

The Oconee Enterprise

A GPA GENERAL EXCELLENCE NEWSPAPER

THE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER OF Alan, Kelly and Knox Posey

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RVs OK at campus ministry

BY LEE BECKER

Athens College of Ministry is planning to build a campus for 750 students on 114 acres that had been a golf course in the far eastern part of the county. The property is on the eastern side of the Oconee River, where Oconee, Clarke and Oglethorpe counties meet.

Attorney Jim Warnes, chair of the Board of Trustees of the College, told the Board of Commissioners this month that nothing had been constructed since the land had been rezoned for the campus in 2017 because of a lack of funds.

The College was seeking a revision of the 2017 rezone to allow for no more than six sites for the temporary parking and use of recreational vehicles.

The proposal is for the RV sites to be used to house volunteer professional workers who are assisting in the construction of improvements to the site, housing for visitors participating in college-sponsored activities, and persons attending retreats on the college campus.

Warnes said the College wanted the RV sites to be permanent, but the Oconee County Planning and Code Enforcement staff recommended that the sites "shall be temporary with removal following the completion of campus construction," and the Planning Commission agreed.

At the BOC meeting, the commissioners agreed to Warnes' request that the sites be permanent but that the RVs must be owned by persons visiting the college and participating in college events.

In other county news, the BOC this month also agreed to convey the land under the Watkinsville Post Office to the county's Industrial Development Authority so the Authority can sell the land with the Post Office Building.

The Industrial Development Authority in October agreed to sell the Watkinsville Post Office for \$1.6 million to Postal Realty Holdings LLC, a group that focuses on properties leased to the United States Postal Service.

Also, the county is seeking sealed bids to surplus both the county annex and the county library, as the library will move to Wire Park.

Lee Becker is a retired journalism professor and resident of Oconee County. A longer version of this story was first published on his blog, oconeecountyobservations.org and was edited for publication in *The Oconee Enterprise*.

Back-to-Back National Champions



Oconee's Guest family traveled to Los Angeles to watch the University of Georgia defeat Texas Christian University 65-7 in the College Football Playoff National Championship. Dutch Guest celebrates with his wife, Mary Beth, and children, Sarah Beth and Mack Guest V. The Oconee Enterprise former Sports Editor Justin Hubbard noted that Stetson Bennett IV is now an all-time Georgia Bulldogs legend who has led the Bulldogs to two national championships. [Submitted photo]

Seniors may get tax relief

Legislature must approve proposal

BY LEE BECKER

Oconee County commissioners are asking the county's state legislative delegation to help it increase the homestead exemption as a way to decrease homeowner property taxes and freeze property tax assessments for persons once they turn 65 years of age.

The commissioners passed a resolution at their meeting last Tuesday calling on the legislators to introduce bills in the General Assembly this year that would allow for a referendum in 2024 on the homestead exemption and the freezing of assessments. The changes in the property taxes would reduce county and school revenue, and Board of Education Chair Kim Argo said the school board does not intend to pass a resolution making the request of the legislators, but it supports the changes proposed by the county.

If the legislators introduce the legislation, if the legislation is supported by the entire General Assembly and if Oconee County voters approve the changes, they would take effect on Jan. 1, 2025.

The proposed changes would increase the homestead exemption from its current \$2,000 to \$5,000 in 2025 and to increase \$10,000 in 2035.

The property assessment would be frozen at its level after a person turns 65, meaning that taxes would not increase unless the county or the school board increased the millage rate. Persons who turn 75 also would get an additional \$10,000 homestead exemption. The resolution passed by the board requests that the county's three legislators, Rep. Marcus Wiedower, Rep. Houston Gaines and Sen. Bill Cowser, introduce legislation that could change the way the county provides property tax exemptions.

"The board has determined that the requested legislation will not adversely affect the revenues and operation of the County in any material way," the resolution states.

Current exemptions

The county currently provides a \$2,000 exemption for all homeowners and two exemptions for persons 65 years old or older based on income. Persons must apply for and qualify for those income-based exemptions.

