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# The Rant

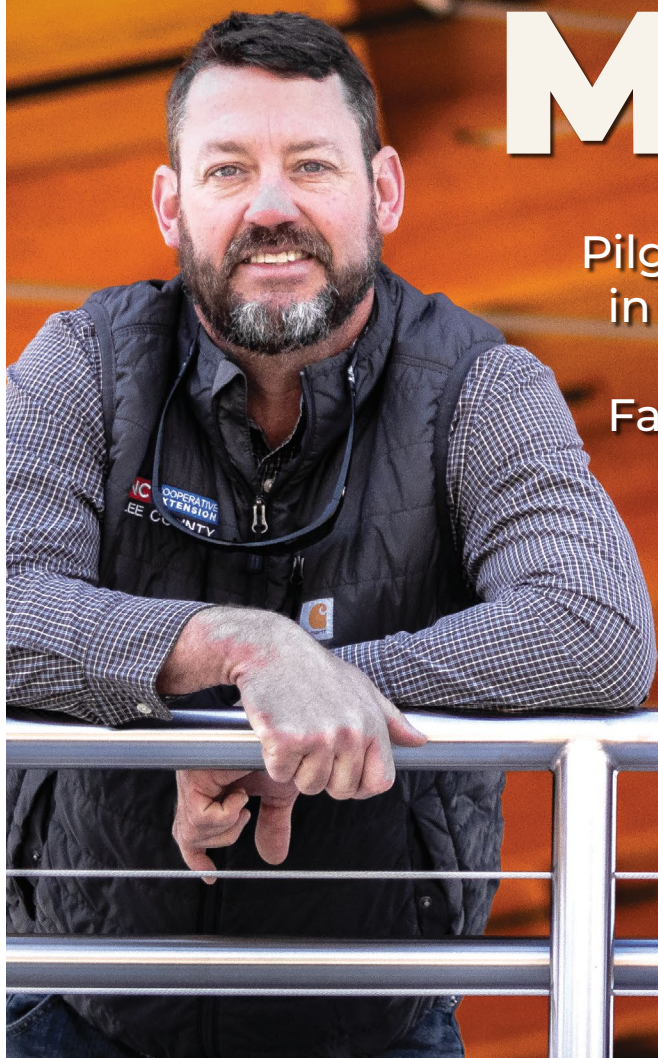
APRIL 2026

SANFORD, NORTH CAROLINA

*Monthly*

## A 'SUPER' MARKET

Pilgrim's Agricultural Marketplace in Downtown Sanford will serve as new home of weekly Farmers Market and offer area's first 'commercial kitchen'



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# The Rant *Monthly*

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

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**COLD OPEN**

**New building makes an already great event better**

Last month it was a preview of Lee County's brand new (impressive) library. This month, it's a sneak peek at the new farmers market pavilion and classrooms/offices/kitchens coming to downtown Sanford.

Growth does have its advantages, and it seems now that for every story we publish about a new subdivision or apartment complex, there's another about something big being built for all of these new people to enjoy (Target, athletic parks, playgrounds and more).

As a somewhat regular customer of Sanford's Farmers Market (which begins this month and runs through November), I'm particularly excited about the new Pilgrim's Agricultural Marketplace. The new building is akin to the much larger farmers market found in Raleigh, but while Sanford's covered pavilion might be smaller, it's newer and nicer.

Unlike the library, I have yet to tour the new marketplace — this month's cover story is the work of Gordon Anderson and photographer Ben Brown. But I have driven by the new building several times, and already, it's an exciting addition to downtown Sanford. That location — and the abandoned buildings along the railroad tracks behind it — have long been an eyesore in this city, and with



plans (still) in place to renovate along the track for a potential train station, the market is the first phase of what could be a city-changing transformation.

If you haven't taken in a Farmers Market in Sanford, there's no better time than now. Building aside, the weekly event (held every Saturday morning) is great for fresh veggies, fresh meats, fresh bread and other products made by local small businesses and artists. It'd put Sanford's up against others I've attended in much larger cities like Winston-Salem and Wilmington.

Thank you, as always, for reading *The Rant Monthly*. We'll see you at the market.

— Billy Liggett

**FOUR North Carolina Cash Crops**

*To stay on the farm-to-market theme, these are our state's biggest agricultural products ...*

			
<b>SOYBEANS</b> Did you know? Just one acre of soybeans can produce more than 82,000 crayons.	<b>TOBACCO</b> Did you know? The seeds in tobacco plants are tiny, very tiny. One flower has about 3,000 seeds.	<b>CORN</b> Did you know? The average ear has 800 kernels in 16 rows. Corn always has an even number of rows.	<b>SWEET POTATOES</b> Did you know? The average American eats double the amount of sweet potatoes than in 2000.

**Your comeback starts here.**



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LEE COUNTY GOVERNMENT  
Parks & Recreation

# APRIL HAPPENINGS

## GYMNASTICS

Registrations Opens: April 6

Session 3: May 11 - July 2

Cost varies with class length & skill \$45+

- All ages
- All skill levels

Full Day Gymnastics Summer Camp: \$120

7:30am - 5:30pm

- May 26 - 29 : Tumbleweed Tumbling
- June 29 - July 2 : Red, White, Flip-tastic
- Aug. 3 - 7 : School Spirits & Cartwheels

Half Day Gymnastics Summer Camp: \$75

8:00am - 12:00pm

- June 8 - 12 : June Bugs & Bounces
- July 13 - 17 : Tropical Twists

## SPECIAL EVENTS

Family Movie Night

- Kiwanis Family Park
- Friday, April 10
- 5:00PM
- Bad Guys 2 (PG)



## ATHLETICS

Registration Opens, April 6, 2026

Summer Sports Camp: \$75

- May 26 - 29
- 8:30am - 12:00pm

Sports Development Program: \$30/sport

- Boys & Girls
- Ages 5-8 at 6pm; Ages 9-13 at 7pm
- Mondays in June: Flag Football
- Wednesdays in June Basketball
- Mondays in July: Baseball/Softball
- Wednesdays in July: Volleyball
- \*No Programming: June 29 - July 3\*

Youth Kickball \$30

- Boys & Girls ages 4-14 as of May 1, 2026
- Mondays & Wednesdays
- 6U @ O.T. Sloan Park
- 10U @ Dalrymple Park
- 14U @ Dalrymple Park

## PROGRAMS

Registration Open until full ↓

Ladies Night Crafting: \$25

Summer Porch Decor

- Ladies ages 18+
- Bob Hales Center
- June 3, 2026
- 6:30pm - 7:30pm

Summer Camp at SLP; \$120/week (M-F)

- Boys & Girls ages 5-12
- 7:30am - 5:30pm
- June 1 - 26; July 6-31

## SPECIAL POPULATIONS

Special Olympics Lee County

Spring Games: Kickball Tournament

- Friday, April 17, 2026
- Lee County Athletic Park
- 9am - 1pm



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Fees shown are for Lee County Residents. A non-Lee County Resident Fee of +\$15 may apply.

2303 Tramway Rd Sanford, NC | 919-775-2107 | Monday - Friday | 8 am - 5pm | @LCGParksnRec

# Kentucky Derby Cancer Survivors Day

Join FirstHealth to celebrate National  
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Thursday, May 7 • 6-8 p.m.  
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Music with the Sand Band • Dinner & Dancing

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This event is free and open to the public, but registration is required.

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# Young hunter among world's best turkey callers

Central Carolina Academy sixth grader, winner of Grand National Calling Competition, shares the secret of a perfect 'call of the wild'

**By Billy Liggett**  
billy@rantnc.com

A great turkey caller is someone who can not only mimic a realistic sound, but someone who can also read the bird's mood and someone who knows when to do it and how to not "overdo it."

At just 12 years old, William Ridgely of Sanford is an elite turkey caller. His list of accolades is already impressive — he's the current Junior World Champion. He was first runner up at the most recent Grand National Calling Competition. He won competitions in his division in both Virginia and West Virginia. He's a two-time runner-up in North Carolina.

He's even been asked to perform his call on the stage of the Grand Ole Opry.

A sixth-grade straight-A student at Central Carolina Academy, Ridgely's true love is hunting. He first accompanied his dad on hunts as early as 3, and he says he shot his first deer when he was 6. His first turkey when he was 7.

"I just love spending time outdoors, getting out in the woods, and being with other people who love to hunt," he says. "I'd like to think I'm real outdoorsy. That's where I'm happiest."

He says he first discovered his turkey calling talent a few years ago during a hunting trip with his dad and his dad's friends in West Virginia. While in the woods, he heard other hunters making calls and gave it a shot.

"My dad's friend heard me and said I was pretty good at it," he recalls. "He said I should try and enter a competition doing it."

And so he did. In his first try, he placed second in a competition in West Virginia, placing behind a young girl who'd been competing for at least four years.

For those unfamiliar with the art of turkey calling, hunters and competitors master their calls by using instruments like box calls or mouth calls (diaphragms) that are placed in the mouth or along the roof of the mouth. Turkey calls sound like short "yelps," "clucks" and even "purrs." The calls mimic the various vocalizations of wild turkeys — mostly hens — and when performed correctly, can attract other turkeys, especially during mating season.

Ridgely says different calling instruments made different sounds — a "slate surface with cherry wood" or a "glass surface with walnut" will yield varied results.

"For the mouth call, which some people call the diaphragm call, there's different types of latex, and depending on how much you stretch it and how many reeds you put on the mouth calls, that'll make different sounds," Ridgely says with expert recollection. "Then for a box call, let's say you give a paddle, it might sound different. Or you can shrill some holes in the side. Maybe that'll sound different."

"All that matters is that a good turkey call will attract a male turkey to come your way. If he hears that, and he's not already with hens, he might gobble at you. And if you respond back, he can head your way."

But like any living, breathing thing trying to attract the opposite sex ... don't talk too much, Ridgely says.

"Calling too much, he'll know you're not a real hen," he says. "Because real hens don't call, call, call, call. Do it, stop for about 30 minutes. Maybe try it again. Then you can put it down."

