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The Rant

Monthly

SANFORD, NORTH CAROLINA

JANUARY 2026

DATA MINING

In-demand AI data centers require huge amounts of energy, and companies are turning to areas rich in natural gas (like Lee County) for possible solutions



ALSO INSIDE: A LOOK BACK AT THE BIGGEST LOCAL STORIES FROM 2025

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I'm on the line, one open mind. This is my four leaf clover.

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LEE COUNTY GOVERNMENT
Parks & Recreation

JANUARY HAPPENINGS

Our Offices, San-Lee Park & Lee County Athletic Park will be closed Thursday, January 1st.
Also, Parks & Recreation Offices will be closed, Monday, January 19th.

Registration Opens: January 5th

Programs

Intersession Camp; \$120/week

- Ages 5-12
- San-Lee Park
- 7:30am - 5:30pm
 - March 18-20
 - March 23-27
 - March 30-April 5



Special Pops

Social Squad; \$25

- Ages 8+
- Bob Hales
- 3:30pm - 5:30pm
- 2nd Tuesday Feb - June



Fees shown are for Lee
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Gymnastics

Session 1: January 5 - March 1

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Looking forward in February

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- Gymnastics Session 2
- Special Olympics Basketball



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Commissioners stick with MedEx for EMS

After much debate, MedEx will replace FirstHealth as Lee County's ambulance provider beginning in July

By Richard Sullins

richard@rantnc.com

The Lee County Board of Commissioners instructed county staff last month to prepare a draft ordinance that names MedEx of Ahoskie as the county's next EMS provider. The county and MedEx will still have to come to a final agreement, but the move is a step toward a switch away from FirstHealth of the Carolinas, which has been providing ambulance service in Lee County since 2021.

Barring any unforeseen obstacles, a contact could be negotiated and finalized as early as next spring. It would take effect on July 1.

The 5-2 vote, with Democrat Robert Reives Sr. joining the board's four Republicans (Andre Knecht, Samantha Martin, Kirk Smith, and Taylor Vorbeck) and Democrats Mark Lovick and Cameron Sharpe voting against, came at a work session in December which had been called after a large group of first responders spoke against MedEx and in favor of FirstHealth at a series of public hearings this fall. It also came to light during the bidding process that while MedEx had claimed it was a "primary" or "co-primary" provider of emergency medical service in Forsyth County, the company is actually a non-emergency provider only authorized to perform emergency medical transport when specifically designated by that county.

The decision to select MedEx for negotiations also comes over the recommendation of county staff, which had recommended staying with FirstHealth.

'BY A WHOLE BUNCH OF COUNTRY MILES'

One issue the commissioners appeared to weigh heavily related to the costs of the unpaid ambulance services, or subsidies, that are ultimately passed on to the county for



MedEx is North Carolina's largest privately owned ambulance provider, operating a fleet of more than 100 ambulances statewide. The company says it delivers both emergency and non-emergency medical transportation, including 911 response, basic and advanced life support and critical care services. Photo: MedEx

and things kicked off in early April. An appointed EMS Advisory Committee pored over proposals and allowed each potential vendor with an opportunity to discuss their ideas with the committee during July.

By the end of August, the committee had narrowed its recommendation for the commissioners down to one company — FirstHealth — and public hearings were held on that recommendation at two meetings in October.

County staff had recommended early in 2025 that the commissioners speed up a decision on the renewal of the EMS contract by more than a year so the issue would be off the table well ahead of the 2026 election. The commissioners agreed

payment. Proposals made by FirstHealth in 2025, as well as in 2021, were higher than those submitted by their competitors.

FirstHealth's bid over the next five years came to just shy of \$20.9 million, while MedEx's proposal was about \$8.2 million.

Donna Hurdle, owner of MedEx, told the commissioners on Nov. 17 "we didn't expect to be the lowest bidder in this competition. We thought we might come in second, maybe even a close second. But we were totally stunned when we found out that not only were we the lowest bidder, but we were lowest by more than a whole bunch of country miles."

When FirstHealth was awarded the EMS agreement in 2021, the actual amount of the contract turned out to be

contracted with the county during the first full year of service by FirstHealth for EMS services in Fiscal Year 2022-23 was \$795,000.

Prestwood has consistently said the increased costs have come largely through inflationary costs passed on to FirstHealth and that a few million dollars here and a few million dollars there can add up to produce a sizeable adjustment in the cost of doing business.

While the commissioners have been at work all year by collecting cost estimates on big-ticket items they know are coming over the horizon, the estimated costs of a new five-year deal for emergency medical services were expected to be much smaller in comparison to those for building new schools or jails.

So, almost no one could have predicted the extent of the surprise generated when the county's Emergency Medical Services Advisory Committee was presented with a proposal from FirstHealth, the current franchise holder, in this year's round of proposals. That document proposed increasing the contract's value

by nearly \$17 million dollars over the life of the contract. Hurdle, the MedEx owner, called it "an outrageous amount of money that (FirstHealth) have gouged this county for."

CLEARING THE DECK

The county commissioners appear to be moving toward an understanding that the clock is ticking and there's a finite amount of time available to resolve this issue, as well as others they can expect in 2026.

So, at the board's Nov. 17 meeting, Reives requested a dedicated workshop on the EMS issues be held as quickly as practical so the options available might be clarified, giving members a chance to clear up any lingering questions they have before a final vote is taken to choose the winning bidder.

The duration of the December meeting was just a bit short of 90 minutes, but it seems to have been long enough to answer most of the questions about the ways this agreement might be framed to serve the needs of the county's population.

Vorbeck won't run again, slams local Republicans

By Richard Sullins

richard@rantnc.com

Lee County Commissioner Taylor Vorbeck announced during a December meeting of the Lee County Board of Commissioners that she won't seek another term, and in a lengthy and at times emotional speech slammed her own party organization for having an "unelected dictator" and being "ran by fear, bullying and control, where you are for the most part not allowed to have your own opinion."

Vorbeck, a Republican, was elected to the Board of Commissioners in 2022 representing the western Lee County-based District 4. Her announcement at the December meeting paves the way for a 2026 matchup between current school board member Eric Davidson, a Republican, and former school board member Jamey Laudate, a Democrat.

Vorbeck brought up accusations during her 2022 campaign that as a commissioner

she would be a "Womack puppet," referring to Lee GOP Chairman Jim Womack, and said she took those accusations "very much to heart, because even though he is the head of our local GOP chapter ... I was my own individual person."

Vorbeck revealed that in 2024, she was voted unanimously to be censured/kicked out of the party for two years because "I voted for an unaffiliated gentleman over the local GOP's recommended Republican man" for an appointment to the CCCC Board of Trustees. She later said she was talking about longtime Trustees Chairman Julian Philpott.

"We should be putting the person over the party into these positions," she said.

Vorbeck went on to say "the person coming for my seat as a GOP candidate" — presumably referring to Davidson — "is not for the community .. He drinks the Kool-Aid and doesn't want unity," she said.

— Full story at rantnc.com

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OPINION

Plumbing with aplomb

By Billy Liggett

The downstairs toilet is bubbling again. Not the first words you want to hear as you wake up from a night of somewhat peaceful slumber, but they were the words my wife delivered — in lieu of a “good morning, dear” — on a cold, rainy morning to start my Christmas break.

Plumbing has been somewhat of an issue in our house. Apparently the main line pipe from said house to where it meets the city’s pipe doesn’t run downhill enough, and at times, that can cause problems (especially if we’ve had guests who haven’t received our strict instructions to flush often and don’t put weird things in the toilets).

I quickly got tired of plumbers charging us for quick visits to clear that pipe, so I became somewhat of a novice plumber myself — buying 100-foot-long pipe snakes, drain augers for the indoor problems and familiarizing myself with cleanout pipes and the miracle of a well-made plunger. In the last three years, I imagine I’ve saved hundreds by simply doing it myself (adding to my appreciation for the trade with every clog).

I didn’t want to break out the tools on this morning. It was 42 degrees outside, and it had just started to drizzle. I longed for the smell of sizzling bacon and hot tea in our kitchen ... not the smells associated with drain work.

Clad in flannel pajama pants, a hoodie, slippers and work gloves, I grabbed my plumbing tools and walked outside to the cleanout drain closest to my house. We’ve learned from experience that when the downstairs toilet begins to bubble, that means trouble is literally brewing. A backup is imminent. And I’ve learned that if I go to that outdoor cleanout drain and see it backed up, that means the problem is somewhere between there and the cleanout drain closest to the road. If all is clear outside, the problem is indoors (where it’s warmer).

On this morning, it was backed up. Gray



water and a few bubbles greeted me when I unscrewed the top. A deer across the street took a break from eating grass to laugh at me.

The drizzle became a steady rain.

Discouraged, but self-trained for these moments, I grabbed my \$25 plunger. Yes, you can get much cheaper plungers just about anywhere, but I’ve learned that if you actually invest in a quality, powerful plunger, you can often push through even the worst clogs. I went to work like I was churning butter and — for the next five minutes, at least — did a month’s worth of arm and shoulder workouts to give that clog hell. Nothing.

Undeterred, I tossed the metal snake at my feet. This is a beast of a tool. Heavy as it looks and nowhere near user friendly, I began to shove it coil-end-first into the murky sea. And I pushed. And unraveled. And pushed. And unraveled. I didn’t hit any resistance, and the gray water hadn’t gone down even an inch.

I’d measured this before, and I knew that this snake could go the length of my front yard to where that second cleanout drain sits next to my road.

That second drain. Yikes. I made a rookie mistake. I would have saved a lot of time and arm pain had I started there. I trudged through the now heavy rain and unscrewed that drain to see another backup.

Either this clog was within 10 feet of where I now stood, or this problem was the city’s.

I grabbed that snake and with the determination of four plumbers, drove it through. I hadn’t gone through two unravels before I hit paydirt. Like I was breaking dirt with a shovel, I gave it one last push and was greeted with the sound all plumbers — professional or amateur — love to hear.

Phlurge. Spillppt. Woosh.

My hands clenched in fisted triumph, I looked up and howled through the rain a victorious “yes!” The deer nodded in approval and ran to tell his friends. My wife walked out to ask why I wasn’t wearing a raincoat.

In the annals of plumbing history, it was a small triumph. But it was my triumph.



DEGENERATIVE AI

The price we pay for comic strips and fake kitty videos.

VORBECK FIGHTING A LOST CAUSE

Taylor Vorbeck fought the good fight. But she lost before she ever put the gloves on. The Republican Party — in Lee County and nationally — is a lost cause, and she should have known that long before putting the “R” next to her name.

Vorbeck made local news in December for her announcement during the Lee County Board of Commissioners meeting that she would not run again in 2026. In her speech, she slammed her party for having an “unelected dictator” (Jim Womack) and being “run by fear, bullying and control, where you are for the most part not allowed to have your own opinion.” Vorbeck was elected to the board in 2022, representing District 4.

Vorbeck’s speech about unity and local politics getting back to the “village mentality” was inspiring. It’s exactly the kind of sentiment that has been long lost on the Republican party, and knowing that the

party still has elected officials who aren’t afraid to publicly say these things is reason for hope.

But we fear Vorbeck’s words are lost on this current iteration of the Grand Old Party. The Party of Lincoln has devolved in the last 12 years to become the Party of Trump — where decorum is an afterthought and winning at all costs (i.e. shady redistricting efforts) is celebrated. Locally (and nationally), it’s a party where if you don’t toe the line, you’re ostracized and publicly shamed.

Vorbeck tried to change the system from the inside, but it was a losing battle from the start. There is no such thing as a RINO (Republican in Name Only) these days — associating yourself with the party is associating yourself with Trumpism and its tactics.

While we commend Vorbeck’s effort, the cynics in us know that the moment she bucked the system, she never had a chance.

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I wasn’t myself in 2025; I committed to a fitness plan

By Gordon Anderson

Not long ago, I would have deeply mocked myself for what I’m about to do. But I’m in the latter half of my 40s now, and I guess that does funny things to you. So here it is: I’m going to tell you about how 2025 was the year I committed to working out regularly, and actually stuck with it.

If you know me at all, athleticism isn’t in the top 100 things that come to mind. I quit baseball as a kid, because I was afraid of the ball. One time I found myself in a tackle football game when I was like 13, and I was the last defender between the end zone and a guy the size of Alaska who was running at me at the speed of Superman. I stepped aside and everybody yelled at me as he charged past to glory. Whatever.

