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FEBRUARY 2025

The Rant

SANFORD, NORTH CAROLINA

Monthly

Support for the supporters

SCHOOL DISTRICT'S CLASSIFIED STAFF AND THEIR FIGHT FOR BETTER PAY

ALSO INSIDE: EL MOLCAJETE SPOTLIGHT | SNOW DAY PHOTOS | EVENT CALENDAR



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The Rant *Monthly*

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Editorial

Gordon Anderson | gordon@rantnc.com
Billy Liggett | billy@rantnc.com
Jonathan Owens | jonathan@rantnc.com
Richard Sullins | richard@rantnc.com

Advertising

Nate Ewing | advertising@rantnc.com | (919) 478-0560

Contributors

Ben Brown

Editorial Board

Russ Grimm, Jeff Bostic, Mark May, Joe Jacoby, George Starke
Fred Dean, Don Warren, Rick Walker and Joe Bugel

Find Us Online:

www.rantnc.com
Facebook: facebook.com/therant905
Twitter: twitter.com/therant905
Instagram: instagram.com/therantnc



The Rant Monthly is located in beautiful Sanford, North Carolina.
Please address all correspondence to LPH Media LLC, 3096 South Horner
Boulevard #126, Sanford, NC, 27332. Editorial email: billy@rantnc.com.
Advertising email: advertising@rantnc.com

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We're not scaremongering. This is really happening.

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OPEN EVERYDAY!
MONDAY - SATURDAY
10:00AM - 5:00PM
SUNDAY 1:00PM - 5:00PM

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COLD OPEN

Support staff salary fight reflects a national struggle

One of my family's closest friends — someone who's known my children since birth, watched over them in pre-school and has been there for us for nearly 15 years — is a Lee County Schools classified employee.

And she's done it all for the district. She has been a teacher's assistant. She's driven the bus. She took on outside-of-the-box roles during the pandemic. And she's done all of this because she loves children, and as my family can attest, children love her.

She's the person I think about when I read stories written by *The Rant's* Richard Sullins about the ongoing fight for better pay that our district's support staff has endured for the past year.

This month's edition of *The Rant Monthly* takes a closer look at that fight, led by April Stone, an instructional assistant and bus driver at Lee County High School who spoke on behalf of her colleagues the Board of Education meeting in November. As you'll see in this month's story, co-written by *The Rant's* Gordon Anderson and Sullins, the hundreds of classified employees — those who don't require certification to hold their jobs in the district — have gone a long time without significant pay raises.

Stone, before the board, called the district's proposed answer both a step in the right direction and a "slap in the face." Others have deemed the current situation



a "failure" on the part of both the board of education and the board of commissioners.

Public education in North Carolina already has a fight on its hands with a government that supports more funding for private schools and less support for the teachers and support staff charged with educating the vast majority of our country's children. This is a microcosm of that much larger fight, but it's no less important.

We invite you to read this month's cover story and decide for yourself whether or not these staff members are justified in their demands. If you have children who attend our public schools, it's a story that has a big impact on your children's education.

— Billy Liggett

FOUR BEST ANIMATED TEACHERS OF ALL TIME

We're fans of cartoons, and we're fans of teachers. This list only made sense.



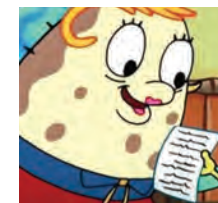
Miss Krabappel

Bart's teacher is the gold standard of animated educators.



Mr. Garrison

We didn't say they had to be particularly good teachers, mmmkay?



Mrs. Puff

The patience of a saint, Mrs. Puff deserves every award out there.



Ms. Teacher

Any teacher who shouts "shut your pork traps" is A-OK in our book.



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LEE COUNTY GOVERNMENT

Parks & Recreation

FEBRUARY HAPPENINGS

Athletics

Spring T-Ball

Opening February 3, 2025; \$30

- Boys & Girls ages 3-6 as of May 1, 2025
- OT Sloan T-Ball Complex

8U Coach Pitch Baseball & Softball

Opening February 3, 2025; \$50

- Boys & Girls ages 7-8 as of May 1, 2025
- Dalrymple Park

10U, 12U, & 14U Baseball

Opening February 3, 2025; \$50

- Boys ages 9-14 as of May 1, 2025
- Tramway Road Park

11U & 14U Softball

Opening February 3, 2025; \$50

- Girls ages 9-14 as of January 1, 2025
- 11U @ Tramway Road Park
- 14U @ Buchanan Park

Adult Softball (16+)

Opening February 3, 2025; \$625/team

- @ Lett Family Park



Programs

Youth Art Classes

Opens: Feb. 3, 2025; \$60

- Ages 5-15; New Projects/session
- Bob Hales Center @ 5:30PM
- Classes on M, T, W, or Th

San-Lee Park Intersession Camp

Opens: Feb. 3, 2025; \$120/week

- Ages 5-12
- Weeks of March 10, March 17 & April 14



Gymnastics

Session 2: March 3 - May 3

Various Ages: Walking - Adults

Various Skill levels; All Abilities

Opens: Feb. 10, 2025

- Cost: Varies \$45 - \$180



Special Olympics

Basketball

Registration Closes: Feb 14

- Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities
- Ages 8+
- Free



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TUBERCULOSIS CASE REPORTED AT ASCEND LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

A case of tuberculosis was reported to the Lee County Health Department at the Ascend Leadership Academy charter school in Sanford recently, and an unspecified number of parents were notified that their children may have been exposed, *The Rant* reported on January.

The instance of the infectious bacterial disease was reported to the county sometime prior to Jan. 13, and testing was conducted for those who were potentially exposed on Jan. 14.

Tuberculosis is rare in the United States and can prove fatal if untreated, although it is “completely curable with medications,” according to the a notice the county provided for the school to give to parents, which also clarifies that a diagnosis of tuberculosis is “NOT immediately life threatening nor an emergency.”

Further, the notice says “a positive TB skin test or blood test does not mean that your child is sick with TB. If your child has a positive TB skin test, he or she will need a chest x-ray to check for signs of TB illness in the lungs.” It was unclear whether any other students showed signs of exposure that required further testing.

A tuberculosis vaccine exists, but isn’t generally administered to patients in the United States.

Ascend Leadership Academy didn’t respond to an email seeking comment. ALA is a sixth- through 12th-grade tuition-free public charter school that serves students in Lee and Harnett counties. The school’s total enrollment in 2023 was approximately 560 students.

— Gordon Anderson

Lee Christian preschool ordered to cease operations by state

By Gordon Anderson

richard@rantnc.com

A preschool program affiliated with Lee Christian School in Sanford was ordered to cease operations by the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services after a number of visits to the program turned up multiple alleged violations of child care requirements.

The claims made by NCDHHS include a range of alleged violations by the Lee Christian K-4 Program on Keller Andrews Road in Sanford, from inadequate child supervision (the report claims “a staff member failed to supervise two-year-old children when two children were laying on the floor chewing on shoes” as a staff member “look(ed) at her phone” and that two children were “seen on two instances standing on top of two shelves while the teachers in that space look(ed) on without addressing them”) to substandard child to staff ratios, as well as sanitation and other alleged violations, including staff changing the diapers of children and failing to wash their hands before serving food.

Additional allegations include restraining children as a form of discipline when the child’s safety and the safety of other children wasn’t at risk, failure to clean and disinfect diaper changing stations, a spray bottle of cleaning solution left within reach of a two-year-old child, and others. Read the entire document here.

The cease order was delivered to Lee Christian K-4 on Dec. 18. The program had 30 days to file an appeal and remains operational pending any such development (*The Rant* has been unable to verify whether Lee Christian K-4 has filed any such appeal.”).

If Lee Christian appeals, the program will be able to remain open while the appeal is considered. The notice indicates that “subsidized child care payments” would cease 45 days from the issuance of the notice.

Lee Christian Head of School Andrew Ricabal didn’t respond to an email seeking comment.

The action by NCDHHS goes back to at least the fall of 2023, when state regulators

made the first of 15 visits to the program to investigate possible violations of child care requirements. Between September 14, 2023 and November 4, 2024, NCDHHS identified 29 violations “regarding staff/child ratios, supervision, discipline, safe environment, sanitation, criminal background checks, developmentally appropriate activities, staff records, program records, and children records, including multiple repeated violations,” according to the order.

“Violations of child care requirements have been willful, continual, and hazardous to the health and safety of children as evidenced by a pattern of non-compliance, the operator has not made efforts to correct repeated

violations or is unable to comply, and the violations are hazardous to the health and safety of children,” the order reads.

After NCDHHS notified Lee Christian that the cease order was being considered, the school “was given the opportunity to provide information about why the action should not be taken.” Lee Christian “subsequently submitted information that was considered by the Division of Child Development and Early Education. After considering that information, the Division of Child Development and Early Education decided to proceed with issuance of the Order to Cease Operation.”

READER RESPONSE

They just happen to be the center that got caught. These facilities need cameras in classrooms just like they should be in place in nursing homes. You don’t truly know what goes on in these places until you work there. Your child does not get better treatment just because of the word Christian in the name. It’s sad and unfortunate.

Tina Fish

As an advocate for young children for many years, I find this alarming but appreciate that such information is being shared with the public. Our young children are least able to speak for themselves. We (citizens) must be diligent in protecting their safety and wellbeing. Thanks for this article.