"Put it down" means, of course, to shoot it. There are approximately



William Ridgely (shown above in a YouTube video on a recent hunting trip and to the right holding his trophy from the North Carolina NWTFF Tarheel Open), says he's been hunting since he was 3. The 12-year-old sixth-grade student from Sanford is a world champion turkey caller.

265,000 eastern wild turkeys in North Carolina, and hunting in the state — the season runs from early April to early May — is hugely popular here.

Ridgely still has several years before having to consider a career, but already, the young man says he'd love to one day work as a wildlife biologist. His backup plan is currently "structural engineer."

In the meantime, he'll continue to hunt with his dad and compete in turkey calling competitions throughout the region (his most recent was in Greensboro). Prizes include cash, gift cards and trophies.

He says the biggest tip for those who want to become good at turkey calling



— or pretty much anything in life — is practice.

"Practice, practice, practice. That's the big thing," he says. "If you have a goal, and you're dreaming of reaching that goal, and you want it. All you have to do is keep practicing and getting better. And one day, you'll get it."

# The Rant to join other area journalists at April 9 event celebrating Local News Day

## Staff Reports

For those interested in the role journalists play in small, but growing communities like Sanford — or those who just want to learn more about *The Rant* and other area news providers — you're invited to attend the first Sanford News Cafe from 1 to 3 p.m. on April 9 at the McSwain Center in Sanford.

News teams from *The Rant*, *The Sanford Herald*, *The Sandhills News* and WWGP News will be on hand to share about their work and engage in a listening session with residents. The gathering is part of Local News Day, a national day of action connecting communities with trusted local news.

Local News Day is led by a coalition of journalists, nonprofit leaders and media innovators, including Montana Free Press, American Journalism Project and Press Forward. The goal is to strengthen and uplift trusted local news and information across the country.

Joining Billy Liggett, Gordon Anderson and Jonathan Owens from *The Rant* will be:

- Mark Rogers, editor of *The Herald*, which publishes a print edition three times a week and through its website, sanfordherald.com
- Margaret Murchison, the long-time news director of radio station WWGP, heard at 95.1FM/1050AM and at wfjwwgpradio.com
- Stephanie Sellars, editor of *Sandhills News*, which launched last summer and covers news in Lee, Moore and Harnett counties through a newsletter and at sandhills.news

Bill Horner III, retired publisher of *The Herald* and the *Chatham News + Record* and a former advisory board member of NC Local, is organizing the event with support from Diara Townes of Sanford, the program manager for NC Local.

NC Local is a nonpartisan, nonprofit news organization helping people in North Carolina's 100 counties understand how statewide

## Want to go?

Of course you do! The free Local News Day event will be held from 1-3 p.m. on April 9 at the McSwain Center in Sanford.

issues and government decisions affect their communities. It is serving as the organizing entity for N.C. News Café events happening around the state on or about April 9. In addition to Sanford, events are scheduled in 15 other locations including Asheville, Charlotte, Lexington, Murphy, Nags Head and Wilmington in North Carolina. More than 40 different news outlets across the state are participating.

National organizers point to the fact that Americans overwhelmingly say local news is essential to democracy and to their daily lives. Yet many communities struggle to access the in-depth, accountable coverage they deserve. Local News Day helps bridge that gap — reconnecting people with trusted sources that keep them informed and strengthen their communities.

In addition to the Sanford event, the Sanford City Council will proclaim April 9 as "Local News Day" in Sanford at its April 7 council meeting.

"It's been amazing to see such energy and enthusiasm behind this collaboration," said NC Local Ecosystem Engagement Director Catherine Komp. "Across the state, people will be gathering in coffee shops, libraries and community centers to celebrate local news and connect with the communities we serve."

Coffee and refreshments will be served at Sanford's April 9 event. There's no charge to attend.

"This is a chance both to celebrate the importance of local news in communities and for the consumers of that news to get to know their local newsrooms a little better," Horner said. "It's an opportunity for connection and engagement."

# Welcome



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# OPINION

## EDITORIAL

### Chairman’s response to environmental concerns embarrassing, yet again

It wasn’t the first time and probably won’t be the last, but it’s worth repeating each time it happens — Lee County Board of Commissioners Chairman Kirk Smith embarrassed Lee County in March.

During a meeting of the commissioners at which hundreds of residents were on hand to protest the idea of a fracking powered artificial intelligence data center, Smith took the opportunity to quiz — and do so in bad faith — a speaker the board itself had invited to share her expertise on the issue.

Brooks Rainey, an environmental attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, had been invited to present her organization’s opinion on a moratorium on data centers and fracking, as well as the impacts data centers are having elsewhere in the country. Her presentation was sober, believable and data-focused.

Smith — who throughout the meeting seemed rattled by the presence of so many opposed to those operations locally — engaged with Rainey not on the merits of her presentation, but to question her about the causes of global warming, the end of the Ice Age and the Roman warming period 2,000 years ago. His questions weren’t designed to elicit any kind of dialogue about an important community issue; instead they appeared as an ill-informed gotcha from the bully pulpit aimed at undermining the SELC’s work.

Rainey conducted herself admirably, and other speakers — and members of the board — expressed disapproval of Smith’s behavior well enough. But we have little faith that Smith will take any lessons from that disapproval. On the issue in question, he’s given this publication direct quotes claiming those with concerns about fracking and data centers in Lee County are funded by foreign governments — quotes that are actually pretty tame for Smith.

Although he’s been a commissioner off and on going back to the late 2000s, behavior of this kind from Smith dates back to at least the mid 1990s, when you could regularly find letters he penned to the Sanford Herald making unhinged declarations about gay people, communists, environmentalists, and anyone else slightly to the left of center. It’s regular enough that it’s no longer a surprise when he blurts out some new crazy, but it’s disheartening

all the same — especially given the status he’s gained in recent years as one of Lee County’s most powerful politicians.

It’s more disturbing that Smith didn’t use any of that power to reassure Lee County residents about what’s actually happening with regards to a fracking powered data center. You have to read between the lines a little bit to pick up on it, but the specific project that’s got so many in the community worked up enough to keep filling up meeting halls doesn’t seem that likely to happen. As of this writing, it’s been nearly half a year since that “proposal” was revealed and there still haven’t been any permit applications to anyone in the relevant state or local agencies that resemble any of what’s been described. We think it’s a whole lot more likely that someone kicked the tires on what would have been an extremely sketchy idea, and hasn’t done much else.

But that doesn’t mean people should be concerned about the issue in general, and we’re always excited to see so much community engagement. It disappoints us that Smith would rather call experts and concerned citizens names than keep them informed of what is and isn’t happening in the community that put him in such an important leadership role.

Randy Nixon was one of those who attended the commissioners meeting in March. He spoke not just against rumors of a data center and fracking operation, but also to Smith directly.

“There’s no bigger conspiracy theorist here than you. You claim we’re all here because of a Chinese Communist Party-funded psyop. I can’t help but think that maybe you’re funded by China because you seem dead set on making sure life expectancy goes down and child cancer goes up. I certainly don’t think you’re qualified to sit in that chair of leadership. You’ve talked about dinosaurs and Romans. I’m praying to the rest of you, save us from this madness.”

We couldn’t have put it better. Smith won’t face opposition this fall in his bid for re-election and appears guaranteed another four years on the board, making decisions about your future. If you ever wonder why we consistently urge citizens to pay attention to and take a part in what’s going on in their local government and politics, look no further.

## COLUMN

### A 19-month wait and diagnosis that changed everything

By Richard Sullins

It started three and a half years ago, with a tremor in my right hand that I couldn’t stop. A month later, my left hand joined in, and other strange symptoms began to appear — including a constant rocking motion that grew worse whenever my anxiety spiked, especially while watching my favorite ACC basketball team.

Then it got worse. Much worse.

Sometimes when I sat down to write, my hands bounced off the keyboard aimlessly. They shook so much I couldn’t control where they were going. Without the ability to take notes in meetings, I lost the ability to concentrate — and to write. I had always been a high performer, producing 10 to 12 stories a month for *The Rant*, but suddenly that dropped to just one or two.

I couldn’t get the words from my brain through my arms and fingers and onto the page. There was a disconnect somewhere, and the more I tried to get around it, the more frustrating it all became. I developed speech impediments. My words came out slowly, if they came out at all. I began to experience memory loss, followed by sudden drop-offs in cognition.

And then, perhaps most frighteningly of all, my internal gyroscope went haywire and I couldn’t stand up or walk. I began to fall 15 to 20 times a day. It didn’t take long at all for us to realize that I was in serious trouble.

My wife and my doctor worked day and night to get me an appointment with a neurologist. But the backlogs caused by COVID and our rapidly aging population meant the lines ahead of me stretched endlessly. We reached out to clinics in Washington, Cleveland, Atlanta, and Florida. The answer was always the same:

long waits, no estimates, and no hope of getting in soon. Ann and I began to feel beaten before the race had even started. Our anxiety was turning into despair.

#### THE LONG WAIT ENDS

It took 19 months — more than a year and a half — before the call finally came. Hope returned instantly. And I was blessed: my appointment would be with one of the best movement disorder teams in the world, right up the road at Duke University Medicine. This old Tar Heel fan didn’t even have to swallow hard.

If they could help me, I was in.

My lead doctor is known internationally for her work with symptoms like mine. Her patients’ questions and resilience have fueled her research and helped shape therapies now used worldwide. Knowing I was in the hands of the very best, we walked in with heads full of confidence and hearts full of hope.

After a full neurological exam and a long discussion of my medical history, she delivered the words that stunned us into silence:

*“You have Parkinson’s disease.”*

We didn’t remember anything she said after that. We stopped for barbecue afterward, but neither of us could speak. It felt like I had been handed a death sentence.

Two things hit us hard. First, despite all our research, Parkinson’s had never once appeared on our list of possibilities. Second, we realized how little we knew about it. Was it something I picked up during my years of traveling? How fast would it progress? Could I pass it on? And the worst question of all: could it be fatal?

#### JUST THE FACTS, PLEASE

Ann and I were both trained in the

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sciences — hers in the biological realm, mine in the social — so we did what came naturally: we dove into research.