But so anyway, I started going to the gym in January of last year with the vague idea that I was gonna at least try to get my physical house

in some kind of order. This wasn’t the first time I’ve tried that, but, you know. I always fell off for one reason or another. Being newly 45 at the time, I had a sense that I should probably take physical health a little more serious, but I wasn’t confident.

That first day was rough (*there were many more rough days*). I “ran” 1.01 miles on the treadmill and then rode an exercise bike for a bit. I woke up totally sore the next day and complained about it to anyone who would listen. But I also went back! A mile in 20 minutes, I thought to myself. Surely I can do better, I thought to myself. So I ran a little farther the next day, and the day after that. I eventually got over worrying about how stupid I’d look trying the weight machines and fell into a routine.

My only real goal at first was to make being active a habit (I developed more measurable goals as I got along, but this one felt the most important). And I can say I succeeded. According to the nerdy little spreadsheet I made, I went to the gym 206 more times after that day in mid-January. I got sick once and missed a couple weeks, but that was

2026

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I’ll be back in the gym in 2026, but I hope to use the experience to make my new habit for the year being more intentional about making music — I want to be able to say I sat down with no distractions once or twice a week for a set amount of time to write songs instead of waiting for inspiration to strike and hoping I can coax an idea out. I’m prepared to write some real stinkers, and I know the most that will happen with anything good is that I might get to play it in front of people. But who cares? I like making up songs, and I want to get better at it.

It turns out challenging yourself is fun. It doesn’t matter what it is — you could want to cook more, or read a certain amount of books, or get better at yard work, or, I dunno, build a car or something. Give it a try! You might surprise yourself.

Gordon Anderson was originally slated to star in the 1977 film “Pumping Iron,” but backed out on account of he hadn’t yet been born. His role ultimately went to Arnold Schwarzenegger. Email him at gordon@rantnc.com.

COVER STORY

DATA MINING

IN-DEMAND AI DATA CENTERS REQUIRE HUGE AMOUNTS OF ENERGY, AND COMPANIES ARE TURNING TO AREAS RICH IN NATURAL GAS (LIKE LEE COUNTY) FOR POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS



On Nov. 1, *Inside Climate News* published a report indicating Alamance County-based Deep River Data wanted to access natural gas from Butler Well No. 3 in Lee County to power a data center for artificial intelligence here.

By Gordon Anderson
gordon@rantnc.com

If you're new to Lee County, fracking might not be a term you've heard a whole lot of in the context of local politics. But there was a time not long ago when fracking — shorthand for hydraulic fracturing, a method used to release natural gas and other resources by injecting high-pressure fluid into underground rock formations — was a hot topic both across the state and in the general area.

Lee and Chatham counties sit atop shale gas deposits identified by state geologists, and for much of the early 2010s, there was a contingent both locally and in the state capitol working to allow those with mineral rights in the area to get to it. Proponents said it would create new wealth, new economic activity and a clean burning energy source right here at home.

rantnc.com

Detractors, however, pointed to reports of environmental harm in places like Pennsylvania and Oklahoma, where fracking has been undertaken on a large scale. There were widely circulated reports at the time of contaminated water — including claims of flammable tap water. Even earthquakes have been tentatively linked to fracking. Also, mineral rights are often severed from land rights, meaning one can theoretically have the right to access natural gas that's beneath land that isn't theirs.

There's not enough space to rehash that debate in its entirety, but it had gone mostly quiet by the turn of the 2020s. Lee County was under a locally-passed fracking moratorium through the last half of the 2010s, but even after it expired, there's been no commercial hydraulic fracturing here or elsewhere in North Carolina outside of test and exploratory wells.

But the debate about fracking, it seems, wasn't over. Just dormant.

FRACKING FOR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Hydraulic fracturing (or fracking) is literally fueling the artificial intelligence boom in the United States by providing massive amounts of cheap natural gas to power data centers, which are specialized facilities built to handle the enormous computing power needed to run AI.

According to Deloitte, one of the world's largest accounting firms, by 2035, the power needed for AI data center demand in the U.S. is expected to grow thirtyfold, reaching 123 gigawatts (up from 4 gigawatts in 2024). According to WRAL, industry estimates show a 250-megawatt data center can use about a billion gallons of water each year, or 2.7 million gallons a day.

On-site AI power generation is creating new business for oilfield service in regions like the Permian Basin in Texas, linking the fossil fuel industry directly to AI's growth. On Nov. 1, *Inside Climate News* reported that North Carolina-based Deep River Data wanted to access gas from Butler Well No. 3, located near U.S. 421 and Cumnock Road near the Lee-Chatham line.

How Fracking Powers AI:

- **On-Site Power Generation:** Huge data centers are being built near major fracking sites (like the Permian Basin) to directly tap into natural gas for power, sometimes generating 2 gigawatts or more on-site.
- **Data Center Growth:** The explosive demand for AI computing is driving the construction of new natural gas-fired power plants and increasing gas consumption.

Environmental concerns:

- **Greenhouse gas:** Fracking releases significant amounts of methane, estimated to be over 80 times more effective at trapping heat than carbon dioxide.
- **Water:** There is a risk of contamination to both groundwater and surface water from fracking, which requires millions of gallons of fresh water per well, straining water supplies in arid regions.

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DEEP RIVER DATA AND THE BUTLER WELL

Things came spilling back into the public on Nov. 1, when *Inside Climate News* published a report indicating Alamance County-based company Deep River Data wanted to access natural gas from Butler Well No. 3, which is situated in the woods between U.S. 421 and Cumnock Road near the Lee-Chatham County line and use it to power a data center for artificial intelligence here.

The story identified Deep River Data as having “connections with the cryptocurrency industry” and detailed connections its officers have both in business and government.

“Company adviser Dan Spuller, who is both a crypto entrepreneur and a natural gas landman, contacted the state Oil & Gas Commission in September about applying for a drilling unit, a parcel of land where drilling would occur,” the story read. “He said the natural gas would be for a data center to power ‘AI workloads,’ not crypto mining. Both applications are energy-intensive, running server farms around the clock to power streams of computer computations.”

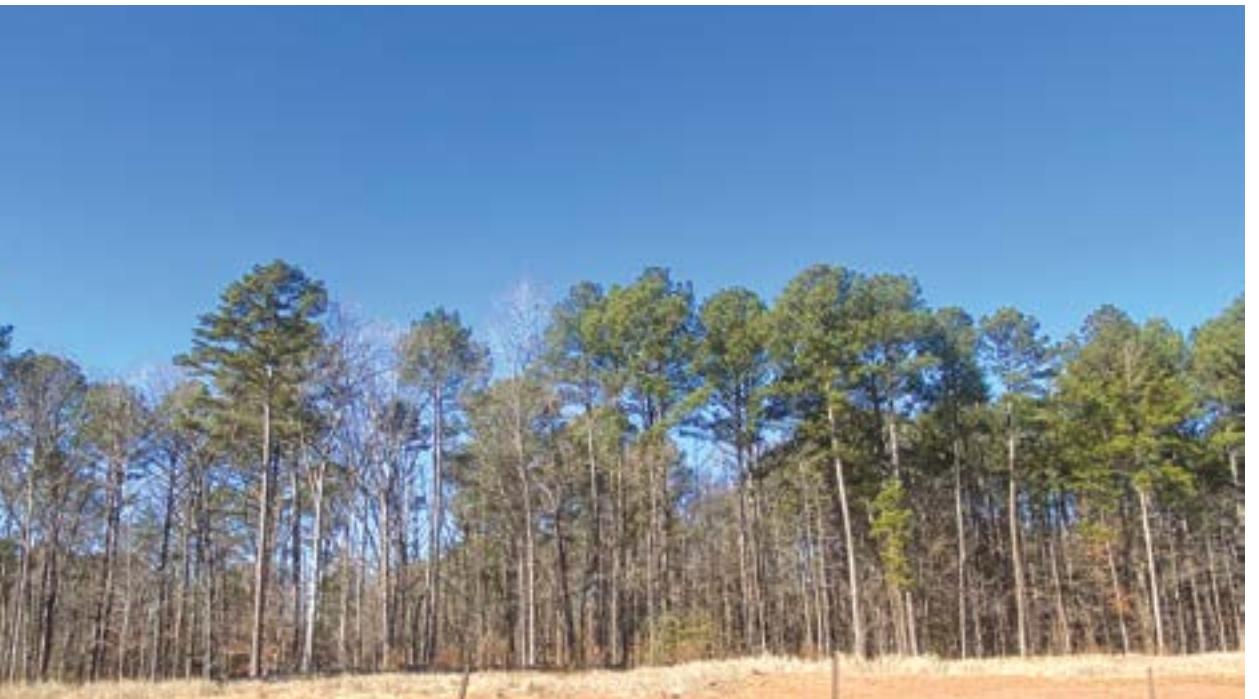
The ICN piece reports Spuller writing “we want to submit a packet that is complete on first impression — avoiding delays and making the Commission’s review as straightforward as possible.”

The news spread quickly — the article and others like it were shared on social media, often with calls to action attached. In December, that action spilled off of the internet and into real life. At meetings of the Sanford City Council (Dec. 2) and the Lee County Board of Commissioners (Dec. 15) nearly 20 people addressed the two boards, urging both to put a stop to the idea as quickly as possible.

Although Spuller is quoted in the *Inside Climate News* piece as saying Deep River Data plans to use “conventional drilling, rather than fracking,” those who appeared before local governing boards in December unanimously asked for moratoriums to be enacted on both data centers and fracking.

COMMUNITY CONCERN

“Sanford has a large population of residents that would be harmed by fracking,” area resident Keely Puricz told the city council on Dec. 2, holding up a map of the area surrounding Butler Well No. 3. “I’m speaking before it’s too late. The risk of using an antiquated well in itself is frightening. This well



“Untapped” shale-rich land at U.S. 1 and Cumnock Road near the Lee-Chatham county line is being eyed for potential exploration to help fuel AI data centers, according to published reports.

has not had regular inspections ... and at recent meetings of the Oil & Gas Commission, the (Department of Environmental Quality) admitted they only had one employee to review the rules versus the four or five they had 10 years ago.”

Sam Kauffman told the council he’s originally from Oklahoma, and “grew up during the oil and gas boom.”

“I’ve seen the wells, I’ve seen the fracking — it’s not worth it,” he said. “You’ll end up in an *Erin Brockovich* situation where pollution is inevitable.

“It’s not if, it’s when.”

The county Board of Commissioners heard more of the same less than two weeks later.

“I know this will be a great monetary gain for the man that’s interested in having this in our county,” Christine Morgan told the commissioners on Dec. 15. “But we all deserve to have clean air and clean water. I feel like that’s our right. God made the planet one way, and we have done enough in our destructive selves.”

Jennifer Garner told the commissioners she was born and raised in Sanford, and had “moved away a couple times.”

“Every time I came back I’d see the growth and the revitalization that’s been done in my favor-

ite city and my favorite downtown,” she said. “It seems like a gross, counterproductive measure to put all that into our community just to destroy it, just to open the literal floodgates of contamination that would be brought by fracking.”

The message was clear: There’s at least a part of the Lee County community that’s not only adamantly opposed to fracking, but also data centers in general, and they’re not afraid to show up and talk about it.

PERMITS, UTILITIES AND REGULATORY REALITY

There’s a wrinkle to the concern over drilling for AI in Lee County. Not a single permit has been requested for any of the things outlined in the Nov. 1 story — not at the state level or the local level.

Not to cast doubt on the *ICN* piece, which is sourced from emails received under a request for public information. There’s no reason to doubt those are real or that Deep River Data has at least explored the idea it described. But potential moratoriums aside, there’s nothing for local government to do right now with regards to the rumored project, because nobody’s asked for anything. At least not on paper, according to Kirk Smith, Republican chairman for the Lee County Board of Commissioners.

“There are no permit requests before the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality to access the natural gas in Lee County nor the Butler #3 gas well,” Smith told *The Rant* via email in December. “There are no permit requests for a drill pad nor for an access road with the NC DOT. There are no permit requests for extraction and the ultimate closing of the well. The Lee County Technical Review Committee has not received any plans for a proposed data center nor has the Sanford Area Growth Alliance received any Requests for Information with the intent of establishing a data center. The Lee County Joint Planning Commission gave instructions for the staff to research possible modifications to the Unified Development Ordinance addressing data centers.”

