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Urban Growth panel part of Legislative Conference Line up

An informative panel discussion on Tennessee's rapid growth and how it's impacting our communities will be part of a dynamic agenda planned for the TML Legislative Conference, slated for March 4-5 in Nashville at the DoubleTree by Hilton.

Tennessee has been named among the top five states in the U.S. that saw a significant population increase with more than 77,500 new residents moving here in 2023, according to U.S. Census data. And although the influx of people has its economic benefits, it also puts a strain on local governments and the services they provide.

The panel – which will include Gallatin Mayor Paige Brown, Brownsville Mayor Bill Rawls, TN County Services Executive Director David Connors, and Farm Bureau Public Policy Director Kevin Hensley - will discuss the various challenges they are facing and what types of tools we need to meet the current demands.

Registration for the conference opens Monday morning, March 4 at 8:30 a.m. with a meetand-greet coffee break with TML's sponsored programs. Lunch will begin at 11:30 a.m.

The conference program will run from 12:45 and until 3:15

p.m. and will feature U.S. Congressman John Rose, TN State Comptroller Jason Mumpower, omy Professor Larry Kessler.



John Rose

Attendees are encouraged to attend the House and Senate floor sessions that evening at the Capitol.

TN Comptroller Jason Mumpower



provided by **UT Economist** Sam Jackson, Larry Kessler attorney with Spencer Fane.

For more information or to register for the conference, click here.

Gov. Bill Lee delivers sixth State of the State

Gov. Bill Lee delivered his sixth State of the State address, presenting budget and legislative goals for the upcoming year in a ioint session of the General Assembly on Feb. 6.

'Tennessee is a remarkable place with a richness of passionate people of all kinds, an unrivaled culture and deep-rooted traditions," Lee said. "We are also a state that is focused on opportunity, security and freedom for all of her people. So, in 2024, and frankly for the remainder of my time in office, I believe our job is to fortify that which has been built over the years, and to remember the work it took to get here."

Lee's proposed \$52.6 billion budget focuses on issues including advancing rural opportunity, keeping the state a business-friendly climate, continuing the state's legacy of fiscal responsibility and economic prosperity, and expanding his Education Freedom Scholarships program, also known as the school voucher program.

Key highlights of the budget include:

Economy

- \$20 million investment in Tennessee's Rainy Day Fund, bringing Tennessee reserves to more than \$2 billion, the largest in state history.
- \$410 million recurring funding \$1.2 billion non-recurring funding to simplify the franchise tax in Tennessee.

Education

More than \$261 million to strengthen education through the Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA) formula growth, including



Photo by Nicole Hestser / The Tennessean

Gov. Bill Lee delivers his sixth State of the State address to the Tennessee General Assembly in the House chamber.

- teacher pay raises.
- \$30 million for summer learning programs to support students between school years.
- \$3.2 million dedicated to AP Access for All, which provides AP courses to students across rural and urban Tennessee.
- \$2.5 million to strengthen students' reading and phonics skills.
- \$577,000 to ensure we train Tennessee teachers to be the best and brightest educators of Tennessee children.
- \$15 million to fund charter school facility improvements.
- \$141.5 million to establish Education Freedom Scholarships.

Healthcare and Wellness

\$208 million over five years from TennCare shared savings to strengthen rural health by investing in apprenticeships and skilled training, greater access to specialty care and telemedicine, improved career pathways, hospital and physician practice grants, and a new Center of Excellence to sustain and expand rural health support.

- \$100 million over five years from TennCare shared savings to strengthen mental health care by investing in community mental health centers and behavioral health hospitals, expanding substance abuse disorder treatment, intensive in-home supports, primary care training, early childhood training, and children's hospital infrastructure.
- \$26.7 million investment in services for Tennesseans with disabilities.
- Combining the Commission on Aging and Disability and Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities into the new Department of Disability and Aging.

See STATE on Page 4

FEMA overhauls disaster benefits, recovery assistance



A neighborhood in Clarksville following the December 2023 tornadoes. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has announced reforms to its Disaster Assistance Program aimed at removing red tape amid an increase in severe weather disasters nationwide.

By KATE COIL

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has announced reforms to its Disaster Assistance Program to remove unnecessary red tape.

Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas and FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell announced the reforms will include changing federal assistance policies and expanding benefits for disaster survivors to cut red tape, provide funds faster, and provide more flexibility. The reforms are the most comprehensive update to FE-MA's disaster program in 20 years.

The changes were prompted by the increased frequency of extreme weather events across the country, which have increased the need to provide survivors faster, easier, and more equitable access to necessary resources. The reforms are also the result

of feedback collected from decades of disaster survivors, communities, and stakeholders on how to improve the program and through partnerships with stead and Congressional leadership.Program reforms include:

Establishing Serious Needs Assistance: This new cash relief program will replace the Critical Needs Assistance Program and will be available in all disasters receiving Individual Assistant. Households needing immediate help to cover expenses such as shelter, evacuation, and basic needs will receive \$750 in addition to other assistance that may be needed.

Establish Displacement As-

sistance: A new benefit that will provide immediate housing needs for disaster survivors, specifically those who cannot return to their home following a disaster.

Removing Loan Application Requires: Removes the requirement that survivors apply for a Small Business Administration (SBA) loan before being considered for certain types of financial assistance, such as personal property and non-housing loans.

Helping Underinsured Survivors: This measure will streamline insurance-related rules to help survivors who do not receive enough money from their insurance companies to cover rebuilding costs.

Simplifying Assistance for Entrepreneurs: FEMA is simplifying the process so entrepreneurs, gig workers and other self-employed individuals can more easily reopen their businesses after a disaster that will provide additional support to SBA loans.

Expanding Habitability Criteria: FEMA is simplifying its definition of "habitability" to broaden eligibility to include repairs to homes with pre-existing conditions, eliminating current limitations to home repair assistance and expanding eligible hazard mitigation measures beyond essential components of a residence. The measure will also offer more flexibility for documentation to prove a home is owner occupied.

See FEMA on Page 3

Rural cities must leverage assets, invest in amenities to reverse population losses

By KATE COIL TT&C Assistant Editor

As populations return to urban centers after the pandemic, many rural communities are looking to bridge gaps in technology, healthcare availability, food access, and economic development to better situate themselves for the future.

Community-engagement platform Polco presented a webinar, "Proven Methods for Governments to Bridge the Urban-Rural Divide" to discuss how rural communities can leverage their assets to address what gaps they have. Polco's Vice President of Data Science Tobin McKearin said growth of both population and economy has long trended upward in urban areas and downward in rural ones, an outcome of how the economy has

changed due to industrialization. "In a time in the not-so-distant past, this wasn't the case," he said. "In a time when textiles and manufacturing were here in the U.S., rural communities had a lot of economic power. With advances in technology and mechanization, we've seen a shift as we have replaced human labor with cognitive thinking, brain replacing brawn. This new economy has really benefited urban economies where people are seeking jobs, options of entertainment, and different ways of going about their lives. The rural has not seen those positive gains."

There was a time during the pandemic when migration to rural communities equaled and outpaced urban communities, but many of those migrants began to return to urban areas as the pandemic waned, brought back by better broadband, access to healthcare, more economic opportunities, and community livability.

"The pandemic has really exacerbated these differences between urban and rural," McKearin said. "Many of these negative hits on education, economy, and broadband have really been felt by rural communities. Health, wellness, and inclusivity have also seen a disproportionate impact, though we have seen this change as folks move into rural communities."



Kingsport's Inventor Center is the result of a collaborative effort by the Model City Makerspace, Engage Kingsport, key local businesses and the city of Kingsport to provide access and training to Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machines, 3D printers, a laser cutter, full woodshop, and a welder. The main goal of the center is the development and promotion of local entrepreneurs and small business.

URBAN VS. RURAL

As defined by Polco, urban areas include all areas with populations of 50,000 or higher or counties that have 25% of their workforce coming in from out of their city limits. Based on data gathered from the National Community Survey, Government Performance Action and Learning (GPAL) partnership, and other publicly available data sets, Polco officials found what community livability domains are more widely associated with urban and rural areas.

Urban strengthens revealed by the data include:

- **Health** Urban areas tend to have more availability, quality, and opportunities for fitness, food access, and medical care.
- **Economy** These areas tend to have more shopping and entertainment opportunities, higher median incomes, more job availability and opportunities, better rates of higher education attainment, and better access to tools for business growth and entrepreneurship.
- Land Use/Infrastructure -Urban areas tend to be more walkable, provide more housing options, have more transit

and transportation options, and better access to and more infrastructure to utilities like high-speed internet.

Inclusivity – Urban areas tend to attract more diverse populations, better ratios of white to non-white residents, and better poverty ratios.

Meanwhile, rural strengths unveiled by data:

- Safety Rural residents report a more overall feeling of safety, both from property and violent crime.
- Affordability Rural housing costs are less, have fairer market rents, and more affordable median home values.
- **Environment** Rural areas have better air quality, water resources, and less natural hazards.
- Transportation While urban areas may have more transportation options, rural residents reported having better traffic flow and volumes.
- Civic Engagement Rural citizens are more likely to have attended a local government meeting, volunteered locally, or campaigned, advocated for or contacted a local official.

See RURAL on Page 6

NEWS ACROSS TENNESSEE



BRISTOL

The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) has recognized Bristol's Nature Center at Steele Creek Park for meeting professional museum standards. The Nature Center has gained its Core Documents Verification, a milestone achieved by only 3% of museums nationwide and a step toward full AAM accreditation. These documents outline the Nature Center's mission statement, code of ethics, strategic plan, emergency response plan, and collections management policy. The process toward full accreditation, which requires selfstudy and peer review, will begin in the coming weeks. If achieved, it will better position the Nature Center to collaborate in a variety of ways with other accredited museums nationwide.