Lyn Hankins

My children attended the school last year, we sent numerous emails to the school board about serious issues: bullying, uneducated teachers, convicted criminals coaching teams, safety issues, teachers and coaches using profanity, lack of discipline and, concerns over the

behavior and actions of the head of school. My children no longer attend Lee Christian. There are some amazing teachers at the school, but they are treated horribly, and every year more teachers continue to leave. The more concerning part is that the majority of the board are pastors, and they are allowing all of this to happen at Lee Christian School, so what does that say about what is probably allowed in the churches they lead. Under the current leadership, Lee Christian will no longer exist in a few years.

Amanda L.

Sad that the governing body of the school has allowed this to happen, especially when the body is made up for the most part by men who are pastors in our local churches. Could be they were not informed or misinformed of what was taking place, but now that they are, let’s hope they are developing a plan to put God back where he belongs and that is first in all things. My prayers continue for all involved, but more so for the children. The safety and well being of the children must never be compromised.

Roger Garrett

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[FirstHealth.org/HeartQuiz](https://www.FirstHealth.org/HeartQuiz)

EVEN A FOOD FEATURE CAN LEAD TO HATRED, RACISM FROM SOME

Our first 2025 edition of *The Rant Monthly* celebrated the plethora of fantastic Mexican and Latin American food restaurants in Sanford and the men and women who run them.

Most of the owners are either first-generation or second-generation Americans, and we are celebrating their accomplishments at a time when our government is unabashedly against the idea of the United States being a refuge for the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

The story was mostly a hit with our readers, leading to several comments about other great places in the city that weren't mentioned (we're going to continue highlighting more restaurants throughout the year, beginning on Page 22 in this edition). But disappointingly (but not surprisingly), our story was met with disdain from some readers.

“No more Spanish in Lowes Home Improvement stores” wrote one anonymous reader. We're not sure how Lowes got roped into this, but the comment continued with a story about how their uncle was once set home for speaking German at school. “No more Spanish masses,” they wrote. “Latin, yes, but Spanish, no, teach them English, if you were truly Christians.”

Sigh.

“What do you expect from a sanctuary city?” wrote another reader. And so on, and so on.

We're happy to report that the hatred and the racism wasn't predominant, but that it popped up at all in a harmless story about great food is, again, disappointing.

But when our government is employing hard and fast tactics on immigration and DEI that only further the divide between our very diverse country, what can we expect?

You can expect us to continue to highlight these businesses and enjoy other cultures. And we can continue to call out those who wish to spread hatred.

OPINION

SUPPORT STAFF RESPECT

Lee County Schools support workers, known as “classified staff,” seem to be getting ping-ponged back and forth between the county commissioners and the school board as they search for someone to step forward and push for across-the-board raises. The Rant has reported on the issue several times in the last few months, and the subject is the focus of this month's cover story in The Rant Monthly. Here's what some of our readers have to say on the issue:

Shame, shame, shame on each and every member of the school board and the county commissioners for allowing these much-needed employees to work for 16 years without a pay raise. That is extremely irresponsible and a slap in the face to the dedicated men and women that have continued to show up for work every day, while being so under appreciated by our commissioners and school board.

I am very grateful for these selfless people for their dedication to our most valuable and precious treasure, our children. It is a shame that the “powers that be” don't feel the same way. Maybe the powers that be should be no more come election time. Unfortunately these employees need help immediately.

Claudia Watts

You know it is sad that a valued teacher chose to resign over the holidays because of inadequate pay. I feel so bad for the students who have study hall for a class and for teachers who are filling in for vacancies and working through their lunch breaks. It's so unfair! You can build all these new communities and rebuild downtown Sanford, but you can't pay teachers a decent salary? This is pathetic.

Claudia Campbell

To take advantage of the love and compassion these employees feel for the students is downright shameful, and we all know this is why the classified staff show up, stay and



“At least we got our Gulf back.”

do the job — they love our kids more than their pay. I hope more people in our community start to show up at these meetings for the school board and the commissioners to support our classified staff. Everyone in town knows or is related to someone who is pouring their heart and soul into our kids, and we need to show up for them. I can't imagine not getting a raise for over a decade and a half and making \$16 an hour working that long, knowing that I'm making the same as someone who just started.

Katherine Perry

School board members and county commissioners need to wake up! Two school board members ran on a platform that they would take back the Lee County Schools finance officers' raise and didn't

do it. It's a shame when there is so much favoritism being played to certain staff. If the central office had to live off the classifieds salary, they would quit. They need to stop the wasteful spending and put that money towards the classified staff, period! Wasted money to buy out the previous superintendent's contract and wasted money to search for a new superintendent, wasted money on a salary study ... and still, we haven't resolved this issue.

Kathleen Rosser

With the way laws are written in North Carolina, these people can not strike but if they all took a sick day at the same time it would shut the schools down.

Ron Noles

DEGENERATIVE AI

We all hate a dynasty, but I loathe a rival even more

By Billy Liggett

Nobody — except maybe the few million people who live in Missouri and Kansas — wanted to see the Kansas City Chiefs in the Super Bowl this year. Nothing against the lovable Andy Reid and the Swifties, but once a team (whether it's the pros or college) reaches the pinnacle and begins to dominate its sport, we are a country that loves to turn on them.



How dare we strive for greatness? It's the reason so many in this country hate the Yankess. The Lakers. The Cowboys. Alabama football. Duke basketball. Tom Brady.

Sure, there are a few who escaped the hatred and yet ruled their respective sports worlds. Michael Jordan remained beloved during his six-title run, and I think that's because he never fully embraced the limelight. He stayed nasty. Americans respect that.

The Chiefs, on the other hand, are easy to hate. Patrick Mahomes is in every commercial. The Travis and Taylor thing is tired. And Chiefs fans are starting to become

insufferable. The country joined together in a respective annoyed sigh when Kansas City topped the scrappy underdogs from blue collar Buffalo yet again to advance for a chance at a first-ever three-peat.

I understand your fatigue, America. We love an underdog, but when they rise to the ranks of dominant, we're ready for the next underdog. Just like we'd be happy if our neighbor won the lottery, but jealously peeved the moment they drove home in a Ferrari.

And I would support your protest of a third straight championship this month if the Chiefs were playing any other team. But they're playing the Philadelphia Eagles. And if there's one thing I hate more than unmatched success, it's the Philadelphia Eagles.

You may recall a year and a half ago, I was in Philly to visit my sister and take in an Eagles-Cowboys game, and I later wrote about the experience. My then 9-year-old son joined me, and while I didn't flaunt my Dallas fandom openly, my very mild blue and silver shirt led to some of the nastiest words ever uttered my way, with my son catching every bit of the vitriol. Philly fans are notoriously nasty, both to opposing fans and even their

own players in non-Super Bowl years. When I saw the headline recently about an Eagles fan banned for life for his nasty behavior toward a female Packers fan, I wasn't surprised about the behavior ... only that Philly didn't promote the fan to chief marketing officer.

I called Lincoln Financial Field the "mouth of hell" in my column, and I might have been too kind then.

And it's a shame, too. Saquon Barkley is a great story this year, and he seems like a deserving champion. Jalen Hurts is the kind of quarterback any team would love to have. But they're Eagles, and the only thing that would make me happy on Super Bowl Sunday is seeing Philadelphia fans cry in their cheesesteaks.

All apologies to my Philadelphia-born, amazing nephew Pierce, who is unfortunately brainwashed. This isn't about you, young man.

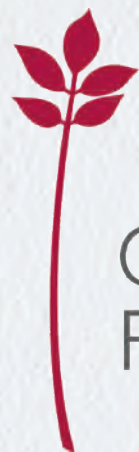
So, go Chiefs. Go Patrick. Go Tay-Tay.

Die, Eagles. Die.



Email Billy Liggett at billy@rantnc.com.

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GROUP REALTY LLC

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Elizabeth Smith
(919) 721-3303

esmith@smithgrouprealtyllc.com



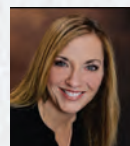
Brenda Brown
(919) 777-3297

bbrown@smithgrouprealtyllc.com



Sherri Garner-Diaz
(478) 258-6322

sdiaz@smithgrouprealtyllc.com



Angie Hegwer
(919) 356-6678

ahegwer@smithgrouprealtyllc.com



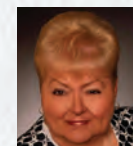
Randy Howell
(919) 410-4785

rhowell@smithgrouprealtyllc.com



Bruce Kelly
(919) 770-4737

bkelly@smithgrouprealtyllc.com



Jean Moore
(919) 880-4168

jmoore@smithgrouprealtyllc.com



Leslie Oldham
(919) 708-3138

loldham@smithgrouprealtyllc.com



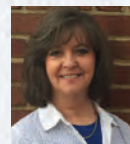
Jason Pate
(919) 592-1570

jpate@smithgrouprealtyllc.com



Kristen Lind Rogers
(704) 467-0866

kr Rogers@smithgrouprealtyllc.com



Linda Vance
(919) 499-8635

lvance@smithgrouprealtyllc.com



Jennifer Williams
(919) 353-1396

jwilliams@smithgrouprealtyllc.com



Lora Wright
(919) 770-2386

lwright@smithgrouprealtyllc.com



COVER STORY

SHOW OF SUPPORT

LEE COUNTY SCHOOLS' CLASSIFIED EMPLOYEES SAY THEIR CURRENT PAY AND THE COUNTY'S PROPOSED RAISE IS A 'SLAP IN THE FACE,' CONSIDERING THEIR SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS TO LOCAL EDUCATION

BY GORDON ANDERSON

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY RICHARD SULLINS

When April Stone went before the Lee County Board of Education in November to make known a demand for increased pay from the school district's classified employees, she didn't know what to expect — but she knew what she was doing was right.