We learned quickly that Parkinson’s would change our lives dramatically, but that with medications and therapies developed over the past 75 years, most people today live out their full life expectancy with the disease, not because of it. Parkinson’s isn’t contagious, and it isn’t something you “pick up” while traveling.

National estimates suggest that about 1.1 million Americans live with Parkinson’s. Based on those models, roughly 435 people in Lee County are likely living with the disease — a number slightly lower than the number of new cancer diagnoses expected here this year. But even those figures are estimates, because the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services doesn’t track cases directly due to cost and logistical challenges.

The good news for people like me is that early-21st-century medicine offers real hope. Some folks look at my life and say, “I’m so sorry for you.” But I feel the

*“April is Parkinson’s Awareness Month, and you may see silver or gray displays around town. If you do, I hope you’ll think of the millions of us living with Parkinson’s — not as people to be pitied, but as people still fighting, still learning and still shining.”*

deepest sorrow for those who miss the chance to hear how God is using my diagnosis to share His love with the world. They are the ones who should be pitied, not me.

#### EVERY DAY IS A NEW CHANCE TO SHINE

Getting out of bed, putting on my clothes, and brushing my teeth are now among the hardest things I do each day. Parkinson’s — along with a rare form of arthritis that’s deforming the vertebrae in my lower back — threatens to turn my golden years to rust. But I’m learning new ways to stay motivated and productive. My little “Ted Lasso” *Believe* sign is one of them.

Living with Parkinson’s is as much about emotional and community connection as it is about physical management. Symptoms fluctuate — what you can do one day might be impossible the next. That’s part of what’s known as a “dynamic disability.”

What has stayed constant is my belief that most people are, at their core, genuinely good. Restaurant staff who helped us find a table that met my needs became places we returned to. Strangers held doors, lifted bags, and went the extra mile to make life a little easier.

But not everyone makes it easier. There was the man in the pickup who zipped into the handicapped space ahead of me and said, “I’ll be back in two minutes — just need a carton of Marlboros.” My

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friend, I hope they had what you needed.

And there was the young woman whose brand new sports car stretched across three handicapped spaces, and the impeccably dressed woman who parked perfectly in a handicapped spot without a plate or placard.

These may seem petty to some. But the rules exist for a reason: to protect the rights of those who are impaired and to remind us that equal protection under the law is a promise of our Constitution.

At the heart of disability rights is a simple belief: equitable access should exist everywhere life exists. And it’s our duty to preserve those rights for the generations who will come after us.

#### A FINAL WORD

April is Parkinson’s Awareness Month, and you may see silver or gray displays around town. If you do, I hope you’ll think of the millions of us living with Parkinson’s — not as people to be pitied, but as people still fighting, still learning and still shining.

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**UNDER COVER**

The Pilgrim's Sanford Agriculture Market features an 8,300-square-foot covered pavilion for vendors and other attractions (like live music). Another 4,000 square feet houses office space, meeting rooms, a classroom kitchen and more. The market will open during this spring's Farmers Market season and will house 40 vendors (up from 30 last year).

**COVER STORY**

# A SUPER MARKET

NORTH CAROLINA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION AND CITY'S NEW PILGRIM'S SANFORD AGRICULTURAL MARKETPLACE WILL BETTER CONNECT LOCAL FARMERS WITH SANFORD'S GROWING COMMUNITY

BY GORDON ANDERSON | PHOTOS BY BEN BROWN

In 2019, *The Rant Monthly* published a photo essay about the Sanford Farmers Market. Back then, the market was open on Saturdays for much of the year in the parking lot of the McSwain Extension Center on Tramway Road, and featured just a handful of vendors. Although there weren't many of them, their offerings were consistently great — stuff of a quality you just don't find at most supermarkets, stuff you'd brag to your friends about.

But the market back then was tucked away outside a government building that didn't get much traffic from anyone who wasn't already going there, even during the week. On weekends it was even quieter.

There just wasn't a whole lot of buzz about the Sanford Farmers Market. But a lot has changed since then.

On April 4, the market enters a new phase as it'll open to the public for the first time in its permanent location at 157 Charlotte Avenue — dubbed the Pilgrim's Sanford Agricultural Marketplace in honor of one of the project's first corporate donors (more on that in a bit). Every Saturday through late November, the building — filled with vendors offering all kinds of locally grown produce and other food — will welcome visitors and shoppers from 8:30 a.m. to noon.



Bill Stone and Meredith Favre with the North Carolina Agriculture Extension provided a tour for *The Rant* of the new Pilgrim's Sanford Agricultural Marketplace in March.



The new agricultural marketplace is located along Chatham Street in downtown Sanford, near the Buggy Factory. "Putting agriculture in the heart of downtown really underscores that connection and says we support our local farmers being able to maintain that space so people understand how important they are to our community," said Mayor Rebecca Wyhof Salmon.



The more than 12,000-square-foot facility marks a whole lot more than just a new phase for the market, though. It represents not just a lot of work by a lot of partners — the city of Sanford and the North Carolina Cooperative Extension at the helm — but also a shared vision that continues the city's gradual but steady transition from a rural environment to a more urban one than it's been in the past, while celebrating the agricultural history (and present) of many of Lee County's more rural areas.

"A major goal for the city council has been to figure out spaces that will allow us to preserve our character and heritage while being innovative and really activating the spaces we have," said Sanford Mayor Rebecca Wyhof Salmon. "Putting agriculture in the heart of downtown really underscores that connection and says we support our local farmers being able to maintain that space so people understand how important they are to our community."

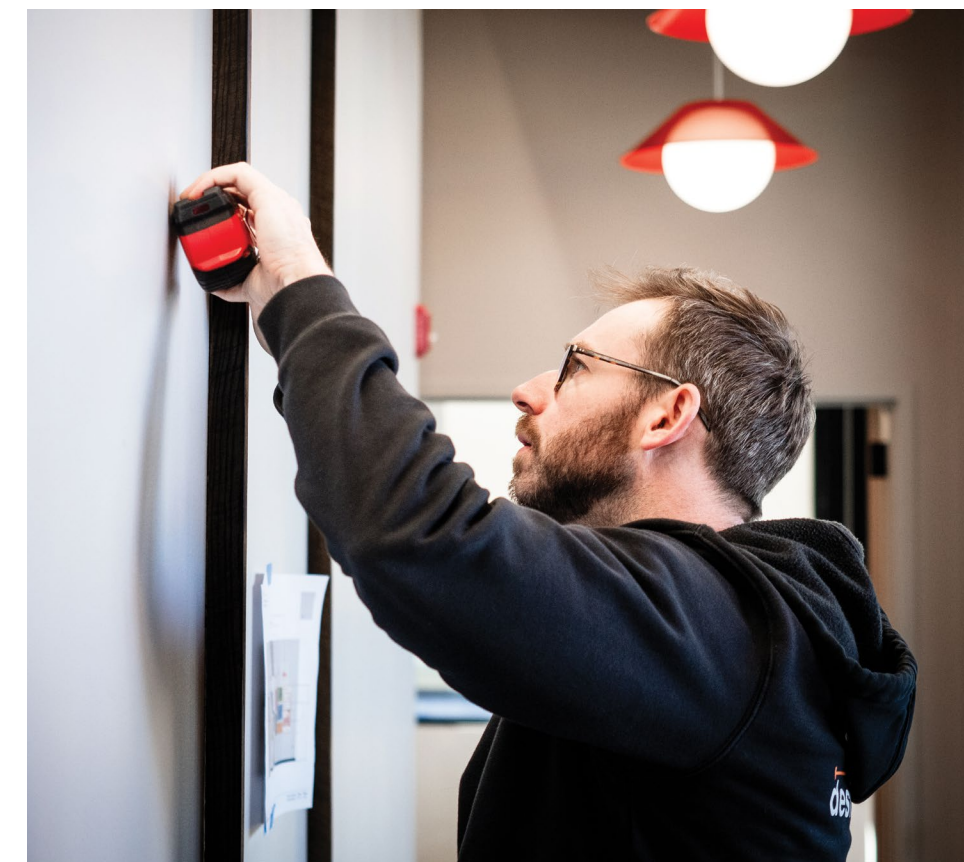
The market first moved downtown from the extension in 2020, and has been held each Saturday during the season in a city owned parking lot bounded by Chatham Street, Charlotte Avenue and McIver Street.

In that time, it has drawn thousands upon thousands of folks downtown — by 2022 about 700 people were visiting the market each week, a number that only continued to grow through last summer. Sanford Tourism Development Authority Wendy Bryan says it has become the county's "number one entry point for visiting downtown" and that the organization expects as many as 68,000 visitors to the market in 2026. She added that as many as 40 percent of the market's visitors come from outside Lee County.

"We think the impact of this market will be even greater than what we hope and anticipate," she said.

The market hadn't been downtown for very long at all when the ball really got moving on making the Charlotte Avenue location — which until that point was home to vacant building which had once housed a roofing company — the market's permanent location. Project partners first made loose plans known that October, and in March of 2021 the city announced a \$505,000 grant from poultry producer Pilgrim's that kicked things into the next gear. There were bumps along the way — the King Roofing building was initially expected to be repurposed as the market's home, a plan that the aging structure ultimately couldn't accommodate — but the market continued to thrive in its temporary location across the street while community decision makers hammered out details.

Other funding sources came into play along the way — they included \$1 million from the Ruby and Ernest McSwain Worthy Lands Trust, \$900,000 from the Rural Transformation Grant Fund, more than \$600,000 from the North Carolina



"We just have a huge opportunity here to showcase what we have in Sanford as far as our farms," said Kelli Laudate, executive director of Downtown Sanford Inc. "It's huge, it's the backbone of who we are and who we've been forever. It just shows that when you dream big and work as a team, you can absolutely create all this things in your community for everyone to enjoy."





Meredith Favre from the N.C. Agricultural Extension: “Downtown is a bit of a food desert and near some low income areas. We wanted this to be in a place people could walk to and we want to have programs that can help people with food insecurity. SNAP vouchers will be eligible for use, and we’ve submitted an application for WIC as well.”