Further, utilities are increasingly wary of data centers — they use an inordinate amount of power after all, and companies like Duke Energy are more regularly asking for sizable, up front monetary commitments from those who want to operate one. It’s possible the rumored project would be powered by a private, onsite power plant of its own, but that would still require approval from Duke for interconnection and backup service. So, nowhere near impossible, but not as simple as it sounds either.

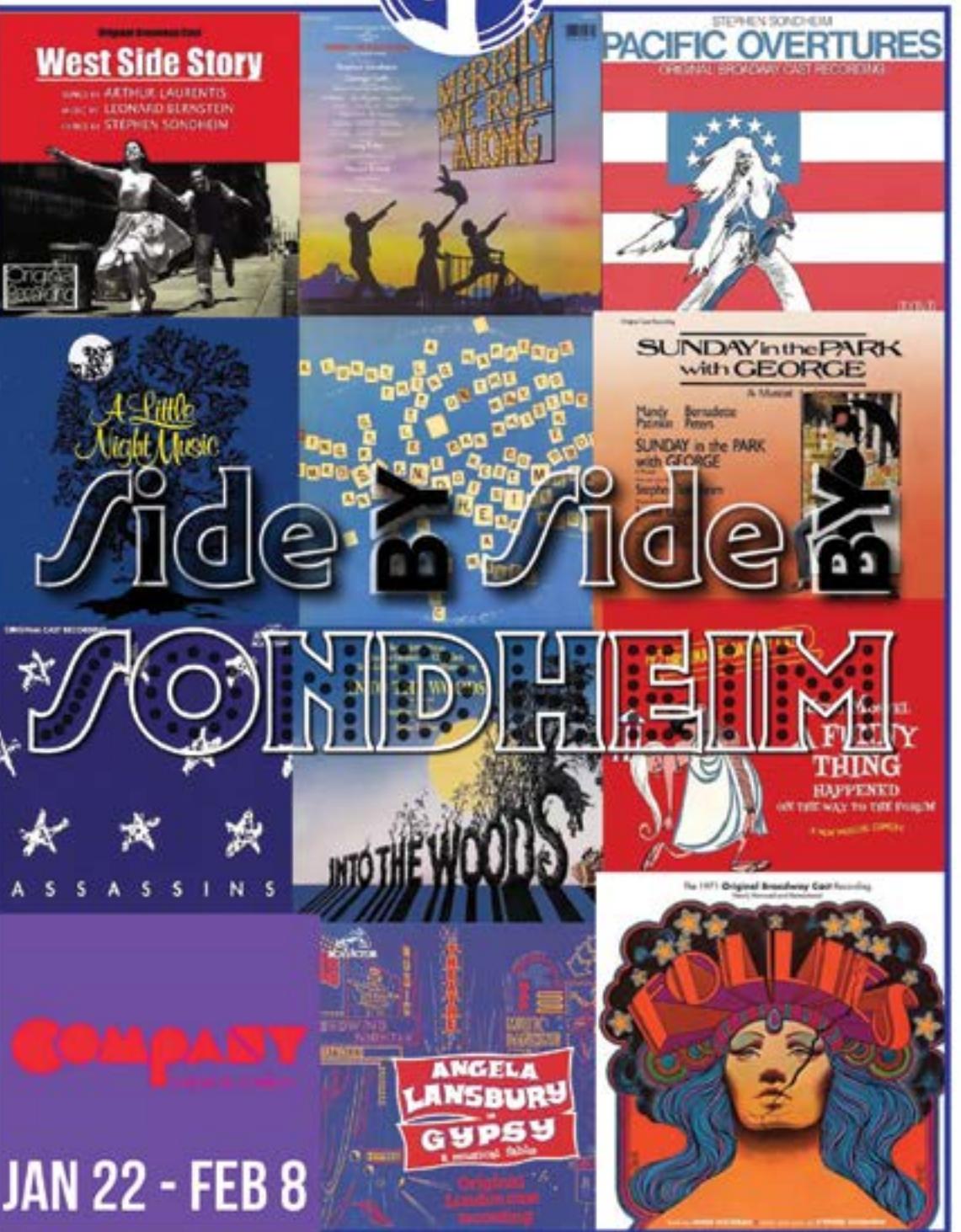
Smith’s statement could be seen as cold water thrown on the idea of drilling for natural gas at Butler No. 3 and using it to power a data center. But Smith also threw cold water on the idea of any kind of moratorium on fracking and/or data centers.

“The demand to establish a moratorium thus blocking land owners from generating wealth from their property, is on its face dictatorial and rooted in an authoritarian regime most associated with Marxists,” he wrote. “While on the subject, recent hearings in the U.S. Congress reveal the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is funding environmental groups opposing ‘data centers.’

“The CCP is home to cheap and plentiful electricity generated by coal fired electrical plants (do you recall the air pollution leading up to the Beijing Olympics?). What better way for China to lead and dominate the Artificial Intelligence industry. Our Constitutional purpose as a governing body is to ‘Protect Life, Liberty, and Property Rights.’ Any moratorium violates that fundamental purpose of our Constitutional Republic protecting property rights.”

However, local fracking moratoriums in North Carolina aren’t explicitly bans on the practices — they’re temporary pauses that allow governments to review potential impacts. The state retains ultimate regulatory authority.

TEMPLE THEATRE



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DATA CENTERS: A SEPARATE BUT LINKED DEBATE

Jimmy Randolph, CEO of the Sanford Area Growth Alliance — a public-private partnership that houses the area chamber of commerce as well as the county's economic development operation — similarly said he hasn't heard much, if any, credible talk about the project. He was careful to distinguish the issues opponents are raising from one another.

"There's a conversation to be had about data centers and the benefits and utility they may be able to provide to communities like ours. The right data center project could absolutely be a

positive for Sanford and Lee County. Fracking is an entirely separate conversation with concerns and questions that are unique to that issue," he said. "That being said, SAGA has not received or been asked to provide any information about the specific project referenced in recent media reports and in front of the city council and the county commissioners, so it would be inappropriate to speculate."

The debate over data centers includes controversies of its own — controversies which are separate from the debate over fracking. They've been shown to bring increased tax revenue and some number of jobs, although nowhere near the number a more traditional in-

dustry might offer. But there have also been concerns about water usage and other environmental concerns (for his part, Smith disputed entirely the idea that data centers "consume enormous amounts of water," calling the idea "fear mongering").

So it's not surprising that news reports are common lately which describe local governments proposing and enacting standards surrounding data centers.

A recent piece in the *Midland Daily News* in Texas described efforts by the government of Bay City, Texas (population of around 18,000) to look at concerns like "maximum

facility size and acreage of the site; power demand threshold and utility capacity review, water usage limits and cooling method requirements; noise, lighting, buffering and setback standards; site location criteria and zoning compatibility; phased development and expansion limitations; emergency response, resiliency and decommissioning plans; and community benefit and infrastructure impact considerations."

North Carolina law does allow local governments to regulate land use through zoning and other methods, making standards similar to those being explored in Bay City theory possible.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

It's too early for alarm or worry about Lee County's potential role in the country's AI boom. There's too much that nobody knows at this point. Data centers and fracking are separate issues, but both have sparked local debate about environmental impacts, utility use and community standards. Those addressing local governments over the matter have the right idea — they're making their stance known now while the issue gathers on horizon, instead of waiting for it unpack its bags.

Puriczz, who spoke before both the city on Dec. 2, told the Board of Commissioners on Dec. 15 about recent fracking activity in Pennsylvania and cited a data center moratorium in Wisconsin that allowed "local government to develop suitable ordinances regulating an industry's activities."

"Since Dec. 4, one (Pennsylvania fracking) company had 360,000 gallons of drilling fluid lost into the local coal pockets," she said.

Another speaker before the county commissioners on Dec. 15 was Debbie Hall, who acknowledged that no applications have been filed. "You know and we all know that the wheels are turning," she said. "Drilling, fracking and data centers are linked to many hazards. You are the people that can help us, and we're asking you to do that."

This issue isn't likely to go away anytime soon, regardless of what happens with the rumored project that kicked off what appears to be a revival in local anti fracking activity. More is coming in the weeks, months and years ahead. The Lee County Board of Commissioners as of this writing is scheduled to meet on Jan. 5, which is *The Rant Monthly*'s publication date. Clean Water for NC, a state based water advocacy group, published a blog on Dec. 17 urging interested parties to attend and ask for a moratorium on fracking and data centers.

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2025 | A LOOK BACK

FIGHT OVER STATE FUNDING FOR PRIVATE K-12 EDUCATION GOES PUBLIC

THE RANT'S DEEP DIVE INTO GRACE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL'S USE OF PUBLIC FUNDS TO SUPPORT PRIVATE SCHOOL SCHOLARSHIPS HIT A NERVE LOCALLY, STATEWIDE IN JULY

When state lawmakers launched the North Carolina Opportunity Scholarship in 2013, they promoted the program as one that would encourage school choice in the form of private school tuition for low-income families. Then, the program's aid was restricted to families of four with household income of less than \$44,123.

Every year since, the state has moved the goal posts.

By 2022, families making as much as \$111,000 qualified, and a decade after the launch, the number of students taking advantage of the program grew from about 1,000 to 25,000. In 2023, the Republican-led legislature removed income caps entirely — and more than 80,000 North Carolina students received vouchers for the following academic year. Plans call for spending as much \$500 million annually on the program by 2032.

Few if any institutions have benefited more from the scholarship program than Grace Christian School in Sanford. It has received the most public funding than any of the state's 930 private schools for three straight years, according to the North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority (NCSEAA), which oversees the scholarship.

Grace Christian School was the subject of a lengthy piece published in *The Rant Monthly* in July of 2025 about not only questions surrounding its use of public funds (and the whole idea of publicly funding private education as a whole),



WHAT'S NEW?

Less than two months after *The Rant* published its piece on Grace Christian School and the mounting public criticism over its treatment of students, parents and faculty — all while leading the state in publicly funded Opportunity Scholarships over the last three years — the school received a letter from the North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority on Aug. 28 about the school charging parents "an impermissible fee" if they were late in endorsing funds from the scholarship program.

The letter read, in part: "Any policy adopted by a school that would require a parent to endorse even if the parent did not fully understand whether the scholarship amount is accurate would be impermissible. ... the Authority is [also] aware that the School may have used scholarship funds disbursed in January 2025 for the payment of tuition and required fees for the fall 2024 semester ... to, instead, apply those funds to student accounts for outstanding balances that may have included optional fees or charges of fees without adequate notice to the parents in lieu of a direct reimbursement as required by law. ... If the School did not properly arrange the method of reimbursement of the funds with the parent or guardian of a student, it would be in direct violation of the law appropriating those funds."

The story became *The Rant's* most viewed story of 2025 online and one of the most-read stories in the *The Rant's* 13-year run as a website. Since the story, the North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority has (quietly) condemned Grace's use of public funding and its penalization of those who don't endorse scholarship funds (further explained on this page's pullout box to the right). And in October, *Business North Carolina* magazine published a follow-up (also written by *The Rant's* Billy Liggett) released to a statewide audience.

The NCSEAA's letter asked Grace leaders to submit a written explanation confirming review of the training materials related to tuition and required fees. The letter amounted to a slap on the wrist for a program that received more than \$5 million in state tuition assistance in 2024-2025.

Grace Christian School officials declined to comment on both stories.

but also several complaints from former students, parents of those students and former faculty over the school's "changing culture" and the treatment of those who don't "fall in line" with that culture.

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The following contains excerpts from both the original and follow-up article from *The Rant* and *Business N.C.*:

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Grace Christian School students received \$5.13 million in tuition assistance during the 2024-2025 school year, a \$2 million jump from the previous year. Over the last three academic years, Grace Christian has taken in nearly \$10.5 million in state tuition assistance, ahead of Concord Academy and Trinity Christian School in Fayetteville, which each collected about \$7.6 million during that time.

Such public assistance was marketed, at least initially, as a way to make a private school option affordable for more families.

Another factor was creating competition to spur improvement at public schools. Grace Christian has more than doubled its annual tuition over the past two years, while adding new buildings and athletic facilities. Enrollment is about 960, according to its website. That is nearly triple the level before the pandemic in 2020.

The school raised tuition to \$18,300 this year, versus \$17,900 last year and \$9,000 in 2023-24, according to a parent who asked to be unnamed because his children attend the school. His family's income made him ineligible for the Opportunity Scholarship program previously.

Each Grace Christian student is required to apply for the scholarship, including students of school employees who receive discounts of as much as 85% of tuition, he notes.

