

The Oconee Enterprise

A GPA GENERAL EXCELLENCE NEWSPAPER



THE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER OF William Watson, Sr. Happy 85th Birthday

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Dove Creek Middle School will open for the fall semester. Parents have until Friday to request that their child be transferred to another school outside their zone. [Photo by Michael Prochaska]

School choice applications due Friday

BY LEE BECKER
Oconee County Schools Associate Superintendent Dallas LeDuff told the Board of Education last week that because every one of the system's 12 schools will be operating under capacity next year, parents applying for school choice will be notified that the request will be granted.

Applications are due on Friday. LeDuff said that 194 applications had been received to date. Parents must provide their own transportation if the student transfers to a different school.

Oconee County Schools Director of Facilities Fred Ricketson told the BOE that construction documents are nearly complete for the 12-classroom addition to Malcom Bridge Elementary School and that he expects to ask the board to approve contracts for that and the new Instruction Support Center construction in March.

The Watkinsville City Council was scheduled to review land disturbance and sewage capacity permits for the In-

structional Support Center, planned for North Main Street behind Bethel Baptist Church.

"We hope to advertise that for proposals by the end of this month," Ricketson said.

Watkinsville turned down the request for two-rows of parking in front of the new building, forcing OCS to resubmit plans for one row of front parking.

Speaking about construction on Dove Creek Middle School, Ricketson said, "You'll be noticing brick going up in the coming weeks, and plastic going over the windows so they can start turning on temporary heat and start getting finishes into the building."

Enrollment data

According to the official Oct. 4, 2022, enrollment report filed by OCS with the Georgia Department of Education, Malcom Bridge Elementary School had only 401 students enrolled on that date. The current capacity of Malcom Bridge Elementary School is 600, and the goal

has been to increase elementary school capacity to 750 students.

The redistricting plan approved by the board will move some students from the new Dove Creek Elementary School, which had 668 students in October of last year (with a capacity of 750) to Malcom Bridge Elementary School.

The projected enrollments for next year based on the redistricting plan are 603 at Malcom Bridge Elementary School and 520 at Dove Creek Elementary School, as shown on a chart obtained from OCS in response to an open records request.

Elementary school enrollment in Oconee County Schools has grown by an annual average of 2.1 percent over the last 28 years, though it has grown by an average of 2.3 percent over the last five years, according to enrollment records downloaded from the Georgia Department of Education website.

SEE BOE PAGE A2

Campaign finance reports disclosed



Cowser



Wiedower



Gaines

BY LEE BECKER

The state Campaign Contribution Disclosure Reports that candidates were required to file by the end of the calendar year show that the Republican incumbents representing Oconee County in the Georgia General Assembly raised much more money than their Democratic challengers but spent more of their war chests per voter than did the Democrats.

During the period covered by the Dec. 31 report, Republican Sen. Bill Cowser raised \$1,200 and spent \$10,472, whereas Democratic opponent Andrew Ferguson raised \$778 and spent \$6,542. Cowser spent only \$3.84 for each of his votes in his five-county Senate race, but Ferguson spent only 74 cents for each of the votes he received.

Republican House Rep. Marcus Wiedower raised \$16,800 in the final period of the campaign and spent \$17,017. Democratic opponent Jeff Auerbach raised \$638 and spent \$4,462. Wiedower spent \$10.92 for each vote he received, while Auerbach spent only \$3.31.

Republican House Rep. Houston Gaines raised \$14,850 and spent \$20,717. Democratic opponent Mokah Jasmine Johnson raised only \$50 in the

Oct. 25 period until the end of the year and spent \$1,314. Gaines spent \$12.36 for each vote he received, compared with \$7.91 that Johnson spent.

The spending figures are deceptive, however, because each of the three Republican candidates gave away significant amounts of the money he raised to other candidates outside their districts.