For the first of these income-based exemptions, each person who is 65 years old or older at present can be granted an exemption of \$15,000 on a homestead owned and occupied by that person, rather than the \$2,000 exemption, if the person's net income, together with the income of a spouse sharing the residence, does not exceed \$15,000 per year.

SEE HOMESTEAD PAGE A2

Internet coming to rural Oconee

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

The 2020s is the decade of public-private partnerships in Oconee County.

Watkinsville collaborated with Extra Special People in the construction of a baseball field and playground and has shared costs with local developer Kelly Mahoney on the forthcoming revitalization of Rocket Field.

For the county, the Oconee Board of Commissioners contracted with Char-

ter to provide high-speed internet service to underserved areas.

The company broke ground in December with infrastructure along Price Mill Road. Work will begin shortly on New High Shoals Road as well. The fiber-optic technology will be able to support 700 homes this year and another 3,500 homes in the near future, Director of Government Affairs for Charter Communications Catherine Fleming told the BOC at a recent

meeting.

A portion of the buildout is subsidized through federal relief dollars. However, the customer cost will not be subsidized by the government. Homeowners who connect to Charter's Spectrum services will pay the prices offered by the company. Charter will have fiber lines in many parts of the county in which AT&T chooses not to compete.

SEE INTERNET PAGE A2



Local officials broke ground last month on infrastructure for fiber-optic lines that will provide high-speed internet service to underserved parts of the county. [Submitted photo]

MAILING LABEL

Famed Oconee County glass blower retires

BY CAITLIN FARMER

Loretta Eby, a hot glass artist at Oconee's Happy Valley Pottery, will retire at the end of January after creating art in Oconee County for almost 40 years.

"I've been trying to retire for three years, and people keep buying stuff," Eby said with a chuckle.

Upon retiring, Eby and her husband, Jeff Jackson, plan to spend more time working in their yard and traveling.

"I am still going to make stuff," she added. "I just don't know what."

Her decision to retire was driven by the need to rebuild her furnace, which is not burning as efficiently as it once was, as well as the cost of the materials and propane needed to create glass art and the physicality of her work.

Throughout January, Eby will be making 50 small ornaments, 40 jumbo ornaments and 40 fairy garden ornaments each day until she completes all her orders. She'll also craft various garden balls and globes.

Eby uses 700 gallons of propane to heat the furnace and begins making pieces around 5 a.m.

"I'm not tired of creating; I am tired of maintaining all the equipment," Eby said. "I'm the oldest tool in here, and glassblowing is very



Loretta Eby, a hot glass artist at Happy Valley Pottery is retiring after nearly 40 years in Oconee. [Photo by Caitlin Farmer]

physical."

Eby has been creating art since she was a child and knew before college that she wanted to be an artist. She credits her seventh-grade art teacher

for teaching her how to make art by looking at something, visualizing it on a page and then transferring it to that page.

In 1977, Eby attended the Cleve-

land Institute of Art in Cleveland, Ohio, where she received scholarships and grants, putting her through college at almost no cost.

SEE LORETTA EBY PAGE A5

This issue was mailed Wednesday, Jan. 11 from Watkinsville and Athens, GA. Please inform your post office if it arrives late.



Pilot Club of Oconee to hold annual 5K fundraiser

BY CAITLIN FARMER

The Pilot Club of Oconee County will host its 14th annual Pilot Club Chase 5K at Oconee Veterans Park on Feb. 4 at noon to raise money for its projects. It will be the first in-person race in two years, said June McKenzie, Oconee native and Pilot Club member since 1999.

The Pilot Club is a volunteer organization providing education and support for brain-related disorders and disabilities, according to its website.

Pre-registration for the race ends on Jan. 17 with a fee of \$20 per person and \$25 for those who want a T-shirt, according to the registration form. After Jan. 17, the fee is \$30 with no guarantee of a T-shirt.

Each year, sponsors who donate money or items such as water and snacks for the race are featured on the back of the T-shirts, McKenzie said, and this year's deadline to be a featured sponsor is Friday.

So far, \$11,675 have been raised



June McKenzie displays 10 of the T-shirts she's collected from the previous Pilot Club Chase 5K races. [Photo by Caitlin Farmer]

for the race, McKenzie said.