"I think everybody was in a state of panic when we saw this [hike], saying, 'What the heck is going on here?'" he says. "There's no way families in Sanford can afford \$18,000 tuition a year. But then they push this Opportunity Scholarship like you're getting a deal."

Grace Christian also offers its own financial aid, requiring a \$40 application fee and family tax returns. The parent says he declined to disclose that information. Grace Christian has developed an outstanding athletics program. Its girls basketball team has won four consecutive state titles in three different divisions.

"Without a doubt, Grace is taking advantage of this program."

PUBLIC FUNDS, PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Grace Christian School has led the state in N.C. Opportunity Scholarship (private school voucher) funding for each of the last three years:

YEAR	FUNDS	RANK
2022-23	\$2,261,497	1
2023-24	\$3,073,962	1
2024-25	\$5,130,642	1
Total:	\$10,466,101	1

Grace Christian School in Sanford topped other private schools — many located in larger cities with larger student enrollments — in total public-funded N.C. Opportunity Scholarships received this past year:

1. Grace Christian School (Sanford)	\$5.1 M
2. Metrolina Christian Academy (Charlotte)	\$4.7 M
3. North Raleigh Christian Academy	\$4.3 M
4. Concord Academy	\$3.8 M
5. Fayetteville Christian School	\$3.7 M
6. Gaston Christian School	\$3.6 M
7. Wake Christian Academy (Raleigh)	\$3.4 M
8. Liberty Christian Academy (Richlands)	\$3.4 M
50. Lee Christian School (Sanford)	\$1.8 M
387. Calvary Education Center (Sanford)	\$272 K
562. Carolina Christian Academy (Sanford)	\$63 K

Grace Christian Head of School Stuart Shumway, Chief Financial Officer Johnathan Bullard and Lead Pastor Joel Murr and other school officials declined multiple requests for interviews for both *The Rant Monthly* and *Business NC* pieces. The North Carolina State Education Assistance Authority, which administers Opportunity Scholarship, also declined to comment when asked about the propriety of requiring students to file applications for scholarships. The agency also didn't want to discuss schools' decision to boost tuition while receiving state funding.

The letter appears to be a slap on the wrist, at least compared to action taken against Mitchener University Academy in Selma (Johnston County) in 2023. The authority found Mitchener ineligible for funds and ordered the repayment of "a number of scholarships," though did not specify the reason for the action, according to a report that year from WRAL. Their report found the school was among 26 private schools in which the number of Opportunity Scholarships awarded exceeded the number of students the schools enrolled.

GRACE'S \$98 MILLION PLAN

The influx of scholarship and tuition comes as Grace Chapel is showing rapid growth. The church runs the school as a "community ministry" by providing facilities, utilities and financial support. It had \$20.2 million in revenue in 2023, more than triple the amount reported in 2017, according to annual tax filings.

Like the church, Grace Christian's

school is enjoying unpreceded success. Its enrollment from kindergarten to 12th grade has nearly tripled since the pandemic, when in-person classes continued with masks not required. The school has invested millions of dollars on renovations for new and existing athletics facilities, helping boost multiple sports programs that have won several state titles. Perhaps the most famous alum is Sarah Strong, who was named college basketball's Freshman of the Year after helping the Connecticut Huskies win the national championship in April.

In June, just weeks before *The Rant's* report, the school disclosed plans for a two-phase, \$98 million expansion that includes a new 59,000-square-foot facility for students in grades six through 12; a 2,000-seat football/soccer stadium with a turf, field house and press box; a new elementary and pre-school building with space for administration and other staff; six additional athletic fields and an expanded strength and conditioning area for athletes.

A four-page prospectus detailed the project, which would rely on a capital campaign supported by parents, the community and local businesses.

Raising tuition at private schools benefiting from Opportunity Scholarship funding isn't unique to Grace Christian. A June report by Public Schools First NC found several schools that raised tuition to match the amount given through the scholarship program and cited evidence of schools giving admissions preference to families who applied for vouchers. The report cited Grace Christian School's success in tapping the program. (Some N.C. private schools in larger cities charge annual tuition topping \$30,000.)

PARENTS FIGHT BACK

Roberto Montero's oldest child started attending Grace Christian shortly after 2014, when then pastor Rudy Holland stepped down after allegations that he embezzled more than \$200,000 from the

church. Soon after, three former Grace Chapel Church employees were arrested on separate felony embezzlement charges going back as far as 2006. Holland was never arrested and today is a ministry representative for a nonprofit legal ministry in Florida.

Despite the surrounding controversy when he arrived, Montero said his family had “nothing but positive” experiences with Grace Christian School until 2023, when he noticed significant discrepancies in billing for his 6-year-old daughter’s tuition. He believes he was overcharged by at least \$2,500 for the 2024-2025 school year.

Montero said he also complained to Rev. Joel Murr and school leaders about the tuition hike and the requirement of applying for an Opportunity Scholarship. The school responded by putting a block on his family’s spending account.

“In my 10 years of supporting Grace Christian, I had never been late on a payment,” says Montero, who works in finance. “The only change was that I refused to endorse incorrect numbers. Retaliation came immediately, threatening to charge daily late fees until I endorsed the scholarship and denying my 6-year-old from being able to purchase food.”

“Other parents told me they saw the same questionable charges but were too afraid to press the school and administration for answers,” he says. “Families worry that if they challenge leadership, their children may be treated differently. That kind of fear should never exist in a school that claims to serve families ‘in the name of Christ.’” He hasn’t recovered the \$2,500.

NCSEAA rules governing the Opportunity Scholarship Program, published in 2016 and amended in 2018, don’t mention the issue of tying school applications with the scholarships. But the optics of making such a rule while tuition is soaring and announcing a major capital campaign aren’t good, says Jane Wettach, a clinical professor and expert in education law at Duke University School of Law.

“It was contemplated that this would happen,” says Wettach, who wrote a study on the state’s school voucher program in 2014. “There’s nothing in the law that would prevent it. And it’s a predictable result of the way the program was designed.”

While the program has widespread support among state lawmakers, the expansion has been built into budget bills with no “up-or-down” votes on the issue, she says.

“The way the proponents of both the voucher program and private schools see it, these are private contracts between parents and the school. If parents don’t like the arrangement [increased tuition], they don’t have to send their kids there.”

The rise in tuition — despite parents being forced to endorse the scholarship — was a thorn in the side of several parents who spoke to *The Rant* for the July piece.

According to “John” (his name was withheld because of friends and family employed or enrolled at Grace), tuition for his high school student for the 2023-24 school year was just under \$9,000. In 2024-25, that tuition jumped to \$17,900, and heading into this school year, his family has been asked to pay more than \$18,300 for tuition and fees (for just one student).

“I think everybody was in a state of panic when we saw this, saying, ‘What the heck is going on here?’” John says. “There’s no way families in Sanford can afford \$18,000 tuition a year. But then they push this Opportunity Scholarship like you’re getting a deal. And they also offer Grace Financial Aid, with a \$40 application fee. Both of these require a family to provide their tax returns.”

The July story also included Grace’s policy of “administrative prerogative,” which gives it the authority to un-enroll a student for any reason it deems necessary. Parents Ricky and Tonya Dew shared how their son, Gaige, was told he was not welcome back in 2024 because he did not “socially fit in.” LaRue Wilson shared how her daughter was denied enrollment head-

ing into the fall 2024 semester because of a video she posted on social media where she was holding a red Solo cup. Ramona Willett shared how her granddaughter was told she could no longer attend after Willett questioned school officials on the school’s changing culture.

Grace teachers also shared stories of being let go (again, without cause) because they questioned spending on athletics and other issues. Tina Shafer said she was fired after reporting potential mold issues in her classroom to state authorities.

“There’s a sign in the main lobby in front of the church and school that reads, ‘Love Like Jesus,’” she told *The Rant*. “What they’ve done to us and to others, it makes Christians look bad. What we experienced is far from what Jesus would have done.”

PUBLIC SCHOOL CHALLENGES

This December, five months after *The Rant*’s report, the Education Law Center gave North Carolina an “F” for funding public schools. Its report showed the state ranked second-to-last nationally, spending approximately \$5,600 less per student than the national average. North Carolina ranked dead last in investing in PK-12 public education as a percentage of its Gross Domestic Product.

Like peers across the state, Lee County’s 9,000-student public school system is dealing with high teacher turnover rates and underperforming schools. Overcrowding is also a concern with about 10,000 homes being built or planned in the Sanford area over the next five years.

Performance is also an issue. Two of the district’s 16 schools earned “A” or “B” grades in the most recent North Carolina School Report Cards report. Four earned a “D” and a middle school received an “F” on the report.

The county struggles to offer competitive incentives for teachers, Alan Rummel, the school board’s vice chairman, told the commissioners in June. But the county agreed to fund only \$840,000 of the district’s \$3.6 million plan for in-



La Terrazita’s arrachera burrito is a fresh tortilla wrapped around carnitas, rice, black beans, pico de gallo and chipotle sauce. It was included in *The Rant Monthly*’s list of “dishes we love” in our ode to local Mexican cuisine.



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A hotbed for Mexican food

Authentic Mexican and Latino restaurants have multiplied in Sanford in the last five years, making it a destination for foodies

□ To kick off 2025 last January, *The Rant Monthly* dedicated its cover story to local restaurants, more specifically, some of the authentic Mexican and Latin-American food joints that have opened up in the last five years.

Meanwhile, state funding through the scholarship program was about \$5,300 per Grace student. The General Assembly reported in June that the program provided \$10 million in statewide savings. Proponents of vouchers also say more money for public schools hasn’t led to improved performance, noting fewer than half of third-graders are proficient at reading.

Wettach says the underlying issue is insufficient support overall. “Every single penny going toward a voucher could be going to a public school. Even if you took all the money going toward private schools and put it toward public schools, they’d still be underfunded,” she says. “There’s no question that our public schools are deeply in need of more funding, and the state legislature is failing to do so.”

Critics of the voucher program say it is further segregating education in North Carolina. In 2014, 51% of voucher applicants were Black, and 27% were white, according to the Public Schools First NC nonprofit. In 2023, only 19% were Black, and 63% were white.

In August, just before the new school year kicked off, Montero decided to pull his daughter from Grace Christian. It was not an easy decision.

“It was the only way to stand by my principles and protect my family,” he says. “The NCSEAA’s oversight mechanisms are weak, and Grace Christian exploits the gaps. Children should attend schools that embody principles such as integrity, fairness and accountability. The lack of responsiveness undermines the intended purpose of the Opportunity Scholarship Program, which is to prioritize the needs of students rather than institutions.”

stands out, offering unique dishes you do not find at other Mexican restaurants. The entrees are in a league of their own.”

□ **El Rojas:** Relatively new to the taqueria scene in Sanford, but they’ve quickly built a strong following with their traditional offerings which stack up nicely against anybody in the game.

Many have already built dedicated customer bases, and a few of them have earned accolades beyond our city limits — most notably, Fonda Lupita, which opened during the pandemic in 2020 and quickly found itself on *eater.com*’s national list of best new restaurants in the country. Among those featured were:

□ **La Terrazita:** “From the very first visit, the atmosphere was warm and inviting, the service was excellent, and the food is always fresh. All the dishes are delicious,” said one customer. “The menu

□ **Fonda Lupita:** The restaurant burst onto the local food scene in 2020, and by 2021, it was named one of the 11 Best New Restaurants in America by



eater.com. Specializing in “Mexican comfort food,” Fonda has since grown — moving to a larger location in Sanford and a second location in Durham.

□ **A Toda Madre:** In addition to traditional Mexican favorites, A Toda Madre offers chicharron (pork skin) en salsa verde, menudo (a traditional Mexican soup) or a plate of guisos (a hearty stewed beef dish).

