

The Oconee Enterprise



THE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER OF Debra Harden

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A photo taken on Monday, May 12 of the gym’s HVAC wall sensor shows air humidity levels above 90%. [Submitted photo]

Parents push for mold testing as OCES staff resign

BY NATHALEE SIMONEAU
Three outgoing Oconee County Elementary School employees this month cited environmental and culture concerns in their resignation letters. Several of the employees specifically claimed that the growth of mold was a reason for their departure.
Last month, a group of parents organized a petition advocating the school board to test for the possible presence of mold inside the school. The petition was signed by 74 parents and emailed to Superintendent Jason Branch. OCES PTO President Mandy Moreira read the petition to the board at their regular meeting

on April 21.
Resignations
During the May 5 Board of Education work session, the Board approved the resignations of four employees of Oconee County Elementary School. All four had resigned, effective the end of the school year.
The Oconee Enterprise obtained their resignation letters through an Open Records Act request.
One third grade teacher requested that her contract be dismissed following health complications related to mold exposure. Parts of this teacher’s resignation letter

had been redacted due to “medical or veterinary records and similar files, the disclosure of which would be an invasion of personal privacy,” according to OCS Communications Director Steven Colquitt.
“During my time (three years) at Oconee County Elementary School, I have been moved between three different classrooms. Of those, two are known to have existing concerns regarding air quality and prominent mold presence,” the teacher wrote. “These issues have been long-standing and, to my knowledge, have not been adequately remedied.”
The teacher alluded to personal health

issues that have stemmed from the exposure, but specific issues were redacted.
“I ask that my employment record reflect that this decision is based on [redacted excerpt] and safety issues within the school environment,” she wrote.
The school’s physical education teacher also submitted a letter of resignation that cited health concerns stemming from moisture and mold within the gym. The teacher said that over the last six months, she has submitted multiple work orders for roof leaks, water seeping from under the floor and growing discoloration in the flooring.

SEE MOLD PAGE A2

BOE approves Debra Harden as OCS interim superintendent

BY NATHALEE SIMONEAU AND MICHAEL PROCHASKA
The Oconee County Board of Education on Monday approved former superintendent Debra Harden to serve as interim superintendent. Outgoing Superintendent Jason Branch announced on April 14 that he will retire at the end of June.
Harden served as superintendent of OCS from 1993-1999. She was both the last publicly elected superintendent and the first board appointed superintendent. During her tenure, OCS built Malcolm Bridge Elementary and Middle schools and allowed the Oconee Cultural Arts Foundation to purchase the Watkinsville High School building for a nominal fee.
Harden first came to Oconee in 1978 and worked five years as director of special education.
During her career, she spent time as a principal in Morgan County and as an as-



Harden
the school system saw its biggest growth spurt, doubling in size from 2,500 students to 5,000 students, according to a previous column from Oconee native Adam Hammond, who now sits on the Board of Education.
“Harden’s tenure saw many considerable accomplishments, including a complete reorganization of the system,” wrote Hammond. “Under Harden’s leadership, the Board of Education moved toward a kindergarten through fifth grade model starting with the construction of

Malcom Bridge Elementary School.”
In 2009, Harden was inducted into the OCS Hall of Fame.
As the director of professional development for the Georgia School Superintendents Association from 2000-2016, Harden counseled sitting and aspiring Superintendents. Since 2016, she has been a consultant to school leaders.
“I am looking forward to working alongside the Board, the leadership team, our dedicated faculty and staff and the entire community,” Harden stated in an OCS press release. “I am excited to move forward with the current goals. The focus is always on how best to advance student success, and I am eager to contribute to that mission.”
Harden will begin on July 1 and will continue the position through the end of 2025 or until a full-time superintendent is selected.

SEE BOE PAGE A2



On April 26, 2023, a Michigan couple died when their Cessna 177B crashed into a field off Government Station Road. [File photo]

Reports released on two fatal plane crashes

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA
The National Transportation Safety Board has released its Aviation Investigation final reports for two light-aircraft crashes in 2020 and 2023, which together, resulted in the deaths of five people.
On March 3, 2020, a pilot and two passengers in a small aircraft were killed when the plane made a descending spiral during a rainstorm, crashing in a wooded area off Elder Road and causing a fully-engulfed fire.
The plane departed from Columbia Metropolitan Airport in Columbia, South Carolina and was en route to Tuscaloosa Regional Airport in Alabama.
There was no evidence of a pre-accident malfunction or failure that would have prevented normal operation, according to the report, which goes into detail how the pilot discussed routing and weather avoidance with the controller before losing control of the plane.
“Radar information indicated that the airplane entered an area of heavy to very heavy precipitation, likely a rain shower updraft,” according to the report. “The pilot elected to navigate the hazardous weather along his route of flight based on the data displayed to him, instead of the routing suggested by the controller, which resulted in the penetration of a rain shower updraft, a loss of airplane control and a subsequent inflight breakup.”

