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JULY 2026

The Rant

SANFORD, NORTH CAROLINA

Monthly

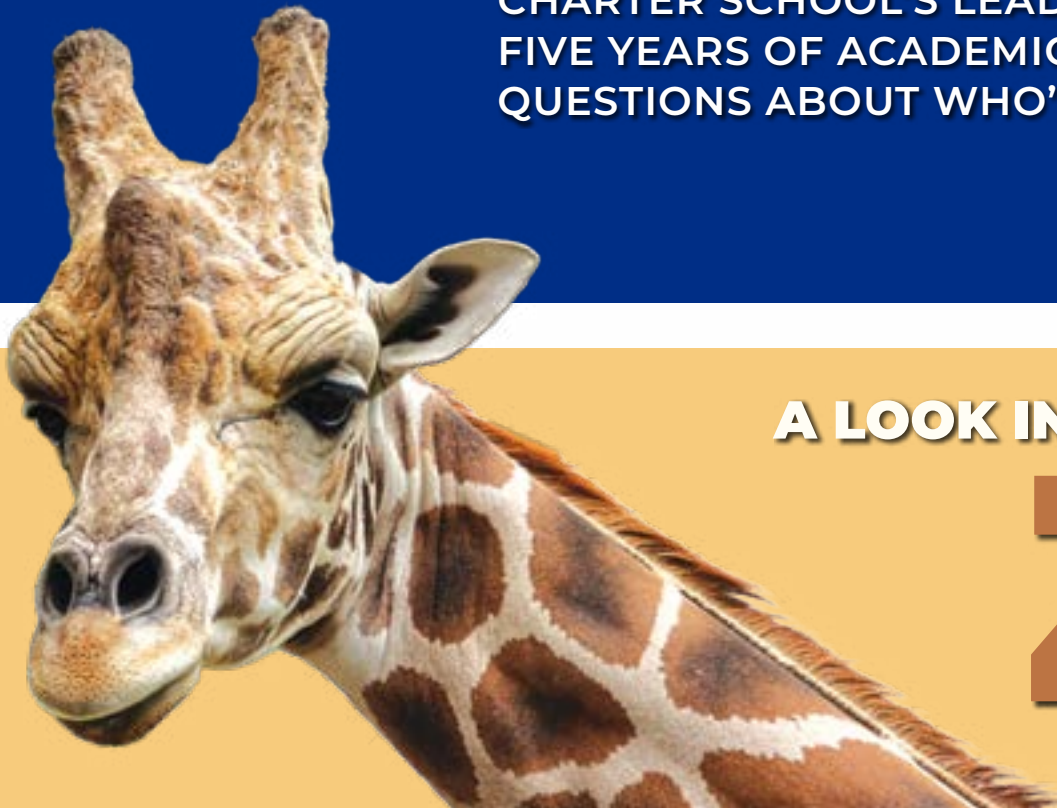
CENTRAL CAROLINA ACADEMY



FROM SUCCESS TO SHAKEUP

CHARTER SCHOOL'S LEADERSHIP CHANGE — AFTER FIVE YEARS OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS — RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT WHO'S REALLY IN CHARGE

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A LOOK INSIDE BROADWAY'S NEW

ZOO

PAGE 20



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The Rant Monthly

July 2026 | Sanford, North Carolina
A product of LPH Media, LLC
Vol. 8 | Issue 7 | No. 88

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The Rant Monthly is published monthly.

The Rant Monthly is wholly owned and operated by LPH Media LLC, a North Carolina corporation. Submissions of all kinds are welcome. This publication is free. Removal of this newspaper from any distribution point for purposes other than reading it constitutes theft.

Printed by the Wilson Times Co. in Wilson, North Carolina.

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CITY OF SANFORD NORTH CAROLINA

COLD OPEN

No 'lazy days' this summer; Sanford remains active

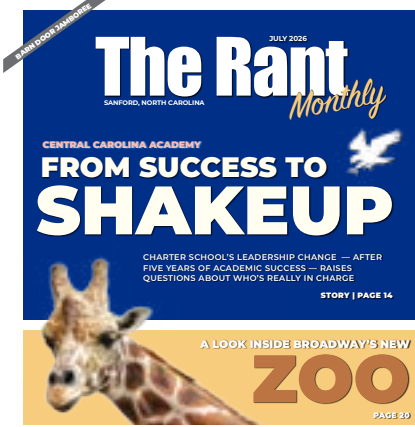
Central Carolina Academy, the Sanford charter school launched in 2022, has already developed a reputation as a strong academic option (among the many public and private options in our growing county). So when the school's board of directors decided to let go of its principal and two assistant principals, despite proven success during its first five years of existence, the move raised a lot of questions.

This "shakeup" — as we call it on the cover of this month's *The Rant Monthly* — has been met with anger by parents at the school who say the board is out of touch with the school and its community.

Gordon Anderson details the adversity facing the young school in this edition. Across the county, Jonathan Owens shares a more positive school story, recapping the championship run of the Southern Lee High School baseball team.

And on the far east side of Lee County, I share my first trip to Broadway Zoological Park, an impressive 90-acre zoo that stresses conservation and education and already rivals (in my opinion) the Greensboro Science Center (without the aquarium). I also feature a local food truck that (again, just my opinion) may offer the best hamburger in Sanford. And I do love a hamburger.

I'll end this with a quick word about the biggest event happening this month — the 250th anniversary of America's independence. This publication has been critical of leadership at the local, state and



national level for much of our (checks notes) 88 editions, but that doesn't mean we don't love this country.

I've taken in a lot of documentaries, books and articles about the American Revolution in the past year, and if I've learned anything, it's that this country was founded by people who challenged authority. And it's OK — despite the thoughts of those currently in charge — to realize that this American experiment has been deeply flawed, from our extermination of Native Americans, to slavery, to fighting against the Civil Rights Movement and to our current treatment of immigrants.

As long as the majority of this country still yearn to learn from our mistakes and do better, we'll be OK. And perhaps we'll last another 250 years.

— Billy Liggett

FOUR Ways to celebrate Independence Day

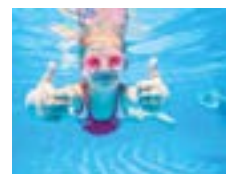
It's a big one this month — here's four ways to honor America's 250th birthday



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- Lee County Athletic Park

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Registration Opens: July 6

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Social Squad; \$25

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- July 13 - 17 : Tropical Twists

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Registrations Open: July 6

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SOUTHERN LEE BASEBALL

HISTORIC RUN

UNEXPECTED HEROES EMERGED IN THE CAVALIERS' FIRST STATE TITLE RUN LAST MONTH. THE FINAL SERIES CAPPED A DREAM SEASON FOR A TEAM FEW PICKED TO GO THIS FAR.



Head coach Tommy Harrington on Southern Lee's title: "For us to walk away with a state championship is a testament to how much work [the players] put in and how unselfish this team was." Photo by John Alan Payne

By Jonathan Owens
jonathan@rantnc.com

Before this spring, Southern Lee High School's baseball team had never won a state championship. Now they have a banner to hang and rings on the way. A total team effort helped the Cavaliers win the best-of-3 NCHSAA 6A State Baseball Championship series against South Caldwell on May 30 in Burlington, securing the school's first state championship in *any* sanctioned team sport.

Southern Lee finished the season 31-5.

"I'm just super proud of what these boys accomplished this year," said head coach Tommy Harrington. "For us to walk away with a state championship is a testament to how much work they put in and how unselfish this team was."

The decisive Game 3 was not close once Southern Lee settled in. The Cavaliers fell behind 2-0 in the top of the first — both runs unearned on a pair of errors — answered with three of their own in the bottom half, and didn't look back. They added a run in the second, four in the third, and two each in the fourth and fifth to end it by mercy rule with a 12-2 win. Junior lefty Rylan Stephens went all five innings, striking out nine and allowing just two hits.

It was the defining performance of Stephens' career so far — and it came under

about as much pressure as a high school pitcher can face.

Senior Christian Cox, one of the Cavaliers' primary starters all season, was unavailable for Game 3. That left Harrington looking for someone to start the most important game in school history. He turned to Stephens, who had thrown under 15 innings all year.

"Rylan, I feel like let's go with a lefty," Harrington told him before the game. "And Rylan said, 'I'm ready, coach.' He goes out there and has a game of his life."

Stephens said the work he had put in over the previous year — throwing bullpens every day, doing bands, getting stronger in the gym — had prepared him for exactly this kind of moment.

"I felt like I had all my stuff," he said. "The fastball was working, the slider was working. Everything was working."

His teammates kept their message simple.

"They were just continuously telling me, I got it," Stephens said. "Don't even worry about it. We'll be behind you the whole time. Just go up there and throw strikes, and we'll be good."

Harrington's former coach, Lee County High School legend and NCHSAA Hall of Famer Charlie Spivey, visited the team in the dugout before they left for the final series. He told them to look around at each other and remember that someone they weren't expecting would step up and play a huge role.

"It was so true," Harrington said.

Stephens was one. Series MVP Drew Patton was another.