Tobacco Trust Fund, and \$50,000 from the Lee County Farm Bureau.

The public got its first look at the facility on March 25, at a ribbon cutting attended by several hundred people that included elected leaders, city and county staff, business partners and more.

“We just have a huge opportunity here to showcase what we have in Sanford as far as our farms,” Kelli Laudate, executive director of Downtown Sanford Inc. told *The Rant*. “It’s huge, it’s the backbone of who we are and who we’ve been forever. It just shows that when you dream big and work as a team, you can absolutely create all this things in your community for everyone to enjoy.”

The market won’t just be a nice addition to downtown Sanford — it’ll also be unique in the region. Meredith Favre and Bill Stone, through their work with Lee County’s North Carolina Cooperative Extension office, have been two of the people closest to



“The shared use commercial kitchen meets all the guidelines for commercial food production and it’ll be available for rental by anyone who needs it. And really, as soon as the word got out about this kitchen, we started getting calls.” — Meredith Favre

the project’s progress in recent years. Their enthusiasm for the space was palpable during a walk through prior to completion in early March.

“There’s nothing like this in the region,” said Stone, the Extension director in Lee County. “We talk about the folks from Sanford and Lee County coming out, but once we get the word out, we think this will be a real destination.”

Favre is the extension’s local foods coordinator, a position the county created in 2022 to help guide the market’s progress into its new home along. She coordinates the market’s vendors each week and plans education programming in conjunction with the market — functions that will all be under the same roof beginning this year.

Programming previously made use

of the extension’s space on Tramway Road or other facilities as necessary.

“This permanent, dedicated space really allows us to think about how we can expand because it’s not a space that is being used as parking on other days of the week,” she said.

Those opportunities for expansion will be many, and staff are already looking at the possibility of having the market open on days other than Saturday. The market’s open air pavilion is made up of 8,300 square feet for vendors and other attractions like weekly live music, while another 4,000-plus will include office space (of which the extension will make use), meeting space, a classroom kitchen that can be used to offer community cooking classes and more, and even a commercial kitchen.

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The Pilgrim's Sanford Agricultural Marketplace will house the Farmers Market this spring, with approximately 40 vendors signed on (up from 30 last year).

“The shared use commercial kitchen meets all the guidelines for commercial food production and it’ll be available for rental by anyone who needs it,” she said. “And really, as soon as the word got out about this kitchen, we started getting calls. We’ve had a lot of people over the years saying things like ‘I want to make and market this product, but it’ll cost me \$20,000 or \$30,000 to upgrade my kitchen, and that’s not feasible.’ This gives the community a space people can use for that kind of thing, and in that way can kind of act as an incubator kitchen.”

The marketplace will open for the 2026 season with 40 vendors — up from the 28 to 30 it featured weekly in 2025 — and the potential to hold up to 52. Those vendors, mainly from Lee, Chatham, Moore, Wake, and Harnett, will offer goods mostly produced within a 100 mile radius of downtown Sanford, although visitors can also expect vendors from as far

away as the coast offering things like fresh seafood.

Favre said the market’s presence won’t just be a plus for curious shoppers looking for a weekend outing or to get ingredients for dinner. It’s also aimed at addressing food insecurity in the area.

“Downtown is a bit of a food desert and near some low income areas,” she said. “We wanted this to be in a place people could walk to and we want to have programs that can help people with food insecurity. SNAP vouchers will be eligible for use, and we’ve submitted an application for WIC as well.”

*The Rant Monthly* published a cover story in 2025 about the increasing loss of farmland in Lee County. Nearly everyone interviewed for this story said the marketplace is part of

an effort that re-centers agriculture — even if it can’t address the loss of farm land head-on — and the work of the farming community as integral to how things fit together locally. In fact, Stone said the close collaboration between Sanford city government and the cooperative extension is somewhat rare, just by virtue of the fact that cities and cooperative extension operations usually have different goals and priorities. That’s not the case in Sanford.

“You don’t typically see as much cooperation between a city and the extension like this,” he said.

That spirit of collaboration is something Salmon reiterated as well, and said is exemplified in Sanford and Lee County.

“One of the things that’s truly remarkable about this project is



“There’s nothing like this in the region. We talk about the folks from Sanford and Lee County coming out, but once we get the word out, we think this will be a real destination.” — Bill Stone, the Extension director in Lee County.

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Elected officials, state leaders, and hundreds of community members joined the City of Sanford on March 25, to cut the ribbon on the Pilgrim's Sanford Agricultural Marketplace. The new space serves as an anchor for the future Sanford Central Green. *Photo by Gordon Anderson*

it inspired so many organizations and groups to want to be a part of something so transformational," she said. "It's not just a city project, it's so much bigger. I don't think I've ever seen a project that had so many partners coming together around a common vision."

The market itself is also part of something bigger — something that's not quite visible yet, but in motion all the same. The city's plan is that it will be an anchor for the eventual "Sanford Central Green," an ambitious, large scale project that will eventually connect that part of downtown to the reconfigured City Hall which sits just a couple miles north of the marketplace on Weatherspoon Street. It's likely to be several years before that project, which envisions greenway trails, retail space and more, is fully realized. But the marketplace makes several, large steps toward that goal.

"It's something that sets us apart," Salmon said. "There's a strategic effort to have it be central to what's going to be the Sanford Central Green, and this just hits so many of our larger community goals in making sure we're meeting this moment as our community continues to grow. Everyone is being so intentional in how we move forward, and we want to keep that sense of place that will help Sanford continue to be Sanford for years to come. We're really seeking to be our best selves."

**Learn More**

*For more information about the Sanford Farmers Market and the Pilgrim's Sanford Agricultural Marketplace, including a full event calendar, visit [sanfordfarmersmarketnc.com](http://sanfordfarmersmarketnc.com).*



The Pilgrim's Sanford Agricultural Marketplace will house the Farmers Market this spring, with approximately 40 vendors signed on (up from 30 last year).

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LOCAL SPORTS

# BACK TO THE PITCH

SEMI-PROFESSIONAL SOCCER RETURNS TO SANFORD IN THE FORM OF BRICK CITY FC, WHICH WILL PLAY ITS HOME GAMES IN THE NEW LEE COUNTY ATHLETIC PARK



By Billy Liggett  
billy@rantnc.com

It was a day designed to not only celebrate the return of semi-professional soccer to Sanford, but do so in a still-new athletic park that helped make this return possible.

And while heavy rain may have kept the fans away, it didn't wash away the excitement of Media Day for Brick City FC, the city's and Sanford Area Soccer League's first United Premiere Soccer League club since SanLee FC disbanded in 2023. That evening, the roughly 30 young (and young-ish) men who make up the squad waited out the downpour and stuck around for a spirited intra-squad scrimmage.

"This sport means a lot to all of us," said Osvaldo "Ozzie" Alvarez, one of two team captains on the squad. "I think about how long I've been playing and to still be doing it, it's about passion and a passion for winning."

Brick City's official return to the eight-team UPSL Division I Mid-Atlantic South Division was a joyous one, with the Lions — the mascot chosen to honor the local Lions Club, which has supported SASL for several years — topping Gastonia City FC near Charlotte, 2-1, in the season opener on March 21. Alvarez and Hector Velazco knocked in the two goals in the program's return.

The team made it two in a row with a 3-0 win over ILM FC from in Wilmington the home debut at Lee County Athletic Park on March 28. At that

game and at all future home games, boys and girls who take part in Sanford Area Soccer League's Classic, Academy and Recreation leagues get free admission by wearing their jersey to the game.

Those kids are another big reason why semi-pro soccer is returning to Sanford, said Ryan Patterson, executive director of SASL.

"There's a reason this team's uniforms look like the uniforms kids are wearing in SASL — we want the younger players to feel like this is their team, too," he said. "Toward the end of San Lee FC, we felt like there was a disconnect between that team and the youth leagues, and we're trying to work on that."

Patterson credits Tim Blodgett, the general manager, owner and founder of the San Lee squad that competed in the UPSL from 2018 to 2023, for making semi-pro soccer in Sanford a reality. Blodgett, who is also a coach at Grace Christian Academy and a member of USA Soccer's Men's Over-40 National Team, created San Lee FC to grow the sport locally and provide an outlet for former high school players who didn't have the opportunity to play at the collegiate level. He found a home in the UPSL, the nation's largest pro development soccer league that is home to 400 clubs split into a premier division and a secondary Division 1 (where Sanford currently competes).

According to Patterson, lack of facilities was among the reasons the team folded in 2023. The Sanford team was paying hundreds a night to practice and



Brick City FC is off to a 2-0 record after two games. The team returns to action on April 12 in Lincolnton and will have its next home game at 7 p.m. on April 18.

play games in Apex. Lee County Athletic Park, which opened last fall, provides a more stable home for Brick City FC (though should the team advance to the Premier division, it would still need upgrades such as a scoreboard and locker room).

Another reason the game is back at this level is talent. Patterson says Sanford is stocked with talented players, many of whom have had to travel north to Raleigh or south to Fayetteville in the past few years to play competitively.

"I'd say probably 90 percent of them grew up playing SASL recreation or travel ball at some point," he says. "Even in their later years, if they moved on to another club, there's still this fondness toward SASL. They get to come back and play with their friends, the guys they grew up with. And for some of these guys, playing soccer keeps them busy ... even keeps some of them out of trouble."