“Contributing to the accident was the pilot’s reliance on outdated weather information on his in-cockpit weather display,” stated the report.
On April 26, 2023, a pilot and passenger in a small aircraft were killed when the plane made an uncontrolled descent, and a section of the right wing and the right flap separated in flight.
The airplane crashed in a farm field off Government Station Road.
The plane departed from Leesburg International Airport in Florida and was heading to Barrow County Airport in Winder.
The probable cause of the accident was the pilot’s spatial disorientation and subsequent loss of airplane control, according to the report.
“Post accident examination of the airframe, engine and propeller did not reveal evidence of a pre-existing mechanical malfunction or anomaly that would have precluded normal operation,” stated the report.
“Although one of the pilot’s toxicology specimens tested positive for gabapentin, a disqualifying medication that can cause dizziness, drowsiness, blurred vision, and sedation, the pilot’s passenger (his spouse) was prescribed the medication and intermingling and contamination of the samples were possible,” according to the report. “Therefore, it is unlikely that the pilot had taken the medication.”

Tentative county budget shows an increase in spending and revenue

Water and sewer rate fees to increase
BY LEE BECKER
Oconee County Finance Director Melissa Braswell released the first draft of the Fiscal Year 2026 General Fund Budget at the May 6 Board of Commissioners meeting. The budget shows an increase of \$694,695 in projected spending over the Amended Budget for the current fiscal year.
Revenue is projected to increase over the Amended Budget largely as the result of growth in sales tax, but the General Fund Budget requires the use of \$310,000 in Fund Balance to be balanced at \$45.7 million.

Revenue from property taxes is budgeted to increase only by \$242,870 in part because of the floating homestead exemption approved by voters statewide in November and an increase in county-specific homestead exemptions approved by voters in May of last year.
BOC Chair John Daniell said after the meeting that the estimate of the county tax digest, upon which the property tax revenues are based, remains tentative because of an initial error in state calculations of the floating exemption. He said that the digest estimates without those state exemptions is largely fixed.
The overall county budget, which includes the General Fund as well as revenue and expenditures from the county’s

self-funding Water Resources Department and from the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) and Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (TSPLOST), increased by \$7.1 million, or 9.2%, to \$83.7 million.
Included in the fee schedule that accompanies the budget is a proposed 3.5% increase in residential water rates and an 5.3% increase in residential sewer rates.
The second budget hearing will be held at 6 p.m. on May 20 before the Board of Commissioners Agenda Setting meeting at the County Administrative Building, 7635 Macon Highway.
The Board is scheduled to adopt the budget at its meeting on June 3. The current Fiscal Year ends on June 30.

SEE BOC PAGE A2

UGA reporting course brings students to meetings

BY LORI JOHNSTON
Editor’s note: This story is written in the first person by Lori Johnston, a professor within University of Georgia’s College of Journalism and Mass Communication.

We decided to expand our coverage of local communities in the Reporting I course I oversee at the University of Georgia, and I knew Oconee County would offer a compelling and welcoming environment for our students to work as journalists on deadline.
As a resident of Oconee County and a professor in UGA’s Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, I saw a need for students to see the inner workings of communities beyond the campus.
We brought more than 80 journalism and public relations majors in our Reporting One course, an introductory required writing and reporting course, to various government meetings during the 2024-2025 academic year.
They covered zoning decisions, budget discussions, updates on speed bumps and playgrounds and votes related to how people use their property.
When the North High Shoals council had to add seats to accommodate 28 students, myself and professor Skylar Bandyol for a standing room-only crowd at