Local hot glass artist Loretta Eby has made ornaments for the past five years awarded to runners who place in their age group, McKenzie said, but this will be the last year Eby makes the awards, as she is retiring.

Some of the club's projects are scholarships awarded to graduating Oconee County seniors for the University of North Georgia's Oconee campus. The Pilot Club

also funds the Brainminders program, which educates senior citizens and children on traumatic brain injuries, disorders and prevention through puppet shows. They also promote Project Lifesaver to provide bracelets with tracking devices for children and adults who may wander away due to Alzheimer's, autism or other conditions and disorders.

"They would just contact us or the Sheriff's [Office], and we

would help them get the bracelet ... and then we provide the batteries for the bracelets," McKenzie said. The Pilot Club of Oconee County began in 1979 and is a chapter of Pilot International, founded in Macon, Georgia, in 1921.

"We have mostly women in our club and it was formed originally for professional women to get together and we raise money to give to other people," McKenzie said.

McKenzie said she became involved through her church, Bishop United Methodist Church, and was an active member during the formation of the Pilot Club Chase 5K.

The Pilot Club meets the first Tuesday of every other month at Bishop United Methodist Church. The next meeting is in March with refreshments beginning at 6:30 p.m. and the meeting at 7 p.m.

More information on the 5K and a link to register can be found on the club's website at oconee-pilotclub.com.

Unwind Winter Fest

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Oconee had highest turnout in the state

BY LEE BECKER

Oconee County ranked No. 1 in the state in turnout in the December runoff election, as it has in the last four state-wide elections going back to November of 2020.

Oconee County retained its top ranking in terms of the percentage of active voters who cast a ballot in December despite a drop-off of 8.4 percentage points in turnout from the vote in November.

That drop off in turnout from November to December was the eighth largest in the state and 2.9 percentage points higher than in neighboring Clarke County and 2.7 percentage points higher than in the state as a whole.

Clarke County was among those in the state that added a sixth day, a Saturday, to early voting after a legal challenge to interpretation of the state's new election law that reduced early voting. Oconee had only five days of early voting.

Oconee County's high voter turnout was noted when the Oconee County Board of Elections and Registration met to certify the votes from the Dec. 6 runoff election last month.

Board Chair Jay Hanley "commended" voters and county elections officials for the high turnout and the "smooth" elections.

Incumbent Democrat U.S. Sen. Raphael Warnock won the runoff election statewide, defeating Republican Herschel Walker with

51.4 percent of the votes cast.

In Oconee County, Warnock received 32.8 percent of the votes, the highest percentage for a Democrat in the county going back to at least November of 2012, when then President Barack Obama received only 24.8 percent of the vote in the county.

Oconee turnout rates

Oconee County's turnout rate for the Dec. 6 runoff between Walker and Warnock of 66.1 percent put it ahead of neighboring Greene County (65.3 percent) and Morgan County (62.9 percent) and nearly 15 percentage points above the overall state figure (51.3 percent). Oconee County has been the leader in turnout in the last four statewide elections and had the second highest turnout rate in November of 2018 and the highest in November of 2016.

Oconee County's drop in turnout for the Dec. 6 runoff from the Nov. 8 general election was 8.4 percent, which was exceeded by only seven of the state's 159 counties. The drop in the turnout rate was 5.7 percent in the state and 5.5 percent in neighboring Clarke County.

Clarke County's turnout rate was 59.1 percent in the Nov. 8 election and 53.6 percent in the Dec. 6 runoff.

The 8.4 percentage point drop in turnout in Oconee County on Dec. 6 of 2022 was greater than the 7.1

percent drop in turnout between the Nov. 3, 2020, election and the Jan. 5, 2021, runoff, which included both of Georgia's two U.S. Senate races.

Voting mode

In the Nov. 3 election in Oconee County, 48.8 percent of the county's active voters cast a ballot in early voting, but that figure in the Dec. 6 runoff was only 38.6 percent, or a drop of 10.2 percentage points.

In November, 4.1 percent of the active voters in Oconee County cast a ballot by absentee by mail, and that figure in the Dec. 6 runoff was 3.5 percent, or a drop of 0.6 percentage points.