"I was always raised to stand up for what's right, even if you're the only one," said Stone, an instructional assistant and bus driver at Lee County High School who also owns and operates a beauty salon.

Stone spoke to the board on Nov. 14, pointing out that the district's classified employees — those like instructional assistants, library and office staff, maintenance and custodial workers (many of whom pull double duty as bus drivers, earning an additional \$17.31 per hour on that gig) who don't require a certification to hold their jobs — needed not just a raise but also a pay scale. She was backed by more than 100 of her fellow classified employees as well as a number of teachers present in support, and asked that the board provide an answer in 30 days.



April Stone speaks before the Lee County Board of Education in 2024, backed by her fellow LCS classified employees, in the group's effort to seek more pay. Classified employees include teaching assistants, library and office staff, maintenance and custodial workers and bus drivers (many in the district pull double duty).



Stone became involved with the issue last fall when she joined a group text thread with dozens of other classified employees, which led to strategy meetings at her beauty shop and places like Golden Corral.

Stone soon found herself as the group's unofficial spokesperson and has since attended more meetings of both the school board and the Lee County Board of Commissioners — responsible today in large part for funding the school district's operations — to further the group's case for the need to adequately compensate the group of crucial employees Stone counts herself among.

For its part, the school district's leadership has proposed using \$709,000 in the next fiscal year, funded by cost savings from a reorganization of the central office, to provide a salary increase — but a raise only about a quarter of the size the classified employees feel they deserve.

Stone in December called it both “a step in the right direction” and also “a slap in the face,” acknowledging the district staff's efforts to do something, but also that it's just not enough.

TWO ELECTED BODIES AT ODDS

The efforts of the group Stone represents don't exist in a vacuum, and can be better understood as the manifestation of a political struggle between two locally elected bodies — the Lee County Board of Education and the Lee County Board of Commissioners. For nearly four years now, the school board has been asking the commissioners during budget season for more money to fund specific needs, and for four years now the commissioners have granted increases in funding — but at levels nowhere near what the school district says it needs to ensure all of its responsibilities are met (the school

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board doesn't have taxing authority and relies on a combination of funds from the county, state and federal governments).

This disagreement has crossed partisan lines, occurring when the school board was led by Democrats and the Board of Commissioners by Republicans, and also when both bodies were controlled by the GOP. And that disagreement is what led Stone and the group she speaks for to lobby not just the school board, but also the commissioners.

And the commissioners have consistently — if sympathetically — turned down the group's requests, correctly saying it's out of their hands how the school board chooses to spend the dollars they give.

"This board is not responsible for the school board's failure to grant those raises," Lee County Manager Lisa Minter said in December.

Commissioners, both as a body and individually, have encouraged Stone and the rest of the classified employees to take their case to Lee County's delegation to the state legislature, which is bound by the North Carolina Constitution to provide funding for public education (Stone says commissioners' Chairman Kirk Smith, a Republican, answered one email about the issue with the state's general statute numbers pertaining to school funding). For many years, counties — an extension of state government — historically took responsibility for funding facilities, while funding what happened on campus and in the classroom was up to the legislature.

But in recent decades, state budget issues have led to state budget cuts with regards to schools, and in many cases boards of education ended up diverting money initially allocated for other purposes to cover the on-campus and in-classroom effect of those cuts. The result has been that in many cases, a significant portion of school funding has shifted downward from Raleigh to county seats, which also juggle costs for other essential services like law enforcement, fire protection, social services and more.



DON'T MISS OUT

Just a few of the big things coming to Sanford, North Carolina, in 2025!

DOWNTOWN ALIVE! | 3rd THURSDAYS

Add a little excitement to your Thursdays with Downtown Alive! Each third Thursday, downtown businesses open their doors for extended hours and feature exclusive promotions, making it the perfect evening to shop, dine and explore. Keep an eye out for special events throughout the year, including live music, food trucks and more.

BUSKING IN THE BORO | MARCH 29

Usher in spring with Busking in the Boro, a street festival full of live music, local talent and vibrant energy in downtown Jonesboro. Enjoy performances from local musicians, browse unique craft and food vendors and experience the heart of Jonesboro come alive. With entertainment and activities for all ages, this event is the perfect way to welcome the warmer months and connect with the community.

TEMPLE THEATRE MAINSTAGE SHOWS

Celebrate 100 years of Temple Theatre with an unforgettable Main Stage Season running through May. This milestone year features incredible productions like Sweet Delilah Swim Club, Jason Petty's 100 Years of Hank Williams and the timeless Beauty & The Beast. Celebrate the centennial with special events, including the Roaring 20's Revue, where past performers honor a century of music and memories.

CIRCLE M CITY MONDAY JAMS

Kick off your week with the lively tunes of Circle M City's Monday Music Jam! Every Monday at 7 p.m., the Livery Stable comes alive with guitars, fiddles, banjos, mandolins and basses. Whether you're here to play or just to listen, this family-friendly gathering offers a mix of melodies, community and Old West charm.

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Further complicating the matter is the state’s “opportunity scholarship” program, which covers the cost of private school tuition for individuals by diverting funds from public schools to the private schools they attend — more than \$600 million statewide over 2023-24 and 2024-25. Sanford’s Grace Christian School received more of this funding last year (over \$1.5 million) than any other school in North Carolina. Before 2024, opportunity scholarships were available mainly to low income families; last year scholarship availability was extended to all income levels.

Stone said a number of classified employees have reached out to state Rep. John Sauls and state Sen. Jim Burgin, but haven’t received an answer. Emails from *The Rant* to Sauls and Burgin weren’t answered by press time.

Lee County Government provided *The Rant* with a statement regarding the situation, clarifying its role.

“While we understand the concerns of the Lee County Schools employees, they are the employees of the Lee County School System and, per the General Assembly, are considered State employees and participate in the State Retirement System and the State Health Plan. The Board of County Commissioners does not play a role in setting the pay scales for any of the Lee County Schools employees,” it read.

“The County is one of three major funding sources for the school district, with the other two being the State and Federal governments. Both the State and Federal governments can restrict how their funding may be used while the County has no such authority. The Board of Commissioners has very limited control of how its contribution is used. It is up to the Board of Commissioners to review the school district’s requests and determine an amount each year that it believes meets the district’s needs amongst other budget requests

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received. It is then up to the Board of Education and its Administrative team to determine how to spend that money, which they also do for the State and Federal unrestricted allocations.”

The statement continued by delineating possible uses for funds it appropriates to Lee County Schools, as well as its other responsibilities.

“The County provides two different types of funding to the LCS, current expense and capital outlay. The current expense monies are funds that can be used for salaries and other operational expenses. Our current expense funding in FY 2007-2008 was \$13,502,134 and has increased to \$21,507,824 for FY 2024-2025. Our contribution of \$20,134,024 in FY 2023-24 placed us 35th in current expense funding compared to counties across the State, and we rank 19th for teacher supplements, per North Carolina Association of County Commissioners 2024 County Map Book.

“In addition to the current expense and capital funds provided to the schools each year, the County spends approximately \$2,000,000 annually on school resource officers employed by the Lee County Sheriff and approximately \$6,000,000 on debt service for school facilities. Lee County Board of Commissioners and staff will strive to work with the Board of Education and its staff to determine an appropriate funding level year over year for the school district.”

WILL 2025-26 BE ANY DIFFERENT?

As winter turns to spring and budget season heats up, Stone and her group are hoping to have a bigger impact than they already have through continued advocacy. State law requires cities and counties across North Carolina to adopt budgets by June 30, and that means the county is already busy looking at their financial forecast for the next fiscal year, and the school board and central office staff are busy prepar-

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Seminar



DR. KAREN SULLIVAN

PHD, ABPP

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Dr. Sullivan is the creator of the I CARE FOR YOUR BRAIN program. She is one of less than 40 providers in North Carolina Board Certified in Clinical Neuropsychology by the American Board of Professional Psychology. Dr. Sullivan founded a private practice called Pinehurst Neuropsychology Brain & Memory Clinic in November 2013.



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ing their request for additional money that would cover a pay increase for classified staff as well as the countless other initiatives that require funding.

Stone acknowledged the complex nature of the issue, explaining that she's had to learn a lot about the various funding streams that allow schools to operate, as well as the multitude of competing factors at both the state and local level that make the question far from one that has a simple answer. But she also noted that Lee County's problem seems unique, at least to the region, and that there's got to be a solution.

"Whether you're a school board member or a commissioner, you're elected in good faith that you'll represent your county the way it's supposed to be represented," she said. "We're being bounced between (the boards), and there has to be a better way. Things aren't going to change when you've got

one pointing the finger at the other. I love my job, but I don't know why you'd expect anybody to stay."