Students from the University of Georgia’s Reporting One course attend the North High Shoals council meeting on April 28. The assignment included attending the meeting, conducting interviews afterward and writing a story on deadline. [Photo by Lori Johnston]

its April 28 meeting, council members welcomed the class and stayed afterward for follow-up interviews.
“Looks like we have a nice full house,” Mayor Stephen Goad said at the

start of the meeting. “I am absolutely thrilled that they’re all fellow Bulldogs.”
The final reporting assignment in the class required students to take photos, write a news story and post

to social media.
Laila Carter, 19, who attended North Oconee High School, said she thought it would be interesting because she grew up in Oconee County and was unaware of how town council meetings worked.
“Different elements of local government were a lot more complex than I had originally thought,” she said.
After seeing national and state headlines about policy changes and laws, covering a city meeting showed her the impact of local government, especially with the discussions about property, traffic and amenities such as playgrounds.
“Overall, the knowledge that I learned from the meeting goes perfectly hand-in-hand with advancing my understanding and knowledge of both fields,” said Carter, a journalism and political science major.
Kristopher Wilhelm, a journalism major, said it was rewarding to meet people who live in North High Shoals and to get a perspective of how the council members shape the community.
“Beforehand it was just like a place that I had driven through once or twice,” he said. “By the end of the meeting, I almost felt like I was a part of the community with how focused I was on the issues and what steps they were going to take in the future.”

SEE UGA JOURNALISM PAGE A2



This issue was mailed Wednesday, May 14 from Watkinsville and Athens, GA. Please inform your post office if it arrives late.



A R R E S T S



Anglin



Brown



Caller



Carias-Mendez



Davenport



Fulton



Cambrell



Lovette



Mackey



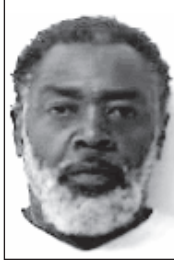
Malinasky



Mehta



C. Miller



M. Miller



Nix



Raywood



Sandino



Stamps



Thornhill



Watkins



Woody

Tanksley Mays Anglin, 26, Statham, theft by taking (felony).
Ivory Terrell Brown, 33, Athens, theft by shoplifting (misdemeanor).
Stephan Caller, 34, Statham, theft by shoplifting (misdemeanor).
Yeremi Alexander Carias-Mendez, 21, Milledgeville, failure to appear for fingerprintable charge (misdemeanor).

Demerriah Davenport, 19, Athens, theft by shoplifting (misdemeanor).
Lynn Fulton, 49, Statham, theft by shoplifting (misdemeanor).
Charmane Cambrell, 27, Greenville, theft by shoplifting (felony).
Lovante Lovette, 32, Athens, driving while license suspended or revoked (misdemeanor).
Jordan Tyree Mackey, 25, Commerce, theft by shoplifting (felony).
Destiny Michelle Malinasky, 33, Bogart, probation violation (felony).
Dilan Sanjay Mehta, 23, Woodstock, illegal stop/stand/park where prohibited, driving under the influence of alcohol.
Corey Dwayne Miller, 47,

Athens, driving while license suspended or revoked (misdemeanor).
Amanda Baker Stamps, 46, Bogart, open container, driving under the influence of alcohol.
Brittany Lynn Thornhill, 30, Eastanolle, theft by shoplifting (misdemeanor).
Matravis Lerion Watkins, 38, Athens, probation violation (felony).
Matthew Leonard Woody, 36, Dawsonville, contempt of Superior Court.
Michael Joseph Woolfolk, 34, Douglasville, failure to appear for fingerprintable charge (misdemeanor).

BOE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

According to her contract with OCS, Harden will work 49% of the superintendent’s full-time commitment, in accordance with the Teachers’ Retirement System (TRS) return to work requirements. Harden’s pay will be prorated from the superintendent salary to a monthly payment of \$10,904.09.

Budget, millage rate

On Monday, the Board approved a tentative budget for fiscal year 2026. This budget includes a decreased millage rate of 13.919 mills, down from 14.25 mills in fiscal year 2025. This ensures that

property taxes will hold steady, rather than increase. Although the millage rate has decreased in recent history, this would be the first time since 2014 that the BOE has fully rolled back the millage rate. The anticipated revenue is \$52,053,865 for fiscal year 2026. The anticipated revenue for fiscal year 2025 was \$50,190,360. Expenditures that have increased over last fiscal year include salary steps for employees, health insurance cost increases, TRS cost increases and costs related to school resource officers. The recommended budget allows for salary step increases for eligible employees, estimated to cost \$1,088,472. Increases to the state health insurance costs are esti-

mated to be \$3,085,080. Employer contributions to TRS are estimated to increase \$1,176,845. Funding for the school resource officers is estimated to cost the system \$2,527,016. With these additional costs, the expected expenditures are \$120,526,304 and the expected revenues are \$119,174,969. To cover the deficit, the proposed budget recommends taking \$1,351,335 from the unassigned fund balance. The BOE will hold budget hearings for the FY26 General Fund Budget in at the Instructional Support Center on May 22 at 4 p.m. and May 29 at 4 p.m.