CHATTANOOGA

The city of Chattanooga is one of 24 cities that has received a U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration (EDA). The \$500,000 strategy development planning grant is intended to analyze and develop strategies around improving workforce outcomes in underserved neighborhoods. The city of Chattanooga is working with County, the Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce, Chattanooga 2.0, the Benwood Foundation, and the Bethlehem Center on the project. Using this grant, the City of Chattanooga will analyze the root causes of systemic barriers to quality economic and workforce opportunities in key neighborhoods in South Chattanooga and East Lake. As part of the federal Recompete Pilot Program, the city of Chattanooga will work with key partners in developing strategies to address barriers including access to childcare, transportation, and access to workforce training and education programs. Chattanooga is also one of 22 finalists for USE-DA's Recompete Implementation Grant, which is worth up to \$50 million.

ELIZABETHTON

Snap-on officials announced today the company will invest \$44 million to expand its manufacturing operations in Elizabethton. Snapon's planned expansion of the Elizabethton facility will create 50 new jobs through the project: adding nearly 49,000 square feet of manufacturing space and new equipment to support additional capacity for forging, machining, heat treating, chrome plating and assembly at its State Line Road location. Snap-on is the third largest employer in Carter County, specializing in manufacturing hand tools including ratchets, wrenches, pry bars and pullers. Once fully operational, the expansion allows the Snap-on Elizabethton plant to employ nearly 500 people.

FARRAGUT

The town of Farragut has received the Certificate of Achievement in Financial Reporting from the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) for the 31st time. The award was for the town's annual comprehensive financial report for Fiscal Year 2022. The report was judged by an impartial panel to meet the high standards of the program, which includes demonstrating a constructive "spirit of full disclosure" to clearly communicate its financial story and motivate potential users and user groups to read the report. Farragut is one of 31 municipalities out of 345 in the state to receive this certificate of achievement. GFOA is the premier association for public-sector finance professionals in the U.S. and Canada.

GREENEVILLE

The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) has announced Greeneville and the Greene County Partnership will host the NAIA Beach Volleyball National Invitational events in 2024 and 2025. The 2024 event will take place from April 25-27 and will be the third sport to have NAIA invitational status. The events will be held at the Greeneville Beach Volleyball Complex and will bring players from 32 institutions. Across the country to the town. The NAIA previously held its Women's Golf National Championships in Greeneville in 2011 and 2012.

HARTSVILLE

Work has begun on an expansion of Highway 141 in Hartsville that will better connect the town further south to the city of Lebanon. The expansion is expected to allow Hartsville residents as well as other rural residents in the area to have better access to Interstate 40 and will replace one of the longest bridges in the state over the Cumberland River. While the project is expected to be completed in three years, local leaders in Hartsville, Lafayette, and Red Boiling Springs have expressed excitement about the project providing more direct routes to their communities, potentially fueling more business investment.

KINGSPORT

The city of Kingsport's Annual Comprehensive Financial Report (ACFR) received a clean audit, the 25th year in a row Kingsport's finances have received a clean opinion - the highest opinion offered. This also marks the 23rd straight year the city's financial report received a GFOA Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting. Kingsport's ACFR is a detailed review of city government (including schools, utilities, and economic development). The document covers 36 separate funds and all manner of financial issues from cash flow to long-term debt to governmental assets. Additionally, Moody's Investor Service and Standard and Poor reaffirmed their Aa2 and AA ratings for the city, respectively.

KNOXVILLE

Knoxville's McGhee Tyson Airport has announced two new flights. The first comes from a new partnership with Avelo Airlines, who will offer flights from Knoxville to New Haven, Conn., twice a week. The one-way airfares start at \$62 and will start on May 9. The flights will arrive at the Tweed-New Haven Airport. Known as the home of Yale University, New Haven is connected to Amtrack lines that travel both the state of Connecticut and from Washington, D.C., to Boston. The new airline is also expected to bring visitors to the Great Smoky Mountains from Connecticut and New York. The second new flight paths are three nonstop flights between Knoxville and Philadelphia carried by Frontier. The initial service is also expected to start in May with introductory fares as low as \$19. Known for its role in American Independence, Philadelphia is also connected via rail to various destinations on the eastern seaboard.

SHARON

The town of Sharon has been awarded \$68,195 in grants to provide needed upgrades to the Sharon Police and Fire Departments. The town received two grants totaling \$5,000 to upgrade to digital radio systems for the departments, which was recently required for first responders. The police department also received a \$63,195 state grants from the state to purchase a new, fully-equipped patrol car, three new bullet-proof vests, upgrades to radar equipment, six body cameras for each officer on patrol, new in-car cameras, and three new tasers with an estimated \$2,000 left in grant funds. Sharon

Memphis' Withers Gallery and Museum added to TN, National Civil Rights Trail



From left to right, TN Tourism Commissioner Mark Ezell, Senior Advisor John DeBerry, Gov. Bill Lee, Rosalind Withers, Memphis Mayor Paul Young, and Memphis Tourism President & CEO Kevin Kane gather at the Withers Collection Gallery and Museum on Beale Street in Memphis to celebrate its inclusion in the U.S. and Tennessee Civil Rights Trail. The gallery honors the work of photographer Ernest C. Withers whose photographs covered numerous important events in the Civil Rights movement, including the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike and assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The new addition makes 15 Tennessee sites along the U.S. Civil Rights.

Last Williamson County Rosenwald school moved to Franklin historic park



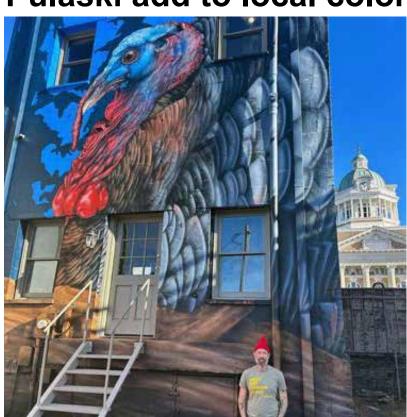
The last remaining Rosenwald School in Williamson County has been moved from its previous location in Spring Hill to the Franklin Grove Estate and Gardens in downtown Franklin. The Heritage Foundation of Williamson County organized the move of the Lee-Buckner School to the property they manage in Franklin with plans to restore, preserve, and transform the former school building in "an accessible and lasting monument to education and Black history." The new, \$35 million Franklin Grove Estate and Gardens broke ground in late 2023 with the goal of preserving historical structures from throughout Williamson County. It took just over two hours to move the school structure, witnessed by both community leaders and former students of the school. The Lee-Buckner School served children in the Rural Hill area of Williamson County from 1927 until it was closed amid desegregation in 1965. It served as a private residence until the 1990s.

Interim Police Chief and Fire Chief Gary Eddings said the grant funds have been invaluable to the town, saying the needed upgrades to equipment would not have been possible in a small municipality without the help of grant funding.

WAYNESBORO

The city of Waynesboro has recently been awarded two grants to help with public safety. The first is a \$125,000 grant from TDOT for a Traffic Signal Modernization Program (TSMP) at the intersection of Highway 64 Bypass and Dexter L. Woods Memorial Boulevard. Funds will also be used to replace signal heads, backplates, the controller, cabinet, battery backup system, and conflict monitor at the intersection to prevent the decades-old system from shutting down in cold weather. Caution lights will also be replaced on the Bypass at Clifton Turnpike to prevent traffic accidents. The city also received a \$109,240 2024 Volunteer Firefighter Equipment and Training grant that will be used to purchase 14 full sets of turnout gear, including breathing apparatus, for the fire department.

New murals in downtown Pulaski add to local color



Two new murals from an area artist are adding even more local color to downtown Pulaski. Etheridge resident Ernest Doty was hired to paint murals on the sides of two downtown murals. One,

depicting a Tennessee wild turkey, was created to honor wildlife conservation and the National Wildlife Turkey Federation on the back of the Williams Law and Mediation building while the owners of The Local Farmer commissioned a mural of a black Angus cow to honor the area's history of agriculture, particularly its beef production.



J. R. Wauford & Company, Consulting Engineers, Inc.

Cities can protect pollinator populations with help from Bee City USA

By KATE COIL TT&C Assistant Editor

A nationwide initiative is providing Tennessee municipalities with the tools and resources they need to protect pollinators in their own communities.

Bee City USA, an initiative of the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation, is helping municipalities to protect local habitats, agriculture, and economies by giving them the tools they need to conserve bee populations and educate the public about pol-

The program began in Asheville, N.C., and soon spread nationwide. It was taken under the umbrella of the Xerces Society in 2018 after the retirement of founder, Phyllis Stiles. To date, there are six Tennessee municipalities who participate in the program: Bell Buckle, Cleveland, Lookout Mountain, Thompson's Station, and Walden.

Laura Rost, national coordinator for Bee City USA and Bee Campus USA, said participation in the initiative can help further steps many cities are already taking to protect pollinators.

"Many times, there is already



a great effort happening in the community to preserve pollinators," she said. "This is a great way to recognize those efforts, come together, and make those efforts even better. Our intention with this program is progress, not perfection. We are looking for incremental improvement. You may have a community garden but can start planting more native wildflowers in that garden that will increase pollinators and food production while reducing pests. Sometimes it's just leaving the weeds over winter at the park to help nesting bees and butterflies."