The Board of Commissioners lowered the property tax rate between 2021-22 and 2023-24 from 77.5 cents per \$100 of valuation to 65 cents (although a revaluation in 2023 resulted in increased overall tax bills for many if not most Lee County property owners), and it's unclear whether the board intends for the 2025-26 budget to hold the line or include another rate cut or increase. Those decisions are obviously sure to play a role in the level at which the county's public school system is funded and the elected commissioners will have to weigh whether they think citizens in Lee County are willing to pay more to fund public education by paying classified staff higher wages.

That final point underscores a troubling reality — that without mutual

buy-in from both the Lee County Board of Education and the Lee County Board of Commissioners, as well as the possibility of help from Raleigh, neither body has much incentive to solve the problem on its own.

The schools could conceivably find money in their budget by cutting something essential elsewhere and undermining their goal of providing the best public education system possible. And the county could unilaterally dig into its fund balance (a fancy word for savings account) to fund an increase in the short term, but doing so could lead to a property tax increase the public may not have an appetite for, particularly so soon after a revaluation that proved so costly to property owners in Lee County.

For now, Stone said she and the group she represents plans to continue their efforts through budget season.

"We're going to be hitting (the meet-

ings) pretty hard," she said. "I feel like we've made progress, but do I feel like we've gotten what we deserve? No. At this rate it could take us four years to get what we should get right now."

The two boards are communicating, which is a good sign. The next few months will prove to the school district's classified employees — and anyone in Lee County with an interest in a strong system of public education — just how serious they are about righting the ship.



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EDUCATION

CITY'S ABC BOARD ANNOUNCES NEW SCHOLARSHIPS

Sanford's Alcoholic Beverage Control Board has announced an opportunity for high school students to earn a \$3,500 college scholarship award.

Winners of the Underage Drinking Prevention and Education Award will be selected by a panel of judges from Central Carolina Community College and receive \$3,500 in scholarship money.

To apply, students must: complete an application, write a well-researched essay explaining the facts and/or dangers surrounding the use and abuse of alcohol by minors, and develop a plan of action for sharing the research project with classmates and/or their school.

Eligible students must work with a supervising teacher at their school or Sunday school to incorporate their research project into the classroom or school/Sunday school environment. Some examples of incorporating the researched information into the classroom include, but are not limited to: creating class discussion topics related to the dangers of underage drinking; publishing the research paper in

the school newspaper; creating a bulletin board or display in the school; incorporating underage drinking prevention tips or facts into school announcements; presenting the research paper to a class or assembly; developing a video that illustrates the researched information; and more.

All seniors residing in Lee County are eligible, including students in private and public schools, as well as home schooled students. Each entrant must be under the supervision and direction of a teacher/Sunday school teacher.

Essays and student entry forms are due on or before April 18. Students who have family members employed by the North Carolina ABC Commission or the San-

ford ABC Board are not eligible.

A total of 20 students will receive scholarship awards of \$3,500. Each essay must reflect the student's own research, writing and original thinking, and only one essay may be submitted by each student.

A sponsoring teacher may sponsor more than one of his/her students. Submissions must include, in addition to the essay, a detailed description of how the student will incorporate the essay's information and research into the classroom or school environment. Teachers must verify and sign the verification of authenticity on the student entry form. Email sanabc@windstream.net for entry materials.

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BOARD OF EDUCATION

'Musical chairs' marks start of Womack's term

By Richard Sullins
richard@rantnc.com

Unless you paid very close attention to the Lee County Board of Education meeting on Jan. 14, you probably missed it.

Even the staff from the district's 17 campuses, the administrative staff at the district office, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, faculty members, instructional assistants – almost any of them would be forgiven for failing to notice the recently elected chair of the Lee County School Board had moved its superintendent almost as far away from her on the dais as she could

When members filed into the Jimmy Love, Sr. Board Room for their meeting that evening, things weren't the way they'd been before. Republican board member Sherry Lynn Womack, who'd been handed the gavel for a second time

as chair, had shuffled the seating, but for just one person: the county's Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Chris Dossenbach.

As background, the school board holds an organizational meeting each December where officers of the board are selected. As a part of that meeting, the chair has the right to seat people on the dais as he or she may see fit and without any obligation to explain those choices to fellow board members or the general public. To make it clear, what Womack did in moving Dr. Dossenbach's seat was well within her authority as the new chair of the board in 2025.

The two seemed to have gotten along well for the past decade or so, something that continued when Dossenbach was named as Interim Superintendent in May of 2023 and carried through the school board's search process after Dr. Andy Bryan resigned in that same month.

As the board conducted a national search over that summer and into early fall, a consensus seemed to build among each of the seven members that their new leader was someone they already knew and trusted, a product of Lee County's schools who had served as a high school principal and assistant superintendent. Even the search consultants concluded that Dossenbach was the pick of the litter.

THEN, IT HAPPENED

At his swearing in, Dossenbach described Lee County Schools not for what they are, but for what they could become.

"Together, we will not only achieve greatness, but redefine it for generations to come," he said at the time.

In turn, each of the board members congratulated him and spoke of Lee

County hitting the jackpot in its superintendent search.

The last speaker was Womack, who also spoke to Dossenbach's accomplishments. And then, as if from out of the blue, came the first of two remarks. Her words were of warning, spoken in front of Dr. Dossenbach's wife, his two small children, other family members, his mentors, and friends who wanted to be there in his moment of triumph.

"Don't you ever frickin' lie to me," she looked at him and said, pointing a finger. Those who were in the room were almost knocked off their heels, but before they could recover, she fired a second salvo in an obvious sexual reference: "Make sure you keep it in your pants."

At the school board's organizational meeting four weeks later, Womack herself nominated Republican Eric Davidson to



EDUCATION *that* WORKS

take her place as chair. She remained as vice chair.

By all accounts Davidson did a commendable job as board chair. Feeling no need to bring attention to himself, he preferred to shine the spotlight on the rank and file who made public education in Lee County an attractive option again for families moving into the Sanford area. “Tell me about your schools” is always the first question asked by companies considering locating their operations here, and Davidson excelled at keeping any district infighting off the front page. He worked hard to rebuild trust and a running dialogue with the county’s commissioners, a project that will take years to fully realize.

Davidson did everything asked of him. But some in the Republican Party wanted a more aggressive leader and when the board reorganized on December 10, 2024 Womack was the unanimous choice to again lead in 2025. And it didn’t take long for her to reassert control over the school board.

But is it really a big deal?

Can’t people just sit where they want and everybody be happy?

It’s been enough of a big deal in the recent past that previous chairs of the Board of Education have occasionally taken it upon themselves to determine who sits up front and who doesn’t, and who sits closest to the chair.

The early days of the COVID-19 pandemic saw leaders

both public and private looking for ways to minimize the risks of possible spread of the virus in virtually every setting.

Among those was former Superintendent Dr. Andy Bryan, who made his board chair aware of his desire to set an example for students, faculty, and staff by giving up his seat on the dais and taking up a position at a small table just to its right. After the spread of the virus had largely been contained and life resumed at a near-normal pace, Bryan kept his seat at the smaller table at his own request.

After Bryan’s departure and Dossenbach’s filling his vacancy on an interim basis, Dossenbach remained at the small table through the first year of Womack’s term as chair, and moved to the dais at a location next to the board chair when Davidson assumed the role. And on January 14 of this year, he was moved once more, this time still on the dais but at a point between new member Cindy Ortiz and Board Secretary Susan Britt, separating him from the board chair by three people. At the start of the organizational meeting in December, he was on the chair’s left elbow.

WHAT TO MAKE OF ALL THIS

In the grand scheme of things, does any of this really matter? If you don’t have a child attending Lee County Schools, probably not. But if you are the parent of one

of the 9,200 or more students who do attend one of the county’s 17 schools on any given day, it does matter.

Looking at the video from Jan. 14 and compare it with any from 2024, older members can be seen leaving and newer ones being sworn in. Their positioning is important and comparing those videos shows only one position that was moved in such a way that could be seen as diminishing its importance. That position was the superintendent of schools.

Time will be the barometer by which all this will be measured. One year from now, the county’s 41,000 registered voters will look back on this, along with all that happened with Lee County’s public schools in 2025. Three members of the school board will be up for their first bid at re-election — all of them Republican, given that the Lee County GOP controls all of the board’s seven seats. So the voters will have their first chance to have a say about all this palace intrigue 12 months from now when filing for office begins.

Each engagement like this is akin to a game of chess that never ends. Even when one color wipes out their opponent completely, the game continues and often ends in a different result. Even little changes — like the moving of a single seat on a governing board — can have a big impact on the ultimate outcome of a given year’s round of chess.

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THE RESTAURANT OF THE MONTH

In January, we featured some of the top Mexican and Latino food restaurants in Sanford. We'll continue highlighting these gems throughout the coming year.



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“The first thing that you notice is the vibe of the place. The moment you step into the restaurant, you should get a feeling of being at home. El Molcajete achieves this by providing great ambient lighting. The decorations of the place shall not be over the board, they should be simple and represent Mexican culture in its true form. We keep in mind all these points and provide you with a great ambiance to have your food in.”

El Molcajete in the Jonesboro Heights area of Sanford is one of the few restaurants in the city with its own blog. The above description of the 20-plus-year-old restaurant's ambiance is one of the many posts added to the site each month for the past two years.