BOC

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The budget presentation last week did not include a statement of the proposed millage rate, or property tax rate. Daniell said after the meeting that the rate will be set once Oconee County Tax Commis-

sioner Jennifer Riddle finalizes the tax digest, or the value of taxable property in the county. Riddle is waiting on the corrected state calculation of the effects of the floating homestead exemption on the tax digest, explained Daniell. The floating exemption is designed to limit the effect of in-

flation on property assessments. *Lee Becker is a retired journalism professor and resident of Oconee County. A version of this story originally appeared on his blog, oconeecountyobservations.org. It has been edited for publication here.*

UGA journalism

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The students said on LinkedIn and their digital portfolios that covering the meeting helped them continue to learn to take notes in real time and interview people quickly. Here’s some of their reflections:
■ Maura Potvin, journalism major: “The installation of speed bumps and updates on other traffic issues [in North High Shoals] will affect [citizens’] daily lives, so it was worth reporting on.”
■ Sydney Fleming, public relations major: “My interviewing strategies grew from simply trying to gather a quote to engaging in meaningful conversations that helped me produce more authentic stories.”
■ Sophia Bobo, journalism major: “What I loved most about this class was the way Professor Johnston let us go out and report...I feel like starting out as a

journalist, it’s uncomfortable to just go up and talk to people because we don’t want to bother them, but that’s our job!”
■ Arianna Flynn, journalism major: “I’ve never attended a town council meeting like this before, and I thought it was fascinating to learn more about how local government works.”
■ Ann Macon Watkins, journalism major: “Covering this meeting helped me sharpen my skills in local government reporting, including distilling complex zoning discussions and accurately quoting public officials and residents.”
Students who have already completed Reporting One also regularly covered the municipal meetings of North High Shoals, Bishop and Bogart for The Oconee Enterprise through a partnership with the Cox Institute’s Journalism Writing Lab, which I operate. They practiced beat reporting on a hyperlocal level.

Julianna Duennes Russ, who covered Bishop and graduated from the University of Georgia this month with degrees in journalism, international affairs and comparative literature, remembers that Mayor Drew Kurtz was the first person she met as she walked into her first meeting. She recognized him from her research and prep work, which included looking up names and photos of city leaders and reading the agenda and past minutes. She shook his hand and introduced herself as a University of Georgia student who would be covering the stories for the paper.
“He knew right off the bat that I would be there consistently,” she said. “He knew that I was going to be serious about it.”
We plan to continue covering county and city meetings in the 2025-2026 academic year, providing ways for more students to see how government works and the decisions that impact the community.

Mold

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Although specific health concerns were redacted by OCS in the letter provided to The Oconee Enterprise, the teacher said health issues she experienced were caused by a reaction to mold. She then performed multiple mold tests on the gym floor in the areas near the growing discoloration. According to the letter, the tests came back positive for multiple types of mold. She then turned over the tests to administration, which relayed the information to Human Resources.
“Rather than addressing the root cause of the problem, the district—through HR—immediately removed me from my PE position for the following year, citing concern for [redacted excerpt] while simultaneously insisting there were ‘no mold issues’ in the building where I work,” the teacher wrote. The teacher, who has worked for the school system for a decade wrote, “It is incredibly disheartening to find myself in a situation where my efforts to protect myself and those under my care have been disregarded.”
The school nurse resigned for similar reasons.
“I take my role as the health-care provider in the school very seriously,” she wrote. “However, with the current environment and culture in OCS, I do not feel like I am able to talk honestly with parents and staff about issues occurring in the school building that have the potential to affect people’s health.”
A fourth employee who works in a room thought to have mold issues also resigned but did not specify a reason for leaving in his or her resignation letter.
Board meeting
OCES PTO President Moreira returned to speak before the Board at the May 12 regular meeting. She was one of five parents who asked for OCS to do