Patton had spent much of the season as a utility player. He became a starter in the playoffs and batted ninth in the order. In the championship series, he



The Cavaliers celebrate their state title at the mound following their 12-2 win over South Caldwell in Game 3 of the best-of-three series. Photo by John Alan Payne



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(Above) Ben Harrington got the win in Game 1 of the championship series, going all seven innings and striking out 8. (Below) The team poses in front of the scoreboard after securing the title. Photos by John Alan Payne



delivered when it counted, batting .600 with 4 RBI and 3 runs scored.

“Our nine-hole hitter is MVP,” Harrington said. “That’s almost in a nutshell how this team was. It was somebody different each night stepping up throughout the playoff run.”

Patton said the MVP award never crossed his mind.

“When they said my name, I was a little surprised,” he said. “I was just more worried about focusing on the team and helping us win.”

Junior Ben Harrington pitched a gem in Game 1 to set a tone for the Cavs. He went all seven innings and struck out 8 as his team won 7-2 on Friday night.

The next day, Southern Lee lost Game 2 on a walkoff single, a strike away from closing out the series. They held a three-run lead late and watched it slip away in the final inning.

The 7A championship game also went to a Game 3, which was played between the 6A games. That gave Southern time to sit on the bus, get out of the heat, eat, and reset before taking the field again.

“I think that really helped us,” Coach Harrington said. “We were able to just flush it. This is what we’re dealt with — let’s go play another game.”

While Stephens kept the Spartans at bay, Southern’s bats came alive in a game that wasn’t close after the first inning. Junior Max Andrew Sercy put the finishing touch on the title. With two outs in the fifth inning and Southern Lee ahead by nine, Sercy studied the South Caldwell catcher from third base and liked what he saw.

“He was lazy,” Sercy said. “You could tell they were beat from the nine-run deficit. I just took advantage of him lobbing it and took off.”

He stole home to end it with a 12-2 win by mercy rule.

Patton said the Cavaliers were a team people underestimated all season, and they knew it.

“Many people probably didn’t think we’d make it very far in the playoffs,” he said. “We showed, because we were such a young team, that we just worked hard and deserved to be there.”

Harrington said one of the things that stood out most about this group all season was that a different player stepped up nearly every game.

“You didn’t have to always count on a certain couple of kids to carry you,” he said. “It was always somebody different stepping up, whether it was this game or the next game. You got nine in the lineup, and it was always somebody different each night.”

For the school and community, Harrington said the support through the playoff run was something he won’t forget. He recalled their last home game of the year, a 13-3 win over Southern Alamance on May 22 that sealed their bid in the state championship, which he called the biggest crowd in school history.

“I can’t thank the community enough for how they supported us,” he said. “It was standing-room only. We brought in extra stands, and they were full.”

The Cavaliers will receive championship rings, and a banner will hang in the gym and at the field. Harrington said he hopes this group of players will reunite 25 years from now.

“This is a bond they will have the rest of their lives,” he said. “We’ve always had a rich history of baseball in this county. Now Southern Lee has put our stamp on it, too.”

“We’ve always had a rich history of baseball in this county. Now Southern Lee has put our stamp on it, too.”

— Southern Lee Head Coach Tommy Harrington —

OPINION

EDITORIAL

When public records inexplicably go private

It seems public records are getting harder to come by these days. *The Rant* made three requests for public information in June that weren't granted. You'll read about all of them in this edition.

Two of the requests were for the same document — an “engagement letter” from the North Carolina Office of the State Auditor to Lee County Government. Lee County declined to release the letter — which presumably informed them about the nature and scope of a review of ... well, we don't know — by citing OSA's designation of the letter as a confidential “work paper.”

The auditor's office didn't respond to our initial request at all.

After that, we informed both agencies we were moving ahead with a story about their decision, and we got a little more. A spokesman for the auditor called to confirm his office did send the county an engagement letter, but still declined to release it. The county told us our request remained open, meaning it could be granted in the future, but that for the time being it would remain confidential.

So we were able to tell you that something in Lee County is being looked at by the state auditor, but we can't tell you what or why.

Also in June, we asked Central Carolina Academy for a copy of the charter school's contract with something called “Central Services,” which appears to serve as the school's central office. We requested the document because students and parents were upset about the decision to part ways with the school's administrative team in May — upset and confused.

Confused because it's not clear whether the school's board — defined in state law as the school's ultimate authority — or this group of administrators whose relationship to the board is difficult to evaluate was responsible for a decision which made many wonder about the school's future. Our request for the contract, which we hoped would outline the legal structure of Central Services and clearly define both its role and the board's in decision making, was acknowledged, but we hadn't received it as of publication of this edition.

So we were able to tell you that there's a dispute over the decision to part ways with administrators and it upset a lot of students, parents and even teachers, but we weren't able to tell you if those decisions were made properly.

We understand those in the news business sometimes take a different view of what constitutes a public record than those who hold them. But we can't understand how a letter from one agency to another informing it of some kind of review, or a contract that governs how public dollars are spent on public education are things that could be considered anything other than public.

Withholding this information makes it harder for us to do our jobs. We're not sure anyone cares about that but us.

More importantly, it makes it harder for the public to evaluate what their representatives are doing in their name. That's the whole point of public records laws.

COLUMN

Important correspondence from the Envoy of the One True Colon

By Gordon Anderson

The return address field on the packet I found in *The Rant*'s mailbox on June 19 was labeled “Envoy of the One True Colon,” out of Colon, Michigan.

“Verified noncompliant,” screamed official red lettering also stamped on the front of the large manila envelope, alongside a seal of something called “the Only One Colon Movement.”

What the hell was this, and why was someone sending it to *The Rant*?



I'm gonna cut to the chase here in just a second, but I want to make clear right now that I'm not making any of this up. Crazy things have happened, and some of them have even ended up in the LPH Media mailbox. But it's unusual enough for me to even write a column at all, much less one about something like this, so I wanted to get that out of the way.

It seems a guy in Colon, Michigan named B.J. Mallen (the aforementioned envoy) doesn't take too kindly to Lee County having a community bearing the same name. We don't have to feel singled out though — he also appears to have sent a version of the packet to Colon, Nebraska.

Mallen's Colon, of which he appears to be rightfully proud, ought to be the country's only Colon, his Doctrine claims. Colon, Nebraska, under Mallen's declaration would be renamed Semi-Colon, and Colon, North Carolina is to take the name Pilcrow (a relatively obscure typographical marker denoting a paragraph — the one aspect of Mallen's effort this publication thinks could have been done better).

All of Mallen's concerns about our country's various Colons, it should be clear, employ double (or triple?) entendres acknowledging not just the common place names but also punctuation, and, well, poop jokes. Do I agree that Lee County should rename its Colon? I don't know. Probably not. Is this a discussion I was born to have? Without a doubt, yes.

Looking through all of Mallen's documentation, it's hard to argue he hasn't given this thing the kind of thought that only develops during a long consti-



tutional. He points out that the Colon in Michigan (population 1,199, founded 1852) isn't just the United States' largest Colon, but also its oldest. Our Colon isn't incorporated so there's no sure way to get a true headcount, and it wasn't named Colon until 1892. Colon, Nebraska, it turns out, was founded and named by a guy who hailed from the Colon in Michigan — absolutely flushing any solitary claim to the title away like so much Charmin.

“Multiple Colons within one nation quickly becomes a mess,” Mallen wrote me.

I emailed Mallen to acknowledge his overture and told him I can't speak for the people of Colon, North Carolina since I don't live there. I informed him that I suspected the people of Lee County “will want to defend their Colon.” Mallen replied that he understood and didn't “take it personally.”

“The Doctrine isn't about blame, it's about regularity,” he told me.

In any case, I don't really know what's next. I guess this column puts the people of Colon on notice that a guy in Michigan wants them to change the name of their community, but whether they will or won't isn't something I can see. My crystal ball on this matter is clogged.

For more information about Mallen's movement, visit www.onlyonecolon.com.

Gordon Anderson checked the website listed at the end of this column and promises it's not something that will get you in trouble at work.

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COVER STORY

SHAKEUP AT CCA

CENTRAL CAROLINA ACADEMY HAS ENJOYED ENROLLMENT AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS IN ITS FIRST FIVE YEARS, WHICH IS WHY PARENTS ARE FIGHTING DECISIONS THAT LED TO PARTING WAYS WITH SCHOOL'S POPULAR PRINCIPAL AND ADMINISTRATORS

BY GORDON ANDERSON

Central Carolina Academy has been a success by most key academic measures. The charter school on Douglas Drive in Sanford, home to about 600 sixth through 12th graders, received a B from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction on its 2024-25 state School Report Card ranking. That put it ahead of nearly every traditional public school in the county, save for Tramway Elementary, and well ahead of the county's other two charter schools.

Additionally, CCA in the same year exceeded academic growth expectations for the second consecutive year, and approaching 68 percent of its graduates were considered "career and college ready" — higher than Lee County's average of 42.7 percent and North Carolina's average of 53.8 percent. There's been no public indication that any of that has changed significantly in the months since those rankings were released.

So it was a surprise to many observers and virtually all involved in May, following the end of CCA's fourth school year, when its entire administrative team — Principal Greg Batten and assistant principals Mary Tatum and Frank Thompson, all of whom have been a part of the school's leadership since its founding — found itself out of a job.



Parents show their support for former Central Carolina Academy principal Greg Batten and assistant principals Mary Tatum and Frank Thompson at a recent meeting of the school's board. Photo by Gordon Anderson

Student families received an email in mid May informing them that Batten had taken an unexpected retirement; Thompson's resignation followed shortly. Tatum was told around the same time that her contract would not be renewed. To date, all of the moves have been largely unexplained. Batten has since been replaced with an interim principal.