To participate, municipalities must establish a Bee City committee, create or enhance pollinator habitats, reduce the use of pollinator-unfriendly pesticides, host a pollinator awareness event,



Thompson's Station is one of six Tennessee municipalities already participating in the Bee City USA program. One of their most recent projects was a pollinator garden, planted as an Eagle Scout project. In addition to providing a habitat and food for pollinators, the garden is also boosting the produce of the nearby community garden.

maintain an online presence for their Bee City affiliate, and incorporate pollinator-conscious practices into their policies.

Bee City USA and the Xerces Society offer resources to help municipalities achieve these goals from providing model ordinances to webinar trainings to promotional and outreach materials to having more than 80 staff members nationwide experts ready to consult on topics like pollinator-safe pest management, farming, native flora, and community coordination. Cities also receive customized signage to promote their participation in Bee City USA.

"We have a pretty simple approach: we are asking people to plant pollinator habitats, reduce pesticide usage, and conduct outreach," Rost said. "Beyond that, each city gets to make their Bee City their own. You get to build the commitments into existing events or create new events. You can take advantage of local talent and enthusiasm. Cities don't have to figure it out all on their own, and they aren't receiving a grade on what they do. We are just here as a resource if they want to know ways they can make their plans even better."

Rost said Bee City wants mucipalities to make the initiative their own and find ways to fit it into their individual communities. She said cities are always finding new and creative ways to make Bee City their own.

"It's a way to celebrate your city's successes with something positive and constructive anyone can participate in it. We want cities to focus it to their inter-

ests. Some may focus more on parades and public arts or businesses involved with pollinators like meaderies or breweries. We have cities who have done festivals, pub crawls, and even a wrestling match. It really runs the gamut."

Micah Woods, Thompson's Station community and economic development director, said involvement in Bee City USA has allowed the town to forge relationships in the community.

"It really lined up things Thompson's Station was talking about, especially being a good steward of the environment, and our parks board was really active on preservation," Woods said. "This worked on conservation of the environment and was a natural fit for our community. Our initiative has been more parks oriented, and we have done a couple of service projects community members have done to create pollinator gardens. We also have a community garden where people can rent out their own plot of land for gardening, which is near that. It helps the bees do their thing in that area and is great for the community garden."

The resources provided by Bee City USA also make it an easy initiative for a town of less than 8,000 residents and a limited municipal staff to take part in. Gardening clubs, scout groups, civic organizations, colleges, and other community groups are often the best cheerleaders and champions for Bee City initiatives.

"Some other organizations, you have to go through a lot of things that are onerous and time-consuming for staff," Woods said. "Bee City leaves it open for what your community wants to make of it. We were able to bring this out to our community, tell them we had to take on a work project every year to focus on pollinator conservation, and then let the community come to us with what they want to. There is a lot of flexibility to it, and it is very easy on our staff. The community is great about taking the initiative in what they want in their parks. It's a great community-builder."

Woods said communities of all sizes can reap multiple benefits from participating in the program.

"I would encourage municipality to look at this program, because it is a great program," he said. "Bees have had a tough time lately, so this is something we can do for them. We wouldn't be here without pollinators. Think about who is going to serve on the board or a person who is the champion for this and make sure they have buy-in. And because this is a part of a larger network of communities, you can learn from other communities. I would recommend for any size community to get involved."

Overall, Rost said the initiative is a way for municipalities to make a global impact within their city limits with options like bioswales, native gardens, street trees, community gardens, rain gardens, and green infrastructure. Bringing in bees also brings in other important pollinator species like butterflies and birds.

'Pollinator conservation can be done by anyone," Rost said. "Cities themselves can be incredible pollinator habitats. We can create steppingstones of habitat to create coordinators within a city. We have found that many cities have quite a bit of pollinator species diversity. Many of these species don't need a huge amount of habitat to survive, so even a small amount of pollinator habitat can create a small steppingstone. By integrating pollinator habitats into our cities, we not only create healthy, robust pollinators,

but it really beautify our cities." For more information on how to become a Bee City USA, click here.

BEE FACTS

The U.S. is home to 3,600 species of bees. Of those, 350 call Tennessee home.



Up to 40% of pollinator species on earth are risk of extinction s a result of habitat loss, pesticide use, and climate change.

One third of all foods and drinks require pollinators.

Pollinators contribute between \$18 and \$27 billion to agriculture annually in the U.S.

While honey bees are not native to the U.S., species including the bumble bees, leafcutter bees, sweat bees, mason bees, longhorn bees, and mining bees are vital to local ecosystems.

> Pollinators contribute between \$18 and \$27 billion to agriculture annually in the

Most bees are solitary creatures and more likely to live in the ground than

Information Courtesy the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation

FEMA overhauls disaster benefits, recovery assistance

FEMA, from Page 1

- Making Accessibility Improvements: Survivors with disabilities can use FEMA funding to make certain accessibility improvements to homes damaged by a declared disaster, even if that includes making the home more accessible than it was pre-disaster.
- Simplifying The Applica-
- tion Process: Reforms to the application process include removing barriers for late applicants, streamlining temporary housing assistance applications by reducing the documentation required and providing individual caseworkers,
- Simplifying the Process for Appeals: Survivors who wish to appeal FEMA's decisions on

their eligibility will no longer need to provide a signed, written appeal letter to accompany the supporting documentation, and simplifying the appeals

FEMA expects the changes to take effect for new disasters declared on or after March 22, 2024.

Additionally, FEMA has made

changes to its DisasterAssitance. gov and Transitional Sheltering Assistance websites to make them more accessible and navigable, including allowing better online application and tracking processes to help reduce time burdens and provide more user-friendly information.

For more information about the changes, click here.

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PEOPLE IN THE NEWS

Chris Bates has been named the new chief of the Cleveland Fire Department. Bates has been in emergency services since



Chris Bates

1995 when he was hired by the city of Cleveland Police Department and has most recently served as fire marshal for the city. He has worked with the Cleveland Fire Department since 2001 and has held positions including firefighter/AEMT, engineer, company officer, shift training officer, and fire investigator. He holds an associate's degree from Cleveland State Community College and a bachelor's degree from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, in addition to numerous certifications from the Tennessee Commission on Fire Fighting and others. He is also a member of the International Association of Fire Fighters, International Association of Arson Investigators, and Tennessee Advisory Committee on Arson.

Frank Buck, longtime former Tennessee House Judiciary Committee chair, died at the age of 80 on Jan. 24, 2024, in Smithville. A



Frank Buck

native of Dowelltown, Buck served for 36 years in the Legislature representing District 40, which was composed of DeKalb, Smith, and Macon counties. He retired in 2008. During his tenure in the legislature, Buck was known for his colorful personality and backing of ethics legislation. In addition to serving as Judiciary Committee chair, Buck also served as vice chair of the House Transportation Committee, chair of the House Public Transportation and Highways Subcommittee, a member of the House Judicial Administration Subcommittee, and the House Criminal Practice and Procedure Subcommittee. He held a bachelor's degree in business administration from Tennessee Tech and his law degree from the University of Tennessee. He also worked as a lawyer and farmer.

Nichole Dusché, a local attorney and city court judge for Spring Hill, was recently named Brentwood's new city judge. Dusché takes



Nichole Dusché

over the position from Laurie Jewett, who retired last year, and will oversee cases involving traffic violations and other Municipal Code violations. A graduate of Vanderbilt University and the Nashville School of Law, she previously served as an interim judge for the city of Brentwood. She owns her own law practice and is a former assistant district attorney. In 2021, she received the Attorney for Justice Award.

Andrew Ellard, assistant city manager for Morristown, has become an ICMA credentialed manager, joining 16 other Tennes-



Andrew Ellard

see managers and 1,500 local government management professionals who participate in the ICMA Voluntary Credentialing Program. To receive ICMA credentials, a member must have significant experience as a senior management executive in local government, have earned a degree, and demonstrated a commitment to high standards of integrity, lifelong learning, and professional development. Ellard has served the city of Morristown since 2021 and prior to that served as city manager in Eagleville and several roles in the city of Hattiesburg, Miss. He holds a bachelor's degree in public administration from Indiana University and a master's in administration from Central Michigan University.





Cpt. Christopher Ellwood

officially joined the Atoka Police Department in 2002. He became an investigator in 2005 and then captain in 2020. Since then, he has assisted in propelling Atoka into the future, introducing electronic ticketing, evidence processing, and updating Atoka Police equipment to the latest technology. Captain Ellwood is recognized by many in the community, keeping the kids engaged and always having fun at community events.

Lt. Stephen Hale with the Nolensville Police Department has been selected to participate in the 289th Session of the FBI National Academy in Quantico, Va.



Lt. Stephen Hale

Over a 10-week period, Hale will participate in physical tests and attend classes similar to those required for FBI agents. Approximately 250 officers from around the world participate in each academy. Participants must be at the rank of lieutenant or above, hold a college degree, pass an interview and physical test, and be nominated for the program by an FBI National Academy graduate and their chief of police or sheriff.

Chris Mc-Donald has been elected to fill the vacant position on the Fairview City Commission following a special election in Janu-



Chris McDonald

ary. McDonald won the seat by 186 votes to fellow challenger Jeff Page's 167. McDonald has served as the city planning commission chairman for Fairview, serves as a volunteer with the Fairview Fire Department, and leads the Fairview Titans Junior Pro Football program. He will fill the seat vacated by the resignation of Leslie Fischer-Street. McDonald's unexpired term will end in November 2025.

Cpt. Kelly Owen has retired after 30 years in the Dickson Police Department. Owen began his career at the department in



Cpt. Kelly Owen

1994, graduating from the Tennessee Law Enforcement Training Academy that same year. He served as a patrol officer for six years then was promoted to patrol corporal in 2000. He then became a field training officer and served with the Special Response Team from 1996 to 2014. He became a detective with the Criminal Investigations Division in 2005 and was a field agent with the Drug Task Force in 2006 to 2008. He then served as a detective from 2008 to 2020 and then was promoted to lieutenant. In 2021 Owen was honored with a promotion to Captain of the Patrol Division, a position that had him overseeing the largest division of the police department from 2021 to his retirement.

