

PACKED WITH PROTEIN

SEPTEMBER 2026

The Rant

SANFORD, NORTH CAROLINA

Monthly

The Rant investigates

THE EMS DEAL

NEW DETAILS EMERGE ABOUT
COUNTY'S BEHIND-CLOSED-DOORS
DEALINGS WITH PROVIDER WHO
LOST OUT ON EMS CONTRACT

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ANIMAL CONTROL LOOKS TO SMOOTH
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The Rant *Monthly*

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I thought I'd pegged you an idiot's dream. Tunnel vision from the outsider's screen.



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Why the EMS deal matters

The Rant has taken part in two recent community events highlighting the importance of local media and how we can better serve our community. These meetings have led to important discussions on the role of local journalism — to celebrate the good in our community, inform the public on what is happening (local government, crime, economic development, education and more) and challenge our elected officials to do what voters expect of them and follow the law in doing so.

This month’s cover story takes a deep dive into the recent mess during negotiations for the county’s next emergency medical services (ambulance) provider. Gordon Anderson and Richard Sullins look at the failed MedEx deal — one that could have saved the money more than \$12 million had a deal been struck, but the parties couldn’t come to terms.



Their reporting uncovers behind-closed-doors meetings out of the public eye and details what eventually led the county to stick with FirstHealth in the end.

The story shines light on an important service to you, and we hope puts local government on alert that their actions are being watched (and reported on).



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LEE COUNTY GOVERNMENT

Parks & Recreation

SEPTEMBER HAPPENINGS



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Late Registration Accepted

Session 5: August 31 - October 24

Cost varies with class length & skill

- All ages
- All skill levels

Gymnastics Day Camp: \$30

7:30am - 5:30pm

- October 15, 2026



SPECIAL EVENTS

Family Movie Night; Hoppers - PG

- September 11th
- Kiwanis Family Park; 5pm - 7:30pm

Vendor Registration for Rec Rhythm

- New Community Event
- \$25/artisan vendor - 10x10 space
- October 2, 2026: 5pm - 8:30pm
- Lee County Athletic Park



AQUATICS

(HORTON & O.T. SLOAN POOL)

Last Weekend!

- September 5, 6, & 7



PROGRAMS

Registration Open!

Fall Youth Art Classes: \$60

- October 12 - January 7
- Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday Options
- Bob Hales Center at 5:30pm



Fall Intersession Camp Registration; \$130

- September 14 - 18
- September 21 - 25
- September 28 - October 2



Parent's Night Out; \$30

- Saturday, October 17 (ages 4-12)

Ladies Night Crafting; \$25

- Friday October 23 (ages 18+)



Cupcakes & Canvas; \$25

- Saturday, October 24 (ages 4-12)

NightTime Hike; \$10

- Saturday, October 10 (all ages)
- San-Lee Park; 5:30p - 7:30p



PARTNER PROGRAMS:

TennisBloc: (www.tennisbloc.com)

- Pickleball: Sept 13 - Nov. 1 (Sundays)
- Tennis: Sept. 12 - Oct. 31 (Saturdays)



Our offices, San-Lee Park & Lee County Athletic Park will be closed on Monday, September 7th in observance of Labor Day.

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

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ALLRED PLEADS GUILTY TO LCS EMBEZZLEMENT

A former Lee County Schools finance employee pleaded guilty in August to embezzling nearly \$200,000 from the district.

Jordan Allred, 37, pleaded guilty to four felony counts of embezzlement. Judge Winston Gilchrist imposed a suspended sentence of 18 to 51 months. Allred won't go to prison if she completes five years of supervised probation, including paying \$190,588 in restitution and completing 135 nonconsecutive days in jail, with the schedule to be determined by her probation officer. Allred paid \$35,000 of the restitution Monday.

If Allred successfully completes three years of probation and meets all court-ordered conditions, she can be transferred to unsupervised probation for the remaining two years.

Sanford police arrested Allred in March 2025, saying she'd taken \$190,588 from the school district where she was employed as an assistant finance officer. Christian Guerrero, 19, of West Makepeace Street in Sanford faces two counts of felony second degree sexual exploitation of a minor.

14 ARRESTED IN SEX CRIME STING

The Lee County Sheriff's Office led a multi-agency sex offender sting that netted 14 arrests in July, including nine suspects from Lee County. Investigators working the case posed as children online and found suspects they said were willing to travel to them to engage in sexual activity. Most of the arrests were made in Lee County, although some were charged closer to their homes.

A full list of arrestees can be found online at rantnc.com.