J.R. Hughes, formerly SASL's director of coaching for travel soccer with 44 years of experience both playing and coaching the game at a high level, is head coach of the new Brick City FC team,

SPRING SCHEDULE

Date	Time	Opponent	Location	Result
March 21	4 p.m.	Gastonia City FC	Indian Trail, NC	W, 2-1
March 28	7 p.m.	ILM FC	Sanford	W, 3-0
April 12	2 p.m.	Combine Academy II	Lincolnton, NC	
April 18	7 p.m.	NC Lions II	Sanford	
April 25	7 p.m.	Bragg FC	Sanford	
May 9	3 p.m.	Mint Hill II	Mint Hill, NC	
May 16	5 p.m.	Electric City FC II	Sanford	
May 30	3 p.m.	Bragg FC	Fayetteville, NC	
June 6	6 p.m.	ILM FC	Leland, NC	
June 13	7p.m.	Gastonia City FC	Sanford	

UPSIL Mid-Atlantic D1 Playoff Schedule

June 20-21	Playoff Quarterfinals	Top 4 teams advance
June 27-28	Playoff Semi-Finals	Top 2 teams from Qfinals advance
July 4-5	Finals	Winners of each semi-final

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Many of the players on Brick City FC played youth travel or rec ball in Sanford Area Soccer League. Current players in SASL get free admission to all home games at Lee County Athletic Park.

and even before the squad's 2-1 opening win, he said he saw a lot of potential in his new team. As a Division I program in the UPSL, he says the ultimate goal is to work toward the Premier Division, which has teams in Raleigh (Wake FC, North Carolina FC among them), Charlotte, Asheville and Winston-Salem, among other cities.

"You get through the first division, the Premier division and then if we do well a couple of seasons in Premier, we look to do the USL [United Soccer League] track," Hughes says. "What I like about all this is for SASL, from the grassroots up, it gives our kids a true professional pathway. That's something the club has been missing the past few years."

"I think most of the guys in this program right now could have played somewhere after high school, but for whatever reason didn't. Some have played in similar leagues. But they all seem pretty thankful that this has returned to Sanford."

Assistant coach Gabriel Chavez says he

thinks the team will be able to compete with any team at the Division I level.

"It's just about finding that chemistry, finding the initial 18 guys who are going to be on the roster consistently, and then just being able to continue working together and build that chemistry. And they'll definitely be able to compete," he says.

Brick City FC has roughly 40 young men on the roster. UPSL requires at least a roster of 25, Hughes says, and they stacked this roster to cover some of the work-life balance the majority of the players have to juggle.

Alvarez, for example, is a professional automotive detailer with his own company. A former Southern Lee High School star (who scored 22 goals in his final season with the team), he's played in Raleigh and Charlotte over the last few years, but Brick City FC gives him an opportunity to play closer to home.

"You get to a certain age where, and you think you might not have an opportunity to keep playing ... and then

we get an opportunity like this. It just feels amazing," says Alvarez. "It just feels amazing. It makes you want to push yourself harder, especially with us getting older."

Fernando Luna DePaz played college ball at Columbia International University in South Carolina after graduating from Grace Christian School. After college, he returned to SASL to coach travel ball and become a private trainer. He also coached at Southern Lee High School. He was a member of Blodgett's San Lee teams in 2018 and 2019.

"Tim did a lot of great things for the soccer community in Sanford," DePaz says. "He saw the potential for all the kids here, and Sanford's big enough and has enough people who love soccer to support something like this."

At 30, DePaz is one of the oldest (if not the oldest) players on Brick City FC. He says he's earned the nickname "Unc" from the younger players, but as one of the team's captains (along with Alvarez), he says he still "has it."

"I try to take care of myself, because

recovery is definitely the most important part of the game, I think," he says. "These young guys, they'll figure it out soon enough that recovery is way more important than training — and every day being out here, practicing, getting touches on the ball, that is key, too. But without recovery, you're not going to be able to move as smoothly as you want to."

The average age of the Brick City roster is between 20 and 24. DePaz calls the UPSL a competitive league stocked with former college players and even a few ex pros. Success for Brick City FC will be about building the program and bringing up athletes currently playing at the middle and high school levels one day.

And doing all of it at the new Lee County Athletic Park makes it even more enjoyable.

"This is amazing for the kids here, for the community of Sanford. It's been a long time coming. I know teams from out of town weren't fans of playing on our former fields," DePaz says. "I'm very grateful for this complex, and I'm glad the kids are able to use it."



Brick City FC plays in the United Premier Soccer League's Division I. The squad hopes to advance to its Premier Division eventually and face larger teams in Raleigh, Charlotte, Winston-Salem and Asheville.

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This project was supported by The Lee County Arts Council and the North Carolina Arts Council, a division of the Department of Natural & Cultural Resources.



### SPINNERS TO PLAY HOME GAMES AT LCHS IN 2026

The Sanford Spinners' sixth season will begin this summer in a new home and under new leadership.

The Spinners announced in March that Tom Andor has been named the team's general manager, and also that games in 2026 will be played at Lee County High School's baseball field.

"Baseball brings communities together, and the Sanford Spinners already mean a great deal to this town," said Andor, a native of St. Francis, Minnesota and a U.S. Army veteran. "I'm honored to serve in this role and excited to help create lasting memories for families, fans and players."

The collegiate level summer league team, part of the Old North State League, announced it will move its home field from Southern Lee to LCHS.

Owner Al Anderson said the decision came "after evaluating logistics, long-term operational needs, and overall fit within the community, the organization determined that Lee County High School provides the right environment for the next phase of Spinners baseball."

A central component of the transition is a facility investment led by the Spinners. The organization will fund brand-new backstop netting, batting cage netting and pitching tunnel netting at the field.

# Southern Lee wrestler becomes school's first state champion

Courtesy of Lee County Schools

GREENSBORO — The Greensboro Coliseum was loud, but for a moment Southern Lee High junior wrestler Nevaeh Williamson heard almost nothing.

Waiting around all day for her championship final against Alyvia Hawkins from Seventy-First High School, the nervous anticipation started to build. Standing on the edge of the mat at the state championships, she shifted her weight from foot to foot, pacing slightly, her mind racing through every practice, every match, every long summer workout that had led her here. The wait before the final match felt longer than any practice she had endured.

"I definitely had to wait a long time, and I did start to get a little nervous and pacing around before the finals," she later recalled. "I just tried to remember my capability. I tried to remember how hard I worked all throughout the summer. I am a year-round wrestler, so I work throughout the summer, all over the off-season. I just had to remember that I put the work in and I deserved it."

Williamson became Southern Lee High School's first women's wrestling state champion with a 15-2 decision in the finals, finishing her impressive season with a 49-2 overall record. For Williamson, the moment wasn't just about one match. It was about a journey that had started only a few years earlier when she first stepped on a wrestling mat during her freshman year at Southern Lee High School.

"I didn't wrestle at all in middle school," she said. "I did not even know wrestling was a thing until I came to high school. I had played a little volleyball, but I didn't really do sports until my eighth grade year."

Before high school, most of her athletic experience had been on an all-girls team. Walking into a wrestling practice filled almost entirely with boys was a completely different world.

"The transition from an all-girls team to almost an all boys team was really strong,"



Nevaeh Williamson won the girls state wrestling championship with a 15-2 decision in the finals in Greensboro. She finished her season with an impressive overall record of 49-2.

she said. "The training was different. The style was different. Working with the guys definitely pushed me harder. I think that is really what helped me get to where I am. I praise my coaches and the guys on the team for that. They pushed me to my limits and knew how far I needed to go to get to be my best."

The early days weren't easy.

"When I first started, the guys were all just beating me, and it did impact my confidence," she admitted. "But I used it as my motivation and my mindset was like, 'I'm going to beat these guys up,'" she said with a laugh.

Somewhere in those early practices, wrestling became more than just something new to try. The deeper she got into the sport, the more she realized what kept pulling her back to the mat.

"I think the grind is what drew me to wrestling. The grit, the determination it takes, both mentally and physically. You second guess yourself a lot, and you just really have to push yourself to be the best."

That mindset began to show in the re-

sults. Her sophomore season ended with a 41-7 record and a trip to the state tournament. That experience was eye-opening.

Her junior season record climbed to 49-2, including a 15-2 major decision win over her opponent, Hawkins, in the finals. Her record and championship a reflection of the countless hours she had spent on the wrestling mat and in training while others rested during the offseason.

On the night Williamson won her state title, she stood there, trying to process it.

"It really felt like a relief," she said. "I just felt that I had done what I came there to do, and I was relieved so I basically started to 'ugly cry.' There were just a lot of emotions that came out."

But her journey isn't finished yet. She is already making preparations for her senior season, building towards what she hopes is a collegiate wrestling career.

"I am hoping to go to college and wrestle," she said. "I would love to get a scholarship to help me pursue my dream of being a physical therapist."



### NO KINGS | ROUND 3

Hundreds in Sanford joined the millions of Americans who took part in the nationwide No Kings protests on March 28. The local gathering was held in downtown Sanford in Depot Park. Attendees brought signs in protest of policies imposed by President Donald Trump, such as the current war in Iran, immigration enforcement and the rising cost of living. Photos by Gordon Anderson



# County moves toward blocking data centers

Commissioners vote comes after heated words between chairman, climate activists

By Richard Sullins  
richard@rantnc.com

A capacity crowd filled Lee County's McSwain Center on March 16 as experts and residents alike told the Board of Commissioners about the dangers of a rumored data center project that would be powered by natural gas drilling and has become a community flashpoint in recent months.

Ultimately, the board voted 6-0 — with Republican Commissioners' Chairman Kirk Smith abstaining — to have county staff draw up language for a new moratorium on fracking in Lee County that the board will take up at a future meeting. That meeting was set for 6 p.m. on April 20.

A company named Deep River Data is at the heart of the controversy. An article

in late 2025 from *Inside Climate News* reported that Deep River Data wanted to access natural gas from Butler Well No. 3, a test well drilled in the late 90s near the Cumnock community, and use it to power an artificial intelligence operation nearby. The story provided emails in which company officials inquired to the state on an informal basis about the project, and also detailed connections the company has to cryptocurrency mining. But state or local officials have reported consistently since that there had been no permit requests of any kind associated with such a project.

Nevertheless, a long line of Lee County residents began speaking before the Board of Commissioners and the Sanford City Council asking for a moratorium against data centers and fracking. Chatham Coun-

ty enacted such a moratorium in February.

The March 16 meeting — which had easily the highest attendance at a commissioners' meeting in the last five years — included presentations from both Brooks Rainey, an attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, and Jimmy Randolph, CEO of the Sanford Area Growth Alliance. Rainey's presentation focused on some of the environmental challenges data centers in general propose to communities, while Randolph argued that data centers can provide significant economic benefits — but probably not this one.