Batten, Tatum and Thompson are well-known in local educational circles. Batten served for years as principal at Lee County High School and elsewhere around the state.

Tatum taught and coached at Lee County High School beginning in 2005 and retired from Lee County Schools in the spring of 2022, and Thompson worked at multiple schools in the Lee County Schools district beginning in the 1990s, including as a principal at J.R. Ingram Elementary and assistant principal at LCHS until his retirement in 2017. After that he came back as a temporary contract administrator when needed until CCA opened.

"These people are why I succeed so well in school. I learned how to have a better drive and apply myself more."

— From the petition to keep Batten, Tatum and Thompson on at CCA —

Many parents have said Batten, Tatum and Thompson's reputations were a key factor in choosing the school. A petition calling for their reinstatement that was circulated by a rising senior described the three as "our beloved administration team" and drew nearly 1,400 signatures as of this writing.

COMMUNITY REACTS, BOARD STAYS SILENT

Later that month, on May 22, students, parents and teachers looking to protest the decision filled an empty classroom for a meeting of the school's

board of directors. The board took no public action, instead going into closed session, but Board Chair Don Sloan remained afterward for more than an hour answering questions.

"I promise I'm looking out for my children's best interest, just like yours," he said at one point. "I can promise this isn't some vast conspiracy."

The decision stood, though opposition to it has continued.

"These people are why I succeed so well in school," one signatory to the petition wrote. "I learned how to have a better drive and apply myself more."

A 'REPLICATION' CHARTER SCHOOL

CCA was founded in 2021 as a replication of Chatham Charter, a charter school in Siler City, and opened its doors a year later. In North Carolina, charter schools are public schools that operate outside the traditional public school system, governed by nonprofit boards and funded directly by the state in exchange for meeting accountability and performance standards outlined in their charters. Unlike traditional public school boards, charter boards are typically self-selecting, with members appointing their own successors rather than being elected by voters. It's a structure that can make questions about oversight and authority more difficult to resolve when disputes arise.

At the time of its opening to students in 2022, CCA became Lee County's third operational charter school, joining Rising Leaders Academy (formerly MINA Charter School) and Ascend Leadership Academy.

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Parents showed up in big numbers at a recent meeting of Central Carolina Academy board of directors to protest decisions that led to parting ways with three administrators. Photo by Gordon Anderson

@therant905

North Carolina's charter school system was created in 1996 with a limit of 100 schools statewide, a cap that was intended to allow the state to evaluate the new model before expanding it further. That cap had been reached by 2001 and remained in place for a decade, when lawmakers removed the statewide limit on the number of charter schools.

That removal helped set the stage for rapid charter growth in the state, including replication models like Central Carolina Academy. As of 2026, North Carolina has more than 200 charter schools.

Supporters of the change said it would expand educational options for families and reduce barriers to opening new schools, while critics warned it could accelerate the growth of a system with uneven oversight and accountability, topics that are at the heart of the current dispute.

Graig Meyer, the executive director of the North Carolina Justice Center, a Raleigh-based nonprofit whose work

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includes tracking public education policy in the state, said opposition to charter school expansion in the 2010s included concerns about accountability and oversight, but was also rooted in the belief that doing so would further inject the private profit motive into public schools.

"The historical opposition to changes to the charter school laws in North Carolina was because a lot of the changes made it easier for the private sector to make a profit off of public education," Meyer said. "We don't believe the way we've created educational choice opportunities in North Carolina has been the best way to create a unified system of public education that's equitable."

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

CCA's connection to Chatham Charter takes the story further backward in time. Founded in 1993 as a private school called Chatham Academy, it became Chatham Charter the same year the state's charter system became oper-

ational, making it one of North Carolina's first charter schools. When Chatham Charter initiated its replication effort in Lee County in 2021, many of the folks involved in the project in Siler City were at the heart of the effort — folks whose roles on both schools' websites are listed as being a part of the "Central Services Team."

It's a phrase — "Central Services" — that's frequently heard in the discussion surrounding the decision to part ways with Batten, Tatum and Thompson. Described somewhat vaguely in public-facing informational materials for both schools, it has the appearance of a Charter Management Organization — groups that run charter schools on behalf of their boards. Charter school boards function similarly to a traditional board of education, and you could think of a CMO as analogous to a district's Central Office, carrying out administrative functions and making sure the day to day obligations are met while the board steers the larger ship. With charter schools, a CMO isn't always

employed, but they aren't uncommon either (Rising Leaders Academy another of Sanford's charter schools, doesn't use a CMO; it's unclear whether Ascend Leadership Academy does).

Although the Central Services Team isn't a separate legal entity and therefore not exactly a CMO, CCA attorney Donna Rascoe said its members are employees of Chatham Charter who provide services to Central Carolina Academy under the replication model approved by the state. She said a memorandum of understanding between the two schools governs those services and that the schools' governance policies designate the CST as the "Chief Executive Officer for both governing boards."

In a written response to *The Rant*, Sloan said the Central Services Team "functions similarly to a central office or superintendent in a county system" and is responsible for supervising the school's administration. He said board members are expected to follow established procedures when raising concerns and that bypassing those channels "can

undermine the CST."

Attendees at the May 22 meeting openly asked whether the board was acting at the direction of Central Services, or the other way around. Mitch Stensland, who was named acting principal at CCA after Batten's departure, was acknowledged by the board to be a part of the Central Services Team, and at the same meeting Tatum said CCA's board "is being micromanaged by the Central Services committee."

State law is plain that regardless of CCA's status as a replication of Chatham Charter, its board has the final say in — and responsibility for — how it operates. Rascoe said the governance structure reflects that arrangement: the board retains ultimate authority, while the Central Services Team acts as the schools' chief executive office, supervising principals and implementing board policy. The question raised repeatedly by parents, Tatum and others is whether that chain of authority has functioned that way in practice.

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Other developments also raise questions about whether CCA's board is functionally the school's ultimate authority. In a March 20 email to Tatum that was provided to *The Rant*, Sloan used language suggesting Central Services — not the board — was being treated as the primary authority.

He said he'd tried to facilitate communication between Tatum and Central Services and "was told in no uncertain terms that facilitation was not needed and that my efforts to help were undermining their authority." In his written statement for this story, Sloan confirmed that characterization, saying he "overstepped" his role and acknowledging that even well-intentioned efforts by board members can interfere with the CST's authority if they fall outside established procedures.

In the same March email to Tatum, Sloan said he planned to leave the chairmanship and later the board itself because his term "should have ended a year ago." He clarified in his statement to *The Rant*, though, that he had been mistaken and said he has approximately one year remaining and now intends to complete his term.

The Rant made a request for public information covering any contracts between Central Services and both CCA and Chatham Charter on June 18, a request that was acknowledged the next day. Rascoe said on June 30 that there was a memorandum of understanding that governed the relationship between the two schools and offered to provide it. It had not been provided by this publication's deadline.

When first contacted to comment on this story, Tatum provided only a written statement in which she says the decision not to renew her contract came after she "raised a number of documented governance and compliance concerns internally regarding board operations, transparency, and the relationship between the Board of Directors and the Central Services Team." Thompson declined to comment on the record; Batten couldn't be reached.

But Tatum said more at a meeting of the school's board on June 25, which was ostensibly to hear from members of the public interested in filling multiple vacancies on the board as well as

a round of public comments. At least 150 people showed up to that meeting, most of them still looking for answers about the staffing changes — answers they wouldn't get. After hearing presentations from several would-be members, the board went into another closed session that lasted for more than an hour and a half while the audience remained in the meeting space and held what looked like a rally in support of the three administrators.

Anna Lucas, a Sanford-based attorney and parent of children at the school, was one of the earliest public commenters that night. She said that back in November of 2025, the board made changes to the school's governance structure that ceded authority from the board to Central Services — changes that were made in closed session, which she said would make them illegal. "Apparently there was a contract signed, but we've never seen it," Lucas said, asking members of the crowd who had requested to see that contract to raise their hands. "We don't know what it is or what it says, and we don't know who signed it."

Lucas added that the board had "bumbled about legally" in the last several months and she wondered if the contract she and other parents had been seeking "even exists."

Another parent, Brandy Grindle, said at the June 25 meeting that her research into the board's bylaws and operating structure turned up repeated instances of it not following its own rules, including multiple members having expired terms or who were never formally reappointed. Her comments came prior to Sloan's later clarification to *The Rant* that his own term had not expired, and addressed broader concerns about how board terms have been managed.

"Serious issues remain unresolved," she said. "Board elections that were never held. Board terms that expired without action. Meeting records that are incomplete or corrected months later. And repeated failures to follow the bylaws that define this board's authority. CCA deserves a board that leads, and a Central Services that supports, not directs."

Sloan took the opposite view in his written statement to *The Rant*.

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"Personally, I'm more concerned with a board that did not support the CST when they bring forward problems that need addressing. They have been in place longer than any current board members and are highly motivated to see the school succeed," he said. "Furthermore, the success we are striving for is not measured solely by test scores; we want all teachers and students to feel safe and supported. I and the rest of the Board remain deeply committed to preserving the qualities that make Central Carolina Academy such a special place while also ensuring the school continues to grow, improve, and meet the needs of our students."

