervous, but Paulk believes he'll have done all that's necessary to best prepare him for his collegiate debut.

"I think I'll be good and ready for the moment," he said.

From BHS Tornado to Andrew Tiger

Cliffin said two schools wanted him, but said that Andrew showed the most interest, so that's why he's off to become a Tiger.

He also likes the atmosphere that the school itself offers.

"It feels exactly like home," Cliffin said. "It's nice. There aren't many people there, so you can focus on school."

Cliffin said Andrew coaches have talked about him being in the mix at running back, but they also can see him playing at linebacker instead, which is what he played primarily in 2024 for BHS.

He just wants to be on the field, but Cliffin added, "If I did have a preference, I'd have to tote the rock."

Cliffin got 74 carries at running back in 2023, gaining 440 yards and scoring four touchdowns. He was more important on defense

for the Tornadoes in 2024. He got only 11 touches at running back.

"He's so selfless," Rodgers said. "He does anything for the team. Whatever the team needs, I know he wanted to run the ball as much as he did as a junior probably, but that's not what this team particularly needed this year. This year, he had to play every single down at linebacker. He had tons of tackles and sacks. We would walk him down to play defensive end some."

"He's just so coachable and wants the team to be successful. It's never about Brian Cliffin. It's, 'What's the best for our team?' I'd love to coach about 40 Brian Cliffins."

Cliffin's 51 tackles in 2024 were the fourth most on the team.

"He's super physical," Rodgers

said. "He's a little short (at 5-9), but he's over 205 pounds — somewhere in that range. Great run stopper. Very smart football player. Most of the time, he was in the position where he was supposed to be."

"What we try to do is take away the run game. He was vital in that. He was our biggest linebacker by far weight-wise and had to take on a bunch of lead blocks, which he did with great success."

When it comes to Cliffin playing running back, Rodgers said, "One man probably won't take him down very often." The coach pointed to Cliffin's strength and his work in the weight room, where he squats 550 pounds and bench presses over 300 pounds.

"There are a lot of reasons we're going to miss Brian Cliffin, but his physicality is probably number one," Rodgers said.

In making a successful transition to college ball, Cliffin said he must "focus, continue to stay in the weight room and learn from the people who are above me."

Cliffin worked hard to get to this point, but he knows the work isn't over. It's one thing to have, as he described it, a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." It's another to do something with it.

"You can't take this for granted," he said. "When you get there, you've got to take it, and you've got to take it with all you've got. Whenever you get to that point, you've got to at least put in work."

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18x25 BOAT COVER

\$3,000 \$57/MO WAG +TAX

POLE BARN

\$8,112 \$115/MO WAG +TAX

Expertly installed by
Cutting Edge Development LLC.
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