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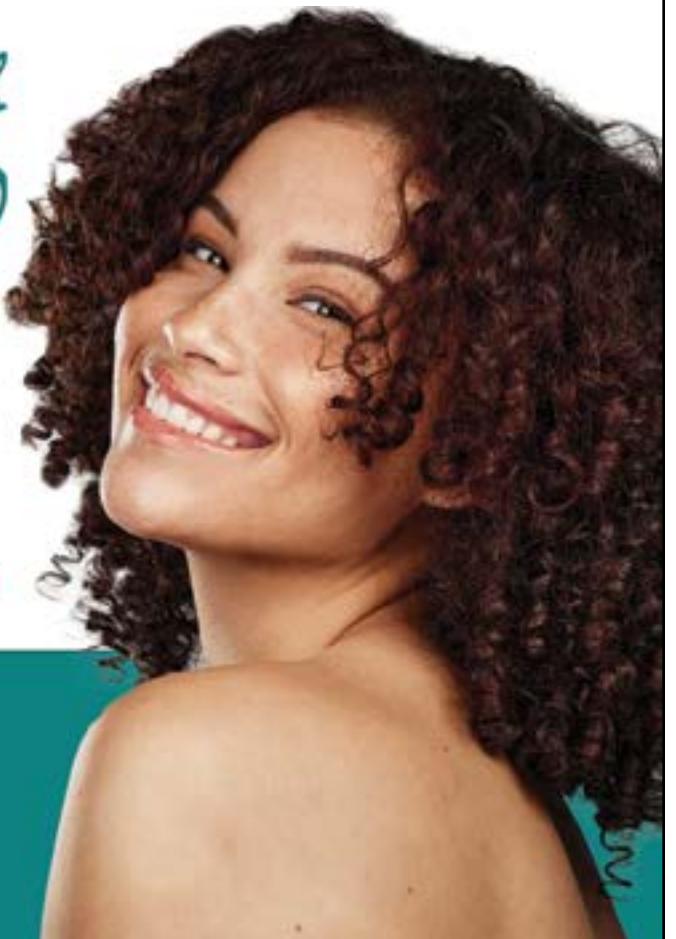
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The Buchanan family

News of the deaths of farmers Travis and Candace Walker and their two young children hit the community hard

When Travis and Candace Buchanan launched Buchanan Farms and constructed its large produce stand and garden supply shop along Broadway Road in 2022, Candace wrote then that their dream was the result of Travis' lifelong love of farming. "We hope this will be a place where the community will love to stop by and visit us and pick up some locally grown produce and supplies for your own gardens. It's super exciting to see this dream become a reality."

Their dream did become a reality, and the Buchanans — in a short time — became a big part of the Broadway and Lee County farming communities. In May, cars packed the empty field across from the farm as hundreds enjoyed Buchanan's third annual Strawberry Festival, and when heavy rains on June 7 derailed plans for the Farms' third Summer Festival, the couple invited kids and adults to play in the mud (and get hosed off by the irrigation reel).

"Shortly after Buchanan Farms opened, I was asked to pray for the new venture, and I gladly accepted," he said. "I asked the Lord to bless Buchanan Farms, because it was going to be a blessing to our community. I believe God honored that prayer. Buchanan Farms became a staple in our community. The family made an impact."

Buchanan Farms was weeks away from its Watermelon Festival in July when news hit of the tragic deaths of Travis and Candace and their young children, Aubrey (10) and Walker (9). All four were killed when their Cirrus SR22 airplane crashed in a field along Riddle Road (just five miles from Raleigh Exec Jetport on their way home from a beach vacation in Florida).

A funeral for the Buchanan family was held at Shallow Well Church on July 14, a week after the crash. The Rev. Eric Burmahl led the service and shared a story about praying with the family when their business opened.

Stone spoke to the board pointing out that the district's classified employees — those like instructional assistants, library and office staff, maintenance and custodial workers — 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.

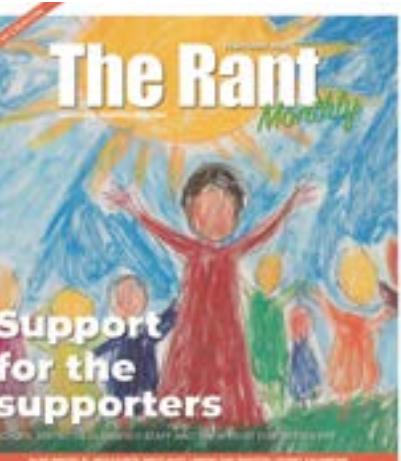
The Rant Monthly wrote about the efforts of Lee County School support staff to receive fair pay in the February 2025 edition. Their fight carried over



April Stone, a Lee County Schools employee, spoke on behalf of the district's support staff at a school board meeting asking for long overdue pay raises for office and teacher assistants, maintenance workers and custodial staff.

Support for support staff

The assistants, office staff and maintenance and custodial workers at Lee County Schools say a pay raise is long overdue



into politics, as the Board of Education that oversees the school district publicly blamed the Board of Commissioners, who hold the purse strings.

In June, the commissioners approved a new budget that provided a small increase in funding for schools, but not nearly enough to cover raises. Not coincidentally, in December, a report from the Education Law Center ranked North Carolina dead last in the U.S. in spending for public education.

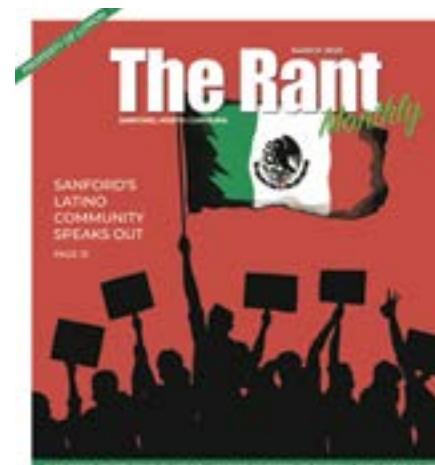


MAR

Video shot by Bryan Viera of one of the February protests by Sanford's Latino community against recent immigration policies featured signs that read "Get rid of ignorance, not immigrants" among many others.

Immigration reform fight

Large protests from Sanford's Latino community showed concern and outrage over Trump's immigration agenda



They called it "A Day Without Immigrants." Across the country, businesses closed and people gathered for peaceful protests on Feb. 3 in response to immigration policies set forth by President Donald Trump to advance mass detention and deportation of undocumented citizens and sweeping changes to visa applications, birthright citizenship, border security and the country's asylum and refugee programs.

There were originally no planned protests in Sanford that day, which compelled Allan Morales — just a junior at Lee County High School — to step up. He took to Instagram that day and called on friends and his community to gather that evening. To his surprise, up to 250 people showed up, holding signs and flags and cheering loudly to passing motorists along Horner Boulevard and Main Street.

Trump's agenda — which was not deterred by protests locally and nationally, as ICE enforcement and public backlash has only ramped up since February — was and still is cause concern



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APR

A young Mandy Johnson shown with a batch of strawberries on Gary Thomas Farms, run by her parents. Today, Mandy and her brothers help run the day-to-day operations on the farm, which has operated since 1973.

Lee County's cash crop

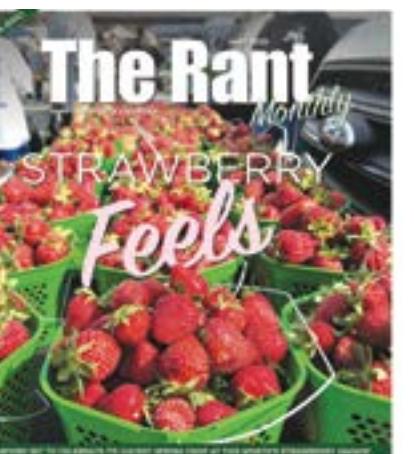
Strawberry farming began locally as a 'stay afloat' crop between tobacco harvests. Today, Lee County is a leader in producing them.

□ Strawberries have been a big deal to Lee County's agritourism industry, and in April of last year, *The Rant Monthly* dedicated its cover story to these sweetest of fruits and the farmers who grow them.

The April edition included an interview with Mandy Johnson, daughter of Gary Thomas of Gary Thomas Farms who was the first to grow strawberries (*en masse*) locally when he turned to the crop in 1981 as a way to bring in some spring income between tobacco harvests. The farm, located off of Rice Road near East Lee Middle School and the 421 Bypass, still grows tobacco today, as well as wheat, corn, soybeans, oats, tomatoes and sweet potatoes (to name a few).

For years, Gary Thomas was the only berry producer in town. A few more popped up in the late 90s and early 2000s, and today, Lee County is home to at least eight large farms that sell strawberries wholesale and/or direct to customers (many of them running "U-Pick" operations) and several smaller farms that sell them both on site and in local markets or road-side stands.

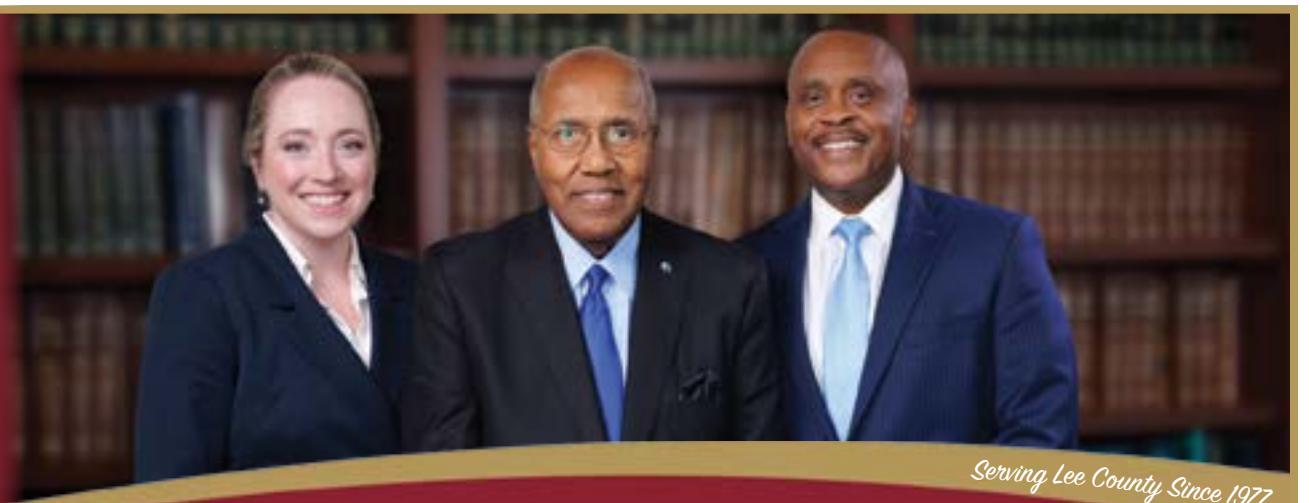
While most U.S.-grown strawberries are produced in California and Florida, North Carolina ranks third in the nation for producing them, with between 1,500 and 2,000 acres of farmland dedicated to them. Lee County — along with Pender and Nash counties — ranks among the top producers within the state.



Strawberries are so popular here, Downtown Sanford Inc. and the Sanford Tourism Development Authority partnered to celebrate them in 2020 with their first Strawberry Jammin' festival (every April) coinciding with downtown's Farmers Market. The event was such a hit, it has grown to include berry-themed dishes and drinks from local restaurants and bars, strawberry themed offerings from downtown businesses, live music and more.

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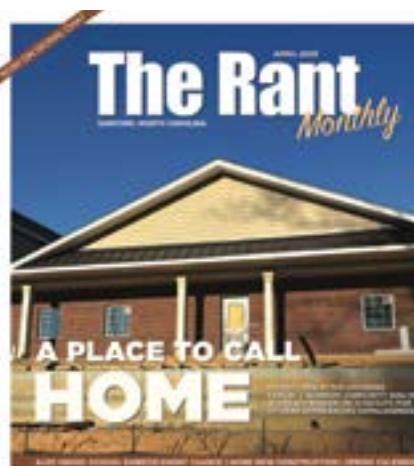
Outreach Mission Inc. joined community leaders on July 1 to celebrate the ribbon cutting ceremony for the Samuel J. Wornom Community Shelter, a \$4 million project that now offers up to 60 beds and four family rooms for those seeking shelter.

The community's shelter

Much-needed community facility in Sanford provides shelter for up to 80 unhoused men, women and children at a time

□ The 8,600-square-foot structure on Third Street just blocks from downtown Sanford looks like it could be a large medical clinic, or perhaps a nice daycare facility with its crimson brick facade, elevated foundation and dormer windows. The building is neither of those. For potentially thousands of men, women and children in the coming years, it's a potential fresh start. It's a home.

The Samuel J. Wornom Community Shelter, a \$4 million project headed by Outreach Mission Inc., opened its doors on July 1, offering 60 beds, four family rooms and opportunities to break the cycle of homelessness for Sanford's unhoused population, which — according to statewide statistics — continues to grow as the city grows. The facility, named for the late founder of The Pantry and a renowned, beloved philanthropist who helped a number of local organizations for decades, consolidated OMI's current shelters (both operating in older residential homes) and provided newer, better living con-



ditions for those either needing a warm bed or a chance to get their feet back on the ground.