Contributions

During the year, Cowser raised \$149,885, with six contributions of \$3,000, and one for \$6,000, or twice the allowed amount, from Georgia Fine Wine LLC of Bethesda, Maryland. Ferguson reported raising \$20,256 during the year, the least any of the candidates reported receiving, and he had no contributions of more than \$2,000.

Gaines raised \$461,455, including 10 contributions of \$3,000. Johnson raised \$61,415, with three of those for \$3,000. She listed a contribution from herself of \$4,800.

Wiedower raised \$319,102 during the year, with 27 of those contributions at the \$3,000 limit. Auerbach raised \$40,148 during the year and had four contributions of \$3,000.

SEE FINANCE PAGE A2

Oconee town to pay elected officials

Ordinance goes into effect next year

BY CAITLIN FARMER AND MICHAEL PROCHASKA

The North High Shoals Town Council on Monday voted to pass a resolution allowing for the mayor and council members to receive compensation and expenses for their services.

Previously, elected officials served in a volunteer capacity.

The ordinance authorizes the mayor to receive \$500 per month for mayoral duties, council members to receive \$75 for council duties and the mayor pro tempore to receive \$125 per month when acting as the mayor, according to the resolution.

Over the course of the year, the mayor would receive \$6,000 and



Mayor Violet Dawe explained that elected officials won't receive compensation until 2024. [Photo by Caitlin Farmer]

council members would receive \$900. The person who serves as mayor pro-tem would earn more, depending on whether he or she assumed mayoral duties in the mayor's absence.

Since council members can't vote on their own pay, this applies to whomever wins in the November election, and the ordinance will go into effect in January 2024.

The mayor of Bishop makes \$6,800 per year, and the council members make \$50 per council meeting, or \$600 for attending 12 meetings per year. On occasion, the town will hold called meetings, so annual compensation could be higher.

The mayor of Bogart makes \$900 per month, or \$10,800 per year. The mayor pro-tem makes \$550 per month, or \$6,600 per year. The remaining council members make \$400 per month, or \$4,800 per year.

The mayor of Watkinsville makes \$9,000 annually and the council members earn \$2,400 annually.

Watkinsville Council approves a \$17,694 raise for city manager

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

Following an executive session at its December meeting, the Watkinsville City Council voted 4-1 in open session to increase the salary of City Manager Sharyn Dickerson from \$86,012 to \$103,706.



Dickerson

Dickerson had just completed an "exemplary" performance review, noted Mayor Brian Brodrick.

"She has been critical to helping us achieve our goals as a group over the past few years, has modernized our processes and led our staff with distinction," Brodrick wrote in a memo to the finance and personnel committee comprised of council members Chuck Garrett and Connie Massey. "I also know that many governments would love to hire someone of Sharyn's caliber and that as Watkinsville's reputation grows, it will be natural for others to try to hire her away."

Council members Garrett, Massey, Christine Tucker and Jeff Campbell voted in favor of the raise, while Councilman Brett Thomas voted against the motion.

"I think she (Dickerson) does an excellent job, a phenomenal job," Thomas told The Oconee Enterprise. "I just don't see that she needs that high of a raise."

Dickerson was hired in the fall of 2018 as a city administrator—a title that was later changed to city manager. Between former Mayor Bob Smith winning a November 2019 mayoral election and him taking office in January 2020, the city council voted to shift various job duties from the mayor to the city manager. As a result, the mayor had less administrative oversight going forward. That significant change in the city's power structure contributed to an enduring discord between the mayor and the manager, as well as the mayor and council, which culminated with Smith's resignation in March 2021.

Dickerson has worked alongside

three mayors—the late Dave Shearon, Smith and now Brodrick.

"Since she joined Watkinsville, [Dickerson's] salary has increased by \$8,145.82, or just over \$2,000 per year," Brodrick wrote in the memo. She has received total bonuses of \$5,241.65 in that time as well."

In an email to The Enterprise, Dickerson said that she works 50-hour work weeks, not including additional time she spends responding to emails and phone calls during off hours.