SAGA is a public-private partnership which serves as the county's economic development arm. Randolph said SAGA hadn't heard a word from Deep River Data about the rumored project until last week. He said his discussion with the company led him to the conclusion that it "would not fit into the category of projects that I have been describing tonight that might be a good fit for a modern sustainable data projects."

"The details described to me during the call I received represented a very small-scale project that would be engaged in activities that I don't think would be activities of a modern sustainable data center that I've described to you," Randolph said.

Rainey's remarks focused on the position that the county has the legal option to enact a moratorium. County staff had been working under an interpretation of state law that counties have no authority to regulate drilling for natural gas or through fracking. But Rainey cited a broad granting of authority to local authorities to do so.

"It's a safe thing to do," she said.

The board also heard from a long list of citizens, who unanimously opposed green-lighting such a plan, and urged them to enact a moratorium.

Critics questioned whether the economic benefits would be distributed equitably, or if they would primarily benefit outside interests, with the costs falling on the backs

of families that have made Lee County their home for generations.

Randy Nixon is a Cumnock resident who has already spoken several times before about the issue. He reiterated his stance on March 16, often speaking directly to Smith.

"I, like many others, have been coming here and asking for this since Thanksgiving of last year. I told you all months ago that if you didn't prioritize our children, this would get ugly. Now you see," he said. "I am a registered Republican, like many here tonight, and I used to think that meant something, something virtuous by standing up for what's right with conservative values meant to protect working class families and their children. Republicans once fought for the abolition of slavery. Now, when I tell people I'm a Republican, it's embarrassing. Mr. Smith, your ego clouds your judgment. You hurt not only yourself, but the security of this county."

Smith got his own barbs in, but not against Nixon. Following Rainey's presentation, he peppered her with a series of questions about her opinion on the cause of global warming, what caused the end of the Ice Age, and what started the warming of the Roman period 2,000 years ago.

Rainey said she didn't see how her opinion on those matters related to the issue and replied "I don't even understand what you are talking about, with all due respect."

"Well," Smith pushed on. "We are talking about the climate, and I am asking for your perspectives on the history of climate change and what its causes were, and you're not able to answer my questions. What is the number one pollutant in the atmosphere today?"

Nixon referenced both that and his treatment of Rainey in his comments, which drew heavy applause from the crowd. "You call many of us 'Sandhills Conspiracy Theorists', but there's no bigger conspiracy theorist here than you. You claim we're all here because of a Chinese Communist Party-funded psyop. Those are your words. After what I've seen here these past few months, and again tonight, I can't help but think that maybe you're funded by China because you seem dead set on making sure life expectancies go down and child cancer goes up. I certainly don't think you're qualified to sit in that chair of leadership tonight."

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**CCCC'S BUTLER NAMED REGION'S PLAYER OF THE YEAR**

Central Carolina Community College's Ma'kyi Butler has been named Player of the Year and First Team All-Region for Region 10 DII Men's Basketball by the National Junior College Athletic Association (NCJAA). Region 10 includes North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia.

Butler, a Grace Christian School graduate, has lived in Sanford since fifth grade. He scored an average of nearly 21 points per game for CCCC amid a highly successful season for the Cougars. He is the second Player of the Year in CCCC's conference history. Assistant Athletic Director and Head Basketball Coach Bradley McDougald called Butler, "nothing short of phenomenal."

He pointed to Butler's 998 career points and the mark he's made on the court for CCCC. At the same time, McDougald said, Butler also showed his dedication by working tirelessly in the classroom, achieving a 3.2 GPA while chasing his dreams.

"It has been an absolute privilege to watch Ma'kyi grow into the outstanding young man he is today," McDougald said. "Hard-working, humble, and unstoppable — he truly embodies what it means to be a Cougar."

**BRIEFS**

**EVENT SHOWCASES EMS, NURSING PROGRAMS AT CCCC**

Standing at a table in the middle of CCCC's Lee Main Campus, EMS Instructor Ryan Jones shoved gauze into a deep gash in a simulated leg.

"Can they get infected?" student Chloe Ochoa asked hypothetically as she watched the demonstration.

"If they live to get the infection, that means that's a good thing," Jones said. "If we don't do this, they aren't going to survive."

CCCC's EMS and Nursing programs educate students for career fields that are critical to frontline response to medical emergencies. At a showcase event held March 23, students from across the college had the opportunity to participate in hands-on activities and demonstrations to learn about these careers and chat with instructors about the programs.

One of the opportunities CCCC offers is a pathway that connects the EMS and Nursing fields. The Paramedic to Associate Degree Nursing Advanced Placement option provides a route for currently certified paramedics to transition into the role of registered nurse. Participating students can take a spring bridge class and join the Associate Degree Nursing class in the summer, completing the nursing program in one year.

At the event, Nursing Instructor Jessica Holt showed off a variety of training tools, including a machine that simulates different breathing and heartbeat sounds. Attendees could use a stethoscope to listen in. Holt said that CCCC nursing graduates very often take jobs in the local community, providing care and support to patients in the college's service area. Likewise, CCCC EMS graduates are filling critical hiring gaps for local governments and saving lives across the region.

For more information about Health Sciences and Public Safety at CCCC, visit [www.cccc.edu/communities](http://www.cccc.edu/communities).



Attendees connected with CCCC Nursing students and faculty, as well as representatives from the college's EMS program, as part of the Emergency Medicine Career Communities Showcase on CCCC's Lee Main Campus on March 23.

**ANIMAL RESCUE PARTNERS WITH FOOD BANK TO PROVIDE FREE PET FOOD**

Lending Paws a Hand launched a new program on March 19 to provide pet food for dog and cat owners through the Christian United Outreach Center of Lee County's food bank.

Lending Paws a Hand is a foster- and volunteer-based animal rescue dedicated to improving the lives of pets in Lee County. While the organization primarily rescues dogs and cats, it has also launched the Ichi and Luke Legacy Fund, a program designed to support families with their pets and help reduce owner surrenders. Through this initiative, Lending Paws a Hand is partnering with CUOC to provide pet food to pet owners in need.

As of 2024, North Carolina ranked second in the nation for the percentage of animals euthanized in shelters, excluding cases involving severe medical or behavioral issues. A portion of animals entering shelters, such as those at Lee County Animal Shelter, are owner surrenders, often driven by financial hardship, including the inability to afford pet food, or life changes like housing instability. Through its pet food bank,

LPAH aims to reduce owner surrenders in Lee County, helping keep pets with the families who love them.

Pet food can be dropped off at CUOC, located at 2885 Lee Ave., Monday through Friday beginning at 9 a.m.

**DEMOCRAT WITHDRAWS FROM NC HOUSE 51 RACE**

Democrat Tashera Nichols McDuffie has withdrawn her name from the race for North Carolina House District 51.

McDuffie, of Cameron, filed paperwork with the Moore County Board of Elections on March 6 taking herself out of the race to replace retiring Republican Rep. John Sauls. House District 51

McDuffie told *The Rant* that she had "temporarily suspended" the campaign "due to a personal family matter."

"I've had the luxury of living my life through my heart's desire over the past 10 years," McDuffie said. "Now I want to do my part to make sure my family has every opportunity to succeed together."

McDuffie's name will not appear on the November ballot. Sanford City Councilman Charles Taylor will face business owner April Montgomery, an independent, in the November race.

**Barringer's primary win rare for Sanford candidates**

By Gordon Anderson  
[gordon@rantnc.com](mailto:gordon@rantnc.com)

When the dust settled on March 3 — primary Election Day in North Carolina — Democratic candidate for North Carolina's 13th Congressional District Paul Barringer came out on top.

Someone was always going to win, of course, but Barringer's victory stood out because it marks the first time in recent memory — and maybe ever — that Sanford has produced a Congressional nominee from either of the major parties.

Jimmy Love Sr. sought the Democratic nomination for the Congressional seat covering Sanford in the early 1970s. But Love, who served in the state House prior to that run and again in the mid 2000s, came up short in that primary. Sanford has produced other political figures who both sought and held higher office — including Dennis Wicker, who served as North Carolina's lieutenant governor from 1992 to 2000, and Robert Reives II, who is from Sanford and now represents Cha-

tham County in the state House (and is Democratic leader in that chamber) — but there has been no evidence of Lee County producing a major-party congressional nominee in the modern era.

Barringer hails from the Deep River area and has deep roots there. He moved back from the Washington, D.C. area in 2025 to be closer to his mother Jane, who taught school here for years and "knows everyone." "She needed some help and I wanted to be here for her," he said.

Running for Congress wasn't on his radar at the time, although he has a long history working as an attorney on health and health care policy. Barringer grew up in Lee County, working for the family fertilizer company (Sapona Mills) in the 1980s, and went on to earn degrees from Davidson College and Princeton, as well as a law degree from the University of North Carolina. He said he decided to run for Congress after becoming concerned about the nature — and volume — of executive orders issued by President Donald Trump in 2025.

"I saw it as very concerning," he said. "And there were many people around me who felt the same. I looked at myself in the mirror and decided I could keep looking at the news, or I could help."

Barringer easily topped his competition in the primary — he carried all of the 13th Congressional District's eight counties with between 50 and 60 percent of the vote over fellow Democrats Frank Pierce and Alexander Nicholi. He'll face incumbent Republican Brad Knott of Raleigh, who is seeking a second term, in the fall.

Victory in the general will be a tougher climb, though, due to the district's partisan makeup. The district is rated as R+8, meaning it's 8 points more Republican than the national average in presidential elections. Knott, who has declined to respond to questions from *The Rant* in the

past, won the seat in 2024 with 58 percent of the vote.

Barringer acknowledges the race being a challenge, but said he "wants to win." He says at one point in his life — and not too long ago — he was registered as a Republican, and hopes that means he'll be able to appeal to folks in places like Lee County.