Margaret "Missy" Sullivan has retired as municipal court clerk for the city of Dickson after nearly 38 years of



Missy Sullivan

service. At the time of her retirement, Sullivan was the longest-serving employee of the city of Dickson. Sullivan began her career with the city as a records clerk for the Dickson Police Department in 1986, also serving as an assistant to then-

Court Clerk JoAnn Brown. When the municipal court was separated from the police department, Sullivan remained as assistant court clerk. She stepped into the role of court clerk in 2011 after Brown's retirement. During her tenure with the city, Sullivan has worked with four police chiefs and four judges. Assistant Court Clerk Gina Swaner has been appointed to take over Sullivan's position.

Baron Swafford plans to retire as the public utility director of Maryville, effective March 1. Swafford has been at the head of the



Baron Swafford

city's electric department since 1994 and became head of the city's water and sewer departments when they and the electric department were combined into the Public Utilities Department in 2010. Swafford has 35 years of service to the city and was instrumental in modernizing and standardizing utility systems and infrastructure in the city, ensuring clean, safe, reliable, and affordable utilities were delivered to residents. The Maryville system oversees nearly 23,000 electric customers and 17,000 water and wastewater customers. In addition to his service to the city, Swafford has served on several United Way of Blount County committees and on the Tennessee Municipal Electrica Power Association board.

Keaira Turner has been selected as the new public affairs director for the Chattanooga Police Department. Turner comes to Chattanoo-



Keaira Turner

ga from Birmingham, where she spent nearly 10 years in strategic communications and government affairs, including as public relations manager for the Birmingham Police Department since November 2021. Turner holds a bachelor's and master's degree in communication from the University of Alabama at Birmingham and Webster University, respectively.

Mary L. Wagner has been appointed to the Tennessee Supreme Court by Gov. Bill Lee. Wagner presently serves as a



Mary Wagner

circuit court judge for the 30th Judicial District in Shelby County. Before that, she was an associate at Rice, Amundsen & Caperton, PLLC and taught as an adjunct professor at The University of Memphis School of Law. She served as a law clerk from 2009-2010 for Judge Steven Stafford of the Tennessee Court of Appeals, law clerk for Judge Robert L. Childers in the Shelby County Circuit Court from 2008-2009 and worked as an extern in 2008 with the U.S. Attorney's office for the Western District of Tennessee. Wagner was a research assistant in 2007 for Prof. Andrew McClurg during law school. She holds a law degree from the University of Memphis School of Law and a bachelor's degree from the University of Colorado.

Oliver Springs mayor helps with snow removal



Oliver Springs Mayor Jason Stiltner joined the town's five street workers to help clear streets following recent snowfall. Stiltner logged 36 hours of work in his own personal skid steerer to help make roadways more passable in the community. Stiltner cited his love for serving his community as why he volunteered to help with road clearing and that community members responded by offering him food and hot chocolate to keep him warm on the job.

Jackson, Johnson City mayors selected for NLC committees

Two Tennessee mayors have been named to National League of Cities (NLC) committees.

Jackson Mayor Scott Conger, has been appointed to the NLC2024 Small Cities Council, while Johnson City Mayor Todd Fowler has been appointed to the 2024 Human Development Federal Advocacy Committee. The appointments were announced by NLC President Mayor-Elect David Sander of Rancho Cordova, Calif.

Mayor Conger was elected to a one-year term to develop and guide programs among local elected officials from similar communities.

"I am honored to serve on the National League of Cities Small Cities Council representing our city. This opportunity will allow me to actively engage in nationwide discussions, share insights, and bring ideas back home," said Mayor Scott Conger. "I am committed to serve and look forward to the opportunity to share with the entire council."

As a member of NLC's Small Cities Council, Mayor Conger will play a key role among a diverse group of local leaders to encourage collaboration, networking and the development of resources and programs beneficial to communities that share demographics, size or location that can be replicated across the country.

"Our member councils play an integral role in NLC's work, bringing local leaders together to share ideas and inform NLC policy about the issues and challenges facing every kind of community in America," said Sander.. "I'm excited to have Mayor Conger serve on NLC's Small Cities Council. The council will ensure that all of our cities, towns and villages have access to ideas and resources they can use to thrive."

The leadership of this year's Small Cities Council will consist of Chair: Vice Mayor Jan Arbuckle, (Grass Valley, Calif.); Vice Chair Mayor Pro Tem Mary Sarver (Grandview, Texas); and Vice Chair Councilwoman Gabrielle Nelson, (Port Wentworth, Ga.).

Mayor Fowler was elected to a one-year term and will provide strategic direction and guidance for NLC's federal advocacy agenda and policy priorities on workforce development, education, early childhood, public health care, mental health parity, immigration reform and more.



Jackson Mayor Scott Conger



Johnson City Mayor Todd Fowler

As a member of NLC's Human Development Committee, Mayor Fowler will play a key role in shaping NLC's policy positions and advocate on behalf of America's cities, towns and villages before Congress, with the administration and at home.

"NLC's federal advocacy committees play an important role in helping policymakers in Washington understand the issues and challenges facing America's cities, towns and villages at the local level," said Sander. "I'm thrilled to have Mayor Fowler serve on NLC's Human Development Committee this year and look forward to working with him to strengthen the federal-local partnership, and grow our common knowledge of the issues and opportunities facing our communities."

This year's Human Development Committee will be led by Chair Adriana Rocha Garcia, councilmember, San Antonio, Texas; Vice Chair Wardine Alexander, council president pro tempore, Birmingham, Ala.; and Vice Chair Kim Norton, mayor, Rochester, Minn.

Lee delivers sixth State of the State Address

the goal of funding a total of

STATE, from Page 1

- \$17 million in funding for an additional 60 State Troopers and related support staff to improve public safety across the state.
- \$8 million to expand the school-based behavioral health liaison program to fund 114 liaisons, giving students across Tennessee schools important resources and mental health support.
- \$750,000 to fund Houses of Worship Security Grants.
- Funding for a National Guard recruitment incentive pack-

Environment and Conservation

\$63 million to create four new

Tennessee State Parks, with

- eight new state parks by the time Gov. Lee leaves office, tying a Tennessee record for the most state parks created by one administration. \$20 million to expand blueway
- trail access, which will drive tourism and economic activity across our rural communities.
- \$20 million to improve water quality at rivers, lakes and streams across the state, making them safe for future generations to enjoy and the Bill Dance Signature Lakes Fishing Trail.
- \$25 million to establish the Farmland Conservation Fund, partnering with farmers to place a conservation easement on their land to preserve and protect Tennessee for future

- generations.
- \$5 million to protect and enhance scenic beauty along our major highways.
- \$3 million for Access 2030 to make Tennessee State Parks accessible to Tennesseans with disabilities.

Governance

- Streamlining and eliminating 40% of executive branch rules.
- Statewide permitting reform.
- Protecting the music industry against AI impersonation.
- Parental consent for children to create social media accounts.

The 2024 State of the State address can be viewed in <u>full here</u>. A Fiscal Year 2023-24 budget overview can be found here.

STATE BRIEFS

The Tennessee Department of Treasury, Unclaimed Property Division returned \$68.7 million in 2023, the most money the division has ever returned in a single year. In addition to record-breaking amounts of cash property returned to the rightful owners or their heirs, local governments, and reciprocal states, the division also returned its greatest ever number of individual claims. During FY2022-23, the division returned 65,150 claims, a 4.1% increase over the previous record high of 62,549 in FY19. About 70% of claims are paid in as little as two weeks, on average. Anyone can see if they are owed any missing money by searching their name at ClaimItTN.gov, and may file a claim online if they find unclaimed property belonging to them.

Tennessee's December 2023 unemployment rate was 3.5%, holding steady from the same rate in November. Data from the Department of Labor and Workforce Development noted this rate also remained unchanged from December 2022. In a month-to-month comparison, Tennessee employers added 1,400 new nonfarm jobs across the state. The health care and social assistance sector saw the most growth in December. The construction sector recorded the next largest number of new jobs, followed by the accommodation and food services sector. A complete analysis of Tennessee's 2023 statewide unemployment data is available here.

Two Tennessee school districts have been selected to share in \$1 billion being awarded through the EPA's Clean School Bus **Grants program.** The Hardin and Warren County School systems will each receive funding to replace five older diesel school buses with new, all-electric buses. A total of 280 school districts in 37 states were awarded funds as part of the latest round of grants. To date, EPA's Clean School Bus Program has awarded nearly \$2 billion and funded approximately 5,000 electric and low-emission school buses nationwide.

The Knoxville-based Keep the Tennessee River Beautiful has celebrated several new milestones in 2018, including removing 218,729 pounds of trash from the Tennessee River. The first affiliate of Keep America Beautiful to focus solely on a river, the organization reached several milestones last year including the most volunteers in one year

at 994, most volunteers at a single event at 172, most trash removed from a single site at 31,115 pounds, a nonprofit milestone of 600,000 pounds of trash removed from the river, and a lifetime milestone of plastic recycled from more than 500,000 cigarette butts.