Lee Animal Control says it will improve communication with rescue groups, public

By Billy Liggett
billy@rantnc.com

After alarms have sounded concerning staffing and lack of resources last week, Lee County Animal Control announced in August improvements to the way it communicates with local animal rescue and foster groups (as well as the public) about availability and adoption options.

The announcement comes after several public critical statements posted online by local rescue organizations and adoption advocates. Among the key concerns:

- Reports of multiple animals euthanized due to shelter overcrowding and understaffing,
- limited transparency around and difficulty learning about animal outcomes, and
- a decrease in funding for the animal shelter for the current fiscal year compared to last year (a 2 percent, a \$22,000 drop).

According to Alyssa "Lizzie" Farr, a Harnett County resident who is actively involved in animal welfare and rescue efforts in Lee County and the region, concerns deserve public scrutiny, but more importantly, changes need to be made to "give [animals] a fair chance at rescue or adoption" without local government making things "unnecessarily challenging" for the shelter to network with local rescue groups.

"The shelter is consistently at or over capacity, leading to the euthanasia of animals for space, and the problem will only worsen as the county's population increases if the government does not commit to dedicating more resources to a shelter that already struggles with understaffing and space issues," Farr said. "The public needs to be aware of this issue to demand transparency from local officials about how the shelter is affected by budget decisions and what the long-term plan is, if any, to address the growing strain on shelter resources — such as introducing affordable spay/neuter clinics, trap-neuter-release pro-



Photo of a recent stray dog posted to Lee County Animals Shelter's website in August. See more at leecountync.animalshelter.net.com

grams, expanded adoption hours/events and more."

The criticisms come after recent awards handed to Lee County Animal Shelter by the nonprofit group, Best Friends Animal Society, which tagged it as a "No-Kill Shelter" in 2023 and 2024, a signal that the shelter hit a 90-percent adoption rate for a calendar year. That number dropped to roughly 82 percent in 2025, with 1,222 animals adopted and rescued throughout the year.

No numbers were provided for 2026 so far.

One organization that has gone public with its difficulties dealing with Lee County Animal Control this year is the Sanford-based nonprofit group It Takes a Village Rescue, which boasts saving more than 2,700 animals since its founding in 2017. In an Aug. 19 Facebook post, the organization featured photos of dogs that were euthanized because, "the shelter is no longer allowed to partner with rescues on critical cats and dogs."

The organization, led by Lori St. James, claimed it had reached out to the county asking to present its concerns to the board of commissioners and

completed forms to get information on animals it was trying to save, "only to be ignored."

"Lee County is going to lose all its rescue help ... if we all don't start standing up for these animals," the post read. "They are going to lose their no-kill status that was worked so hard by the animal shelter staff and the local rescues to obtain. For two years, Lee County was 'no kill.' In the last two weeks they have put down 10 dogs."

Contacted by *The Rant* to provide more details about their concerns, a representative of It Takes a Village declined additional comment, stating, "I just had a wonderful phone call with commissioner Samantha Martin. For now I'm going to stand down on any more negative publicity as she seems more than willing to help us fix the things that are going wrong with Lee County animals."

Martin admitted to *The Rant* the shelter has been short-staffed and "unable to both carry out their animal welfare duties and respond to lengthy information request calls and messages." In order to alleviate some of this, she said, the staff believed the best practice would be implementing a public records request

process for the in-depth information requests in addition to sending weekly updates to rescue and foster partners to streamline communications.

Beginning in September, she said, the shelter will be fully staffed and will be able to both “care for the animals and fully communicate with the public and adopt and foster groups.”

Martin said the shelter’s website — leecountync.animalshelternet.com — will continue providing weekly updates to rescue and foster partners, and the county communications team will assist Animal Services in increasing the frequency of their social media posts.

“The goal has always been to maintain transparency and provide accessible information with the end goal of finding homes for the adoptable animals,” Martin said.

Hailey Hall, communications manager for Lee County Government, added that shelter staff “work tirelessly” with local rescue groups, and the goal remains to decrease euthanasia rates and improve adoption rates. She said shelter staff will

take adoption interest calls to schedule appointment visits and utilize recently implemented processes — weekly email updates to partner rescue and foster groups, regular maintenance of the website and Facebook page, and a public records request process for in-depth inquiries.

“The primary focus of staff will always be ensuring the welfare of the animals in their care and we recognize and appreciate our local rescue and foster partners for assisting in this mission,” Hall said.

Martin added that volunteer opportunities are also available to those wanting to help.

“The Lee County Animal Shelter welcomes volunteers to provide enrichment for the animals, including leash-walking and teaching basic commands, along with assisting in light cleaning and helping to capture photos and videos to showcase these animals for adoption,” Martin said. “Volunteer applications are appreciated and are available at leecountync.gov/volunteer.”