"As a Republican, I believed that government had a role in addressing the issues we have," he said. "I still believe that as a Democrat. In fact, at the polling sites (during the primary), I met a lot of Republicans. I told them I don't want the government to be any bigger than it needs to be, I don't want to pay any more taxes than I need to, and I want to follow the Constitution — a lot of them agreed with me. I think people want to see us find ways to work together and get things done."

**Central Electric providing grants to local educators to fund innovative projects**

Teachers, are you looking for new opportunities to fund projects for your classroom?

Central Electric is awarding up to \$15,000 in Bright Ideas education grants to local educators in K-12 classrooms for the 2026-27 school year. Educators in K-12 classrooms with creative ideas for learning projects are encouraged to apply for a grant up to \$2,000.

Grant applications will be accepted through Sept. 15. However, it pays to apply early.

All teachers who submit their applications by the early bird deadline of Aug. 15 will be entered into a drawing for one of five \$100 Visa gift cards. Scan the QR code or visit [NCBrightIdeas.com](http://NCBrightIdeas.com) for more information or to apply!



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**DISTRICT HOSTS STATE SUPERINTENDENT, GOLDEN LEAF GROUP**

Lee County Schools welcomed State Superintendent Maurice "Mo" Green and a delegation of education leaders from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the Golden LEAF Foundation for visits to three schools in the district in March.

West Lee and SanLee Middle Schools are in their first year participating in the Golden LEAF Schools Initiative, a program designed to strengthen academic outcomes and expand career readiness for middle school students statewide. Through the initiative, the Golden LEAF Foundation and NCDPI are investing \$2.1 million over five years to support programming at both schools.

During the visit, Green and his team met with district and school leaders, toured classrooms, and engaged directly with students and teachers to observe the initiative in action.

"The most impressive thing was actually seeing the student engagement at both schools in different ways," Green said. "Seeing the students working in small groups was exciting, particularly in the Open Up Curriculum."

Green emphasized the broader importance of the initiative, particularly for rural districts. "Golden LEAF is important because it shows the types of resources that are needed so educators can get the level of professional development that they need," he said.

**BRIEFS**

**WICKER SCHOOL OPENS FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER FOR COMMUNITY**

W.B. Wicker Elementary School and Lee County Schools announced in March the opening of its new Family Resource Center, a dedicated space designed to connect students, families and community members with essential resources and support services. The center and a new Community School coordinator position are funded through a grant from the N.C. Community Schools Coalition, which serves a network of schools and families across the state.

The center will serve as a hub offering assistance with basic necessities, access to community partnerships, and guidance navigating local services. The initiative is part of the school's commitment to removing barriers to student success and strengthening family engagement.

Principal James Beasley-Mungin emphasized the importance of expanding support beyond the classroom. "I think it is important that all families are able to support the needs of the student," said Beasley-Mungin. "What I have seen in our students is that there are just some needs that are beyond the day-to-day operations of a school. So, having a role such as the Community Schools Coordinator adds a different level of resources to the playing field to help provide for the basic needs of students."

The Family Resource Center, which will be known as the "Tiger Den," aims to provide a wide range of services, from connecting families to food and school supplies to offering guidance on budgeting, life skills and other personal challenges. Degraffenreidt also emphasized the importance of creating a welcoming, judgement-free environment.

School leaders believe the addition of the Family Resource Center and the Community Schools Coordinator role will significantly enhance the school's ability to respond to student and family needs.



CCCC is offering a variety of camps across its campuses. At the West Harnett Restoration Center, campers can explore the world of motorsports through the Race Car Technology Camp. On the Chatham and Lee Main campuses, young chefs can sharpen their skills in several fun and creative cooking camps. Campers on the Lee Main Campus can also practice volleyball fundamentals, explore careers in dental health, and learn the basics of entrepreneurship through interactive activities designed to spark curiosity and creativity. Visit [ccc.edu/summercamps](http://ccc.edu/summercamps) to explore all available camps and enroll.

**CCCC DESIGNATED AS 'MILITARY FRIENDLY'**

Central Carolina Community College has earned the 2026-2027 Military Friendly Schools Designation and Silver-level recognition.

"It is a privilege to serve our military-affiliated students," said CCCC Veterans Affairs Coordinator Angie Estes. "They have sacrificed so much for this country. They deserve our best service. It is such an honor to receive this distinction."

Institutions earning the Military Friendly Schools® Designation were evaluated using both public data sources and responses from a proprietary survey. Over 3,200 organizations participated in the survey. Final ratings were determined by combining an organization's survey score, public data, and an assessment of the institution's ability to meet and exceed thresholds for student recruitment, retention,

academic progress, graduation rates, career placement, and support services for veterans, transitioning service members, and military spouses.

**SOUTHERN LEE TO PRESENT 'WILLY WONKA JR.'**

The Solee Theatre at Southern Lee High School has announced its upcoming production of "Willy Wonka Jr.," set to delight audiences at the Mann Center for the Arts at 7 p.m. on April 16-17 and 2 p.m. on April 18.

This enchanting musical adaptation of Roald Dahl's beloved story promises to be a treat for audiences of all ages. The April 18 matinee will also serve as Senior Recognition Day.

Tickets are \$10 for adults and \$5 for students and teachers and will be available at [soleetheatre.ludus.com](http://soleetheatre.ludus.com) or at the door on performance days.



Campbell University President Dr. William M. Downs and First Lady Kimberly Downs greet students and well-wishers after the president's formal investiture ceremony on March 27.

**CAMPBELL FORMALLY INAUGURATES JUST ITS SIXTH PRESIDENT**

President Dr. William M. Downs called for Campbell to rededicate itself to a "powerful and world-changing mission" on the day he was formally invested and sworn in as just the sixth president in the University's 139-year history on Friday.

More than 1,600 delegates, faculty, staff, students, community members, family and friends were on hand for the Investiture Ceremony held on the floor of Gore Arena inside Campbell's Pope Convocation Center. In his 34-minute speech, Downs echoed Campbell's second president, Leslie H. Campbell, saying the University's future demands "our wholehearted endeavor."

"Ours is a world filled with uncertainty," he said, referencing a current war, global financial instability, pandemic recovery, declining trust in institutions of higher education and falling membership in churches. "Some question the very value of a college education. Artificial intelligence causes us to question what we see, what we read and what we once thought we could understand as the truth. Social

media has, without a doubt, dumbed down our national discourse. These are challenging times, my friends.

"So in a world filled with uncertainty, let Campbell University be the answer. Let Campbell be a beacon that will guide us safely through it. Campbell will be the answer, because Campbell truly is special."

Downs' investiture ceremony comes nearly nine months after his arrival in Buies Creek on July 1, 2025. Prior to coming to Campbell, he was the 13th president of Gardner-Webb University. He was also dean of the Thomas Harriot College of Arts & Sciences at East Carolina University.

Downs ended his speech with a familiar refrain, one that he used during tour stops and at various gatherings with faculty and staff — the world needs more Campbell.

"I'm going to say it again because I truly, truly believe it. I believe that the world we live in today needs more Campbell doctors and more Campbell nurses, physician assistants, pharmacists, and healthcare professionals. We need more Campbell teachers, mental health counselors and pastors. Our world needs more Campbell ... and it is our plan, it is our purpose and it is our promise to meet that need."

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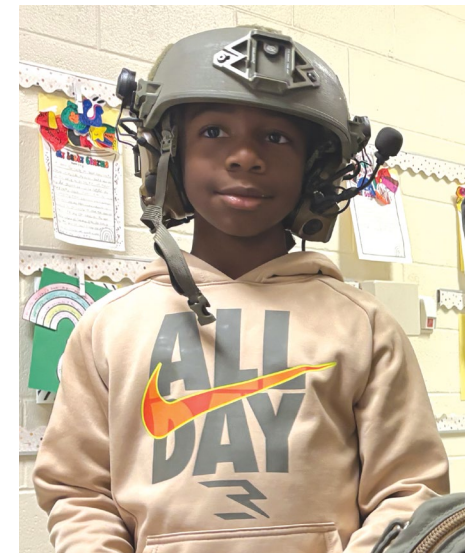
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**Duke Energy Science Night**

B.T. Bullock Elementary School was one of several locally and hundreds statewide to take part in Duke Energy Science Night on March 18. Special guests from Mertek Solutions, Campbell University School of Engineering, Lee County Library, Lee County Sheriff's Office, Pfizer and the local fire departments were on hand to talk STEM careers with the students. *Photos by Billy Liggett*

rantnc.com

**BRIEFS**

**SPRING LANE FILM FESTIVAL TO FEATURE 20 COMPETING MOVIES**

Spring Lane Cinemas and General Manager Jared Campbell will host the Spring Lane Film Festival on April 4, an all-day event featuring independent movies you won't see anywhere else from filmmakers in North Carolina, the United States and beyond.

The festival takes place entirely inside just one of the facility's theaters, so seats are limited — the festival sold out its first year in 2022, as well as in 2024 and 2025. "We've had films play here that have been bought by studios, some of them now appear on (streaming service) Tubi, so our little theater has definitely

had some premieres," Campbell said. "We've had submissions from all over the place, Canada, even Russia."

The festival will include 20 competing films — presented in two blocks of shorts and one block of features — and begins at 11 a.m. Tickets are \$10 (those under 17 must be accompanied by an adult). In addition to the competing films— with names like "The Alien," "Vapor Trails," "Tales From the Shiny Diner," "The Devil's Lettuce," and more— the festival will culminate with the premiere of "Lady Parts," Campbell's latest film.

For more information about the Spring Lane Film Festival or the purchase tickets, visit [springlanecinema.com/movie/spring-lane-film-festival](http://springlanecinema.com/movie/spring-lane-film-festival)

**EMBEZZLEMENT CHARGES DISMISSED AGAINST FORMER CHARTER SCHOOL OFFICIAL**

Embezzlement charges against a former administrator of a local charter school brought in 2024 were dismissed by a judge Tuesday after the school in question apparently stopped cooperating with the prosecution.

Shawn Williams was the lead administrator of the MINA Charter School on Industrial Drive (later renamed Rising Leaders Academy) in Sanford until 2023, and is a former Democratic chairman of the Lee County Board of Education. He was accused in 2024 of taking more than \$100,000 in school funds, changing passwords to school accounts and taking

files that belonged to the school. He faced three felony counts of embezzlement.