"To date, I have given the city more than 995 hours of time for which I have not been compensated," she told The Enterprise. "That works out to a little more than \$41,000."

The finance committee researched compensation levels of city managers for more than a dozen Georgia municipalities with a population of less than 5,000 people and found that the average pay was just over \$100,000. Watkinsville's population is 2,908, and six other cities with a population of less than 3,000 paid their city manager between \$98,987 and \$115,000. For example, Statham, whose population is 2,893, pays its city manager \$103,502.

Geographic proximity, size of the city and levels of public service were factors in comparing municipalities, Brodrick said.

In his memo, Brodrick also noted that Oconee County Administrator Justin Kirouac earns \$140,000 per year. Though not mentioned in Brodrick's memo, Oconee Board of Commissioners Chairman John Daniell earns \$128,607 per year and Oconee County Schools Superintendent Jason Branch has a salary of \$241,020.

Thomas said that he didn't believe the county administrator was a fair comparison to a city manager due to vast differences in population size, number of employees and scope of public services.

"As a city manager, I have the same professional responsibilities as many of my peers who work in much larger local governments," Dickerson said.

"We are proud of the work Sharyn has done for Watkinsville," said Brodrick. "She is a tireless worker and deserves to be compensated a level similar to her peers."

MAILING LABEL

OCHS graduate achieves National FFA distinction

BY CAITLIN FARMER

Earlier this fall, Oconee County High School and University of Georgia graduate Marin Lonnee won an American Star Award in Agriscience at the National FFA Convention and Exposition in Indianapolis, Indiana. Winning the American Star Award was a goal Lonnee set for herself in sixth grade when she decided to join FFA after being placed in the agriculture elective at Oconee County Middle School.



Lonnee

"I'm a very goal-driven human being," Lonnee said, adding that FFA is about serving her community.

Part of Lonnee's research was through a lab at UGA where she studied different forage grasses and how they can be used as byproducts, as well as for cattle, livestock and horses.

The American degree application consists of compiling research, work and service hours, while the American

Star application consists of writing essays and completing interviews.

"It took me about two months of consistent work every day to compile all of that, because mine was 11 years [worth]," Lonnee said. "If you become a finalist, then you have to go through the interview process."

There are 16 total finalists each year for the American Star, and one winner is chosen from four finalists in each of the four categories: Agribusiness, Agricultural Placement, Agriscience and Farmer.

Winners in each category were announced on stage at the National FFA Convention & Expo, where they first played each finalist's video about their work and experience.

Lonnee said that Georgia had representatives who were finalists in three of the four American Star categories, with Colquitt County FFA Chapter member Kaitlyn Hart winning an American Star for Agribusiness.

Lonnee was alongside two other American Star finalists from Georgia.

"To stand on that stage was the culmination of all of it," she said.

This issue was mailed Wednesday, Jan. 18 from Watkinsville and Athens, GA. Please inform your post office if it arrives late.



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The Oconee Enterprise Lifestyles

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We want our Helleborus back



Jane Bath
Garden Memo

Helleborus, or Lenton Rose, is such an important evergreen, beautiful blooming flower with robust leaves that quietly multiply. It's a grand, healthy plant for the garden.

Every year, Sam and Carleen Jones had spring openings at their Piccadilly Nursery, where hundreds descended to buy their Lenton Roses and many other special plants not found in other nurseries.

This went on for many years with such a fabulous tradition. Jones was a horticulturist at the University of Georgia and Carleen a teacher. Both eventually retired to run the nursery full time.

Fortunately, their daughter, a landscape architect, and her husband took over the nursery. But then tragedy struck.

The Helleborus became diseased. Each year, we all prayed the disease would wear out, not spread and that there would be a remedy.

It was quite painful and hard work digging out hundreds of sad, once-

were-beautiful specimens.