The first round of federal funds for electric vehicle (EV) fast-charging stations across the state has been awarded by TDOT and TDEC. The state has awarded \$21 million from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funds to 31 EV fast-charging locations to fill in gaps along the state's designated Alternative Fuel Corridors (AFC) which include Tennessee's two-digit interstate routes and US 64. The Tennessee Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (TEVI) Deployment Plan details how with federal funding the state will install EV charging infrastructure and support the establishment of an federally interconnected EV network across the nation. Federal funding through the National Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (NEVI) Program allocated \$88 million for Tennessee over five years (Fiscal Years 2022-2026). TDOT and TDEC, developed a Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) to solicit applications for the grant funding. 167 applications were received from 23 different applicants, comprised of both public and private entities. Ten of those applicants will be awarded contracts to establish 30 new charging locations throughout the state. For more information, click here.

Tennessee Promise students are earning more credits, staying enrolled, and earning more awards than non-Promise students at the same schools, according to a new evaluation from the Tennessee Comptroller's office. Researchers also found that the most common reason applicants are unable to qualify for the Tennessee Promise program is they have not completed the mandatory eight hours of service. While the Promise is a last-dollar scholarship that pays tuition and mandatory fees, it does not cover other costs such as textbooks, supplies, tools, lab fees, and other program-specific fees. The Comptroller's evaluation found that a Promise student at a community college may pay at least \$1,000 per year in out-of-pocket expenses. Students attending a Tennessee College of Applied Technology may pay as much as \$3,100 out-of-pocket. To read the 2024 evaluation, visit the Comptroller's website.

TCCY releases annual report on child welfare in Tennessee

The <u>2023 State of the Child</u> report has been released by the Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth.

Demographics from the report found 31% of Tennessee's children are under 6, 33% are aged 6 to 11, and 35% are 12 to 17. Compared to a decade before, there has been a decline in the percentage of children under 6 in the state.

Of the state's children, more than 8 in 10 attend a public school, 1 in 4 live in a household receiving some type of public assistance, 36% live in rental housing, 1 in 10 live with a grandparent rather than parents and 5% have a disability.

Key findings from the report

ECONOMICS

- Child poverty has declined in the past decade overall, but remains above the national average while child poverty for children under five increased over the past year.
- Food is the most common expense Tennessee families use their child tax credit on at 67%
- Rising costs are having a negative impact on household expenses for families while children as wages and federal poverty guidelines remain stagnant.
- Approximately 1,145 Tennessee children were homeless in 2023.

CHILDCARE & EDUCATION

- There were only nine child care centers per 1,000 children in Tennessee.

 Children

 Childre
- Childcare costs increased by an estimated \$1,253 to an average of \$8,335 per year for nonschool age children.
- school age children.TCAP scores continue to rise

with students showing improvement from pandemic learning loss

HEALTH

- 1 in 6 Tennessee children have a chronic illness or disability diagnosis with ADHD being the most common
- School nurses conducted more than 1.3 million health screenings during the 2022-3 school
- 42.8% of students are overweight with the amount of students active for at least an hour a day decreasing by 15%
- 5.3% of Tennessee children have no health insurance though they are financially eligible for programs like TennCare
- The infant mortality and maternal mortality rate both increased over the previous year
- Inhalants were the most common substance abused by teens followed by ecstasy, cocaine, meth, and heroin

WELFARE AND JUSTICE

- Parental drug abuse was the most common reason a child was entered into the foster care system (36%) followed by neglect (35%)
- 57% of children in foster care were eventually reunified with their family
- There were 111 child victims of human trafficking in the state, 94% of whom were girls.
- Youth crime has trended downward over the past decade, though increased slightly last year toward prepandemic levels
 The amount of gun crimes com-
- mitted against children have increased 133.2% over the past year with handguns being the most commonly used weapon in youth-related crimes.

17 cities to share in \$46M in TDOT grants

TDOT officials announced 17 cities will share in more \$46 million in state and federal grant funds that support multimodal investments in walking, biking, and transit statewide in Tennessee.

TN Governor Bill Lee along with Deputy Governor & TN Department of Transportation (TDOT) Commissioner Butch Eley announced six cities will receive more than \$15 million from the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) grants: Clarksville, Dickson, Jackson, Memphis, LaFollette, and Lexington were all awarded funds.

Five municipalities were also awarded eight grants as part of the total 12 successful applicants to the IMPROVE Transit Investment Grant totaling \$18,754,216. These grants were granted to transit authorities in Chattanooga, Clarksville, Gatlinburg, Knoxville, Memphis, and Nashville.

TDOT also awarded \$12,529,075 in Multimodal Access Grant (MMAG) funding for 12 projects supporting pedestrians, bicyclists, and transit users through infrastructure projects that address existing gaps along state routes. These projects were awarded to Athens, Clifton, Dickson, Erin, Fayetteville, Jackson, Knoxville, Lebanon, Lexington, Sevierville, Somerville, and Tiptonville.



This pedestrian bridge at the University of Memphis is a past recipient of a multimodal grant from TDOT.

"Increasing safety, promoting healthy lifestyles, and providing improved access to our cities and towns make our communities better places to live and work," said Gov. Lee. "I'm pleased the state can provide the support necessary to move these projects forward."

The awards announcement is for three grant programs administered through TDOT. The Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) grant is made possible through a federally funded program. A variety of activities, such as the restoration of historic facilities, bike and pedestrian trails, landscaping, and other non-traditional transportation

projects, are eligible for grant funds under the federal program. This year TDOT is awarding \$15,201,777 to seven communities.

"Since 1991, through these grants, TDOT has funded \$400 million in non-traditional transportation projects," said Deputy Governor & TDOT Commissioner Butch Eley. "This program has assisted communities across Tennessee in their efforts to revitalize downtowns, highlight historic areas, provide alternative means of transportation, and increase opportunities for economic development."

For full details on individual project awards, <u>visit here.</u>

State December revenues declined by 1.6% TN Department of Finance and the amount of \$81.4 million and the revenues for five months are \$63.7

TN Department of Finance and Administration Commissioner Jim Bryson announced revenues for December were lower than expected and were less than the monthly revenues from the previous year.

State revenues for December were \$1.9 billion or \$82.5 million less than the budgeted estimate declining 1.6%.

"Total revenues in December were lower than expected," Bryson said. "Nevertheless, sales tax receipts, reflecting November consumer activity, rebounded nicely following the state's three-month food sales tax holiday and suggests that consumer behavior remains resilient. Most of the revenue shortfall for the month can be attributed to reduced franchise and excise tax receipts and diminished revenues from real estate transaction fees, reported within the privilege tax. All other taxes combined revealed modest growth.

"Because of slowing tax collections, the administration plans to recommend a lowered revised revenue estimate for the current fiscal year. As such, we will continue to closely monitor state finances and remain committed to maintaining a balanced budget."

On an accrual basis, December is the fifth month in the 2023-2024 fiscal year.

General fund revenues were less than the budgeted estimates in

four other funds that share in state tax revenues were \$1.1 million less than the estimates.

Sales tax revenues were \$0.9 million less than the estimate for December. The December growth rate was 2.94%. For the first five months of this fiscal year, revenues are \$14.1 million higher than estimated, and the year-to-date growth rate is 1.43 percent.

Franchise and excise taxes combined were \$66.5 million less than the December budgeted estimate. Year-to-date revenues are less than estimates in the amount of \$232.3 million, or 12.68% less than the same period last year.

Gasoline and motor fuel revenues decreased by 2.46% compared to last December and were \$1.4 million less than the budgeted estimate of \$105.2 million. For five months revenues are \$2.3 million more than estimates.

Motor vehicle registration revenues were \$0.1 million less than the December estimate and on a year-to-date basis revenues are \$4.7 million less than estimates.

Tobacco tax revenues were

\$0.4 million less than the budgeted estimate of \$18.1 million. For five months, revenues are \$8.7 million less than estimated.

Privilege tax revenues were \$12

million less than the budgeted estimate of \$42.2 million. Year- to-date

revenues for five months are \$63.7 million less than the estimate.

Business tax revenues were \$2.2 million less than the December estimate and \$1.9 million less than estimates on a year-to-date basis.

Mixed drink, or liquor-by-thedrink, taxes were \$0.8 million more than the December estimate, and on a year-to-date basis, revenues are \$3.1 million more than estimates.

All other taxes combined for December were \$0.2 million more than estimated.

Year-to-date revenues for five months were \$279.9 million less than the budgeted estimate. The general fund recorded \$283.6 million in revenues less than estimates, and the four other funds recorded \$3.7 million more than estimates. Year-to-date growth for the first five months of the fiscal year is negative 1.39 percent.

The budgeted revenue estimates for 2023-2024 are based upon the State Funding Board's consensus recommendation from Nov. 28, 2022, and adopted by the first session of the 113th General Assembly in April 2023.

Also incorporated in the estimates are any changes in revenue enacted during the 2023 session of the General Assembly. These estimates are available on the state's website at https://www.tn.gov/content/tn/finance/fa/fa-budget-information/fa-budget-rev.html.

Six cities receive of state site development grants

State officials awarded site development grants to 12 recipients across the state, including six municipal properties.

Gov. Bill Lee and TN Department of Economic and Community Development Commissioner Stuart C. McWhorter announced \$17.9 million for the program, which is designed to help communities invest in infrastructure and engineering improvements to land economic development projects and achieve Select Tennessee site certification.