And it's true — the ambiance is great, but the food at

El Molcajete (which translates to “the mortar and pestle”) is even better. Also from the blog:

“We believe that it is good to offer the most authentic Mexican dishes along with a few popular Tex-Mex dishes too. We pay meticulous attention to detail while preparing our dishes and take pride in the fact that no person who visits us will ever leave disappointed. We cater to everyone's taste palette while maintaining the charm and authenticity of the food.”

WHAT WE LOVE ★

The Milanesa de Res torta (steak sandwich) and pescado y camaron (fish and/or shrimp) tostada are our favorites, but you can't go wrong with any of the seafood dishes or any of the sandwiches at El Molcajete.

THEIR SPECIALTIES

The restaurant lists three signature dishes on its website, so feel free to try them all on your next (or first) visit.

Molcajete Caliente: “A feast for both the eyes and taste buds, this dish showcases a sizzling molcajete filled with succulent grilled meats, sautéed vegetables, and a rich blend of spices. The theatrical presentation adds an element of excitement to the dining experience.”

Tacos al Pastor: “A classic street food favorite, El Molcajete's rendition of Tacos al Pastor features marinated pork cooked to perfection on a vertical spit. Topped with diced onions, fresh cilantro, and a hint of pineapple, these tacos offer a delightful balance of sweet, savory, and tangy flavors.”

Mole Poblano: “A true testament to the complexity of Mexican cuisine, their Mole Poblano is a symphony of flavors. The deep, velvety sauce is made from a blend of chilies, spices, and chocolate, creating a harmonious combination that envelops tender pieces of chicken or enchiladas.”



OUR READERS' FAVORITES

Our January edition of *The Rant Monthly* highlighted some of the best Mexican and Latino food restaurants in Sanford. Below are just some of the positive feedback (and suggested entries) from readers:

My wife and I went to Las Sirenas, located at 2902 Industrial Drive in Sanford, for many years. When we went there, 98 percent of the staff and clientele only spoke Spanish. We loved the food and the friendly people. Haven't been back for awhile.

Joe and Marlais Soderquist

What a great article. We are huge fans of La Terrazita. Not only for the amazing food and drinks, but their service is unmatched. Everyone there works hard to make your meal an experience. They're all so friendly and helpful!

Elizabeth Desmond

I really love how you guys put this article together with pictures of dishes, specialties and what you loved. Great job! I can't wait to visit Sanford again to try some of these places.

Justin Bridwell

Can you please do one on El Molcajete Mexican Cuisine? I eat at this restaurant two to four times a week, and the reason is — bottom line — the food is awesome. And the prices can't be matched. Some people made comments about portion sizes, but El Molcajete Mexican Cuisine does not have this issue. All in house-made salsa and corn tortillas, and the meat is cut in house also.

Jackie A.

Editor's Note: Dear Jackie ... look at the previous page. :)



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CITY IDENTIFIES SITE FOR PROPOSED MOBILITY HUB

City leaders announced in January that in concert with the North Carolina Department of Transportation, they've identified a location in downtown Sanford for a possible long-discussed mobility hub.

Sanford government issued a press release indicating that a triangle shaped city block bounded by South Steele, Cole and South Moore streets had been identified as the mobility hub's possible location. According to the press release, a mobility hub is a central location for transit services, and would help connect Sanford to other communities along the proposed S-Line rail project.

"While the S-Line may be another decade in the making, Amtrak stops could start sooner, says David Montgomery, the City's long-range planner and lead on the project," reads the release. "Currently, Amtrak passes through Sanford twice daily, but does not stop. A mobility hub would provide the infrastructure needed to make Sanford a destination."

The project is not currently funded and is somewhat aspirational, but as the council moves closer to realizing it, it became important to identify a site around which plans could be formed. As such, it's possible the location could change. But for now, city government has its sights on the Cole Street site, which is made up of several parcels that are currently privately owned and home to a number of various businesses.

The council chose the site over another nearby location at the intersection of Hawkins and Charlotte avenues, overlooking the Singer Building and the site of the city's proposed Sanford Central Green. The Singer Building was recently the subject of a lawsuit from a developer who had expressed interest in doing a development there.

2021 CAPITOL INSURRECTION

Sanford man among the Jan. 6 arrestees pardoned by Trump

By Richard Sullins

richard@rantnc.com

A Sanford man was among the nearly 1,500 pardoned by President Donald Trump for participating in the 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol following his inauguration on Jan. 20.

David Joseph Gietzen of Sanford was convicted in August 2023 of felony and misdemeanor charges for assaulting law enforcement officers and other conduct intended to disrupt official proceedings of Congress to count and certify the results of the 2020 presidential election.

Trump promised many times during the 2024 presidential campaign that freeing the men and women who stormed the Capitol — the most serious assault on the Capitol building since the British tried to burn it down in 1814 — would be among his first acts after he took the oath of office. He often referred to them as "political prisoners" or "hostages."

Between the time of Gietzen's conviction and his sentencing the following April, he skipped a scheduled court appearance in October 2023 to surrender himself for confinement and became a fugitive for nearly 60 days. Most of that time was spent in Lee County until Dec. 12 of that year, when he was taken into custody by a U.S. Marshal at his mother's home and returned to Washington to await sentencing.

Judge Carl Nichols, appointed to the federal bench by President Trump in 2019, sentenced Gietzen to six years behind bars and a fine of \$2,000. Gietzen initially spent time at the Federal Detention Center in Philadelphia while his paperwork was being processed before he was transferred to another federal prison facility in the Midwest.

Gietzen was among the more than 1,250 persons who were convicted or pleaded guilty over the past four years that were pardoned by the president in



Justice Department trial exhibits show David Joseph Gietzen at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, wearing a green jacket and white helmet and goggles and using a long metal pole to jab at officers or his gloved hands to rip their masks off.

connection with the events that played out on live television for five hours that afternoon. Trump's executive order made no distinction between those convicted of non-violent offenses and others found guilty of violent crimes during the affair.

The vast majority, including Gietzen, received pardons, meaning they would not only regain their freedom but also soon be on the pathway to having their civil rights restored, such as the right to vote and the ability to purchase and own a firearm.

Gietzen was indicted by a federal grand jury in Washington on charges that stemmed from his participation in the riot, including two counts of assaulting, resisting, or impeding officers with a dangerous weapon, which may have been a long metal pole that he is seen to be carrying in several photographs contained within the indictment.

Two other charges were levied against him for assaulting, resisting, or impeding officers, one for engaging in physical violence on Capitol grounds, and four others related to his participation in the

mob violence. The assault charges against police officers were felonies.

He was first charged in a criminal complaint in March 2021 and indicted by a federal grand jury in April of that year, but the FBI failed to locate him at the time, and he was never arrested in connection with that initial complaint.

At the time, the FBI was pursuing thousands of suspects who had fled the scene, investigating nearly 30,000 tips from a hotline and another 200,000 digital media tips, all part of the largest FBI investigation in history, bigger even than those connected with the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Gietzen was first identified by a tipster who contacted the FBI after seeing his picture posted on the agency's website. A second person gave a positive identification from the same photograph and a third believed it might have been him but said he hadn't seen Gietzen in a few years.

Meanwhile, investigators began to build their case against Gietzen by assembling a

picture of his movements around the Capitol campus and methodically reviewing the photographic records created that day.

In one picture made on the National Mall just below the Capitol sometime before 2:13 p.m. that day, Gietzen is seen wearing jeans, knee pads, dark shoes, and a distinctive green jacket. He had shoulder-length brown hair, a short beard, and a mustache. It was the jacket and a white helmet that he appeared to put on near the Capitol that allowed for him to be easily spotted in both still and moving pictures.

The indictment alleged that Gietzen assaulted several law enforcement officers on the west terrace of the Capitol between 2:13 and 2:31 p.m. that day, using the pole in the last of his attacks. In photographs and video made during the melee, he can be seen shoving one officer and reaching for the throat of another.

The crimes committed at the Capitol were among the most documented in American history. In Gietzen's case, it took more than a year for investigators to assemble what they believed was a complete visual record of his actions. In doing so, they reviewed the thousands of pictures made at the scene and the millions of individual frames of video footage that were available almost immediately through social media.

The FBI seized Gietzen's cell phone as evidence when he was taken into custody in May of 2022. The phone contained records of text messages he had either sent or received describing his activities on January 6 and of plans for a second attack two weeks later.

According to publications that covered the Jan. 6 hearings, trial records show that in one text, Gietzen longed for an armed civil war and that it would coincide with the inauguration of President Joe Biden.

"Unfortunately, it seems civil war is all but assured now. Word on the street is that the next rally is on the 20th, and people are bringing guns this time," Gietzen wrote.

"This rally is with or without Trump. We aren't his employee and if he chooses to concede to election fraud, that is treason. There is no giving up permitted when it comes to the future of the world."

RETURNED TO WASHINGTON FOR BIDEN INAUGURATION

The FBI first heard of Gietzen on January 16 – 10 days after the insurrection – when it received a report about text messages in which Gietzen and an unnamed brother said they wanted to meet up with others at the Capitol on January 20 as Biden was being sworn in.

The DOJ's statement of facts in the case says in the reported text messages "their plan was to force their way in the Capitol building to force Congress to hold another election, and that the Gietzen brothers were also at the U.S. Capitol riot on Jan. 6, 2021."

An FBI agent was able to reach him by telephone on Tuesday, January 19, and Gietzen said he and his brother were en route to Washington on that same day for the inauguration. He said he had no plans to commit any acts of violence.