In November, 21 percent of the active voters cast a ballot on election day. That figure in December was 24 percent, or an increase of 3 percentage points.

The Oconee County Board of Elections and Registration scheduled five days for early voting starting on Nov. 28, following the guidance of Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger.

When a judge overturned Raffensperger's interpretation of the law and allowed voting on Saturday, Nov. 26, the board did not alter its original plans.

Jennifer Stone, Assistant Director of Elections and Registration, said that the Civic

Center, which was used for early voting, was not available on Nov. 26.

Elections chair comments

At the Dec. 12 Board of Elections and Registration meeting, Chair Hanley noted that Marswood Hall Precinct, with 68.5 percent turnout, was highest amount the county's eight precincts, followed by Colham Ferry, with 68.3 percent. Bogart had the lowest turnout, at 59.0 percent.

"We're lucky to have such a great staff, poll workers, office staff," Hanley said. "It's a testament to where our county and where our citizens want to be. We consistently have the highest, or one of, if not the highest, voter turnout in the state."

Lee Becker is a retired journalism professor and resident of Oconee County. A longer version of this story was first published on his blog, oconee-county-observations.org and was edited for publication in *The Oconee Enterprise*.

Public Notice

OF DESTRUCTION OF RECORDS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

The Department of Special Education of Oconee County Schools announces its intention to destroy specific data. Records will be destroyed that were collected, maintained, or used in the provision of a free appropriate public education for disabled students in Oconee County Schools. This notice is in compliance with the system's comprehensive plan for special education required by P.L. 94-142.

Records on students who enrolled in a special education program for the disabled and whose birthdays are between January 1, 1999, through December 31, 1999, are no longer needed for education planning purposes. These records may be needed by the student or parents for Social Security or other reasons. The system plans to destroy these records on Wednesday, February 1, 2023, unless there has been a request for a due process hearing, under P.L. 94-142 or a complaint filed with the Office of Civil Rights, under section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

If you, as the student or parent(s) of the student, desire copies of these records prior to destruction, contact the Department of Special Education at (706) 769-5130, ext. 1214. You will be required to produce identification or provide verification data.

POLITICAL ROUNDUP

State Republican Party leaders speak at Wild Hog Supper

BY JEFF HOOD

ATLANTA—Elected officials, activists, lobbyists, media and political junkies filled the Georgia Railroad Freight Depot Sunday evening to participate in the 60th annual Wild Hog Supper, a long-standing tradition and the unofficial kick off to each year's legislative session.

The two-hour event included plenty of buffet-style barbecue, fried chicken, vegetables, sweet tea and desserts along with a heaping of discussion on which legislation might make it across the finish line this year.

Proceeds from the event benefited Feeding Georgia's Farm to Food Bank Program. In attendance were Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, State School Superintendent Richard Woods, Labor Commissioner Bruce Thompson, Agriculture Commis-

sion Tyler Harper and new Speaker of the House Jon Burns

It was the ideal setting for Rebecca Yardley of White County to shake hands and explain why she should become the next chairman of the Georgia GOP. She is hoping to replace current chair David Shafer, who has held the post since 2019.

"I have been a grassroots activist here in the state of Georgia for 30 years and served in local, district and state leadership," said Yardley, who currently serves as Chairman of the 9th District GOP. "The course of the last two elections have proven to me that we need a change in the direction that our state party is going in."

"We need a party that is willing to engage our voter base, be accountable for our finances, support our local counties and bridge the gap that has grown between our

elected officials, our grassroots and our donor base," she said. "We have a lack of party of unity that needs to be rejuvenated and fixed."

Among legislation expected to gain traction during this legislative session is a proposed "Oversight Committee" that would hold district attorneys accountable to enforce Georgia law. The legislation is being promoted by State Rep. Houston Gaines and has the backing of many high-powered officials, including Senators Steve Gooch (R-Dahlonega) and Larry Walker (R-Perry).

"I'm 100 percent in favor of passing this bill," said Gooch, the state's newly elected Senate Majority leader.

Jeff Hood is an Oconee County resident and political science enthusiast who can be reached at oconee-politics@gmail.com.