Awards recipients included:

- \$2 million to Bristol Essential Services for property grading at the Bristol Industrial Park
- \$98,314 to the Bolivar Industrial Development Board for due diligence studies on the Watson property

- \$740,490 to the city of Henderson for tree and property clearing at the Henderson Industrial Park
- \$50,000 to Livingston for due diligence studies at the City Industrial Park
 \$93,542 to Franklin County for
- \$93,342 to Franklin County for tree and property clearing at the East Moon property.
- \$2.1 million to Greene County for property grading at the Snapps Ferry Property
 \$3 million to Hamilton County
- for water infrastructure at Mc-Donald Farm

 • \$2 million to Haywood County
- \$2 million to Haywood County to construct an access road at the I-40 Advantage Industrial Park
- \$5 million to Dyer County for spec building construction at the Commerce Park Interstate Site
- \$1 million to Sullivan County for due diligence studies at the

- Bristol South Industrial Park
- \$1.97 million to the city of Greenfield for access road construction, property clearing, and water and sewer infrastructure at the Greenfield-Pentecost Property
- \$797,597 to the Oak Ridge Industrial Board for access road construction, property clearing, and due diligence studies at the Horizon Center Industrial Park.

The Site Development Grant program, part of the Rural Economic Opportunity Act, works in tandem with TNECD's Select Tennessee program.

Since 2016, TNECD has awarded 174 Site Development Grants across the state, totaling nearly \$85 million in assistance to local communities and generating 6,595 new jobs

Latest TN Blue Book dedicated to first responders

The latest edition of the Tennessee Blue Book will honor the state's first responders.

"I am pleased to dedicate the 2023-2024 Tennessee Blue Book to these public servants," said Tennessee Secretary of State Tre Hargett. "These heroic individuals put the well-being of their fellow citizens above their own to render lifesaving services and protect families. This dedication is a small way we can celebrate all those who have made a tremendous impact in communities across this state."

"Tennessee's first responders are some of the finest, most selfless individuals that we know in our communities," said Lt. Gov. Randy McNally (R-Oak Ridge). "We are incredibly grateful to them and their families for their heroic service; dedicating the state's new Blue Book is a small token of our appreciation to these everyday heroes."

The Volunteer State is home to more than 50,000 law enforcement, firefighters, and emergency services professionals. All continue to impact the lives of every Tennessean.

"We owe an invaluable debt to all first responders who have sworn the oath to protect our state and the people of Tennessee," said House Speaker Cameron Sexton (R-Crossville). "We'll never be able to thank them or their families enough for the sacrifices they make to keep our communities safe."

Published every two years

by the Secretary of State's office, the Tennessee Blue Book features detailed information about all three branches of state government, Tennessee history, biographies of elected and appointed officials, census data, election statistics, and more.

The 2023-2024 Blue Book will soon be available free of charge to all Tennessee residents. To request a copy of the state's definitive manual about the Tennessee State Government, citizens can soon contact their representative in the General Assembly.

They can also soon place an order with the Secretary of State's Division of Publications online at sos.tn.gov/bluebook-request

Rural cities must leverage assets, invest in amenities to reverse population losses

KNOXVILLE, from Page 1

McKearin noted urban areas rank better on the availability of housing and different housing types, rural areas rank higher in terms of housing affordability.

"It is interesting here to talk about the urban domain does better in the economy domain but rural does better in the affordability domain," he said. "Wages are higher in urban areas, but housing costs more in urban areas. The higher wages typically don't come up to meet what those housing needs are. That is why the urban area does better in terms of economy. For affordability, the rent and home values overall are typically better in rural areas."

While rural areas have more in their favor when it comes to livability, some of the gaps in service in rural areas have directly contributed to why their populations and economies are declining

Kobayashi particularly noted are how gaps in economic growth, broadband access, educational attainment and availability, health and wellness, and inclusivity are among the reasons Americans are choosing to live in urban areas.

BRIDGING ECONOMIC GAPS

Polco Principal Research Strategist Michelle Kobayashi said there are numerous strategies that rural communities can employ to bridge gaps, particularly pertaining to economic development, tourism, collaboration, and improving livability.

Rural leaders can promote and support niche industries, rural entrepreneurship, microbusinesses, and maker spaces to better grow their local economies and provide unique, new business opportunities for residents. Kobayashi said NLC has an entire guide on how small cities can support maker economies, which can in turn grow local businesses and even make cities a tourist attraction for people who come specifically to purchase those locally-made goods.

"A lot of people who have a great idea for a new company often move to an urban area," Kobayashi said. "They think that they will have more support, more mentorship opportunities, and more residents to purchase whatever they are providing. What we found is that rural communities can do a great job of supporting these folks who are trying to start a business. It's actually more affordable to start in rural communities. We are also seeing more of a focus on maker economies where there is more focus on people who make things. That could be someone who has a store on Etsy or someone doing light manufacturing."

Smaller businesses and makerspaces can also help fill up vacant spaces in downtowns as well as attract more people to those areas, especially those visitors and shoppers who enjoy purchasing things



Comfort Foods is one local businesses that uses Unicoi's Mountain Harvest Kitchen. In addition to teaching cooking classes, the main goal is to foster food-related business start-ups by providing a certified commercial kitchen to give entrepreneurs a chance to begin with a safety net before taking steps toward larger investments. The kitchen also provides supply and distribution chain assistance, manufacturing guidelines, state and local food regulations, and introduction to the local market.

they just so manufactured.

Agriculture can also provide important opportunities for rural communities, especially as niche, and organic, farm-to-table products become popular, helping re-envision the traditional family farm.

"We know that we are losing about 3,000 acres every day of family land," Kobayashi said. "Farmers who are trying to stay in business are changing and adapting what they do. What we are finding is an uprising in niche or specialty products, such as growing honey, lavender, goat cheese, and wineries. Farmers are trying to find new ways to produce products that don't create a large volume but can sell at higher prices, especially because of trends toward natural food sources, protecting the environment, and all the people who are foodies."

Communities can support this type of agritourism through supporting farmers' markets, community gardens and kitchens, promoting farm-direct sales, allowing pop-up shops to serve as test-runs for local businesses, and allowing food truck events.

Likewise, tourism can help strengthen both rural economics and provide improved livability. Many rural communities have built successful tourism industries centered around agritourism, educational experiences, entertainment venues, hospitality services like wedding and event venues, sports tourism, festivals and events, and their unique cultural heritage and history.

Rural communities that work together can also better support

business communities, boost civic engagement, and bridge gaps and divides. One tactic many smaller communities have used is creating economic clusters where several communities in a region band together to recruit a specific industry or sector.

"An example of a rural cluster is in North Carolina where a number of communities all worked together to recruit a number of boatmakers," Kobayashi said. "A lot of these businesses moved to the same area of the country, creating a regional cluster. This not only drew people who are looking for boats to come visit but also developed

a cluster of people with a specific skillset. There were people being trained in practices about building boats. There are also services surrounding boat manufacturing that now make sense to have in that area. Your town and one small business may not be enough, but working with other small towns to recruit an industry cluster may be a way to put your town on the map and get well-known."

Having resources for secondary education – especially community and technical colleges, can also help bridge gaps in rural communities, both in terms of upskilling local talents and support-

ing small business and innovation.

IMPROVING LIVABILITY

Perhaps the biggest challenge for rural communities is providing amenities that are widely perceived as only being present in urban areas. Kobayashi said studies show that residents often would prefer to live in more rural areas, but they are held back from a lack or perceived lack of access to the amenities that may be more widely available in urban centers.

Broadband access is often the biggest factor that determines if a community is "livable" for residents.

"Amenity migration is something that is happening and has been predicted to happen once technology got to a place where people could work from home." Kobayashi said. "Traditionally, we always lived by where we worked. That has been disentangled now due to technology and the pandemic. People are moving to places where there are amenities. They want places where they can be outdoors, hunt, fish, ride their bikes, and practice photography. They want downtowns where they know people and can go to have a cup of coffee or a drink. They want a sense of community. But they need broadband access to do that."

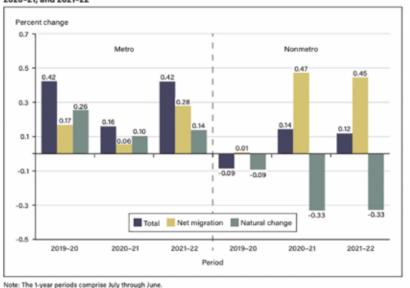
Certain amenities can help provide this sense of community such as vibrant downtowns, opportunities for active lifestyles, and outdoor spaces for public events. Rural communities can do a lot to show they provide a healthy economy, diverse employment opportunities, quality government services, and build community trust.

A sense of community connection can also be a major asset for providing livability in rural

for providing livability in rural areas. Kobayashi said residents with a sense of neighborliness but also a sense that their community is equitable and inclusive.

Population Change in Metro and Non-Metro Areas

Population change and components of change, metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas, 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22



Note: The 1-year periods comprise July through June.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census.

Net migration: # of movers (in - out)

Natural Change = births - deaths

Despite some initial migration at the onset of the pandemic, rural communities are largely loosing their populations. While many people would prefer to live in rural communities the lack of access to necessities like broadband, healthcare, and economic opportunities is keeping them in urban centers.

No loan is too large or too small



The Town of Oakland closed a \$7 million public building authority loan with the Tennessee Municipal Bond Fund to finance water and sewer projects. The town has used TMBF programs since 2021. Pictured are Town Recorder Yvonne Bullard, Mayor H.Michael Brown, TMBF Marketing Representative Justin Hanson and Town Manager Harvey Ellis.



The City of Loretto has used the TMBF loan programs since 2021. The most recent closing was a \$2 million public building authority draw loan to be used to finance various public works projects. The loan was provided by a local bank, Bank of Frankewing in Pulaski. Pictured are City Recorder Jennifer Augustin, Mayor Steve McMaster and TMBF Marketing Representative Kevin Krushenski.



See us for your special projects needs (615) 255-1561

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TN Fire Safety Inspectors TN Assn. of Floodplain Management TN Assn. Housing & Redevel. Auth.

TN Municipal Attorneys Assn. TN Municipal Judges Conference TN Chapter, American Public Works TN Recreation and Parks Assn.