Thankfully, Valeri and Bill immediately branched out into even more specialty varieties of plants of all kinds. This is so important, because regular nurseries must sell a selected quality of plant material in rather large quantities and do not have the facility to carry unique plant material.

But the Helleborus? After several years, some of mine are coming back. Will they be disease free? There are some named varieties back on the market, but these are not "disease free."

That is the plant world and the world in general. Nothing stays the same. We do want our Helleborus back. Stay tuned.

Jane Bath of Bishop is the author of "The Landscape Design Answer Book," former nursery owner and designer of thousands of landscape plans. The opinions expressed are those of the writer.

Colham Ferry teacher to compete in Dancing with the Athens Stars

BY CAITLIN FARMER

Colham Ferry Elementary School music teacher Matthew Lawing will be taking to The Classic Center stage on March 18 to perform in "Dancing with the Athens Stars."

DWAS is a dance competition between 10 teams benefitting Project Safe, a nonprofit working to end domestic violence through intervention, support and education.

Natalie Cox, director of the contact ballroom company and revolution salsa company at DanceFX, will be joining Lawing on stage, making up the other half of Team 4.

"Natalie has been great," Lawing said. "She's such a good teacher."

Lawing has always loved dancing. He and his wife have been going to dance parties since they first started dating.

Cox was the instructor of the Salsa class Lawing and his wife took and asked if he'd be interested in DWAS.

Lawing said that although dancing is a big part of the event, to him, the most significant part is fundrais-



CFES teacher Matthew Lawing will be competing in Dancing With the Athens Stars as a part of Team 4 on March 18 at The Classic Center. [Submitted photo]

ing for Project Safe. "I am not a dancer, so at first, it's

like your body fighting against you," Lawing said. "But then, eventually, you start to learn it and you're like 'I kind of know what I'm doing; I know which way to go.'"

Lawing has begun fundraising for their team by reaching out to local businesses, teachers and students' parents. He and Cox are also planning to do spirit nights at local restaurants and dance classes.

"Close to Valentine's Day, we're going to do salsa classes for couples," Lawing said. Each team will be judged by a panel of three judges and are competing for trophies in three categories: best dance, most money raised and audience choice, which is who sold the most tickets to the show for their team.

Donations can be made out to each team on Project Safe's website, project-safe.org.

"If people can donate, I would love to show what this community can do as far as giving and helping," Lawing said.

Oconee County author releases murder-mystery book

BY CAITLIN FARMER

Gail Langer Karwoski, an author and painter in Oconee County who is known for writing children's books, has released "A Brush With Murder." This is the first book of her murder mystery series, "A Watercolor Mystery," published by Black Rose Writing.

Karwoski has written and published 14 children's books and had previously only written one book for adults in 2015. At that time, she was the ghostwriter for a book about America's first legal same-sex marriage.

"During the pandemic, I decided that I was going to do some bucket-list writing, because we were all isolated from each other and so I started writing this mystery because I love murder mysteries," she said. "I always liked the cozy kind that aren't so violent but focused on the solution to the puzzle."

Karwoski became inspired to write the book from her Wonders of Watercolor group that meets weekly in the kitchen of the Oconee Cultural Arts Foundation.

"We started out with a common interest



Gail Karwoski poses in her Oconee home with a copy of her new book "A Brush With Murder." [Photo by Caitlin Farmer]

in watercolor," Janet Rodekohr, a WOW painter and the inspiration for the book's fictional sleuth, Jane Roland, stated in a

press release. "As we share advice about painting techniques, we also share our lives. Our art has become richer and more

fulfilling [and] so have our friendships."

The book begins with the characters traveling to an outdoor painting workshop at an up-scale retreat called Gardens and Horses. The mystery starts when the group discovers a dead thoroughbred racehorse in a reflecting pool.

"Murder is a very serious thing, I realize that, but the book is very lighthearted and I hope there are places where you end up sort of smiling or chuckling at the cleverness of the characters," Karwoski said.