LIBRARY ROUNDUP

Learn about prayer and meditation at the library

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

Families can listen to a panel discussion of local faith leaders on what prayer and meditation mean in their traditions on Sunday, Jan. 29 at 3 p.m. at the Oconee County Library. Featured guests include Rob Bruce of Watkinsville First UMC, Hisham Qureshi of the Athens Islamic Community Center, Athens Zen Group and the College of Athens School of Ministry. For more information

about the following library events, call (706) 769-3950.

■ Read to Rover today from 3-4 p.m. Reading aloud to a therapy dog helps children develop their reading skills and build confidence.

■ Design your own cutting board for adults Friday from 4-5 p.m.

■ Free Vietnamese Class Wednesday, Jan. 18 from 6-7 p.m. Instructor Martine Thy Nguyen will lead a program for anyone interested in

learning Vietnamese. To register email Librarian James Mitchell at jmitchell@athenslibrary.org.

■ Board Game Group Sunday, Jan. 22 from 2-5 p.m.

■ Third Monday Book Club for adults Monday, Jan. 23 at 7 p.m. This month's book is Trevor Noah's "Born a Crime." Limited copies are available at the front desk.

■ Chess Club for adults Wednesday, Jan. 25 from 5-7 p.m.



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The Oconee Enterprise Forum

ON THE STREET What is your New Year's resolution?



Lyda

■ **Zachary Lyda, Maryland:**
“I guess it’s to have a better diet this year—you know, the classic one.”



Boris

■ **Elaine Boris, Watkinsville:**
“I am going to floss daily...I am going to get a new [dog] agility yard. I am going to take down a bunch of trees, smooth it out and have a new field for doing agility.”



Rakich

■ **Pauline Rakich, Athens:**
“I’m going to take music lessons...clarinet...I took it many years ago and enjoyed it and then got into grad school and just didn’t have time so I’m going to do it again.”



Oconee’s own in service

After 21 years in Afghanistan, the war ended Aug. 31, 2021. However, there are members of the military who either are from Oconee or have relatives here who serve around the world. If you know someone who could be added or removed from this list, email editor@oconeeenterprise.com. Please include a phone number.

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------------|
| ■ Isaac Searcy | ■ LTC Jenifer Gustafson Hope |
| ■ Myles Cheatum | ■ William Hollis Jackson |
| ■ LTC. Jeff Chambers | ■ 1st Lt. Bennett F. Shelton IV |
| ■ Major John Campbell | ■ Zach Wiggins |
| ■ AIC Andrew Chambers | ■ Josephine Lloyd |
| ■ Captain Alex Dempsey | ■ Tennyson Lloyd |
| ■ Daniel Evans | ■ Cara Martz |
| ■ Richard Gustafson | ■ Nick Martz |



Now all we have to do is connect the dots.

Oconee Enterprise seeks small town literary input

Those familiar with The Oconee Enterprise prior to the 1990s may remember the “community columns” that ran each week. These columns were about everyday life in different parts of the county.

Topics were centered around church and Sunday school, the weather, farming, home cooking, social events and personal shout outs, such as congratulating a neighbor on a birthday, new baby or retirement.

We plan to revive this feature in a different format that is more collaborative too.

“Around the County” will consist of bullet-point lists of musings from citizens representing different parts of the county. Entries should be several sentences long.

This may run weekly, bi-monthly or monthly depending on the level of contributions and interest. This feature will help preserve and celebrate the identity of Oconee’s small towns.

If you would like to contribute, please email editor@oconeeenterprise.com and identify which part of the county you are representing.

Childcare workers are loved

If you have been reading The OE and our supplemental Oconee The Magazine for a while, you know that Michael and I have a 1-year-old daughter named Mary Louise. It took us 7 years, including one loss, to bring her earthside. She is our pride and joy. Like all babies, she has the nerve to grow up and reach new milestones at a rapid pace. Some hit me in the gut more than others. The latest? Moving out of the baby class at school.

As a mother working outside of the home, childcare is a vital resource for our family. The caregivers who nurture our youngest children become like family. You can’t drive far around Oconee without passing a childcare center. Some have been here for generations and others are just opening for their first year. All are providing care that often goes underappreciated.