TN Chapter, American Planning TN Personnel Management Assn. TN Assn. of Public Purchasing

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Terrifying new tactic used to harass public officials

Swatting — falsely reporting a serious emergency to provoke aggressive police response — is on the rise. Fighting this dangerous and distracting trend remains challenging, both legally and technologically.

By CARL SMITH Governing

In recent years, public officials have unfortunately grown used to protesters showing up at their homes. Now, they face a new form of harassment, known as swatting. People are calling in false reports of shootings or bombs, drawing law enforcement, including SWAT teams, to people's homes.

With police on high alert, this raises the risk that responses could turn deadly. "This is an assassination attempt," Brandon Williams, a Republican member of Congress from New York, said after being victimized at his home on Christmas Day.

Williams is not alone. Lately, there's been a rash of incidents involving government officials, including Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, Missouri Attorney General Jay Ashcroft, Georgia Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene and Maine Secretary of State Shenna Bellows, as well as Jack Smith, the special counsel investigating former President Donald Trump.

The practice of knowingly making a false report about a crime or emergency to provoke a response by law enforcement originated among gamers as a prank. Once relatively rare, it's happened more often in recent years and touched more segments of the population, including students calling in false reports to shut down schools on test days and the like. Swatting's spread is creating pressure on legislators and law enforcement to find ways to contain it.

It's hard to form an exact sense of the scale of the problem. Swatting is not a specific crime in federal law. While several states have enacted laws defining the crime of swatting and creating penalties for it, local law enforcement agencies may simply categorize it as a false police report. A collaborative effort between the FBI and local law enforcement to track swatting incidents has counted more than 550 since it was launched in May 2023.

The old consensus, that swatting doesn't happen often enough to be a priority, is now harder to sustain. It's difficult to find the path toward reducing the potential for harm, however, because this would involve technology, emergency infrastructure, school administration and more than one section of criminal codes.

There's a fundamental di-

Despite early fears of a re-

cession, the U.S. economy

grew by 3.1% in 2023, buoyed

by a resilient labor market

and strong consumer spend-

ing. The year was capped by

fourth-quarter growth of 3.3%

as household and govern-

ment spending rose. While the

growth rate was slower than the

4.9% pace over the summer, it

NATIONAL BRIEFS

lemma in swatting, which takes its name from the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams sent to deal with serious emergencies. Even if a dispatcher suspects a hoax, they are obligated to send a response. It's too much of a risk to do otherwise. No 911 call sounds "right," says Tina Chaffin, who has worked as a 911 dispatcher for several Texas law enforcement agencies.

Swatters find personally identifying information for their targets through Internet searches, or they may buy it from data brokers or acquire it illegally through phishing, text messages or other means. Readily available phone apps and Internet phone services allow them to conceal their identity and display a false phone number, while possibly altering their voice. Such spoofing can create the impression that they are calling from the location of an emergency, or a neighboring home.

Automatic number identification and automatic location identifier technology can indicate that a call is not, in fact, coming from where the caller claims to be located. But even authentic calls can look questionable, Chaffin says. The portability of cellphone numbers is another problem. When landlines were the norm, she was never in doubt that a call that appeared to be from Dallas really was. That's not true in the age of cellphones, when so many people retain numbers from states where they haven't lived for years.

Chaffin trains dispatchers and has published a free course covering best practices for dealing with swatting calls. There are signals that a call may be swatting, such as background sounds that don't match the event being reported. A dispatcher will send a response team in every case, but they can pass along what they have observed.

Only two fatalities have been associated with swatting, but every swatter creates danger by diverting resources needed for real emergencies. Chaffin is currently traveling around the country to help support understaffed agencies, where dispatcher shortages can run as much as 40 to 60%.

"Stand your ground" laws in Texas and other states mean serious risk for first responders; homeowners surprised by strangers bursting into their homes have the right to

Last year, a good portion of swatting attacks originated from outside the country, Klinger says, sometimes targeting multiple schools simultaneously. She's concerned that the disruption they caused, and the media attention they received, might inspire other bad actors.

2024 with the Federal Reserve

likely to cut interest rates to sup-

The U.S. labor market added

353,000 jobs in January, a sign

of vigorous economic growth.

The Labor Department reported

that unemployment remained at

3.7%, information that is likely

to reinforce the Fed's patience

port the economy.

Lauren Shapiro, an associate professor at CUNY's John Jay College of Criminal Justice, dedicated a chapter to swatting in her 2023 book, Cyberpredators and Their Prey. Federal statutes relating to matters including interstate communications and threats, protection of personal information of public officials, access device fraud and wire fraud and conspiracy have all informed federal prosecutions of swatters, she writes. State prosecutions have used similar statutes, with charges ranging from misdemeanor to felony.

The integral role of technology in perpetrating swatting makes it an interstate matter, Shapiro says, and fair and equal treatment of offenders would be best accomplished if federal law established definitions and penalties for the crime. States could use this as the basis of their own statutes.

Clear definitions would help with accurate counting and uniform sentencing, but these aren't the only benefits. Accurate counts could guide funding allocations to train dispatchers, pay detectives to find perpetrators of anonymous crimes and provide support to responders experiencing the same stresses that come with real events as well as the moral injury of being exploited for a malicious purpose.

There have been attempts at a federal statute since the early 2000s, Shapiro says. Critics of such proposals have said they violate First Amendment rights to free speech and Fourth Amendment rights to privacy. "Sometimes there's a fear that if we criminalize reporting that a crime is occurring to 911 and a crime is not occurring, you could be charged," says Shapiro.

But there may be more impetus to act now that members of Congress and other prominent officials have been targeted. A new bill was introduced in Congress this month, which has the backing of the National Association of Police Organizations and the National Sheriffs' Association.

Up to this point, swatting has seldom had a fatal consequence, but it's harassment that can cause false arrest, reputational damage and cost local governments thousands of dollars — even tens of thousands - per incident. Ongoing problems recruiting and retaining officers mean that there are none to spare for false reports.

The swatters that have been arrested are predominantly juveniles and young adults. Chaffin's school presentations are built on an unflinching message: "Not only are we going to catch you and you could be in trouble, you are potentially putting someone's life in danger."

prior two months, bringing the

average monthly job gain in 2023

to 255,000. The biggest growth

was in the professional and busi-

ness services sector followed by

healthcare. Mining and logging

was the only major sector to lose

jobs. Wages have also been grow-

ing faster than historical rates

with a strong increase in pro-

ductivity balancing those higher



Feb. 24: Oak Ridge International Festival

The Children's Museum of Oak Ridge hosts this family-friendly event that highlights cultures from across the world.

Feb. 24: Townsend

Tennessee Winter Beer Fest

Breweries from across Tennessee will gather at Company Distilling in Townsend. Learn more about craft breweries in East Tennessee and beyond. All proceeds from the festival go to support the Blount County Children's Advocacy Center.

March 1-2: Etowah

Cousin Jack Tullock Memorial Bluegrass Festival

Hosted by the Etowah Arts Commission, the Cousin Jake Memorial Bluegrass Festival, established in 1994, is an annual event that celebrates bluegrass music and honors the late Jake Tullock.

March 2-3: Pigeon Forge

Chuck Wagon Cook-off

Pigeon Forge invites western lifestyle enthusiasts, foodies, and those in search of a hearty meal to the annual Chuck Wagon Cook-off Weekend. This three-day event includes a dinner concert, cowboy church, and cooking competition at Clabough's Campground.

March 15-17: Lenoir City

Harmony in the Hollow This music and arts festival

celebrates the beauty of Appalachian music, the enchantment of Celtic traditions, and the boundless creativity of the fantasy genre.

March 16: Bell Buckle Daffodil Day

This quaint little festival began in 1978 to celebrate the coming of Spring and the thousands of daffodils that line the roads and farmlands for a six mile stretch of highway leading into Bell

March 16: Erin

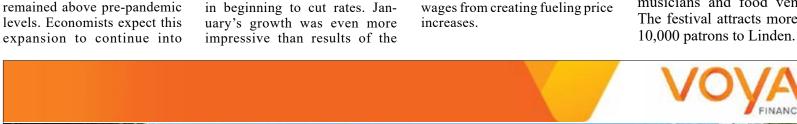
62nd Annual Irish Celebration

This annual celebration of Erin's Irish heritage featuring a Leprechaun Parade, Grand Parade, a carnival, food and craft vendors, entertainment, and visitors from across the country and world.

March 22-23: Linden

16th Annual Blooming Arts **Festival**

Blooming Arts Festival has grown to feature more than 150 exhibitors, including artisans, musicians and food vendors. The festival attracts more than





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Ed Stewart, ChFC, CLU, CF **Financial Advisor**

Clarksville black history trail models how cities can preserve heritage

By KATE COIL TT&C Assistant Editor

From an Olympic athlete to music stars to medical professionals, the city of Clarksville is home to numerous important people and places in African-American history.

Highlighting these contributions is the Clarksville-Montgomery County African American Legacy Trail, a growing list of more than 40 destinations both locals and tourists can visit via maps on their smart phones and computers. Michelle Dickerson, senior director of marketing and public relations for Visit Clarksville said that, of the dozens of trails Visit Clarksville makes available for visitors, the African-American Legacy Trail is easily the most popular.

What began as a labor of love from a few local residents has brought the Clarksville community together in unexpected ways and is continuing to teach visitors and Clarksvillians about the city's heritage.