In 2024, OMI served 564 people experiencing homelessness. Just three years prior, that number was around 368 and prior to 2018, OMI provided shelter and support for anywhere between 60 to 70 people a year. The May edition of *The Rant Monthly* put a spotlight on the home and the growing need for resources for those struggling.

MOST VIEWED | 2025

Lee County Schools employee charged with embezzlement

□ A former Lee County Schools employee charged last March with stealing nearly \$200,000 from the district has been scheduled for trial in July of next year.

The North Carolina Courts website shows that Jordan Allred is scheduled for trial in Lee County Superior Court beginning on July 6. She faces a single count of embezzlement of more than \$100,000.

Allred's arrest was one of the most viewed stories on *The Rant's* website for 2025. Allred, 36, is a former assistant finance officer with LCS. She was charged on March 19 after

voluntarily surrendering on charges that she took \$190,588.93 from the district. The theft was reported several days prior to her arrest.

Embezzlement of more than \$100,000 is a class C felony under North Carolina law.

The office of North Carolina State Auditor Dave Bielick announced in the wake of Allred's arrest that it was conducting "an investigative audit" of Lee County Schools to "provide an objective account to assist in resolving what appears to be financial malfeasance."

Lee Christian preschool program faces allegations

□ 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 story from last January was among the most viewed stories from *The Rant* in 2025.

The claims made by NCDHHS included a range of alleged violations by the Lee Christian K-4 Program on Keller Andrews Road in Sanford,

from inadequate child supervision — the report claimed "a staff member failed to supervise 2-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.

Deputies detain brother of man wanted in 1995 killing

□ Lee County sheriff's deputies in May detained the brother of a man who has been wanted on a murder warrant for nearly 30 years, believing for a time that he was the fugitive they'd been seeking since 1995. The situation unfolded after deputies received word that Willard Eugene Smith was in town for the funeral of

his brother at Liberty Chapel Church in Chatham County. Smith has been wanted on an open warrant for first degree murder since the June 1995 shooting death of Rodney Cotten.

Deputies attempted to locate Smith in the church's parking area after the service, and detained his brother instead.



Programs fear the axe

Uncertainty abounds (and continues to do so) for local programs that rely on the federal government for funding

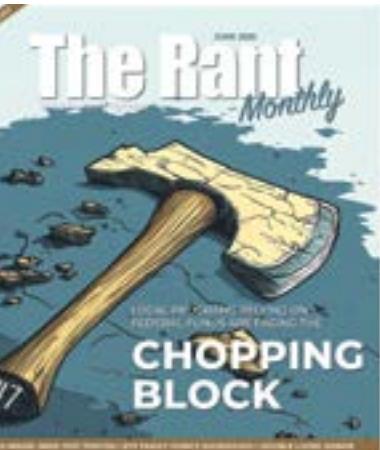
□ The June 2025 edition of *The Rant Monthly* came out roughly six months into President Donald Trump's second term — a term that promised big cuts to federally funded programs that people in Sanford (and across the nation) rely on. It seems like forever ago, but it was then when Trump and Elon Musk launched the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, with the goal of "modernizing information technology, maximizing productivity and cutting excess regulations and spending within the federal government."

DOGE set a goal to balance the budget by cutting \$2 trillion in waste, fraud and abuse. This goal was later reduced to \$1 trillion and then again to just \$150 billion, according to the

CATO Institute, a national public policy nonprofit organization. The program is considered by many to have been a failure — the New York Times' recent headline read: *How Did DOGE Disrupt So Much While Saving So Little?*

The Rant Monthly article focused on the local impact of federal cuts — a spotlight was shone on Sara, a nurse whose job was in jeopardy because of job cuts within the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. It also looked at programs like Lee County Schools' Child Nutrition programs, which allows students who qualify to eat their breakfasts and lunches in school at no charge.

From the story: The list of federal projects that bring millions of dollars into Sanford and Lee County could extend for



hundreds of pages. Still, these provide a flavor of the types and amounts of dollars that [were] on the chopping block ... for the 2026-27 fiscal year.

A poll from the Partnership for Public Service revealed the our area isn't alone: It found that 46% of respondents say they or someone they know have been personally affected by the government cuts. That is a substantial increase from a poll conducted in March when only 29% of respondents answered similarly.

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Even operating at just 60 percent of its screen capacity, Spring Lane Cinemas is attracting customers by showing first-run movies every night of the week and by becoming a place where you can see all kinds of things from years past.

Sanford's 'reel heroes'

Spring Lane Cinemas in Sanford gets innovative to stay alive in the face of a changing entertainment landscape



□ When Spring Lane Cinemas opened in 2004, it was a big deal for Sanford. It had been who-knows-how-long since Sanford residents could watch first-run movies in the city, and the only other option for local movie-goers at the time was Kendale Cinemas — a two-plex on the other side of Sanford that showed movies which had been out for several months at a buck or two a pop (the Wilrik Theater, which is now home to a pawn shop on Carthage Street, was similarly small and had been closed for business since at least the mid 1980s).

Spring Lane, by contrast, offered a whopping 10 screens showing the newest films in a state-of-the-art facility. It wasn't long before Kendale Cinemas was out of business and Spring Lane was the only movie game in town.

Times have changed — the National Association of Theatre Owners has reported that movie ticket sales in the U.S. dropped from 1.58 billion in 2002 to 1.24 billion in 2019. Coupled with a sea change in film release strategy and a willingness on the part of the movie-go-

ing public to stay at home and watch movies new and old alike from the comfort of their couch, theaters like Spring Lane have had to adapt to survive.

The Rant Monthly in August featured Spring Lane managers Jared Campbell and Ben Johnson, who are working to keep Sanford's lone cinema alive by introducing nostalgic experiences like Wayback Wednesday and Throwback Thursday and by maintaining a fun, active presence with customers on social media.



MOST VIEWED | 2025

Several new subdivisions, businesses planned for 2026-27

way with projected opening in early 2026.

□ Raleigh-based real estate and investment group CBRE announced it has begun marketing the 32 acres of retail and commercial space along South Horner Boulevard in Sanford that will serve as the entrance Ashby Village, the 140-acre master planned community between Lowe's Home Improvement and the new Lee County Athletic Park. The commercial development will house 125,000 square feet of new restaurants, retailers and medical offices, according to CBRE. While no new businesses have been announced, the company expects to deliver the new development in 2027.

□ A major commercial development that would include a grocery store, new restaurants and more was proposed next to the Galvin's Ridge subdivision along U.S. 421 and N.C. 87 split in the southern part of Sanford. The complex, which will be known as Truelove Apartments, is being built next to the Lidl grocery store at 3209 N.C. 87. As of December, work on the complex appeared to be well under

way with projected opening in early 2026.

□ Work is under way on a large apartment complex near the U.S. 421 and N.C. 87 split in the southern part of Sanford. The complex, which will be known as Truelove Apartments, is being built next to the Lidl grocery store at 3209 N.C. 87. As of December, work on the complex appeared to be well under



Rapid loss of farmland

As more residential, business developments eye Lee County, the area is losing cropland at a faster pace than the rest of the state

When the Sanford City Council approved the Vermillion residential development last July, a familiar set of events played out.

Vermillion, to be the county's largest-ever housing development, will consist of 1,233 homes on 470 acres near the intersection of U.S. 1 and Colon Road.

It will occupy a part of Sanford that not very many years ago wasn't even in the city limits, but today includes the Central Carolina Enterprise Park, Sanford's newest fire station, and the Galvin's Ridge subdivision (which at 1,219 lots held that "largest-ever housing development" distinction for Sanford before Vermillion came along). There are new commercial developments already in the planning stages for properties that line that Colon

Road exit, developments that are expected to include a convenience store, fast food options, a larger restaurant, and other establishments yet to be determined.

While direct farming employment accounts for about one and a half percent of local jobs, the broader category of agribusiness brings that number to about 13 percent.

But growth and other factors have eaten into that quite a bit over the years. U.S. Census data shows that cropland in Lee County declined from 19,534 acres in 2017 to 14,187 (27 percent) in 2022, and total farmland decreased from 35,062 acres to 31,204 (11 percent) in the same time period. That 11 percent loss far outpaces the statewide number — about 4 percent — over the same stretch.



The Jackson family has farmed the 700-acre White Hill Farms for generations. The family says local growth has led to more customers, but they're watching closely as the agricultural landscape in Lee County shrinks.

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Computer rendering of the proposed Target store potentially coming to Riverbirch Shopping Center in west Sanford. Rendering (which is subject to change) provided to *The Rant* by CASTO, which purchased Riverbirch Corner in 2022.

Sanford lands Target

Shoppers rejoiced at the news of Target (plus a new grocery store and several new businesses) coming to Riverbirch Center

Without a doubt, the No. 1 question with regards to retail among the general population in Lee County for more than a decade has been some variation of "when are we getting a Target?"

Now, we know the answer appears to be sometime in 2027.

After months of rumors (and years of speculation) about a major retailer looking to locate in the area, the news came in a fairly rapid series of bursts. On Sept. 3, Sanford learned that commercial real estate developer CASTO, which purchased Riverbirch Corner in west Sanford in 2022, had submitted plans to the city-county Planning Department's Technical Review Committee which call for a near-complete demolition of the shopping center and a total redevelopment of the site that would be centered around a Target store if undertaken.

The city and county will pitch in a combined \$6.4 million in incentives to make it happen — both entities approved the deal in 2025. So what do Sanford and Lee County get in return



for their \$6.4 million?

To start with, the Sanford Area Growth Alliance estimates the cost of CASTO's redevelopment at more than \$60 million. Between Target, the new grocer and whatever other retailers occupy the remainder of the new Riverbirch footprint, it's estimated to generate upward of \$100 million in annual sales, meaning between property taxes and sales taxes the project could generate as much as \$3 million in local tax revenue.

MOST VIEWED | ALL-TIME

A look at the biggest stories from rantnc.com since 2013

The first edition of *The Rant* Monthly was published in April of 2019, but *The Rant*'s website has been around much longer (going on 13 years). The following are the most viewed stories from our site ... some of them surprised even us:

ICE agents arrest at least 30 at Sanford manufacturing plant:

From 2019, six years before North Carolina got another wave of Immigration and Customs Enforcement visits, agents arrested approximately 30 men and women for "identification theft and fraud" from Bear Creek Arsenal — a manufacturer of AR-15 firearms and firearm products. The incident has led to several Latino-owned businesses in Sanford to close their doors that week. The story is, by far, the most viewed story ever published at rantnc.com.

Kim Ashby and Hurricane Helene: The death of Kim Ashby, a beloved SanLee Middle School teacher whose mountain home in western North Carolina was swept away by Hurricane Helene in 2024, also made statewide and national headlines. Locally, students and parents expressed grief and an outpouring of love for their teacher.

Lee County's first COVID-19 case: It seems like ages ago, but in May of 2020, *The Rant* shared the story of Lee County's first confirmed COVID-19 case. Lacey Mathis had been in the nation's capital to cheer at a college basketball tournament, and when she arrived back in North Carolina, she began feeling symptoms. A young, active person in good health, Mathis described her symptoms: "I sleep 20 hours a day, which is possibly a relief from the pain. Symptoms include debilitating fevers, sore throat, coughing, body aches, chest pain, mental fogginess ... I've been lucky that I haven't had difficulty breathing."

State of Grace: From this past year, our look at Grace Christian School, which has alienated parents and former teachers for questionable enrollment and employment tactics, all while leading the state in public funding through the "Opportunity Scholarship" program. The story has done little to deter Grace's approach, as it prepares for a nearly \$100 million expansion.

The Buchanan Family: The tragic deaths of local farmers Travis

and Candace Buchanan and their two young children in a small plane crash just miles from the Raleigh Exec Jetport in Lee County not only touched the community, but the nation as well, as media outlets all over the world reported on the incident from last July.

Any and all development stories:

There are so many stories about new subdivisions and apartment complexes that have done well for us, that we thought we'd lump them all into one entry here. The most viewed story was actually a subdivision that was voted down by the Sanford City Council — a 600-home development from D.R. Horton — in 2023.

Kim Ashby and Hurricane

Helene: The death of Kim Ashby, a beloved SanLee Middle School teacher whose mountain home in western North Carolina was swept away by Hurricane Helene in 2024, also made statewide and national headlines. Locally, students and parents expressed grief and an outpouring of love for their teacher.