If Mary Louise could say more than a handful of words, I’m certain she would tell me about how much she loves and adores Ms. Elizabeth and Mr. Brady at Kiddiland in



Amanda Prochaska
Community corner

Watkinsville. It’s not hard to know why Mary Louise has grown fond of these caregivers. They have nurtured her growth just as much as we have. They play with her, teach her, guide her and genuinely care for her.

They say babies don’t keep. With every new stage comes new opportunities. In that newness, I give thanks for those who have helped carry us this far and can’t wait to see what is to come. How do you honor those who have nurtured you over the years? I’d love to hear from you! Email me at amanda@oconeeenterprise.com or write to me at PO Box 535 Watkinsville, Ga 30677.

Amanda Prochaska is co-publisher of The Oconee Enterprise. Opinions expressed are those of the writer.

NOHS alumnae joins The Oconee Enterprise staff as news reporter

BY CAITLIN FARMER

As the new reporter for The Oconee Enterprise, I am so excited about getting to know people in the community.

I spent the first 15 years of my life in Milton until my parents—both of whom are graduates of the University of Georgia—decided to move our family to Watkinsville. The move was daunting, but I quickly fell in love with Oconee County.

The people were friendly, the scenery was beautiful and for the first time in my life, I began to feel a sense of community.

My dad graduated from UGA’s Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication. And when I was in elementary school, I decided that was what I would one day do too.

In 2018, I graduated from North Oconee High School and eventually fulfilled my dream of being accepted into Grady College.

While taking my first course when I began my journalism major, I discovered my passion for print journalism.

I worked for The Red & Black, an independent student newspaper covering UGA and Athens, as a news reporter, campus news editor and head news editor from 2021-2022.

While at The Red & Black, I won third place for best feature story in



Caitlin Farmer previously worked for The Red & Black as the head news editor. [File photo]

crime, courts and public safety reporter.

My time at The Echo and The Red & Black laid the foundation for where I am today, teaching me how to cover the communities I am a part of carefully and objectively, but also with compassion.

I quickly realized I was passionate about working in local news and the important role it plays in informing communities on the events and people surrounding them.

While at UGA, I obtained minors in both human services and criminal justice, which provided me with the tools I needed to find and report on stories that had yet to be heard.

I graduated from UGA in December 2022 and knew that my work in the area wasn’t complete.

There are so many aspects of Oconee that fascinate me, as well as stories waiting to be heard. My goal is to give the community a platform for its voices to be heard.

I look forward to learning even more about Oconee County and its residents, sharing its stories and continuing the work of the reporters who came before me.

Caitlin Farmer is a newly hired news reporter for The Oconee Enterprise. She is a graduate of North Oconee High School and the University of Georgia.

OUR OPINION

State DA oversight committee needed

We were glad to hear that Western Judicial Circuit Deborah Gonzalez has hired a Special Assistant District Attorney who specializes in the prosecution of sex crimes and homicides.

This was a much-needed addition to a DA’s Office that has botched some high-profile sex-crime cases since Gonzalez took office in December 2020.

In early 2022, an Oconee County rape case was dismissed following a mistrial caused by prosecutorial misconduct. The defendant was a 17-year-old Oconee County High School senior at the time of the alleged crime. Both former Oconee Sheriff Scott Berry and current Sheriff James Hale were confident in their investigation.

In the fall of 2022, a man who made sexual videos of women he knew and uploaded them to the internet with their names and addresses had additional charges of rape and sodomy dismissed in Athens. Granted, a plea deal in Troup County ensured that he will serve a long

sentence, but his Athens-based charges should not have been dismissed.

In December, an Athens child sex trafficking case was dismissed “due to prosecutors failing to grant the defendant’s demand for a speedy trial,” according to Classic City News Publisher Joe Johnson.

Johnson’s reporting states that the suspect—who had faced charges of trafficking of person for sexual servitude, statutory rape, kidnapping, false imprisonment and aggravated child molestation of a 14-year-old girl—hadn’t been brought to trial under the speedy trial statute “because of prosecutorial mismanagement.”