An exhibit featuring about 40 of WOW's paintings will be held at OCAF through Feb. 10. It celebrates the book's launch with copies for sale. Profits from the exhibit will benefit OCAF.

Each of the exhibit's paintings was chosen to go with the theme and setting of the book. Most of the characters in "A Brush With Murder" are retired women who paint together at their local art center, similar to WOW.

She fictionalized the book's characters and wrote the chapters one by one, reading each to her group for them to laugh about.

Upon realizing she had the foundation for a book, Karwoski had to decide who had committed the murder and go back to the previous chapters and sprinkle in clues.

"I wanted the characters to be strong enough to pull the book along," Karwoski said. "But a mystery book has to be focused on the plot because it's all about an event, a murder, and how it gets solved."

At the end of "A Brush With Murder" are two chapters from the next book in the series, "Skeleton in the Art Closet," which is available for pre-order through Amazon.

"Skeleton in the Art Closet" takes place in the fictional version of Watkinsville that Karwoski calls "Atkinsville" and features the same painting group from the first book.

"I want you to get the feeling that you're with a bunch of friends having a good time because that's how I view the work that we do at the art center," Karwoski said. "It's for fun, you know, to make the world a better place through enjoying one another."

Good News

Epiphany Sunday celebrates the revelation of Jesus Christ to the world

On New Year's Day, my church celebrated Epiphany Sunday. It commemorates the visit of the magi or wise men to see Jesus as a child. Epiphany Sunday celebrates the revelation of Jesus Christ to the world, particularly those outside the Jewish faith. The story of the visit of the magi is found in Matthew 2:1-12. In the story the magi or wisemen travel for months if not years to visit the child Jesus. Jesus is no longer a baby in a manger, but now he is a child as old as 2 years old.

The magi saw a star in the sky that represented the king of the Jews and they decided to follow the star. These are strangers to Israel who see star in the sky and decide to follow it. Because they give the

child three gifts, we assume that means there were 3 magi, but we don't know for sure. These magi were astrologers, magicians, people who dabbled in some dark arts and they are the ones who see the star and follow. They travel in a caravan and arrive in Jerusalem. They go to King Herod - the current king of the Jews--and ask where the new King of the Jews is because they want to worship him. King Herod and all of Jerusalem get very worried about this new king. Herod asks the magi to let him know when they find the child, so he too can worship the child. The magi travel to Bethlehem following the star until it stops over the house where Jesus is, and they find the child with his mother Mary and they



Beth Dickinson
Keeping the Faith

kneel down and worship him. They are the first people in scripture to kneel and worship Him.

We are told they are warned in a dream not to tell Herod where the child is and that they go home by another route.

I've always wondered what caused these visitors to travel hundreds or thousands of miles for months or years following a star. I believe God stirred their hearts to follow. God began to call, and they

couldn't resist. God still guides us by stars and by all kinds of means if we are open to the work of God in our lives.

On Epiphany for the past several years, I've been in the practice of receiving a star word. A star word is a word that is usually given to you or one that you select that guides you as the year progresses. I have seen people encouraged by God through their star words to go on mission trips, lose weight, grow spiritually, take sabbath and renew. In my own life when I was on medical leave and at a very low place, I received the word "restoration" and I held onto that word all year. It encouraged me and let me know that God was not through with me. The year I was able to go back into min-

istry, I received the word "ready" and again I felt God saying I was ready to minister again.

What star word might God be giving to you this year? Maybe peace, renew, life, beginning, sabbath, adventure, joy, hope, love, healing, health? I challenge and encourage you to pray for a word for the year that God might use to speak new life into your heart. If you would like a star word, please contact me & I will send one to you. My email is Beth.dickinson@bethlehemfirstumc.com

Beth Dickinson is an associate pastor at Bethlehem First UMC in Bethlehem who focuses on evangelism and missions. She is an Oconee County resident and married mother of two boys.

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