He told the agent the brothers had attended the protest in Washington on Jan. 6 but did not make it to the Capitol because of the large crowd. But the many photographs made by other participants and posted online, as well as others made by the media and security footage, show Gietzen wearing his green jacket, scuffling with police as they attempted to hold the line in defense of the legislators and staff members inside the building.

The pictures also show Gietzen on the exterior terraces on the West Front of the Capitol mere feet from the entrance of a tunnel where officers were making a last stand to prevent the rioters from entering the building. Others show him, pole in hand, appearing to strike the plastic shield being held by an officer on the steps leading to the Capitol's west front.

In all, there were dead and injured on both sides. Because many of the rioters left the scene before dusk, the number of persons within the mob who were injured may never be known. Around 140 police officers suffered injuries that day, and nine persons are known to have died in connection with the events.

With the pardons, commutations, and dismissals of charges, the Jan. 6 riot has moved now from an active legal phase to another relegated to history, all by the stroke of a pen. It's unknown when David Gietzen was officially released and whether he will return to Sanford.

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BRIEFS

COLLAZO NAMED CHIEF OF SANFORD FIRE DEPT.'S RISK REDUCTION DIVISION

Alex Collazo was appointed assistant chief of risk reduction for the Sanford Fire Department, the city announced in January. Collazo now manages all aspects of fire inspections and codes, leads the fire investigation team and coordinates education and outreach initiatives to reduce fire risk in Sanford.



“This new role allows Chief Collazo and his team to focus on risk reduction and education while also providing a strategic foundation to meet the needs of our community and our department,” said Fire Chief Matt Arnold.

“As assistant chief of risk reduction, I hope to increase the safety and well-being of everyone in our community through prevention, education, and outreach,” Collazo said.

Collazo has a long history with the Sanford Fire Department. He joined in March 2006 and was promoted to Inspector two years later. In July 2016, he was appointed deputy fire marshal, serving under now retired Deputy Fire Chief and Fire Marshal Ken Cotten.

In 2019, Collazo was recognized as a Hometown Hero by the N.C. Automobile Dealer Association for his service to the community, both on the clock and off.

“Collazo’s ability to communicate with Sanford’s diverse population has been crucial in reducing fire risk in our community,” said now retired Fire Chief Wayne Barber at the award ceremony.

Collazo’s leadership in organizing a supply drive for struggling fire departments in Sanford’s Sister City of Atizapán de Zaragoza, Mexico, was noted in the recognition. He worked with local fire departments and Red Wolf to send 21 air packs and face masks to Mexico using only private donations.

Collazo was promoted to fire marshal following Cotten’s retirement.

— *City of Sanford*



The inaugural Sanford Resolution Run & FirstHealth Fitness Fest — held in downtown Sanford on Jan. 11, was a success. The event enjoyed 243 participants and 10 vendors set up inside Hugger Mugger Brewing. The 5K was the result of a partnership between FirstHealth Fitness, Visit Sanford NC and Downtown Sanford Inc. *Photo courtesy of Downtown Sanford Inc.*

REGISTRATION FOR SANFORD 101 NOW OPEN

Registration has opened for the 2025 session of Sanford 101, a free 13-week program that gives residents a behind-the-scenes look at municipal government.

First conceived in 2014, Sanford 101’s mission is to educate Sanford residents about how their municipal government functions. At the end of the program, participants should have a greater understanding of how and why municipal decisions are made – and become more engaged in that process.

The 2025 session will run on Tuesday mornings from February 18 through May 13. Each week will feature a different topic, including TriRiver Water, current and long-range planning, and public safety. Some standout sessions include trips to the Raleigh Exec Jetport and Sanford

Municipal Golf Course.

“We want our residents to understand and be engaged in the decision-making process,” explains Mayor Rebecca Wyhof Salmon. “Those who participate in Sanford 101 serve as creative and thoughtful ambassadors for local government and advocates for their communities.”

Participants will spend time with head staff and have the opportunity to ask their most pressing questions. There will also be a special discussion with and recognition by Sanford City Council.

Enrollment is limited to 12 participants to ensure everyone has a rich, unique experience. Registration will end on February 11, 2025, or when spaces are full.

For more information, contact Kelly Miller at 919-718-4658 x1 or kelly.miller@sanfordnc.net. Online registration is available at sanfordnc.net/sanford101.

— *City of Sanford*

DOMESTIC CALL ENDS WITH ONE DEAD IN WEST SANFORD

A Sanford man apparently killed himself on the evening of Jan. 7 after a domestic situation at his home, according to Sanford Police.

Officers responded to 1616 Columbine Road in west Sanford around 6:07 p.m. after being called by a woman who had fled from that address to a neighbor’s house. The victim told police she’d been held against her will inside the home, but managed to escape.

Officers secured a perimeter around 1616 Columbine and obtained a warrant for the arrest of the man inside, a David Wayne Worth, age 50, on charges of second degree kidnapping. Police entered the home around 10:40 p.m. and found Worth dead from an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound.

LET'S DO IT TOGETHER FOUNDATION TO HOST PRAISE BRUNCH, AWARD LOCAL WOMEN

In recognition of Black History Month, the board of directors of Let's Do It Together Foundation announced the names of local African Americans who will be recognized as "Hometown Heroes" at an awards ceremony at 10 a.m. on Feb. 1 at the Dennis A. Wicker Civic Center.

The Prayer and Praise Brunch will honor nine individuals for their service to the community in two separate categories — Lifetime Achievement and 40-and-Under Rising Star.

Those receiving Lifetime Achievement awards include:

- Brenda Johnson, a civil rights activist, member of the City of Sanford Appearance Commission and advocate for the remodeling of Horton Park;
- Ruby Maxwell, career educator and W.B. Wicker historian;
- Angel Mills, a champion for children of color and founder of ABLE (Alliance of Black Leaders and Educators);
- Margaret Murchison, the first African-American woman to serve two terms on the school board member, first African-American ABC Board Member and founder of CEAD (Council for Effective Actions and Decisions);
- Vonda Reives, the first African-American woman to chair the Lee County Democratic Party and founder of SISTAHS in Action — Sisters Inspiring Souls to Attain Higher Success;
- Dr. Linda Smith, a retired master educator and school administrator served on the Lee County Board of Education for eight years and the assistant pastor of First Calvary Missionary Baptist Church;
- Donna Taylor, founder of the B2B Basketball Camp (2012–2019), providing high-quality training and mentoring to young athletes, head girls basketball coach at The O'Neal School, leading them to their first State Championship in 2024, and associate pastor at Christian Provision Ministries.

In the 40 and under Rising Star category:

- Hope White, current chairperson of the Board of Commissioners with 10 years of exemplary service to the Sanford Housing Authority and member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc;
- Crystal Williams, member of Estro-nauts, Democratic Women of Lee County and the Lee County Parks Commission, a passionate advocate for aging adults and for children with autism.

REGISTRATION NOW OPEN FOR HARNETT BUSINESS SUMMIT

Entrepreneurs, business owners and leaders in Harnett County are invited to join a transformative event that will provide them with valuable tools, resources and insights to succeed in today's competitive business world.

The Harnett Business Resource Summit is set for Feb. 10, from 8:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. at the Harnett Resource Center and Library in Lillington. According to organizers, the event — hosted by Central Carolina Community College; chambers from Dunn, Erwin, Angier, Coats and Lillington; and KS Bank — will be a one-of-a-kind event that offers a unique opportunity to discover resources that can accelerate business growth and development.

The event will include information on financial resources to support business expansion and growth, grant opportunities designed to fuel innovation and business development, employee training programs to build a skilled and effective workforce, and educational opportunities to empower your team for long-term success.

A highlight of the event will be a special address by N.C. Secretary of State Elaine Marshall and Sen. Jim Burgin, who will share their insights on supporting small businesses and the critical role of state-level initiatives for growth and sustainability.

Jimmy Randolph, CEO of the Sanford Area Growth Alliance, underscored the Moore Center's importance as a driver of economic development.

"The reality is that those companies looking to make an investment in their future are focused on our region because of the fact that we are growing ... and we are a forward looking community," he said.



CCCC HOSTS AREA LEGISLATIVE DELEGATION, SHOWCASES WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT HUB

Central Carolina Community College welcomed state legislators and community leaders to a Legislative Delegation Breakfast on Jan. 16, at the E. Eugene Moore Manufacturing and Biotech Solutions Center, a state-of-the-art facility designed to shape the future of workforce development in the region.

North Carolina Sen. Jim Burgin, Rep. Joseph Pike and Rep. John Sauls joined CCCC President Dr. Lisa M. Chapman and Julian Philpott, chairman of the CCCC Board of Trustees, along with key stakeholders, to discuss the college's ongoing efforts to meet the region's growing demand for a skilled workforce.

The breakfast offered a platform to highlight the transformative impact of the Moore Center, located on CCCC's Lee Main Campus. Situated in the heart of an area experiencing economic growth, the Moore Center is a 220,000-square-foot facility on a 21.4-acre site acquired through the generosity of the Lee County Board of Commissioners. It is poised to prepare workers for today's manufacturing jobs while equipping them with advanced biotechnology and manufacturing skills to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

"This is very important for the region," said Chapman, emphasizing the nearly \$25 million invested in the center to date. She noted that the total cost of the project has risen from \$70 million four years ago to \$90 million today, stressing the urgency of continued investment. "The longer we wait, the more expensive it's going to be."