ACCOUNTABILITY AND A FAMILIAR PATTERN

When Tatum addressed the crowd on June 25, she made clear she'd been raising these and other issues with the board prior to being informed her contract wouldn't be renewed. She said she was suspended with pay after looking at school documents to which she had legal access as an administrator, and that her actions were referred to the district attorney for investigation. Tatum



Central Carolina Academy opened its doors in 2022. The charter school exceeded growth according to state performance evaluations this past year and had 68 percent of its graduates deemed "career and college ready" — outperforming the county's two largest high schools.

said she'd been cleared by the district attorney, something *The Rant* has been unable to verify, but had received no word on the matter's conclusion from the board.

Centrally, Tatum said she'd been raising questions aimed at uncovering the chain of authority — whether the

CCA board or Central Services calls the shots — since the beginning of the year. She said she submitted a compliance report detailing her findings to Sloan in March, findings she thought were particularly important because the school's charter renewal is on the horizon. She said she believes those questions led Central Services to decide against re-

newing her contract.

"I'll be honest," she told the crowd that night. "In January, I'd been looking for a new contract and it wasn't coming. I was ready to leave. But I prayed about it and decided to stay and try to make sure we do things the right way."

Meyer, who isn't familiar with the situation at CCA, said it doesn't appear to be an uncommon one.

"Sometimes you'll have charter schools that are started by one or two charismatic education leaders," he said. "And when that school becomes a success, you have a long waiting list of kids, there's pressure to start another site. And suddenly you have a pattern where you've got a group that's acting like a CMO, or even starting a CMO just to serve one or two schools."

Central Carolina Academy is a public school funded by taxpayers, and ostensibly governed by an unelected board. The lack of clarity about who holds authority — and under what structure — leaves a basic issue unresolved: who, if anyone, is accountable when decisions like these are made?

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MEET & GREETs
 One of the most fun and popular attractions at Broadway Zoological Park is the opportunity to feed one of its three giraffes by hand. Zoo staff are also happy to share facts about these beautiful animals to feed these gentle giants and share what you can do to help conserve them. *Photo by Billy Liggett*

BROADWAY

SMALL ZOO, BIG GOALS

BROADWAY ZOOLOGICAL PARK IS A 90-ACRE HIDDEN GEM ALONG THE CAPE FEAR RIVER, BUILT WITH CONSERVATION, ACCESSIBILITY AND FAMILY FUN IN MIND

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BILLY LIGGETT

Broadway Zoological Park isn't necessarily "new." The 90-acre zoo nestled among the tall oaks and loblolly pines just east of Broadway and south of the Cape Fear River officially opened in April 2025 and has been in the works for over roughly six years. The park has more than 13,000 followers on Facebook and a growing legion of fans who have publicly praised its size, breadth of animals on display, cleanliness, affordability and accessibility.

Yet, according to Park Manager Haley Jernigan, Broadway Zoological Park has done little to "get its name out" in its 15 months of existence.

They're ready to change that.

Built with conservation, accessibility and family fun in mind, the zoo is a "labor of love, through and through," says Jernigan, who oversees 171 different species and nearly 700 individual animals on the site, from the large giraffes that greet visitors near the entrance to the hundreds of small parakeets you can feed or pet by hand in the aviary.

The zoological park — in its look and feel — is reminiscent of the popular Greensboro Science Center a little over an hour northwest. It's a comparison Jernigan welcomes.

"We're thrilled with that compar-

ison," she says. "We are constantly trying to push and grow here. Constantly revamping our animal enclosures. Pretty much every time you come here, we're hopeful that you see renovation happening. It's literally 365, 24-7 for us. It's always, 'How can we make the lives of these animals better?' and 'How can we make this park more interactive?' It's our life."

Broadway Zoological Park Manager Haley Jernigan and two lesser tamaranduas, small anteaters native to South Africa.





Nestled in the woods along Patterson Road near the Cape Fear River on the Harnett County side of Broadway, the Broadway Zoological Park reminds one of Greensboro Science Center (sans the aquarium). The park opened in April 2025 and is enjoying big crowds so far this year.

Photos by Billy Liggett



@therant905

As it is, Broadway Zoological Park is impressive. Families can take a tractor ride through the 50-acre safari and get up close to buffalo, zebras, ostriches and more. A walk-through reptile building features massive snakes, lizards, crocodiles and more. Marmosets, tamarins and bushbabies populate the small primate area, and goats can be heard climbing overhead towers near the entrance and the aforementioned safari area.

As one young girl and her grandparents craned their necks near the Eurasian lynx display to catch one napping, Jernigan used her special access to approach the enclosure and called for the giant kitty — roughly three times the size of your typical house cat — by name. When the lynx approached, Jernigan scratched its ear, much to its delight.

“I really could not imagine doing anything else,” says Jernigan, a native of the tiny town of Bear Grass, North Carolina, population 89, just outside of Greenville. Her mother was an animal rescuer, so Jernigan remembers growing up in a home with owls and other wild animals taken in for rehabilitation. “My one constant has always been animals. I always had a wonderful dog or three — when I needed somebody, I had them. So, I feel like it’s literally woven into my DNA to be with [animals] and to help them as much as they’ve helped me. It doesn’t matter if it’s a snake, a tarantula or a giraffe. I got their back.”

Jernigan met Kurt Smith and his wife six years ago when the couple decided to clear the land along Patterson Road near the Harnett-Lee county line and build a park with conservation and education in mind. Also important to Smith was accessibility — the father of a daughter with special needs, Smith wants a park that anybody can enjoy. He recently announced a partnership with KultureCity to improve the park’s ability to assist and accommodate sensory processing needs — sensory bags, weight-

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ed lap pads, noise-cancelling headphones and designated quiet zones are just a few of the steps they’ve taken in recent months.

“We’ve taken our daughter to zoos before, and we didn’t know if we would be there for five minutes or five hours,” Smith says. “And I’ve seen her bond with animals, a lot of times better than she does with people. The animals seem to understand her more. So it was important to us to have a place where anybody with a disability can come out, feel welcome and just be involved. We want to have a place that is safe for the animals and a safe place for everybody.”

Jernigan also has a little sister with several health issues, and in addition to saving animals, her mother taught exceptional children for several years. The marriage of conservation and accessibility made Broadway Zoological Park the perfect fit for her. When she first got on board with Smith in



Broadway Zoological Park co-owner Kurt Smith (front right) talks to an employee while walking through the park in June. Smith says the goal of the park is to have a safe place for the animals (many of them are rescues) and a safe place for people, especially those with special needs. Photo by Billy Liggett

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2019, the park was little more than the quarantine building (usually used for new arrivals or for animals that need to be isolated from the others).

“They had a few animals on site, but mostly, everything was under construction when I got here,” she says. “This property was little more than open fields, trees and an old farm. There were debris piles where the giraffes are today.”

Jernigan says her initial meetings with the owners put her at ease — she could sense they were also passionate about conservation, education and community. She joined knowing that nothing would be immediate — construction at the privately funded park took more than five years before the first paying guest was allowed to walk the paved roads that weave through the animal habitats. The process that led to now included several long and stressful days, she says, but in the end, the initial staff at the park were there for the same reasons.

“Here at Broadway Zoological Park, these animals are able to live out the rest of their lives both happily and healthily, and educate the public on the importance of letting the wild be wild,” reads the park’s website. Already, the zoo is one of the largest natural habitats for alligators in North Carolina.



“We’re here to improve the welfare of these animals and to make an impact on our community,” she says.

The park has done little in the form of marketing, yet the number of guests they receive is steadily growing. This past spring was surprisingly busy, Jernigan says, and summer has remained steady so far despite the heat. The slow burn, word-of-mouth approach has been intentional — not only does the park want the community to acclimate to the zoo, they want the animals to acclimate to visits by strangers holding cameras and small children.

Clean facilities, well-manicured grounds and a strong animal lineup are big reasons for the growing popularity. Affordability is another. Beginning in July, an adult ticket to the zoo is \$15, and children ages 4-15 get in at a reduced rate. Ages 3 and under are free. The zoo is open Wednesdays through Mondays (Tuesdays are the

lone off day), and hours run from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. through September and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. in the fall and winter months.

The zoo also offers several free events and free field trips for organizations that serve people with special needs (reservations required).

Jernigan says she wants guests to come away from their visit to Broadway Zoological Park to learn something new about animals and conservation, but just as importantly, she wants adults and children both to feel like “they got to see something cool.”

“If they don’t, I feel like that’s a failure on my part,” she says. “Then after that, we want them to understand why these animals are here. About 60 percent of these animals on site — specifically our primates, parrots and reptiles — are almost all exclusively rescues or re-homes. We get them from pet trade facilities or from private owners who no longer can take care of them. And we want to raise

awareness of that. We want everyone to know you can make a difference.”

Fifteen months in, Smith, Jernigan and the staff at Broadway Zoological Park are pleased with the progress, but they insist there’s always room for improvement. According to Jernigan, one big step toward that would be accreditation. She says paperwork is complete, and the zoo is hoping to push for accreditation within the next year.

“Accreditation is a higher standard, and it’s federally required for facilities like ours,” she says. “And it’s important because it shows our guests and our community that we care about the animals we receive.”