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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BUILD LEE COUNTY FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

OPINION

EDITORIAL

Shining light on county's messy EMS negotiations

It's hard to know exactly what to make of the revelation that two county commissioners met with medical transport company MedEx and invited them to submit a new contract proposal for EMS service well after both parties said they couldn't come to an agreement.

In some sense, it's purely academic — in the end, Lee County stuck with its incumbent provider, FirstHealth of the Carolinas. FirstHealth's proposal cost \$12 million more than MedEx's, but it's also a company with a proven history right here in Lee County. \$12 million is obviously a lot of money, but EMS is a service with life-and-death stakes. Those aren't areas where defaulting to the lowest bidder automatically ensures you're getting the best value.

The new details — which came out of a public records request for documents related to the negotiations and a statement from the CEO of MedEx — raise a number of questions which should be important to anyone living in Lee County. Those are questions we were unable to answer in our reporting on the topic, which is The Rant Monthly's lead story for September.

What we know now that we didn't know before this month is that two members of the Lee County Board of Commissioners reached back out to MedEx after the talks stalled and invited them to a meeting. A meeting to which the county staff would not be invited. A meeting at which the CEO of MedEx tells us the two commissioners — he didn't say who they were — “questioned aloud” whether county staff had intentionally tried to sink the deal. A meeting at which MedEx was asked to provide yet another contract proposal. And a meeting outside the public process which had been the framework for negotiations before that point.

Samantha Martin, the chair of the Lee County Board of Commissioners, confirmed the meeting happened in a two-sentence statement which indicated there was hope the taxpayers could still save the \$12 million difference in the competing proposals. But what we still don't know could probably fill as much space in this edition as what we do.

Which commissioners initiated and attended the meeting? Who authorized them to negotiate on behalf of Lee County? Do those commissioners agree with Lowe's characterization that they thought county staff might be to blame for the failure to reach an agreement?

Why did the revived negotiations end there?

Those questions matter regardless of whether the commissioners involved believed they were acting in the county's best interest. Saving \$12 million is a worthy goal. If there was still a realistic path to an agreement with MedEx, there's nothing inherently wrong with wanting to explore it.

But county government operates through public decisions made by a board of commissioners, and then carried out by staff. Individual commissioners deciding among themselves which matters remain open for negotiation is something entirely different.

We're not suggesting that any of this was illegal. But residents of Lee County have a right to know who was conducting their business and how. Conducting county business this way leaves the public to find out how the sausage is made months after the fact because a news outlet made a public records request.

We think that's wrong.

COLUMN

I love you, sweet tea, but alas, you're no longer good for me

By Billy Liggett

Growing old means growing up. Growing old means eventually realizing that you can't do the things you've always done without consequences.

At 50, I realize I'll probably never do a back flip again. I used to be able to do one — I usually had to be standing in sand out of fear of breaking my neck — and the thought of even attempting one today is out of the realm of possibility. I would die.

My hair will never be brown again, at least naturally. I'll never undo the recent “font size increase” I recently made to my phone, at least without corrective surgery. I'll never sprint (I mean, really sprint) again, without being chased by someone with an axe. Even then, I'm not making it far.

No more all-nighters. No more Jell-O shots. No more ignoring health check-ups.

I've written a bit in the past year about hitting the half-century mark and the fact that my history of relatively good health has been hit by a bus named “back problems” and a litany of other issues that have since arisen. This one's a bit more forward-thinking, because I'm at one of those crossroads where if I don't change some very-difficult-to-change parts of my lifestyle, and soon, these next 10 years will be as frustrating as these past 10 months.

My first big change — one that may sound small on the surface, but will no doubt help make everything else go smoother — is giving up my love of ... hell, my addiction to ... sugary drinks.

One of my first columns for *The Rant* just under a decade ago was dedicated to my love of sweet tea. In it, I ranked the best — giving Bojangles' “legendary” sweet tea both the No. 1 and No. 2 spots, because I loved (and still love) it so much. I wrote:

“The Cadillac of sweet tea. It's dark, bold ... a hint of flavors you don't expect, but you need all the same (seriously, it could be chocolate ... it could be coffee ... it's a mystery). Bojangles calls its tea legendary, and the title fits. Poured over giant, smooth ice chips,

it's best served in the large styrofoam cups (locally, it's just 99 cents) — these cups keep it cold for hours.”

Seriously, I don't know if my wife has received love letters this fawning. In my nearly 20 years in North Carolina, I have probably consumed 2,000 large Bojangles' sweet teas.

And that's not good. Anymore, at least.

That 32-ounce drink contains 350 calories and just under 90 grams of sugar. Not to pick on the king, but the same goes for all the other sweet teas from that list — store-bought Milo's, Biscuitville and Chick-fil-A, to name a few.