Fifteen individuals were among the most recent graduates of the Central Carolina Community College Basic Law Enforcement Training program. They were: David Burleson Jr., Dylan Byrd, Erick Deal, Eric Elsenner, Terrence Fearington, Jose Garcia Jr., Jonathan Hamaker, Sebastian Lopez, Michael Mestas, Brenda Plancarte-Reyes, Alan Henry Warnasch Reece, Andrew Smith, Julie Thomas, Adan Torres, and Austin Vega.



'INTENTIONAL AND MEANINGFUL WORK' EARNS J. GLENN EDWARDS ITS THIRD LEE COUNTY 'HEAD OF CLASS' PRIZE

Back in 2014, in the early days of the Lee County Education Foundation's "Head of Class" project, J. Glenn Edwards Elementary became the first — and so far the only — school to win the award in consecutive years.

The school hasn't won since.

So when Emily Mize became principal there in 2022, winning again became a priority and one of her primary goals.

"It's been over a decade since J. Glenn Edwards earned the Head of Class award," Mize said. "There were many years when we felt disheartened. So many amazing things are happening at JGE that may not be reflected in test scores."

Test scores and improved student performance from the most recent school year, however, do reflect the excellence Mize and her staff have been seeking, making her goal a reality: Edwards Elementary was announced as the Education Foundation's newest Head of Class winner.

Mize and the rest of the faculty, staff and students will receive the 2023-24 Head of Class award at a Jan. 29 celebration at the school. In announcing JGE as the newest Head of Class recipient, Education Foundation board chairman Susan Keller said the award's purpose is to recognize and reward a single elementary school for demonstrating stellar performance in a given school year.

In addition to the honor, and having the Head of Class trophy at the school for a full year, the recognition comes with a \$75,000 cash prize — to be shared among all faculty and staff at the school — as an incentive. It's an increase from the \$50,000 that has been awarded to past HOC winners, and has been bolstered by an anonymous pledge to the program of \$25,000 a year for the next five years.

"The longer-term goal of HOC, for the Lee County Education Foundation, is for it to show our support for educators, encourage friendly competition, and spur all school teams to work smarter and collaboratively to move the needle for all LCS

elementary students," Keller said. "We are so excited for Principal Mize and her amazing J. Glenn Edwards team, who set their sights on Head of Class and worked together to achieve remarkable success for their students."

In joining Greenwood Elementary (four Head of Class awards) and Deep River elementary (three) as the only schools to earn the honor more than twice, Mize said the achievement came as the result of a highly intentional approach going into the 2023-24 school year. Mize's first objective: creating an environment where students and staff were enthusiastic about — and took pride in — being part of the school.

"I wanted J. Glenn Edwards to be an experience," she said, "not just a job."

JGE's School Improvement Team met over the summer of 2023, then followed up during the opening weeks of the school year to conduct a thorough needs assessment to help determine and prioritize goals.

"We took a strategic approach in developing our master schedule to ensure we were maximizing every minute of the school day," Mize said. "We streamlined various systems and implemented consistent protocols across all grade levels."

She and her staff also made a commitment to "set aside our emotions and concentrate on how to genuinely move the needle forward at JGE" — a necessity, Mize said, because test scores "feel deeply personal" to teachers and school leadership.

Among Edwards' other initiatives: implementing "mini glows," or smaller goals, to keep momentum toward those School Improvement Goals in place; extra weekly professional development sessions that led to tailored strategies to address specific needs in each grade level; and organized family-focused events to share more about curriculum and student expectations.

LCS Superintendent Dr. Chris Dossenbach said, "The school has cultivated a culture where students feel welcomed, appreciated and empowered to learn at high levels while feeling safe to make mistakes along the way. Through a team approach, the staff analyzed student data and strategically planned lessons and activities to meet the individual needs of every student. They made learning attainable, enjoyable, and the top priority every day." — Lee County Education Foundation

BRIEFS

REGISTRATION OPEN FOR SPRING REC SPORTS

Lee County Parks & Recreation announced registration dates for upcoming spring sports. For questions, contact Adam Dossenbach at adossenbach@leecountync.gov.

T-BALL

- Registration Fee: \$30 In-County Resident / Extra \$15 for out-of-county residents
- Location: T-Ball Complex at O.T. Sloan Park, 1420 Bragg St.

SOFTBALL/BASEBALL (coach pitch)

- Registration Fee: \$50 In-County Resident / Extra \$15 for out-of-county residents
- Location: Dalrymple Park, 300 West Globe Street

SOFTBALL

- Registration Fee: \$50 In-County Resident / Extra \$15 for out-of-county residents
- Location: Tramway Road Park, 2303 Tramway Road (9-11U)
- Location: Buchanan Park, 3100 Cameron Drive (12-14U)

BASEBALL

- Registration Fee: \$50 In-County Resident / Extra \$15 for out-of-county residents
- Location: Tramway Road Park, 2303 Tramway Road

ADULT SOFTBALL

- Registration Fee: \$625 Per Team / Extra \$15 for each out-of-county player
- Location: Lett Family Park, 301 Gilbert Lett Dr., Broadway
- LCPR Adult Softball League is designed for adults 16 and older to enhance physical/mental well-being and promote community involvement. Games are typically played on weeknights.

CAMPBELL CELEBRATES FIRST COMMENCEMENT AT ANSON CORRECTIONAL FACILITY

POLKTON — Anita Barton sat with a smile, tears still glistening in her eyes, as she shared the big moment with her aunt and uncle in a post-graduation celebration that felt like any other, aside from the guards who monitored the scene close by.

Wearing a black cap and gown with orange tassel — a welcome reprieve from the purple and gray prison uniforms worn by those incarcerated at Anson Correctional Institution — Barton called earning her associate of science degree from Campbell University a “privilege” and perhaps the biggest milestone in her 59 years.

“Today allows me to look at my future with hope,” she said. “It was an answer to my prayers that came long before I knew this was even possible. It’s a second chance, and I will do everything I can to pay it forward.”

Barton was one of 16 to earn their two-year degree during the Jan. 17 commencement ceremony at Anson Correctional, a medium custody prison for women

launched by the state in 2019. Anson, along with Sampson Correctional Institution in Clinton, is one of two prisons taking part in Campbell’s Second Chance Initiative, which is actively working to bring more education opportunities to correctional facilities throughout North Carolina.

While Sampson has now seen three commencement ceremonies to date, this was the first for Anson and its students, some of whom could be released within the next year, while others (like Barton) still have at least another 15 years of incarceration.

“Your journeys have been filled with difficulties,” Campbell President Dr. J. Bradley Creed told the graduates, referencing the University’s motto, *ad astra per aspera*, “to the stars, through difficulties.” “But restoration is a primary theme in Judeo Christian theology, offering hope when there is no hope. Our unified prayer and hope for this program was for it to lead to restoration, and its students to lives of meaningful service.

“Today is a new day for you, and you’ll never be the same again.”

— *Campbell University News*



Campbell introduced the Second Chance Initiative at Anson Correctional Institution in January 2023, placing an emphasis on preparing students for admission into a bachelor’s degree program that will help them meet their post-prison educational and career objectives. Threaded throughout the program is an emphasis on providing academic rigor, faith development, critical thinking, writing, math and other life skills. *Photo by Bennett Scarborough*

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GALLERY

SNOW DAY

Sanford got its first significant snow in three years in January, and you made the most of it with a fun-filled two days away from work and school.

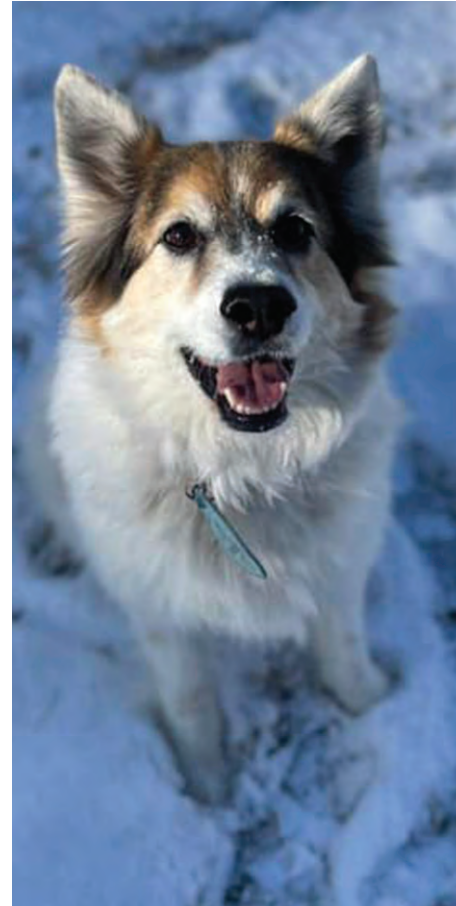












EVENT CALENDAR



JAN 30-FEB 16

TEMPLE THEATRE PRESENTS
'SWEET DELILAH SWIM CLUB'

JAN 30-FEB 16: The Sweet Delilah Swim Club will be the first main-stage production at Temple Theatre in 2025. Five Southern women, whose friendships began on their college swim team, set aside a long weekend every August to recharge those relationships. Free from husbands, kids and jobs, they meet at the beach cottage, the "Sweet Delilah" on the Outer Banks to catch up, laugh and meddle in each other's lives. Tickets and showtimes can be found at templeshows.org.