LEARN MORE | VOLUNTEER

Visit broadwayzoologicalpark.com to learn more about the zoo, its mission, special events and what to expect upon your visit. Click “support” to learn about donating “tools, toys and supplies” to the animals or to learn about volunteer opportunities.



Hayley Jernigan, a 2016 graduate of Campbell University and the park manager at Broadway Zoological Park, with a friend inside the aviary near the zoo’s entrance. *Photos by Billy Liggett*

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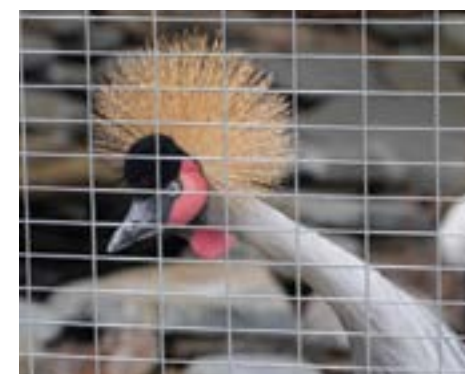
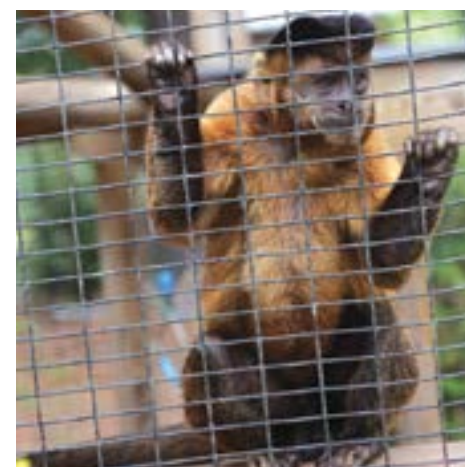




CONSERVATION & EDUCATION

While conservation and education are two of the most prevalent goals at Broadway Zoological Park, the park also provides homes to those in need and when applicable, rescue efforts. Already, the park has one of the largest natural habitats for alligators in the state. All of the gators housed onsite are rescues that would have otherwise been euthanized.

Photos by Billy Liggett



LOCAL BUSINESS

A LOVE LETTER TO THE CUBAN STREET BURGER

New **FRITA STOP** food truck offers spirit of Miami culture, Southern hospitality and one mean burger

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

Let's start with the burger. The frita. Alex Blanco's "love letter" to the *frita cubana*, Cuba's twist on the classic American hamburger.

The patty is a blend of fresh beef and ground chorizo. Cooked "smashburger" style with loads of "bold seasoning," the meat is then topped with crispy papitas — thin hand-shredded potatoes — and "pure Miami sabor." Sandwiched between two buns with some ketchup, onion and cheese, the burger has been a hit with customers since Blanco's Frita Stop food truck first opened on Valentine's Day this year.

Not that he's surprised. Despite cooking hundreds of them each weekend at various stops in Sanford and around the Triangle region, Blanco can't get enough of them either.

"That's the beauty of it, right?" he says with a smile. "Every time I open this truck, I crave my own burgers."

Alex and his wife Natalie Blanco have spent nearly every weekend since February taking Frita Stop to local festivals



Alex and Natalie Blanco opened up their Frita Stop food truck on Valentine's Day this year, and already, some are calling their take on the *frita cubana* Sanford's best burger. Photo by Billy Liggett

and public hot spots getting the word out about their limited — but strong — menu that features different styles of frita (the 50/50 includes bacon, aioli and pickles; and the Korean style option includes barbecue sauce, cilantro and kimchi), beef tallow or garlic fries and "Chichi's Famous Cream Cheese Flan." During the week, Natalie is a teacher,

and Alex runs food service at Campbell University.

Their food truck is a labor of love, and Alex Blanco is excited to share the food he grew up loving in Miami with his North Carolina friends and neighbors.

"The frita was invented in Cuba by street cart vendors called *friteros*," he says. "The

word came from the way they fried them on a flat grill. Every vendor had their own blend of the sauce itself, which added to that flavor profile. Then the shoestring potatoes kind of make the sandwich."

Fritas are much harder to find in Cuba these days, Blanco says — they were a hit in Havana in the 1930s through the 1950s, but disappeared in the 60s follow-

ing the 1959 revolution. Severe shortages of basic necessities like fuel, ground beef and potatoes have made it nearly impossible for vendors to produce them.

The burgers are huge in Miami, home to approximately 1.2 million Cuban Americans. Blanco's decision to start a food truck is his way of honoring his heritage.

"The idea started during a karaoke night at Wild Dogs Brewery [in downtown Sanford]," he says. "After a few beers, I talked to friends about it and asked my wife what she thought of the concept. The rest is history."

The idea wasn't completely without merit. Blanco's mother, who is Honduran, worked in kitchens for most of her life (she met his father when he'd go on lunch breaks at her restaurant). Blanco's first jobs as a teen was serving at restaurants. He and Natalie left Miami and 2017 for North Carolina, and in his nearly full decade in the Tar Heel State, he has noticed a lack of variety here when it comes to Latin food — "We're the first Cuban place I've seen in this city," he says.

Like any new business, launching the food truck hasn't been easy. Securing

the truck itself and getting the proper inspections and certifications was a chore, but the Blancos are beginning to reap the fruits of their labor.

"We've had people tell us it's the best burger they've tried, and we've had others say they've never tried anything like it. So I love hearing that," Blanco says. "Slowly, but surely, I think it's coming together. And we're just figuring it out as we go."

Meanwhile, the Blancos are keeping their new business loose and fun. A gold flip flop dangles from the awning at the order window — a *chancleta* famous in Cuba for its "disciplinary power" for grandmothers to keep rowdy kids in line. And a QR code on one of the napkin dispensers sends guests to YouTube rather than a menu (we won't reveal the surprise).

While the burgers are the reason to stop at Frita Stop, Blanco hopes the welcoming atmosphere leads to repeat customers. He writes on their website: Hospitality is at the heart of everything we do. We believe the people who serve others deserve to be celebrated, and we aim to give back to hospitality workers through acts of generosity, community initiatives and opportunities for our customers to join us in showing appreciation."



An old dominoes table once owned by Alex Blanco's grandfather is set up outside of his Frita Stop food truck to encourage guests to gather around, chat and enjoy each other's company.

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Data center proposed in northern Lee County



Virginia-based PointOne, in conjunction with local developer Helix Ventures, has proposed a 300,000 square foot data center facility on 56 acres off Lower Moncure Road.

By Gordon Anderson
gordon@rantnc.com

A developer has applied for a permit to build a large capacity data center in northern Lee County, according to paperwork on file with the local planning department.

Virginia-based PointOne, in conjunction with local developer Helix Ventures, has proposed a 300,000 square foot data center facility on 56 acres off Lower Moncure Road. Once the project is complete, data center operator CyrusOne will become the owner and end user of the 90 megawatt IT load facility. CyrusOne is headquartered in Dallas and operates more than 60 data centers worldwide.

The project comes with a significant tax base investment. The building itself will be valued at \$900 million, containing technology worth as much as two to three times that value. Annually, the building will generate at least \$1 million in new tax revenue locally, plus whatever revenue comes from the servers and equipment. There are no tax incentives associated with the project.

Data centers are typically warehouse-type structures that are home to computer servers powering a variety of operations like cloud storage, website hosting, streaming platforms, financial transactions, and other data-intensive digital services. The facility will use a “closed loop” cooling system that requires 250,000 gallons of water — provided by CyrusOne — which will be re-used “for the life of the project,” according to Katy Hancock, CyrusOne’s vice president of community affairs.

“This water is trucked in and the system is filled once,” Hancock said. “The water is essentially a vehicle for cooling, and there’s no discharge whatsoever. CyrusOne has been using closed loop systems for about 15 years now.”

The only other water use on the site would be for internal plumbing – things like kitchens, bathrooms and landscaping.

Next to the site on Lower Moncure Road, Central Electric Membership Corporation is constructing a substation that will serve the project. CEMC has

provided a “will serve” letter as part of the project submittal indicating the company is able to serve the project without adverse impacts to its rate payers.

“CyrusOne covers the costs of serving its projects, investing in infrastructure that strengthens the grid,” Kelsey Fehr of PointOne said, adding this reinforces CEMC’s ability to serve the project without adverse impacts to its ratepayers.

Fehr said the project is considered “phase one” of the development, which would total 430 acres. The remainder of the development hasn’t been planned, she said, and end users and use types are currently unknown other than they would be light industrial uses. “Any further expansion of the site is not guaranteed to be data center usage,” she said.

The data center would be staffed by about 30 to 40 people “working around the clock,” according to Hancock, and a significant number of construction jobs during the building phase, jobs she said the company would be “heavily focused” on providing to local workers where possible.

It’s unknown right now exactly what customer or customers the data center would serve. Hancock said CyrusOne leases space to users — in some cases that means a single company, in others it may be many.

“CyrusOne works with reputable technology companies, hyperscalers and cloud computing providers who share our commitment safety, sustainability and being a good neighbor,” Hancock explained.

If the project is permitted, PointOne is looking to begin work in the fall of this year and be operational sometime in 2028. The proposal comes after months of speculation and even uproar in Lee County about data centers. The issue spilled into public discourse in 2025, when it was reported that a company called Deep River Data was interested in accessing natural gas from an old test well in order to power an AI data operation. Concerns about fracking and other potential adverse impacts from that project — which was never officially proposed or submitted for approvals — led local leaders to adopt a rule set governing data centers in Sanford and Lee County.