mold testing. Parents have started another petition—this time offering to pay for the mold testing. As of deadline, the petition had 216 signatures.
“I was in the gym two weeks ago,” Moreira said. “Go in there and look, smell, open your mouth. If you did a walkthrough, you would know. It was in my mouth all night long.”
At the beginning of the meeting, Board Member Amy Parrish motioned to amend the agenda to include a report from operations concerning work that occurred at OCES over spring break. Chief Operations Officer Ryan White said that there were stains from seams in the gym floor and left-over glue under the carpet inside the third grade outside pod classrooms.
“Also know that the gym floor is designed with an impermeable layer to not allow moisture through the flooring,” White said. White explained that OCS uses humidity sensors and moisture meters tests to monitor spaces, “all of which came back within industry norms.”
White clarified later in the meeting that the “industry norm” threshold for humidity is below 60% and that OCS sets their units at 45%.
A photograph shared with The Enterprise shows the humidity in the gym at 91% earlier that day.
Through an Open Records Act request, The Enterprise previously asked for air humidity tests and analyses of the carpet in OCES. Colquitt responded that there were no records responsive to either requests.
White said an outside pod at the school underwent renovations in 2022 and that “powder residue” was removed during work over spring break.
Four other community members spoke to the board about concerns they have about OCES.
“How the district office has responded to concerns about mold at OCES has highlighted that in addition to having a potentially toxic building, you have a potentially toxic work culture in this organization,” Meryl Herr said. She said that the conditions that

led to the resignations will trickle through the organization and erode trust.
Brandi Herndon also addressed the board. Herndon previously spoke to the board about the same matter in 2018, when mildew and fungi were discovered at OCES. Herndon claimed that the problem was not adequately addressed in 2018 and that the current board has the opportunity to fix the issues.
“If the problem had been handled swiftly and appropriately at that time, we wouldn’t be here now with the same, albeit worsening issue,” Herndon said.

Previous moisture issues
As previously reported by The Enterprise, reports of mold occurred in 2017 and 2018 within OCES.
In 2018, a series of repairs occurred at the school. The most extensive was in a classroom where a hole in the roof drain pipe was fixed, carpet and ceiling tiles were replaced and an air humidity test was performed. The test showed results similar to the exterior of the building on the same day with the exception of Basidiospores, which could indicate rot. There was no black mold evident on the tests.
According to documents received through an open records request, a third grade teacher sent an email to then-Principal Ashley Templeton in June 2018 expressing concern about mold growing in her classroom.
“This mold really concerns me and it has for years,” the teacher wrote.
According to the records, the email was forwarded to maintenance personnel, who told the principal and teacher that the problem areas should be treated with peroxide. According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, hydrogen peroxide may be used as part of a comprehensive remediation plan, but is not intended for use to control mold on textiles or hard porous surfaces.

NOTICE OF BUDGET HEARING

The Oconee County Board of Commissioners plans to hold two public hearings on the proposed 2026 Fiscal Year Budget, 6:00 p.m. on Tuesday, May 06, 2025, and 6:00 p.m. on Tuesday, May 20, 2025. Both meetings will be held in the Commissioners Meeting Chambers at the Oconee County Administrative Building, 7635 Macon Highway, Watkinsville, Georgia. A copy of the proposed budget will be available after May 06, 2025 at the Oconee County Administrative Building and on the County’s website. The Oconee County Board of Commissioners plans to adopt the 2026 Fiscal Year Budget at 6:00 p.m. on Tuesday, June 03, 2025, at the Board of Commissioners Regular Meeting which will be held in the Commissioners Meeting Chambers at the Oconee County Administrative Building, 7635 Macon Highway, Watkinsville, Georgia.

OCONEE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
JOHN DANIELL, CHAIRMAN

STATE OF GEORGIA

COUNTY OF OCONEE

LOGIC AND ACCURACY TESTING NOTICE

Notice is hereby given that the logic and accuracy testing and preparation of the voting equipment to be used in the June 17, 2025 Special Primary Election will begin at 10am on May 21, 2025. Testing will continue from day to day until completed. Members of the public are permitted to be present during testing. The testing will be conducted at 7635 Macon Hwy, Watkinsville, GA 30677.

Please call (706) 769-3958 if you have any questions regarding testing dates/times.