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NOV

The district's most crowded elementary school is Deep River Elementary, which is fewer than 50 students away from capacity. Broadway and J. Glenn Edwards schools are projected to exceed capacity in the next five years.

The need for new school(s)

Significant growth has caught up with the area's public schools, and talks have begun on how to serve a rising student population

□ Growth presents challenges in every sector of a community. An influx of new residents means leaders, particularly in the public sector, have to weigh how to adequately provide government services at the scale necessary — water, transportation, public safety and more.

Nowhere is this more true than in the field of public education.

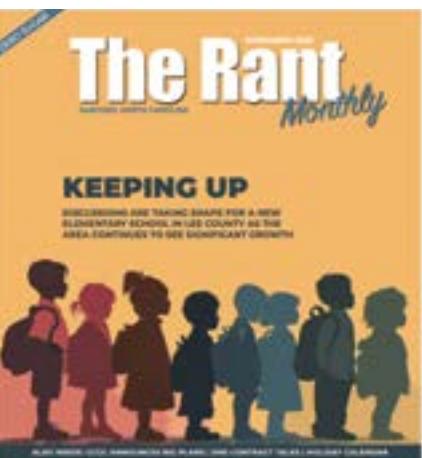
Projections show 80,000 people living in Lee County by 2035, and leaders in both the public school system and in county government have been laying the groundwork for a new elementary school for some time. It's a slow process, though, and a complicated one with a lot of steps. There's the matter of finding suitable land, lining up financing to pay for its purchase, hiring an architect to design

the school, hiring a builder to stand it up, staffing the school, drawing new district lines, and more.

NC State's Institute for Transportation Research and Education presented a land use study to the school board in September, offering a data-driven view of the growth in Lee County and its impact on public schools. It reported that more than 79 residential developments are pending countywide and expected to bring more than 15,600 new housing units. It further reported that Sanford's city limits continue to expand through annexation with robust industrial and commercial development, and that infrastructure capacity in areas like water, sewer, and transportation remains strong. But it concludes the

school board's motion authorizes Superintendent Dr. Chris Dossenbach to begin searching for suitable land, including hiring a real estate agent.

The November edition of *The Rant Monthly* analyzed the need for expansion in the face of dramatic upcoming growth.



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DEC

Sanford native Neil Bullard launched his store in downtown Sanford, Neil's Apparel and Accents, in June of this year. The East Carolina business grad says he's wanted to open his own business since high school.

Love for small businesses

Sips and Sequels, Neil's Apparel and Accents and Wheeler Sports Collectibles featured in time for the holiday season

□ Amy Truckner has built her own small community for lovers of great books and great beer through Sips and Sequels — a bar and book store — and its numerous monthly book clubs. The first Wednesday of each month invites fans of science fiction, and the second Wednesday is for horror enthusiasts. A "Romance After Dark" book club is scheduled for Dec. 12, and those more interested in writing the next great novel can meet the following morning for the Saturday Writers Workshop.

Dec. 16 marked Sips and Sequels' one-year anniversary, and Truckner says Year 1 was a good one for her store. She credited her team — she's the sole owner, and she employs four others — for building the kind of atmosphere and community that welcomed her when she moved to Sanford nearly eight years ago.

On the other side of downtown Sanford, Neil Bullard's apparel and home goods store — Neil's Apparel and Accents — has brought the look and feel of old-school department stores. And on Wicker Street, Wheeler Sports Collect-

ibles has everything a card and collectible lover could need.

All three downtown businesses were featured in the December edition of *The Rant Monthly*, just in time for the 2025 holiday shopping season. Downtown Sanford continues to grow since its resurgence began over a decade ago, and that growth now coincides with the current population boom in both Sanford and Lee County.



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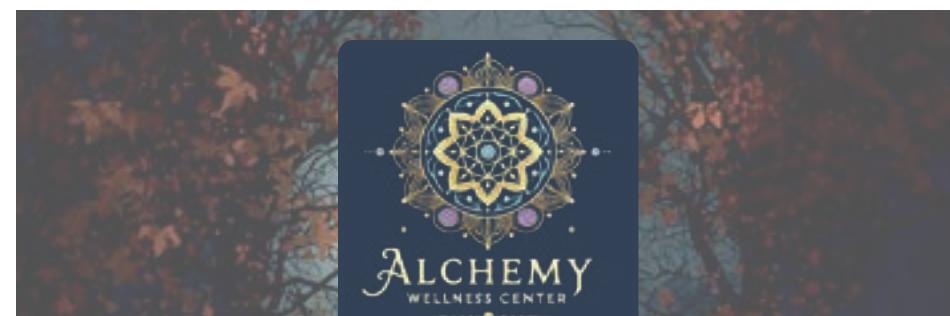
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NEWS BRIEFS

**TRIAL IN LCS
EMBEZZLEMENT
CASE SET FOR JULY**

A former Lee County Schools employee charged with stealing nearly \$200,000 from the district has been scheduled for trial in July.

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Embezzlement of more than \$100,000 is a class C felony under North Carolina law. The office of North Carolina State Auditor Dave Bealek announced in the wake of Allred's arrest that it was conducting "an investigative audit" of Lee County Schools to "provide an objective account to assist in resolving what appears to be financial malfeasance."

**SANFORD MAN ID'D IN
ARKANSAS NAZI RALLY**

A Sanford man was identified as part of a group of neo-Nazis who rallied in front of the Arkansas state capitol earlier in December.

Eric Adam, 29, was among 23 members of the "Blood Tribe" neo-Nazi extremist group, which the *Arkansas Times* reported formed in 2022 and was rallying in Little Rock on Dec. 6. Authorities stopped a box truck the group was traveling in after the rally; the identities of the men became public after police released bodycam footage in response to a public information request. Police cited the driver for carrying passengers in the back.

WCNC reported that three other men identified in the group were also from North Carolina.

**THE BIG TUNA**

Colton Davis of Sanford landed a 630-pound blue fin tuna while fishing off the coast of Morehead City.

**SLATE SET FOR 2026
LOCAL ELECTIONS**

Filing for the 2026 elections ended in December, and there will be a number of contested races on the ballot in Lee County next year — both in the general election and the March primary.

At the federal level, incumbent Congressman Brad Knott, who represents North Carolina's 13th Congressional District, will face a primary challenge from Morrisville Republican Sid Sharma. On the Democratic side, Sanford native Paul Barringer will face fellow Democrats Alexander Nicholi (Raleigh) and Frank Pierce (Raleigh) in the primary. Libertarian Steven Swinton, also of Sanford, is also in the race. The 13th Congressional District covers all of Lee, Harnett, Johnston, Franklin, Person and Caswell counties, and parts of Wake and Granville counties. The Cook PVI report for 2025 lists NC-

13 as R+9, or "solid Republican."

There will also be primaries for both seats in Lee County's delegation to the North Carolina General Assembly.

In Senate District 12, four-term incumbent Republican Jim Burgen will face a challenge from Tim McNeill, a former Harnett County commissioner. Democrats Tanya White Anderson, who ran in 2024, and Jheri Hardaway will face one another in a primary for their party's nomination.

Senate 12, which the Civitas Partisan Index rates as R+9, or "likely Republican," includes all of Lee and Harnett counties, and part of Sampson County. All four are from Harnett County.

In House District 51, Republicans Charles Taylor, who has served on the Sanford City Council since 2007, and

Board of Education Chairman Sherry Womack will face off in a primary to re-

**NEW CANDIDATE SEEKING
SIGNATURES FOR BOE RACE**

The race for three seats on Lee County Board of Education in 2026 may include an unaffiliated candidate.

Unaffiliated candidate April Montgomery, who has been endorsed by the Forward Party, is collecting signatures to get on the ballot as an independent.

place outgoing Representative John Sauls, who did not file for a seventh term. The winner of the primary will face Cameron Democrat Tashera Nichols McDuffie. House District 51 is rated by Civitas as R+11, or "safe Republican."

Nonprofit leader Yanira Scott announced via social media on December 23 that she would seek a seat on the board, which sets policy for public schools in Lee County. Scott is the executive director of El Refugio, a nonprofit that works with local immigrant communities.

There will be two contested races for the Lee County Board of Commissioners. District 1 incumbent Robert Reives Sr., a Democrat who has served since the 1990s, faces a challenge from Republican Louis Williams, who sought a seat on the Sanford City Council this year against Democrat Linda Rhodes. District 1 encompasses parts of central and eastern Lee County, including much of the Sanford city limits.

In District 4, which covers western Lee County and parts of the western Sanford city limits, Republican Eric Davidson, a current member of the Lee County Board of Education, and Democrat Jamey Laudate, a former member and two time candidate for the school board, will square off to replace Republican Taylor Vorbeck. Vorbeck announced recently that she would not seek re-election, citing issues within her own party.

On the Lee County Board of Education, incumbent Republicans Chris Gaster and Alan Rummel both filed for re-election, and are joined on the ballot by newcomer Marc Mason. Democrat Patrick Kelly, who served two terms on the board before losing a re-election bid in 2024, also filed. Voters will be able to choose three candidates for the at-large seats; the top three vote getters will be seated. Because Kelly was the only Democrat to file, Republicans are guaranteed to maintain partisan control of that board.

Yanira Scott, the executive director of El Refugio, a local nonprofit that works with immigrant communities, is collecting signatures to get on the ballot as an independent.

Primaries will be held on March 3. The general election is on Nov. 3.

county. That says a lot. It shows that many people want decisions to be made based on what is best, not political agendas. Moving beyond party labels should be a goal for our Board of Education. The focus should be on values, our community, and people-first decisions," Scott wrote in her Facebook post.

Voters will be able to select three candidates for school board seats in November, and the top three vote getters will win seats. Two Republican incumbents — Chris Gaster and Alan Rummel — filed for re-election, and are joined by Republican newcomer Marc Mason. Democrat Patrick Kelly, who served two terms from 2016 to 2024, also filed for a seat. Because the board is entirely Republican, even victories by both Kelly and Scott would see the board remain in GOP hands.



Sign misspelled. Lee County Athletic Park. (It has since been fixed).

**Students, get your applications in for the
2026 Electric Cooperative Youth Tour!**

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EDUCATION BRIEFS

CAMPBELL TO OFFER FREE TUITION FOR HARNETT RESIDENTS

New first-year, full-time students who reside in Harnett County will have 100 percent of their undergraduate tuition covered by Campbell University beginning in 2026, the University announced in December.

The Campbell University Tuition-Free Guarantee for Harnett County Residents initiative reflects Campbell's commitment to expanding access, supporting local students and families and investing in future leaders who will serve and shape our communities.

"As Campbell University implements a new and aggressive recruitment strategy that extends our geographic reach across North Carolina, around the southeast and indeed throughout the nation, we want to simultaneously rededicate ourselves to the local county that has nurtured our school for the last 138 years," said President Dr. William M. Downs. "Harnett is home. With this new initiative, we signal to the neighbors in our own backyard that Campbell can and should be their home, their destination of first choice when deciding on where to get a world-class college education."

Beginning in fall 2026, incoming new full-time students who reside in Harnett County will have their full tuition covered for up to four years (eight semesters). The award is provided entirely through scholarships and grants (including any institutional, federal and state grants or scholarships). Student and parent loans are not packaged or included as part of the guarantee.

To qualify for the guarantee, students must: be admitted as a first-time, full-time undergraduate, be a resident of Harnett County, live on campus, enroll full-time in a traditional undergraduate program, and file for FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) using Campbell's FAFSA code 002913.

**NEW WINTER CEREMONY**

With more graduates than ever this year, Central Carolina Community College added something new: a December commencement ceremony. The college's 67th Commencement Exercises, held Dec. 17 at the Dennis A. Wicker Civic Center, honored 195 graduates. "Thank you for being part of this very historic moment here at the college," CCCC President Dr. Lisa Chapman said. "We are so proud, and so happy that we are here to celebrate you and all of your accomplishments."

**CCCC ADDS SECTIONS TO BIOWORK PROGRAM**

Starting in January, Central Carolina Community College will be offering new sections of its BioWork certificate program — aimed at helping students secure entry-level jobs as process technicians, kickstarting careers in North Carolina's thriving Biotech industry.

To earn the widely-recognized Bio-

Work certificate, students take one class that lasts two to four months. Students take part in flexible, asynchronous online learning and also participate in hands-on, in-person instruction one or two days per week.