STATE SENDS ‘ENGAGEMENT LETTER;’ RECORDS ARE WITHHELD

The North Carolina State Auditor’s Office sent an engagement letter to Lee County Government earlier in June, *The Rant* has learned. An engagement letter typically marks the formal start of an auditor’s work with a government entity and outlines the scope and purpose of the review. It does not contain findings.

Both Lee County Government and the auditor’s office declined to release the letter in response to a request for public records, citing “work paper” confidentiality under state law. But Randy Brechbiel, communications director for North Carolina State Auditor Dave Boliek, confirmed the office has “engaged” with Lee County. He didn’t disclose what the auditor’s office was looking into.

The Rant submitted a public records request on June 9 seeking communications between Boliek’s office and Lee County Government, including any letters or emails describing an inquiry by the auditor’s office and the reasons for and duration of any such review.

Deputy Lee County Attorney Elizabeth Boone responded on June 22, saying the county was following legal guidance from the auditor’s office which indicated that the requested records were “not releasable at this time.”

The possibility of state scrutiny has surfaced publicly in recent weeks. At a June 1 meeting of the Lee County Board of Commissioners, Lee County Republican Party Chairman Jim Womack said the State Auditor should look into Lee County following a breakdown in contract negotiations with emergency medical services provider MedEx.

— Gordon Anderson

County adopts budget, avoids tax hike

By Richard Sullins
richard@rantnc.com

The Lee County Board of Commissioners approved a new budget in June that avoids a tax increase, ending months of political tension and internal disagreement. The \$127.86 million budget for fiscal year 2026–27 passed 4-3 on a party line vote.

Republican Chair Samantha Martin and commissioners Andre Knecht, Taylor Vorbeck, and Kirk Smith voted in favor. Democrats Robert Reives Sr., Cameron Sharpe, and Mark Lovick opposed it.

The vote capped a drama that began before Christmas, when County Manager Lisa Minter and her team began putting in the hard work that would ultimately result in the final budget proposal that commissioners saw first on May 18. Minter’s original proposal called for a five cent tax increase to close a nearly \$9 million shortfall. With four commission seats on the ballot this November — and the remaining three coming up two years after that — several board members wanted to avoid a tax hike instead.

That urgency opened the door to a series of reductions that balanced the budget without raising taxes, while postponing any deeper structural reforms until next spring, when work begins on the FY 2027-28 plan.

To avoid a tax hike, commissioners removed or reduced several major items from Minter’s May 18 proposal, including \$1,023,388 from the capital reserve fund for building improvements, and \$1 million that would have reduced long term debt from past bond funded construction projects. Also removed was funding for a \$2 million increase in the EMS contract with FirstHealth, effective July 1. Those dollars are to be covered by transfers from a different source of funding that will not be available after next year, leaving another hole that will have to be filled when next year’s budget cycle comes around.

Keeping the tax rate at 65 cents per \$100 of valuation — instead of raising it to 70 — means the county will collect \$5.1 million less in property tax revenue next year. But the relief to taxpayers may

be temporary. With spending tightened across all departments, only three new positions made it into the final budget:

- Two deputies for the Lee County Sheriff’s Office — \$367,557 for salaries, benefits, and equipment
- One Real Property Appraiser — \$82,944 for salary, benefits, and equipment

To make the numbers work, Minter said the county will draw \$2.5 million from its fund balance, a savings account built from unspent state dollars at the end of each fiscal year.

The county’s growing tax base — fueled by rising property values brought through rapid residential, commercial, and industrial development — has masked struc-

tural issues for years. But the pressure is building. Revenue from new growth often lags months behind the arrival of new residents and businesses, and commissioners across the political spectrum say the current model is reaching its limits.

Chair Samantha Martin proposed one concrete step: a performance audit of all county functions, the first in more than a decade. Lee County Schools District did a similar audit in 2023 that resulted in 97 operational recommendations.

“I would propose that we do a performance audit this coming year — that we re-evaluate how we go about delivering services,” Martin said. “We have a full fiscal year before we find ourselves in this position again.”

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 for more information or to apply!



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STUDENT EARNS LOVIS HERO AWARD FOR BIRTHDAY IDEA

Tanner Reichel, a student at Central Carolina Academy and Central Carolina Community College, was one of 34 young people nationally to earn a Lovis Hero Award in June from the Lovis Foundation, an organization that works to spread joy by “supporting initiatives and non-profit partners for the under-supported and under-recognized” with a focus on the disability community.

Reichel was honored for his generosity — instead of celebrating his 17th birthday in the traditional way, he chose to organize a birthday kit collection to help ensure that individuals facing financial challenges could still experience the joy of celebrating their special day.

The kits included cake mix, frosting, soda (as a substitute for eggs), plates, napkins, birthday banners and a small card game. Reichel donated the kits to the CCCC Cougar Den, where he also had the opportunity to distribute some of the kits to students.

“Since I was able to, I wanted the chance for someone else to be able to celebrate their birthday as well,” he said, pointing out that the cake kits could also be used for other kinds of celebrations.

BRIEFS

CCCC, LEE EARLY GRAD HEADING TO PRINCETON

For 2026 Lee Early College and CCCC graduate Addison Tunnard, applying to Princeton and accepting the New Jersey university’s offer of admission felt like a bit of a step into the unknown.

“I was just taking a chance on myself, because you know, why not,” she said.

What has been reassuring for Tunnard is the welcome she has received and what she has heard about the community from students and alumni. She said she has been pleasantly surprised by how extremely friendly everyone has been to her.

Those feelings also reflect how Tunnard, a Sanford native, has felt about Lee Early College and CCCC.

When Tunnard first made plans to attend Lee Early College, she knew it would be a good match for her desire to challenge herself academically. Still, she figured the focus would be “plain academics.” She didn’t realize how much she would also enjoy herself and the close-knit community she would find.

“I’ve really grown fond of all the people I’ve met, the connections I’ve made,” she said.

Fun times included the campus-wide capture-the-flag games on the Lee Main



Addison Tunnard says her experience at Lee Early College prepared her well for her jump to the Ivy League this fall. Photo courtesy of CCCC

Campus she helped to organize with the Lee Early College National Honor Society, as well as CCCC student events like this autumn’s Cougar Homecoming fall festival.

She also pointed to positive relationships with high school teachers and college instructors, such as Spanish Instructor Clyde Shafer, who she praised as both very supportive and very passionate about the Spanish language.

As a tour guide for eighth graders considering the Lee Early College, Tunnard would emphasize the basics: that it’s an opportunity for them to earn both their

high school diploma and associate degree in four years.

At the same time, she said, she emphasized to them how much Lee Early College students are connected to the CCCC campus community.

“There’s just a bunch of places for us as early college students to feel acclimated with college culture,” she said.



Editor’s Note: A story in last month’s publication misspelled Addison Tunnard’s name. The Rant regrets the error.

Heath Buckmaster, gallery curator. “We’re moving away from traditional media to sequential artwork (art forms typically used for graphic storytelling), and expressionist artwork with social commentary and introspection. Booker’s art is built on themes of Anime and Manga, from his love of superheroes and television character design. Correa expresses art through spray paint, oil pastels and written messaging that creates more than just a painting.”

MANN CENTER TO HOST EMERGING ARTIST GALLERY

The Emerging Artist Gallery at the Mann Center for the Arts will present new exhibitions by Jayden Booker and Julian Correa, July 3 through Aug. 29.. The exhibitions open with a First Friday Public Reception on July 3 from 5 to 7 p.m. at the Center.

“I’m excited to showcase two local artists this summer in our gallery,” said

Buckmaster said they’re thrilled that Raven Forge Games has shown support for emerging artists by becoming a new gallery sponsor. Additional works by both artists will be on display at the game store, located in downtown Sanford.

The community is invited to the center on July 3 for an opening ceremony with refreshments, music and art displays from Brick City Gallery and the Lee County Arts Council.

SANFORD CITY BUDGET TO INCLUDE TAX INCREASE

The Sanford City Council voted at its June 25 meeting to adopt the \$162 million budget for fiscal year 2026-2027 that prioritizes public safety and reduces a proposed property tax increase.

During the budget process, a property tax increase was reduced from a proposed 3 cents to 2 cents, bringing the city’s rate to 55.5 cents per \$100 assessed valuation. For homeowners, the increase equates to approximately \$50 per year for a \$250,000 home and \$60 per year for a \$300,000 home.

The adopted budget fully funds the City’s public safety requests, providing resources to strengthen emergency response and fire prevention services. Funding includes:

Three additional fire fighter positions to support the Sanford Fire Department’s service demands. One additional full-time fire Inspector position to enhance fire prevention efforts through inspections, education, and code enforcement.

To help minimize the financial impact

on taxpayers, Sanford City Council chose to eliminate all proposed funding for additional street resurfacing beyond the City’s standard annual paving program. The budget maintains the typical \$750,000 annual allocation for street resurfacing but does not include any supplemental funding for expanded paving projects.

“This budget reflects the Council’s commitment to balancing fiscal responsibility with the need to invest in the services our community relies on every day,” says Mayor Rebecca Wyhof Salmon. “By reducing the proposed tax increase while fully funding critical public safety needs, we’ve worked to protect residents and maintain the high level of service our community expects.”