Admittedly, we have cherry picked these three sex-crime cases. This editorial should be read not as a scientific analysis but as an anecdotal observation. Regardless of successful prosecutions that don’t necessarily make headlines, it doesn’t change the fact that the end result of these three cases

are unacceptable to the victims. In these three specific cases, the DA’s Office failed the victims.

In 2021, a state judicial council assessed the circuit boundary of the Western Judicial Circuit and concluded that it should remain unchanged. We agree; Gonzalez was elected to office by a majority of voters, and she should remain in office until the people either vote her out or reaffirm their faith in her through the voting booth.

However, we do support State Rep. Houston Gaines’ effort toward the creation of a district attorney oversight committee. This judicial circuit needs it. If done fairly and without partisan politics, this is a good check and balance for other parts of the state too. For example, former Brunswick District Attorney Jackie Johnson has been criminally charged with interfering in the investigation of the 2020 murder of Ahmaud Arbery. A watchdog group is needed for all district attorneys.

The Oconee Enterprise

YOUR COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER SINCE 1884

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Letters to the Editor

The Oconee Enterprise welcomes letters from readers. Send your letters to The Oconee Enterprise, P.O. Box 535, Watkinsville, Georgia 30677 or e-mail to news@oconeeenterprise.com. Letters must not exceed 300 words, must be signed and include a daytime phone number. The editor reserves the right to edit letters, especially for length due to space considerations.



OCONEE REFLECTIONS

Mid-century girls gather at Courthouse

Editor's note: The Oconee Enterprise periodically publishes a photo of historical importance. These photos depict people, places or structures in Oconee County that may no longer exist or that represent a vestige of a forgotten era.

Diana Butler and Mary Hannah Kenimer pose for a picture on the front lawn of the Oconee County Courthouse in the late 1940s or early 1950s. The far-left door behind them was Tom Durham's barber shop. [Photo courtesy of Tommy Eades]

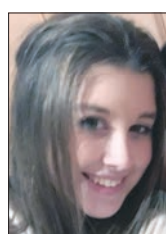
Filmmaker' lack of black actors concerning

Tim Burton is credited with being an icon of filmmaking, a mogul of horror subculture and a masterful animator. However, since his first film in 1984, Burton has been criticized for failing to include diversity and ethnic representation in his films. Burton has only included one person of color in his filmography since the beginning of his career.

Burton has stated that "things either call for things, or they don't," which is a seemingly nonchalant response to a serious accusation.

Samuel L. Jackson, the only black person who has appeared in Burton's films, told the website Bustle, "I don't think it's any fault of his or his method of storytelling; it's just how it's played out."

Burton's apparent racism



Kate Hicks
.....
Young Scholar

has been called into question recently since the growth in popularity of his newest endeavor, the TV series "Wednesday" on Netflix.

Burton seems to have an obsession with both ruling out diversity in his films and only showcasing aryan features. This affinity for whiteness is not only concerning, but also a blatant example of beautifying white features and in turn villainizing people of color.

Kate Hicks is an Oconee County junior. Opinions expressed are those of the writer.

Thank you, FFA

I just want to brag on the Oconee County High School FFA Students.

I had been looking for a vintage FFA mailbox post and discovered through a newspaper article that agricultural education teacher John Collins and his students were making them, which is kind of unheard of these days.

Anyway, it has been built, purchased and installed at our south Georgia home. It's a really a beautiful addition to a rural Georgia home.

Thanks, guys, for a job well done.

—Tim Coombs
Hahira

Ranked-choice voting has benefits

Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensburger recently stated that he supports ending Georgia's current runoff system when a candidate does not receive a majority of votes in the General Election.

His reasons for doing so include the inconvenience of holding runoff elections during the holiday period and difficulties in conducting a runoff election in the recently established four-week time period.

One option is plurality voting: the person with the most votes wins.

Another option is ranked-choice voting. Voters rank their choices in order of preference. The candidate with the least first-preference votes is eliminated and his or her second-preference votes are allocated to the remaining candidates. The process continues until one candidate acquires a majority.

Ranked-choice voting addresses concerns with plurality voting—specifically, that a large field of candidates could result in a winner with a small percentage of voting support.