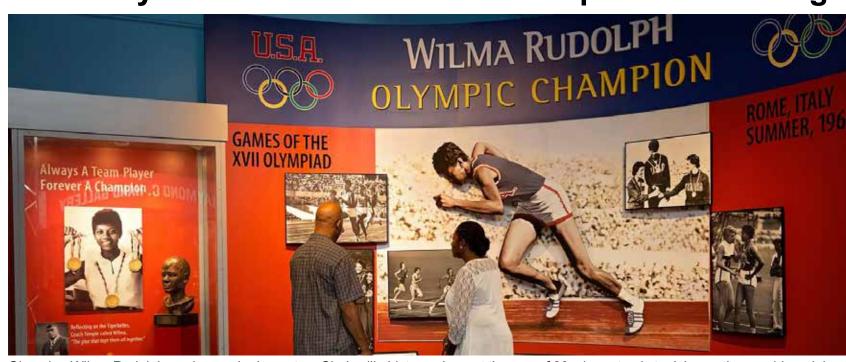
COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS

Clarksville Mayor Joe Pitts said the trail began with a small group of local residents who wanted to bring together the collected stories of Clarksville's African-American history.

"Every cause needs a champion, so you need to find the champions," Pitts said. "If you have someone who is passionate about doing this, support them and get resources to them. If you are an elected official, use your bully-pulpit to promote it. It starts with someone or a small group of people who want to get involved."

Clarksville found their champions in local publisher and Deputy Montgomery County Historian Shana Thornton, Bethel University Recruiter Terry Morris, and local historian Jerome Parcham. The three gathered a focus group that included the then-vice president of Clarksville's NAACP, other historians, and community leaders to determine how to proceed. The group then reached out to Clarksville's city leaders, county officials, and community members who could help promote the trail or volunteer their time and talents.

"I think reaching out to our mayor, city council, and our local state representative was so valuable," Thornton said. "Just going to them and saying, 'this is what we are thinking about, what do you



Olympian Wilma Rudolph made a major impact on Clarksville history when, at the age of 20, she not only took home three gold medals at the Rome Olympics but also refused to let her hometown host a parade in her honor unless it was integrated. The impact of her decision is still felt in Clarksville today. Rudolph is one of several prominent African-American residents of Clarksville whose histories are told on the African-American Legacy Trail.

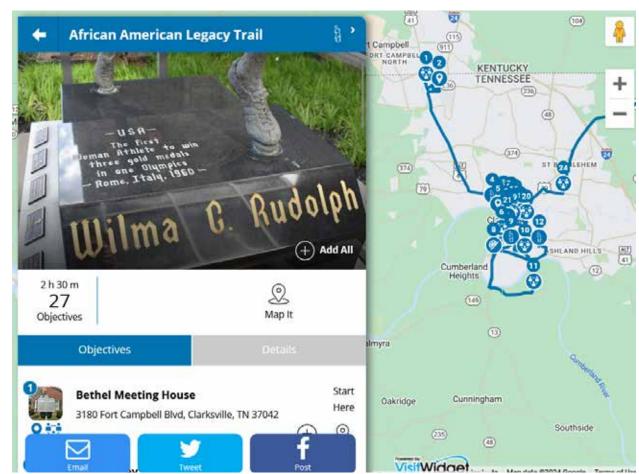
think, and how can you help us?' was important. All those offices, organizations, and government entities are important because they help see that full picture."

For a community wanting to make a similar trail, Thornton advises first connecting with local historians to see what resources they already have. In Clarksville, a lot of research had already been done for state historical markers that could then be folded into the larger trail. Thornton also advises reaching out to civic organizations like the NAACP, chamber and tourism officials, and local churches to help make connections, build support, and gather information.

CREATING THE TRAIL

Before launching the trail, Thornton and Morris set certain parameters for what they would include. Criteria included that people the trail focused on had to be deceased and that only publicly-owned properties would be included in the trail, unless owners of privately-owned land gave their permission.

Once the information was gathered and locations for stops on the trail were determined, it was time to put the information into a format that visitors and residents could use. A teacher and students from Rossview High School Academy of Media Arts and Technology volunteered their skills to create a logo, physical brochure, and capture art and photographs of the trail.



The self-guided African-American Legacy Trail can be accessed via the Visit Clarksville website or downloaded from the Apple and Google Play stores. Users can take their own time and digitally check in at a variety of stops in and around the city that tell the stories of African-American residents. Once travelers have checked in at all stops, they can receive a prize from Visit Clarksville.

Visit Clarksville officials offered to both promote the trail and use a function on their website to create a digital version of the trail. Those who complete trails can earn rewards from Visit Clarksville.

"We were glad to be able to package it, pitch it to media, and put it in our app," Dickerson said. "We also have a challenge system where you plan an itinerary and users can digitally check in at a designated number of spots. We create custom-designed pins for each trail that people can then collect form us when they finish the trail."

Trails can be used on the Visit Clarksville website or downloaded in the Apple and Store or on Google Play. The digital aspect of the trail makes access easier for both those using the trail and those creating it.

"In the digital world, you can go in and update anytime," Dickerson said. "Rather than having to wait for the next printed edition or the next year, we can make those updates instantaneously. It keeps it a living document. You can also start wherever you are and its proximity-based location, so it directs you to the next location. It is a long trail, but you don't have to do it all at once. You can check-in over a couple of weekends. The fact that it's flexible makes it more accessible for visitors

and residents."

Morris said the trail has already grown beyond its original scope as more people come forward with stories, history, and personal experiences from the trail.

"The map Visit Clarksville built was just amazing," he said. "The trail originally had 19 people and places. We now have 45 people and places you can visit. The mayor's office told us to go ahead and launch, to not wait until it was perfect. This has allowed us to grow and build on it."

Mayor Pitts said the trail is a major asset for both residents and visitors to Clarksville.

"It's free, so the price is right. It's self-paced and self-guided, so you can do as much or as little as you want to," he said. "You can do it in groups or individually. There is always something new to discover on this trail, and I think people will be pleasantly surprised how much information is on this trail. I think every community needs to do this. As elected leaders, we have to make sure we promote these things and encourage them."

SPREADING THE WORD

The trail has already begun to grow beyond the city limits of Clarksville. Thornton said community support for the trail has been "overwhelming" with numerous residents and visitors reaching out to talk about how much they enjoyed taking and learning from the trail. Others have reached out with new stories and information that have helped the trail grow.

Dickerson said the African-American Legacy Trail is the most popular digital trail Visit Clarksville hosts.

"We have hundreds of people who access the digital trails, and the African-American Legacy Trail always has the highest numbers," she said. "It's also the longest trail, by far. It's so educational, and people don't know what they don't know. It's been a great learning opportunity for both locals and visitors to understand more about Clarksville's history and heritage."

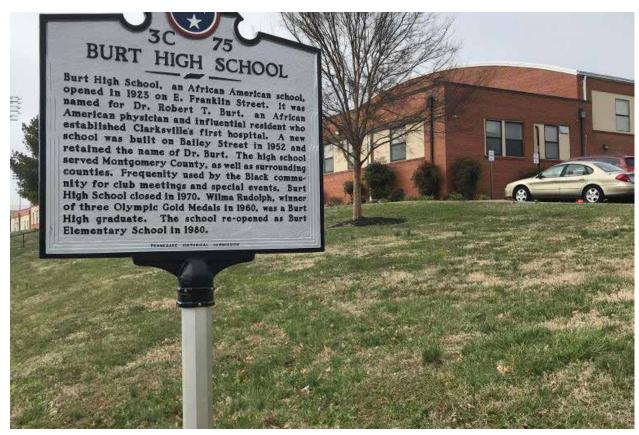
Pitts said the finished project was even better than what he expected.

"I give them all the credit," he said. "Clarksville has a rich African-American history, and it's a history that needs to be celebrated and recognized. There are some names on here that may not be familiar names to people, but there are also some names, buildings, parks, and community centers that will be familiar. There is a lot to celebrate within these various locations around our community."

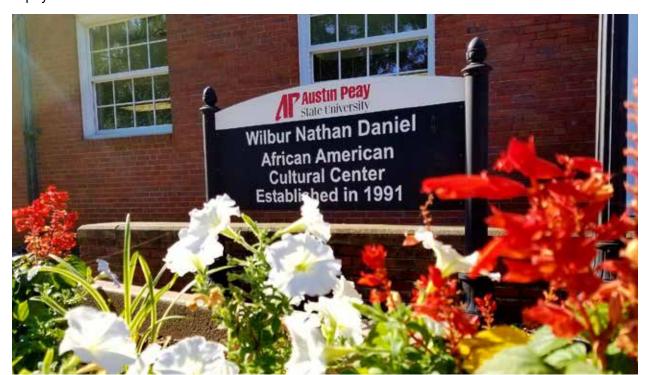
The trail is also drawing interest from those who want to create something similar in their own community. Morris said tourism officials from the St. Paul, Minn., area have contacted them with the hopes of touring the trail themselves and getting more information on how it was built so they can create their own African-American Legacy Trail using grant funds in the future.

Dickerson said the trail is a way to tell Clarksville's story in a way that reaches more people and builds a sense of community.

"It's an important part of our local history, and those stories, they're very impressive," she said. "It's a point of community pride, but it's also important to understand the culture of a place and who laid the groundwork that makes the community what it is today. Visitors now want those immersive experiences. Navigating a trail to hear and learn about people, standing where they stood, gives them that enriched experience."



Named for Dr. Robert Burt, Burt High School was not only important as the city's African-American High School per-desegregation but also a symbol of the city's most influential residents. Dr. Burt founded the city's first hospital and was known for not turning away patients based on skin color or their ability to pay for services.



Community resources, like local churches, civic organizations, historians, and the Wilbur Nathan Daniel African American Cultural Center at Austin Peay helped provide background and context for many of the stops on the trail. The center is named for the first black student to attend Austin Peay.