The budget also includes a 7-percent adjustment to water and sewer rates, which will increase the average residential utility bill by approximately \$5.12 per month. The adjustment will help support continued investment in the City’s water and wastewater infrastructure, ensuring reliable service, regulatory compliance, and the long-term sustainability of these essential systems.



Sara Stephens with Duke Energy Foundation (left), presented a check to Central Carolina Community College for \$25,000. The gift will help support the college’s new maintenance technician apprenticeship program, known as the Maintenance Technician Apprenticeship Accelerator. Receiving the check on behalf of the college are CCCC President Dr. Lisa M. Chapman, Dean of Business and Applied Technologies Dr. Sara Newcomb and Dr. Lisa Smelser, executive director for Workforce Strategic Initiatives.

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18 CADETS FINISH LAW ENFORCEMENT ACADEMY AT CCCC

During CCCC's Basic Law Enforcement Training commencement on June 10 at the Dennis A. Wicker Civic & Conference Center in Sanford, local law enforcement officers and CCCC leaders took to the stage to present awards representing top performances in some key aspects of the BLET training, which takes place over the course of 21 weeks.

The awards included honors for the cadets with the fastest times on the Police Officer Physical Abilities Test. Trevor Williams had the fastest time on the first phase, and Claybourne Cole had the fastest time for the second phase. This year's Jimmy Collins Top Gun Award went to cadet Phillip Hunter, who had the best score for the firearms field course portion of the training.

The highest GPA for the class was held by Tyler Billiet, and Donald Dunlap had the highest score on the 300-question state certification exam.

In his remarks to the graduates, Capt. Bill Marcum of the Lee County Sheriff's Office said cadets are faced with learning numerous facts and details that can all seem equally important.

"BLET has a way of testing you. It tests your discipline, your commitment. And it tests your patience," he said. "Never lose your humanity. The badge gives your authority, but your character gives you credibility."

BRIEFS

NEW PRINCIPAL NAMED AT DEEP RIVER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



Lee County Schools announced a leadership transition at Deep River Elementary School. Emily Coggins stepped down as principal to focus on personal and family priorities, and Sal Cosimo became principal effective July 1.

"I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to serve the students, staff and families of Deep River Elementary and for the support I have received from the Lee County Schools community," Coggins said. "While this is a temporary step in a different direction, I look forward to what the future holds and will always cherish my connection to Deep River."

Cosimo is no stranger to Lee County Schools, having served the district for the past 11 years in a variety of roles, including teacher, assistant principal and executive director of human resources. After spending time in New York, Cosimo and his family returned to Lee County, where he served as assistant principal at Southern Lee High School during the 2025-2026 school year.

"We are excited to welcome Sal to Deep River Elementary and congratulate him on this well-deserved opportunity," said Superintendent Dr. Chris Dossenbach. "His many years of experience and his knowledge of our schools and community, have prepared him to take this next step in his leadership journey. Sal recognizes the school's longstanding success and traditions and will continue to build on the solid foundation already in place while guiding Deep River toward an even brighter future."

"I am committed to fostering a culture where every student is challenged and supported, teachers are empowered to lead and innovate, and families are valued as essential partners in their children's academic success," Cosimo said.



Sanford's own Tim Blodgett saw his own international soccer action in June as a member of the U.S. Men's National Team Over 40 Squad, which earned a bronze medal at the Senior World Cup in Thailand in June. Victories over Taiwan and Thailand sent Team USA to the semifinals. After a loss to France on penalty kicks, the team came back to beat Australia for the bronze medal, finishing third out of eight countries. In the opening match against Taiwan, Blodgett fractured three ribs but still finished the match and scored a goal in the 2-0 win. *Photo: Facebook*

TWO TEENS ARRESTED IN JUNE 11 SHOOTING DEATH

Sanford police arrested two teenagers on June 11 in connection with a shooting at the Oaks Apartments the day prior that left a 17-year-old dead.

Naquan Tymarion Clegg, 19, of Brookfield Circle faces charges of murder and discharging a weapon into an occupied vehicle. Police arrested him at his home around 5 p.m. on June 11. The second suspect, whose name was not released because he's 17 years old, surrendered to police and faces the same charges as Clegg.

Clegg was placed in the Lee County Jail without bond; the juvenile suspect was taken to the Wake County Juvenile Detention Center.

SANFORD BRUSH & PALETTE CLUB EXPANDS FOOTPRINT

In preparation for its SBPC 61st Annual Art Show in October, the Sanford Brush & Palette Club invites membership from the four collar counties — Lee, Moore, Harnett and Chatham — to its historic event, Step Out and Step In.

This year's show, Oct. 9-17, promises to be a spectacular event, featuring a diverse range of artistic expressions across various mediums. JuliAnn Robinson, SBPC president and show chair said, "We are on an exciting artistic journey exploring new paths and creating new footprints. We are delighted with new and longstanding membership, including the many talented artists that live here and the surrounding area."



Campbell University held the first two of four summer orientations for new students on June 26-27 on its main campus.

STUDENTS IMPRESSED BY FIRST CAMPBELL SUMMER ORIENTATION

Sahara Knight was on the other side of the table two years ago. Then a freshman from Fayetteville interested in getting involved at her new school, Knight approached the Dance Team table during her freshman orientation at Campbell University and asked if there were openings. She had just missed tryouts, but a new round of open auditions were approaching.

On June 26, she was the one greeting future students during the Camel Connect Expo portion of orientation for incoming freshmen and transfer students — letting them know about upcoming tryouts and her own experiences on the Dance Team.

"What I've seen today is that everyone is extremely excited to be here," said Knight, now a junior communications pre-law major who also found her job in digital media services during that 2024 orientation. "They're like me — they don't know what to expect, but they're eager to learn more about what we have to offer."

The day marked the first of four one-day summer orientations — the second

is slated for Saturday, and two more are scheduled for July. Campbell is expecting roughly 800 students who will make up the Class of 2030 over the four days.

One of them is Ane Nichols, an exercise science major from Raleigh. Nichols said she was hoping to learn more about her home for the next four years and, like Knight, perhaps learn more about potential jobs as a freshman (she coached youth swimming while in high school).

"I've really enjoyed the day so far. It's all been really well organized," she said. "Campbell felt like home the first time I visited here. Everyone was so friendly. I felt like I was meeting my neighbors."

Ken and Michele Baker were on campus with their son, Nathan Baker, a music major transferring from Sampson Community College. Ken Baker praised the beauty of the campus and the community feel, as well as the planning that went into orientation.

"We happened to go over to the music performance hall, and when we walked in, Dr. [Dwayne] Wilson saw us wandering the halls," he said. "So he brought us into his office and spent like an hour to an hour and a half talking to us and showing Nathan around. That's not the kind of thing that happens everywhere."

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EVENT CALENDAR

WEDNESDAYS

FARMERS MARKET ADDS WEEKDAY EVENT

The Sanford Farmers' Market have added an additional market day each week starting this month. The market — located inside the Pilgrim's Sanford Agricultural Marketplace downtown — will be held Wednesdays from 4 to 7 p.m. through Nov. 18.



JULY 2-3: Temple Theatre youth conservatory presents High School Musical. Tickets and showtimes available at templeshows.org.

JULY 3: The Mann Center for the Arts will host its First Friday Art Reception from 5 to 7 p.m. Enjoy exhibitions in their Emerging Artist Gallery, Brick City Gallery, Lee County Arts Council Gallery and more.

JULY 4: The City of Sanford will celebrate the 250th birthday of America with its Red, White & Blue Bash, scheduled for 5 p.m. at Kiwanis Park in Sanford. The event will begin with live music from the Marcel Portilla Band and a hot dog eating contest at 6:30 p.m. The Fandinos will perform at 7 p.m., followed by the "Great American Dance Party" with D.J. BFree at 8:15 p.m. Fireworks will begin at dusk.

JULY 4: The Town of Broadway and the Lee County Veterans Council will host their America's 250th Birthday Celebration at the North Carolina Veterans Memorial. Join residents, veterans and families beginning at 10 a.m. at the North Carolina Veterans Memorial, 210 South Main St.

JULY 6: The Sanford Spinners will host the Raleigh Red Oaks at 7 p.m. at Lee County High School. General admission is \$10, \$5 for children 6-12 and free for those under 5.

JULY 8: Sips and Sequels in downtown Sanford will host its Horror Book Club at 6:30 p.m. Get to know Carolyn and Emily during each session and fall in love with the genre again.

JULY 8: The Sanford Spinners will host the Carolina White Sox at 7 p.m. at Lee County High School.

JULY 9: The Summer Concert Series at Depot Park will feature the Dowdy Boys from 6:30 p.m. to 8:15. Admission is free, and lawn chairs or blankets are encouraged.

JULY 10: The Steele Street Band will perform at The Smoke & Barrel in downtown Sanford at 8:30 p.m.

JULY 11: Hugger Mugger Brewing and Tacos El Primo will host Latin Dance Night from 6 to 11 p.m. at the brewery in downtown Sanford. Watch the World Cup, enjoy the taco bar and enjoy the live DJ. No cover charge.

JULY 12: The Sanford Spinners will host the Chatham County Yardbirds at 7 p.m. at Lee County High School.