But Lee County Assistant District Attorney Emily Everest signed a dismissal form indicating that RLA leaders "are no longer responsive to the requests from law enforcement, or the DA's office to return contact or meet" and that "the State will not have sufficient admissible evidence to proceed with trial."

"This outcome confirms what we maintained from the beginning — that there was no evidence to support these charges," Williams said. "I'm grateful for the court's decision and for attorneys who stood tall when others would not. Today allows my family and me to finally move forward."



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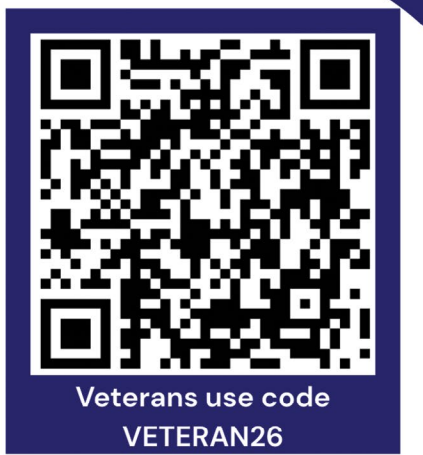


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**EVENT CALENDAR**

**APRIL 25**

**DOWNTOWN SANFORD STRAWBERRY JAMMIN'**

Sanford Farmers' Market's annual Strawberry Jammin' event will run during that morning's market and throughout the day in various downtown businesses. Shop for the biggest, juiciest berries from local vendors and check out the strawberry-inspired dishes and drinks from downtown restaurants.



**APRIL 3-4:** The Sanford Lions Club will host its fifth annual N.C. Farm Heritage Days. Antique tractors, farm equipment, logging equipment, cars and trucks will be on display. Food trucks, craft and antique vendors and a swap meet. Event runs from 8:15 a.m. to 4:15 p.m. both days.

**APRIL 3:** Hugger Muger Brewing will host a pottery exhibition featuring Imperfect Tense Pottery from noon to 8 p.m. The exhibition is free to the public.

**APRIL 3:** Huger Muger Brewing's First Friday Karaoke Championship will begin at 8 p.m. Every month, the audience will vote on a new monthly winner who will receive a coveted GOAT medal and advance to the finals. Event is free.

**APRIL 3:** Sayer McShane will perform at Smoke and Barrel in downtown Sanford at 8:30 p.m.

**APRIL 4:** The Sanford Farmers' Market returns each Saturday from 8:30 until noon from April 4 through Nov. 21. The market can be found along Carthage and Wicker Streets behind the Buggy Building.

**APRIL 10:** The Kevin Regan band will perform at Smoke and Barrel in downtown Sanford at 9 p.m.

**APRIL 10:** Sanford Family Movie Night will feature "Bad Guys 2" at

Kiwanis Family Park beginning at 5:45 p.m.

**APRIL 10:** Singer-songwriter Michael Duaghtry will perform at Wana Navu Kava Bar in downtown Sanford at 7 p.m.

**APRIL 12:** Sanford Cars & Coffee will run from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Static Line Brewing Co., 1671 Buffalo Road. All makes and models welcome.

**APRIL 12:** Kiwanis Family Park will host Second Sundays, a free outdoor concert series with Cinematheque, beginning at 5 p.m.

**APRIL 16:** Downtown Sanford's Third Thursday event will feature the She Shines Downtown Fashion Show from 5 to 6 p.m. The show celebrates the strength, confidence and authenticity of the women in our community. Tickets at eventbrite.com.

**APRIL 16-MAY 10:** Temple Theatre's mainstage production, "Bright Star," is a musical about a literary editor and a World War II soldier who discover a secret that changes

their lives. The show is set in the American South in the 1920s and 1940s. Tickets information available at templeshows.org.

**APRIL 18:** The fifth annual Blues & BBQ brews competition returns to Hugger Muger Brewing. The old-fashioned BBQ competition will feature 10 teams competing for prize money. Three blues bands will perform. Event is free, but ticket holders will have great advantages. Learn more at huggermuggerbrewing.com.

**APRIL 18:** The annual Broadway Our Way Festival returns with live music, great food and much more. Family friendly event runs begins at 10 a.m. Details to come.

**APRIL 21:** Temple Theatre presents "Armfolk from Armenia," a dynamic Armenian folk dance ensemble dedicated to preserving and sharing the rich cultural heritage of Armenia through authentic movement, music, and storytelling. Rooted in centuries-old traditions, the group performs a diverse repertoire of regional dances that celebrate community, history, faith and joyful

expression. Ticket info at templeshows.org.

**APRIL 22:** Allison Radcliffe will headline the Mann Center's Women in Country concert series beginning at 7 p.m.

**APRIL 23-26:** The Southern Side-by-Side Championship and Exhibition at Deep River Sporting Clays draws the best shooters from around the world. Shooters, gun makers, outdoor enthusiasts, artisans and historians will be on hand to celebrate the rich tradition of wing shooting over a thrilling weekend of friendly competitions, exhibitions and fellowship. Learn more at southernsidebyside.com.

**APRIL 24-26:** So Much Fest — featuring a stacked lineup of DJs spinning all night — runs for three days and two nights at Old Gilliam Park in Sanford. The festival is "rooted in community, resistance and collective liberation. Alongside live music and speakers, this is a space for expression, connection and standing for peace and justice." Learn more at somuchfest.com.

**MAY 15-16:** Carolina Indie Fest returns with an all original, multi-day music festival hosted in downtown Sanford around Hugger Muger Brewing. Thousands of music fans flock to this unique festival yearly. This festival features food trucks, crafty local vendors and a seemingly endless supply of beer from Hugger Muger

driven log splitter. There will also be a liquor still in operation and weaving demonstrations. In addition, you can take a tour of the park behind a 1950's tractor, watch a blacksmith at work and eat some ice cream.

**JUNE 12-13:** Temple Theatre's mainstage conservatory event, Fiddler on the Roof Jr., kicks off the summer conservatory season. Ticket info at templeshows.org.

**MAY 16-17:** The Old Gilliam Mill Crank Up runs from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Guests can see an old sawmill in operation, a "hit & miss" motor

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  - Mogul rider
  - Right-hand page
  - \*Lady Gaga: "You and me could write a bad \_\_\_\_"
  - \*Missy Elliott: "Get Ur \_\_\_\_"
  - Exclamation of disgust
  - At the apex
  - PÉrignon of champagne fame
  - Two-masted vessel
  - Cast out
  - Larger-than-life
  - Electrical resistance units
  - Star bursts
  - Silicate mineral
  - Alexander, for short
  - \_\_\_\_ of the valley
  - Sushi option
  - Alpine lift
  - Impose a tax
  - Forward and email, e.g.
  - Made in Vegas
  - Siren's domain
  - Cajole
  - \*Drake: "I need a \_\_\_\_ dance"
  - \*Adele: "We could've had it all \_\_\_\_ in the deep"

- \*Olivia Rodrigo: "I got my \_\_\_\_"
- Earliest stage of sickness
- Ribonucleic acid, acr.
- Tipi, alt. sp.
- Drugstore shampoo brand
- Many, many moons
- Witchy woman
- \_\_\_\_ Spumante
- Ovine mom
- Chinese green tea

- Prescott of Dallas Cowboys
- Swiftie's idol
- Geometric calculation
- \_\_\_\_ the Can
- \*Ariana Grande: "Cause I'm so \_\_\_\_ you"
- Glowing gas
- Trephination tool
- \*Maroon 5: "The \_\_\_\_ that controlled my mind"
- Actor Lowe
- Sheriff of Nottingham's collection container
- Raise doubts
- Suppose
- #40 Across, pl.
- \*Pink: "So \_\_\_\_? I'm still a rock star"
- Long-lasting Steelers coach
- Brown and such
- Topical remedy
- \*OutKast: "\_\_\_\_"
- \*The Killers: "Comin' out of my \_\_\_\_"
- Food fish
- Eagerness
- Stir up violence
- Knotts or McLean
- Mole
- Come to terms
- Each and all
- Parks of Civil Rights fame
- Blame
- Law school prerequisite, acr.
- Denim innovator
- Copenhagen native
- "Iliad," e.g.
- Nevada city
- "As \_\_\_\_ on TV"
- \*Gotye: "\_\_\_\_ you're just some-body that I used to know"

**CROSSWORD**

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8		9	10	11	12	
13						14				15				
16						17				18				
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72						73				74				

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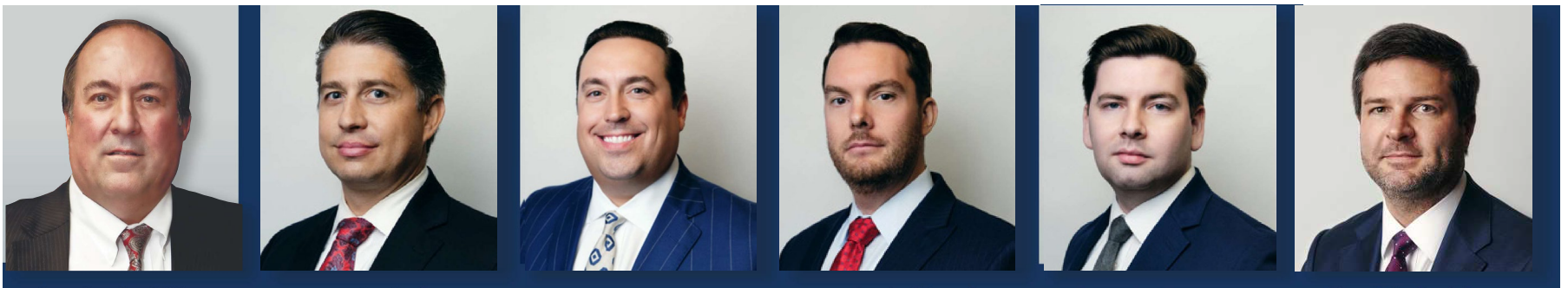
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