It also addresses another concern. Georgia laws establishing runoff elections were passed in 1964 and 1966 and have been associ-

ated with a segregationist South. Though times have certainly changed—Georgia just re-elected a Black senator in an all-Black runoff—the fact remains that runoff elections can neutralize minority candidates in the unfortunate cases where racial polarization is an issue.

Ranked-choice voting remedies a number of issues, both present and past. It also provides an opportunity for a more inclusive electoral process.

—Bert DeSimone
Bishop

DA is working hard

I read the Jan. 5 letter by Allie Smith criticizing the work of our DA, Deborah Gonzalez. As a citizen and taxpayer, I am awed with the attention of the DA and her staff to civility and community welfare.

I am extremely impressed with the grand efforts she makes to meet people in the district, giving attention to younger adults and people representing a variety of communities.

I also read each month the lengthy newsletter from her office that describes in great detail endeavors she has underway to address criminal matters like gangs with a focus on endeavors to divert young adults away from crime.

My understanding is that the crime rate has changed for the better in the district since she took office. I think letter writer Smith should check in on factual data from both Clarke and Oconee County regarding crime in our area. Soon, public data will be available for our own county.

An email correspondence between myself and Oconee County Sheriff James Hale revealed that there is an increase in shoplifting and traffic accidents, but otherwise, he felt the rates of crime were rather in line with past years.

I think as citizens, we should all look at the actual data. I see nothing in the data so far that indicates failure on the part of our

DA. I would say just the opposite.

She's working really hard on behalf of all of us, and she is very transparent.

—Margaret E. Holt
Watkinsville

Don't live in Covid fear

I am writing in response to Don Palsgaard's Jan. 5 letter, "Covid is not over."

For some people, Covid will never be over. And while Covid is likely here to stay, so are all of the other respiratory viruses that pose risks primarily to the elderly and immune-compromised. We should all take care of ourselves and take appropriate precautions based on our personal health/risks.

The precautions Dr. Palsgaard would have you and your family take in perpetuity are not only limited in their ability to prevent Covid but also come with risks.

Dr. Palsgaard repeats talking points, such as that deaths from the vaccine are "far exceeded by" deaths from Covid. There is not enough data on vaccine adverse events to support this statement, and he makes no effort to provide any.

He also ignores any downsides to masking, such as the difficulties it presents for the one in eight Americans with hearing loss or the delays in language development to young children. He ignores the data showing that masks do not prevent the spread of Covid.

I hope Dr. Palsgaard saw the new analysis by Stanford Uni-

versity scientists, published in Environmental Research this month, which found that the infection fatality rate from Covid-19 for the youngest age group (0 to 19) was 0.0003 percent, meaning that 99.9997 percent of children under age 19 survived Covid infection.

And for the 60 to 69 age group, 99.49 percent of people who got Covid survived. I would hope that these numbers would make him rethink the burdensome and ineffective protocols he prescribes for all.

—Nicole Johnson
Co-Director Georgia Coalition for Vaccine Choice Bishop

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Eby's studio is at Happy Volley Pottery at 1210 Carson Graves Road off Colham Ferry Road. The communal sanctuary and studio space for local artists has been thriving since the late 1970s when it was founded by Jerry and Kathy Chappelle. [Photo by Caitlin Farmer]

Loretta Eby

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

Originally, Eby had gone to art school in order to be an illustrator and graphic designer but was drawn to the art of glassblowing.

"Glassblowing looked very exciting and hands-on," Eby said. "And then of course, there's the zen of it, the process of making glass. Once you figure out how to make something, you make it the same way every time."

Throughout her career, Eby made ornaments for the Betsy Ross House Museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; glass flags for the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum in Grand Rapids, Michigan; and ornaments for Island Treasures, a scavenger hunt in Jekyll Island, for which she has made 4,000 ornaments.

In January 2022, Eby attended Island Treasures and engraved about 70 ornaments to personalize them for the people who found them.

"I'll sell ornaments until I don't have any to sell," she said.



Eby has been professionally crafting blown glass art for 40 years. In recent years, she has been commissioned to create thousands of ornaments for a scavenger hunt in Jekyll Island. [File photo]

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