JULY 12: The Celebrandote Expo — Lee County's first Quinceañera & Coming of Age Expo — will run from 1 to 5 p.m. at the Black Pearl Event Center, 2503 Fayetteville St. in Sanford. Dresses, tuxes, DJs, vendors, mocktails and more.

JULY 12: Join Hugger Mugger Brewing and the Eduardo de Rosamaria Ensemble for an afternoon of flamenco music and dance at Hugger Mugger Brewing in downtown Sanford from 2 to 5 p.m. Tickets available online.

JULY 12: Raven Forge Games will celebrate Star Wars Unlimited: Ashes of the Empire Pre-Release at 1 p.m. Every player will get a pre-release box containing six brand-new booster packs. Admission is \$30.

JULY 14: The Sanford Spinners will host the Chatham County Yardbirds at 7 p.m. at Lee County High School.

JULY 16: The City of Sanford's Summer Concert Series will feature Big Daddy Love at 6:30 p.m. at Depot Park. Lawn chairs and blankets are encouraged.

JULY 16: Downtown Sanford Inc. will host its Third Thursday event, Red, White, Blue & Local, beginning at 5 p.m. Stroll through Downtown Sanford and enjoy special sales, patriotic perks and summertime finds at participating shops. It's the perfect chance to refresh your wardrobe, pick up unique gifts and show your love for local businesses.

JULY 16: The Sanford Spinners will host the Chatham County Yardbirds at 7 p.m. at Lee County High School.

JULY 17: Sayer McShane will perform at The Smoke and Barrel in downtown Sanford at 8:30 p.m.

JULY 17: The Dennis A. Wicker Civic Center will host the Scrap Kings Fight Tournament at 6 p.m. Presented by Carolina Gloves Promotions, the championship qualifier gives contestants a chance to fight for \$3,000 in prize money.

JULY 17-18: Temple Theatre youth conservator presents The Tempest. Tickets and showtimes available at templeshows.org.

LIVE, ORIGINAL MUSIC

JULY 4: Wild Dogs Brewing, 136 N. Steele St., will host its 5th Anniversary Celebration on America's 250th with live music all day, starting with Patrick Harrison from 1 to 3 p.m., singer/songwriter Russ James from 4 to 6 p.m., and Rod Brady and Rusted Luck from 7 to 10 p.m. The brewery will offer commemorative pint glasses while supplies last.

JULY 10: July 10: Sanford pop rockers Solar Illusion will play Wild Dogs Brewing, 136 N. Steele St., with Hemlock Theory, also of Sanford. Admission is free; music begins at 7 p.m.

JULY 18: Singer/songwriter Russ James of Wilmington will play at Wild Dogs Brewing, 136 N. Steele St. from 7 to 10 p.m. Admission free.

JULY 26: The Celtic Jam event returns to Hugger Mugger Brewing, 229 Wicker St.. A day full of traditional Celtic music will start at 2 p.m. until the brewery closes.

Got an event with live, original music coming up? Email Bryson Lyons at brysonlyonsmedia@gmail.com

JULY 17-19: Hugger Mugger Brewing in downtown Sanford will host Retro Arcade Games — free to play throughout the day beginning at 3 p.m.

JULY 18: The Sanford Tea Room at 1218 Hawkins Ave. will host A Mid Summer's Night Tea Party beginning at 6:30 p.m. Step into a dreamy midsummer evening filled with candlelight, florals, delicate teas and whimsical charm.

JULY 18: The Sanford Spinners will host the Wake Forest Fungo at 7 p.m. at Lee County High School.

JULY 22: Jim Quick and Coastline will perform at the Mann Center for the Arts at 6 p.m. Pulling from the threads of soul, blues, R&B and Americana, the band weaves together their own genre of music known as Swamp Soul. Tickets online.

JULY 23: Sahara Reggae Band will perform as part of the City of Sanford's Summer Concert Series at 6:30 p.m. at Depot Park.

JULY 24: Eric Strickland will perform at The Smoke and Barrel in downtown Sanford at 8:30 p.m.

JULY 25: Join MonkeyKat Books for an unforgettable evening with New York Times bestselling author Scott

Reintgen, creator of the beloved Dragonships series, at the historic Temple Theater at 6 p.m. This special event kicks off Dragonfest — the official celebration of MonkeyKat Books' second anniversary .

JULY 30: Florencia and the Feeling will perform as part of the City of Sanford's Summer Concert Series at 6:30 p.m. at Depot Park.

JULY 31-AUG 1: Temple Theatre's mainstage conservatory event, Fiddler on the Roof Jr., ends the summer conservatory season. Ticket info at templeshows.org.

AUG 3-7: Animal Superpowers — a creative and active week focused on how animals survive and adapt — comes to the Pint Sized Pasture from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. each day. Cost is \$300 for the full week of summer camp or \$75 for one day.

AUG. 6: d.a.l.i.a. will perform for City of Sanford's Summer Concert Series at 6:30 p.m. at Depot Park.

AUG 8: The Taylor Phillips Writer's Cup Invitational is a premier golf event bringing together community leaders, partners and supporters for a memorable day on the course. The invitational tournament will be held at Quail Ridge Golf Course.

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CROSSWORD: The 4th of July

ACROSS

- 1. Dagger's partner
- 6. Elephant party, acr.
- 9. Do like volcano
- 13. Fire (2 words)
- 14. Pro football org.
- 15. Jonas Salk's conquest
- 16. Like a Harvard building?
- 17. ET carrier
- 18. Bedeck
- 19. *Tasty Fourth of July outings
- 21. *Float processions
- 23. Black gunk
- 24. Ivan the Terrible, e.g.
- 25. The Jackson 5's 1970 hit
- 28. Caffeine source
- 30. TV classic "____ Heroes"
- 35. Folio page
- 37. Abel's big brother
- 39. Fortune teller's card
- 40. Rank in British peerage
- 41. Archipelago parts
- 43. Head for (2 words)
- 44. Besech
- 46. Impermanent employee
- 47. Prayer's end
- 48. Gardener's trimmer
- 50. Part of speech
- 52. Am is to I as ____ is to we
- 53. Calista Flockhart's husband
- 55. Likewise
- 57. *Salad tuber
- 60. *____ Famous Hot Dog Eating Contest
- 64. Nonsense
- 65. Female gametes
- 67. "A Doll's House" playwright

- 68. Cuckoo
- 69. Opposite of guzzle
- 70. Cuckoo for what puffs?
- 71. Eyelid affliction
- 72. Driver's aid
- 73. Giving a once-over

DOWN

- 1. Hair holder
- 2. First name in jeans
- 3. Auricular
- 4. ____ provocateur
- 5. Island off Alaskan coast
- 6. Wildebeests
- 7. *For most, the 4th is a day ____
- 8. Onomatopoeia for splash
- 9. *Drink at a barbecue
- 10. Weary walk
- 11. Ireland, once
- 12. *Patriots ____ over Loyalists
- 15. Long John Silver's pet
- 20. Crocus, pl.
- 22. Ooh partner
- 24. Last part (2 words)
- 25. 1st letter of Hebrew alphabet
- 26. Famous Memphis street
- 27. Felt concern
- 29. *"...twilight's ____ gleaming"
- 31. Lady of "A Star is Born"
- 32. Smell
- 33. Post-it user
- 34. *"Born on the Fourth of July" director
- 36. *Popular July 4th decoration
- 38. Captain of Nautilus
- 42. Phlegms
- 49. Go bad
- 51. Public announcement
- 54. Fowl perch
- 56. Exclamation of delight or dismay (2 words)
- 57. Bridge, in Paris
- 58. Colloquial approval
- 59. Ditty
- 60. Back of neck
- 61. Ascus, pl.
- 62. Ne
- 63. Glitch
- 64. Part of O.H.M.S.
- 66. Strive

CROSSWORD

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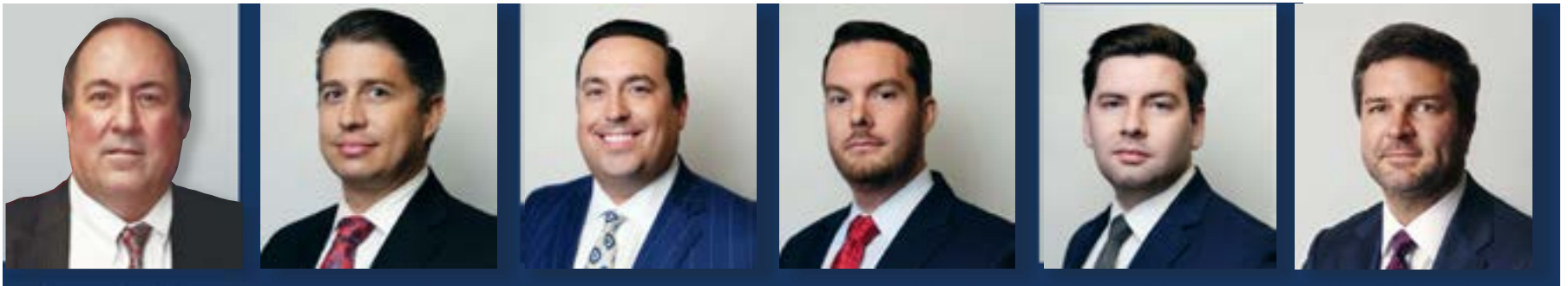
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