SEND YOUR EVENT

The Rant Monthly's community calendar has returned, and we're doing our best to track down everything going on in Sanford and Lee County. Send us your events by email at billy@rantnc.com and include the date, time, location and a brief description.

FEB 1: The Mixtapes — a five piece band that covers songs from Linda Ronstadt to Fleetwood Mac, Miranda Lambert to Whitney Houston, AC/DC to Van Halen, Bruce Springsteen to Billy Joel, and plenty of Stones, Beatles and others — will perform at Smoke & Barrel in downtown Sanford at 8 p.m.

FEB 1: Buchanan Farms in Broadway will host a **Cruise-In** featuring "vintage wheels and timeless appeals" from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. All cars, trucks and motorcycles are welcome, and admission is free.

FEB 2: Hugger Mugger Brewing will host **Stitch & Bltch**, an event created to hold space for the LGBTQ community to come together, vent and build connections in a supportive environment. Bring a craft — knitting, embroidery or anything you love to stitch — or just come as you are to share stories, unwind, and find comfort among friends. This is your chance to express yourself, be heard and know you're not alone. Event begins at noon.

FEB 3: The Sanford Area Growth Alliance will host its monthly **Public Policy Luncheon** from 11:45 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Dennis A. Wicker Civic Center. This month's luncheon will feature a panel discussion presented by S3 Housing Connect. Discover their mission, learn about housing advocacy efforts, and gain valuable insights into state and local assistance programs designed to support homeownership in our community. Registration fee includes lunch. Learn more at growsanfordnc.com.

FEB 7: Mike Edwards & His Only Friends — a trio of veteran acoustic musicians — will perform at Smoke & Barrel in downtown Sanford at 8 p.m.

FEB 7: The Smashing Art Glass Studio at 217 B Carthage St. in Sanford will host an **Illuminated Sea Glass Succulents Workshop** from 6 to 9 p.m. Get ready for a fun and creative twist on plant decor. Make one 5x6-inch sea glass succulent for \$45 or a set of three in tiered sizes

for \$65. Ticket information on studio's Facebook page.

FEB 8: The North Carolina Cooperative Extension Lee County Center will host a **Raised Bed Gardening Workshop: Gardening Off the Ground** from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. This event was originally set for January but was postponed due to winter weather. Learn more: lee.ces.ncsu.edu.

FEB 8: Big City — Gary Braddy, Allyn Love and Walter Garland — will perform classic country tunes from Merle, Waylon, Hank and Randy Travis at 8 p.m. at Smoke & Barrel in downtown Sanford.

FEB 8: Hugger Mugger Brewing will host a **book exchange** from 2 to 5 p.m. Got books? Bring them to this free event and swap with fellow book lovers.

FEB 9: The fourth annual **Wild Dogs Brewing Superbowl Sunday Chili Bowl Cook-Off** will be held at 5 p.m., before the big game.

FEB 10: Lee County Library will host **Lore & Legends Gaming Strategy & Adventure Club** from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. The brand new monthly program for game enthusiasts will be held the second Monday of each month. No registration required — event is for ages 13 and up.

FEB 14: **Josh Watson & the Oola Mal-la Band** will perform from 8 to 11 p.m. at Smoke & Barrel in downtown Sanford.

FEB 20-23: **Jason Petty's 100 Years of Hank** will honor Hank Williams on Temple Theatre's main stage. Since 2001, Petty has traveled the continent with his own production called *Hank and My Honky Tonk Heroes*. Over the years, he had the chance to meet and become friends with those who knew and played with Williams. They shared their stories of what Hank and his music meant to them and to the history of country music. Petty has translated those stories into a beautiful mosaic of live music and storytelling, expertly weaving Williams' story of triumph and tragedy. Learn more at templeshow.org.

FEB 21: **Big Bump & The Stun Gunz** — a blues, boogie and classic rock group — will perform at Smoke & Barrel at 8 p.m.

FEB 22: Huger Mudder's **Grown Up Book Fair** will be held at the brewery in downtown Sanford from 2 to 8 p.m. Grab a beer, cider or wine and browse at your leisure in the beer hall or get on the book bus. Food truck will be in the beer garden beginning at 5.

FEB 22: The Pint Sized Pasture will host **Family Farm Day** from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Stroll around the farm and meet all the animals — pet and brush the large animals and snuggle with the bunnies. Also, hang out with some of the goats (if they'll let you). Yard games, a music wall, play areas, tower mountain and face painting for the kids, and food trucks will be on site. Admission is \$7 (ages 1 and under are free).

FEB 28: **The Simpletones** — a Sanford quartet playing rock and pop covers — will perform at Smoke & Barrel at 8 p.m.

MARCH 1: Temple Theatre's first of three Centennial Celebrations — honoring 100 years of the theater's presence in downtown Sanford — will be the **100 Years Gala** on March 1. Visit templeshow.org to learn more.

MARCH 6-9: Temple Theatre's second of three Centennial Celebrations — honoring 100 years of the theater's presence in downtown Sanford — will be the **Roaring 20's Revue**, featuring hits from the 1920s through the 2020s. Visit templeshow.org to learn more.

MARCH 7: **Dmitri Resnik & Bootleg Beat** will perform at Smoke & Barrel in downtown Sanford from 8 to 11 p.m. Resnik, a native of Chatham County, will bring blues, roots rock and Louisiana rhythms with a nod to New Orleans, where he lived and performed for a dozen years.

MARCH 14: **80s Unleashed** will perform at Smoke & Barrel in down Sanford from 8 to 11 p.m.

MARCH 15-16: Temple Theatre's third of three Centennial Celebrations — honoring 100 years of the theater's presence in downtown Sanford — will be the **Temple Teen Reunion Celebration**. Visit templeshow.org to learn more.

APRIL 24-MAY 18: Temple Theatre's final mainstage show of the 2024-2025 season will be the beloved classic, **Disney's Beauty and the Beast**. Ticket information available at templeshow.org.


MONDAYS: Circle M City in Sanford hosts **Monday Music Jam** at 7 p.m. every Monday. The town comes alive with pickin' and singin' ... guitars, mandolins, banjos, fiddles, bass and their players perform inside the Livery Stable. Pull up chairs to listen or join in. Families are welcome. Located at 74 Cowboy Lane.

WEDNESDAYS: Wild Dogs Brewing in downtown Sanford hosts **Trivia Night** each Wednesday at 7 p.m.

WEDNESDAYS: Lee County Libraries will host **Baby Story Times** (0-18 months) and **Toddler Story Times** (1-3 years) at 10 a.m. and 10:45 a.m. respectively on Wednesdays throughout June at the library in downtown Sanford.


THURSDAYS: Wild Dogs Brewing hosts a **"pop-up bookstore and bottle shop"** every Thursday from 4 to 10 p.m.

THURSDAYS: Lee County Libraries will host **Family Story Times** for all ages at 10 a.m. on Thursdays throughout the month of June.



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Fill in the blank squares in the grid, making sure that every row, column and 3-by-3 box includes all digits 1 through 9.

CROSSWORD: Super Bowl

ACROSS

1. Bungle
5. Cause of a trip?
8. Dao, alt. sp.
11. Between marquess and viscount
12. Super garb?
13. Inlet in Norway
15. Cogito ____ sum
16. Long story
17. Deprived of a limb
18. *Half-time headliner
20. Ice, dark or middle ____
21. *Cindy Crawford wore " ____ Dukes" in a Super Bowl ad
22. Flightless bird
23. *Last year's Super Bowl winners
26. A cheap, run-down motel
30. " ____ the fields we go"
31. Merry
34. Actor's part
35. Expensive
37. Not him
38. Cell phone bill item
39. Civil Rights icon
40. *David Tyree's ____ Catch
42. Letters of distress
43. What rule follower does
45. Get cozy
47. Greed, biblically-speaking
48. Grieve for the dead
50. Time period
52. *Team with most Super Bowl appearances
55. 3600 seconds, pl.
56. Casino chip
57. Salmon's output

59. En ____, all together
60. Like Piper of Hamelin
61. Uber alternative
62. ____ Robinson
63. Acronym, abbr.
64. "Come Sail Away" band

DOWN

1. Service charge
2. Songbird
3. Craving
4. Marilyn Monroe, e.g.
5. ____ lazuli
6. Hot
7. 52 cards
8. Hefty volume
9. Greek god of war
10. 1, e.g.
12. Cherry red
13. Post vitriol
14. *Team with no Super Bowl appearances
19. Looney Tunes duck
22. Architectural add-on
23. Meat of coconut
24. Roman king of Judea
25. Like certain whiskey
26. Grow crop
27. Brag
28. Algorithmic language
29. Ganders' companions
32. Tom Jones's " ____ a Lady"
33. Rolodex abbr.
36. * ____ Superdome
38. Wombs

40. Lady lobster
41. Hardened
44. Follows wash
46. Pig sounds
48. Bouncing off the walls
49. Weasel's aquatic cousin
50. Fly like an eagle
51. Boot-wearing kitty
52. Mama Bear's husband
53. To perfection (3 words)
54. *Justin Timberlake's " ____ Back," sung in Super Bowl show
55. Expression of doubt
58. *Steelers' number of Super Bowl trophies

CROSSWORD

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