"BioWork has definitely made me well prepared for my job," said Curtis Bright, a CCCC BioWork alumnus and Manufacturing Associate at CSL Seqirus, one of

the world's leading manufacturing of flu vaccines. "It gave me a great understanding of what I can expect. You are really engrossed in a career and not just a job."

For more information, visit www.cccc.edu/biowork or contact Biotechnology Department Chair Brenda Grubb at (919) 718-7064. Upcoming sections will run from January to May, February to April and March to May.

RECIPIENTS, DONORS CONNECT AT LUNCHEON

The Central Carolina Community College Foundation held its annual scholarship luncheon on Nov. 19 at the Dennis A. Wicker Civic & Conference Center in Sanford.

The event provided an opportunity for donors and student scholarship recipients to meet one another, and for the foundation and college community to express gratitude for the donors' generosity.

Scholarship recipients shared their stories and thanks from during the program portion of the event.

Dominique Small spoke about raising her three children. As a single mother, she said, she experienced moments of uncertainty, even periods of homelessness, but those hard times fueled her determination to change the direction of her life and to encourage others to do the same. Today, Small wears many hats including certified life coach, nonprofit founder and student.

In December, student council members from third, fourth and fifth grades loaded a bus with donated items and personally delivered boxes, bags, and gifts to the HAVEN. With arms full and hearts even fuller, the students brought comfort and joy to families affected by domestic violence and abuse across Sanford and the surrounding communities.

TRUCK DRIVER TRAINING**STARTS FEB. 2 AT CCCC**

Central Carolina Community College will hold its next Class A CDL class starting Feb. 2. The program prepares students to drive tractor-trailers and provides a direct path to employment in just a few months.

Graduates see high job placement rates and many enter the workforce with competitive starting salaries. Significant scholarship opportunities are available.

CCCC's next Class A CDL runs from Feb. 2 to March 27. It will take place at CCCC's E. Eugene Moore Center in Sanford, Monday through Thursday, 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., and on Friday, March 27, from 8 a.m. to noon.

**DEEP RIVER STUDENTS LEAD HAVEN TOY DRIVE**

For nearly a decade, the Deep River Elementary Student Council has demonstrated the power of service and leadership through its annual Toy and Donation Drive supporting the HAVEN of Lee County. Under the guidance of Student Council Facilitator Laura Thomas, students collect toys, winter clothing and essential items for families and individuals seeking safety at the emergency shelter.

In December, student council members from third, fourth and fifth grades loaded a bus with donated items and personally delivered boxes, bags, and gifts to the HAVEN. With arms full and hearts even fuller, the students brought comfort and joy to families affected by domestic violence and abuse across Sanford and the surrounding communities.

"I was looking for a way to teach the children that being a leader meant looking outside of yourself and your circle to others in the community," Thomas said. "Because it was close to Christmas that first year, our winter wear drive evolved into a winter wear and toy drive, including 'Mama Bags' to provide something special for the moms."

Savannah Campbell, Executive Director of the HAVEN of Lee County, shared her appreciation for the long-standing partnership. "Deep River is one of my favorite groups that donates every year," Campbell told the students. "I love seeing familiar faces return as they move into fourth and fifth grade. They ask thoughtful questions and genuinely care about helping others."



Earlier this year, B.T. Bullock second-grade teacher Yolanda Vazquez invited her students to color and design a winter cap using their own creativity. What they did not know was that, over the following months, Vazquez, her mother and her sisters worked tirelessly to transform each child's design into a handmade crocheted or knitted winter hat — one for every student. For the "big reveal," the Vazquez family gathered in the classroom as students opened their gifts — gifts they'll remember long after the holidays.

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EVENT CALENDAR

JAN 23-24**RENAISSANCE FAIR AT HUGGER MUGGER**

Hugger Mugger Brewing transforms into Ye Olde Froth & Sloss for its first Renaissance Fair to celebrate the brewery's eighth anniversary. Come for giant turkey wings, mead, a contra dance, fighting knights, axe throwing, costumed actors and more. The fair runs from 5 to 8 p.m. both days.



JAN 2: Karaoke Night returns to Hugger Mugger Brewing in downtown Sanford. Bowtie Entertainment is back with its first karaoke of the year. No vendors — just a great food truck, beer and singing starting at 8 p.m.

JAN 4: Yoga & Beer with Sanford Yoga & Community Center at Hugger Mugger Brewing in downtown Sanford.

JAN 4: Line dancing at Hugger Mugger Brewing in downtown Sanford runs from 2 to 5 p.m. Tickets are \$20 and can be purchased at the door. One drink is included in the ticket price.

JAN 7: Tasting Queens Market in Sanford will host a 90-minute Herbal Cleansing class at 6:45 p.m. Explore natural ways to support the colon, kidney and liver through traditional herbs and intentional cleansing practices.

JAN 9: Sanford's own Tuesday Night Music Club will perform at Smoke and Barrel at 8 p.m.

JAN 9-10: The Dennis A. Wicker Civic Center will host a Quilting and Fiber Arts Marketplace from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. both days. New this year — classes and workshops will be offered on sewing techniques, make-and-take sewing projects, bag making, applique, free motion quilting,

ruler work quilting, as well as lecture/demos on paper piecing and how to select the right quilting materials. Register at fiberartshownc.com.

JAN 22-FEB 8: Temple Theatre's mainstage production of *Side by Side by Sondheim* will celebrate the wit and genius of musical theater's most influential artist. Get ready to laugh, cry and fall in love with lyrics that are heartbreakingly true and music that captures the soaring emotions of a new generation. Tickets at templeshows.org.

Haven in Lee County, and Zoomies Funny Farm. Expect a full weekend dedicated to your favorite games, plus a variety of raffles, fun competitions, drawings, custom merch, food discounts and artists to round out the festivities.

FEB 6:

Whiskey Pines (acoustic rock) will perform at Smoke and Barrel at 8 p.m.

FEB 7:

Hugger Mugger Brewing will host Celtic Jam at 2 p.m. It's bound to be a mighty musical event with Nor'Easter Tippers & Pypes, the O'Carolinians and more.

FEB 13:

The British Invaders Band

will perform at Temple Theatre at 7:30 p.m. Known for their authentic performances and classic British charm, the band brings to life the legendary hits of The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Kinks and more.

FEB 22:

Hugger Mugger Brewing will host Project Point Five's second annual Chili Cookoff and Baking Contest at 4:15 p.m. Think you can make a prizeworthy chili? Register now to reserve your space (\$25).

MARCH 7-8:

Experience the dramatic intensity of Schumann paired with Beethoven's revolutionary Third Symphony 'Eroica' at

**JAN 24: FITNESS FEST 5K**

The Sanford Resolution Run & FirstHealth Fitness Fest 5K will begin at 8:45 a.m. Start your morning with a scenic run or walk through historic downtown Sanford, then celebrate healthy living at the Fitness Fest. Register at runsignup.com (\$30 for the 5K/walk, \$20 for the one-mile fun run).

FEB 19-MAR 8: The Temple Theatre's mainstage show *Parton Me!* Celebrating Dolly with Katie Deal, will run from Feb. 19 to March 8. Backed by the phenomenal Real Deal band, Katie takes you on a musical adventure of Dolly Parton through the years, from her earliest recordings to her latest. Ticket info and showtimes at templeshows.org.

Lee County Community Orchestra's Empire and Revolution concert (7:30 p.m. Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday) at the Harper Center in First Presbyterian Church.

MONDAYS: Circle M City in Sanford will host Monday Music Jam Monday nights at 7 p.m. The town comes alive with pickin' and singing — guitars, mandolins, banjos, fiddles, bases and their players will gather in the livery stables.

MONDAYS: Lee County Library hosts Story Time in the Park each Monday at 10 a.m., rotating between Horton Park and Kiwanis Family Park (check the website for details).

TUESDAYS: Hugger Mugger Brewing hosts Tuesday Trivia Night at 7 p.m. Prizes await the winners.

WEDNESDAYS: Lee County Libraries hosts Story Time for Toddlers at the library in downtown Sanford at 10:45 a.m. The Broadway branch hosts its storytime Fridays at 10:45.

FRIDAYS: Live Music at Wana Navu Kava Bar in Sanford runs from 7 to 10 p.m. every Friday.

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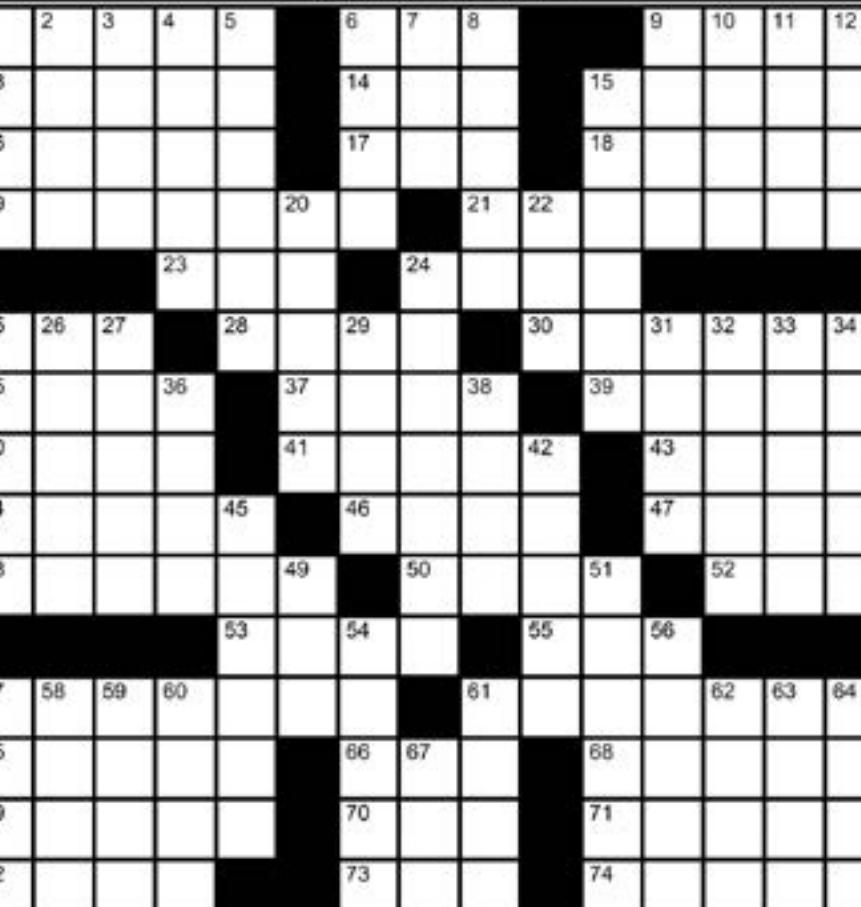
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Fill in the blank squares in the grid, making sure that every row, column and 3-by-3 box includes all digits 1 through 9.

CROSSWORD: On the farm**ACROSS**

1. Laura Ingalls' notebook
6. Boozer
9. Biblical pronoun
13. Sacred text, to some
14. "Fat chance!"
15. Afrikaners' ancestors
16. Cake spread
17. Chowed down
18. Clear the blackboard
19. *Barn chore
21. *John Deere, e.g.
23. Nirvana's "Come as You _____"
24. Spasm of pain
25. Broadband access overseer, acr.
28. Mark for omission
30. Recessed space
35. "____ and the Real Girl," movie
37. "Shoot!"
39. E in baseball box score
40. Oil org.
41. Intelligent
43. A mixture or medley
44. Children's respiratory disease
46. Foggy view?
47. Politicians, for short
48. In a sympathetic manner
50. Ski hill ride
52. Maiden name indicator
53. Bald eagle's nest
55. Repeated Latin dance step
57. *a.k.a. harvester
61. *Opposite of pasture
65. *Common varieties are

9. yellow, red and white
66. Tall tale
68. Smooth, in manner
69. Audience's approval
70. "____ at ease"
71. Stomach sore
72. Caribou or moose
73. Soldier's bed
74. Harsh
42. Vanish without this?
45. Lamentation
49. Japanese capital
51. Rh in Rh disease
54. Indiana Jones' find, e.g.
56. Not a minor
57. For boys and girls
58. Popular fairy-tale beginning
59. Stephen King's "The Green _____"
60. *Male pig
61. Abe Lincoln's hat material
62. Tatted cloth
63. Done
64. Seaside bird
67. UN labor grp.

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