Unsweetened tea, which contains no sugar and, most of the time, no calories if it's just leaves and water, has zero calories and zero sugar. But unsweetened tea, as claimed in my list, is an abomination. More on that in a bit.

I'm not just giving up tea. I'm done with sodas. Sports drinks that don't have the word “zero” on them. Most fruit juices. The sugar levels are insane, and the health risks are real.

One study released in August found that drinking at least one sugar-sweetened beverage a day can double the risk of stomach cancer. According to the smart folks at Harvard, those who drink two or more sugary drinks a day have a 21% increased risk for an early death, especially from cardiovascular disease (compared to those who don't).

For me, it's a weight issue. I have a fairly normal to healthy diet, aside from the drinks, and no amount of walking and other light exercising is making a dent. As I write this, I haven't had a sweet tea in two weeks, and while tea without sugar brings me no joy, I'm learning to adapt. I'm also re-introducing myself to some drink called “water.” I've heard good things.

Why I am I telling you this? Therapy, perhaps. I have a long way to go to get where I want to be, health-wise, and this is an important step. I suppose writing this leads to more motivation.

And if it motivates any of you to consider a lifestyle change, there are worse things in the world to give up than sugary drinks.

Not many. But there are worse.



READERS RESPOND

Comments from Rant readers on various stories from the past month (visit our Facebook page @rantnc to see more):

On The Rant’s August list of new projects underway in Lee County:

The \$98 million for Grace. Is that privately funded by tuition or is that funded by grants or the state? The elementary school is only 56 million. So why not pull the funding from the Private school and build two additional public schools? Just a thought.

Jonah Godfrey

So basically what I’m reading is all of this out of control development is due to The Rant making an April Fool’s joke. Thanks, bro. Great job.

Dave Chau

The amount of apartments being built in Lee County is staggering. The apartment renter does not pay property taxes. It is the single family home owners that get stuck with the burden of paying higher property taxes to pay for all of this growth. I hope all

of these people coming to Lee County enjoy what us long time residents are paying for. All of this growth is not progress.

Suzanne Hart

I understand so much is coming to our sweet little town. But convenience will be there for those who appreciate the growth.

Lyona Black

Progress isn’t always a good thing. We dont need more neighborhoods or apartments. What stands out to me is driving by and seeing all the land being destroyed and dug up. Animals are losing their homes. One of the perks in living in Sanford was it not being like Cary or Apex. Proud of it being a blue collared community. A lot of whats happening is greed.

Taylor Snyder

So many “meh” businesses and restaurants (in my opinion). We’re still not even coming close to the offerings of Apex or Holly Springs, but at the same time, the existing neighborhoods/suburbs around Sanford are way more liveable than those two.

Austin Lipsack

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COVER STORY

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

OFFICIALS MET PRIVATELY WITH MEDEX FOR EMS SERVICES AFTER COUNTY DECLARED NEGOTIATIONS OVER; COMPANY SUBMITTED ANOTHER PROPOSAL DAYS LATER, *THE RANT* LEARNED

BY GORDON ANDERSON AND RICHARD SULLINS

Months of controversy over the selection of a vendor for EMS service negotiations ended on April 17 with less of a bang than many in Lee County expected.

It had been a process with high stakes for all involved. Eastern North Carolina-based MedEx had spent a good portion of late 2025 working to win the county’s upcoming five-year EMS franchise at a price tag substantially lower than incumbent FirstHealth of the Carolinas, promising the board of commissioners it could meet or exceed FirstHealth’s level of service for \$12.6 million less over five years.

So the commissioners’ 5-2 vote in December to go with MedEx (voting in favor were Republicans Andre Knecht, Samantha Martin, Kirk Smith and Taylor Vorbeck, as well as Democrat Robert Reives Sr.) placed a lot of public weight on a negotiation process that was supposed to definitively answer not only how much Lee County taxpayers would spend on EMS, but also which company would begin answering Lee County’s calls for medical emergencies beginning on July 1.



FirstHealth of the Carolinas maintained its contract with Lee County Government to handle emergency medical services this year after a controversial agreement with MedEx — which would have cost more than \$12 million less, but came with many more questions and uncertainties — fell through.

Many in the local first responder community had expressed skepticism about changing EMS providers, questioning at multiple commissioners meetings whether MedEx could provide the level of service the county had received from FirstHealth at the substantially lower price it proposed. An advisory committee appointed by the county to evaluate the competing proposals had recommended sticking with FirstHealth despite the higher cost.

And MedEx’s selection had been controversial for reasons beyond its price.

It had come to light during the bidding process that MedEx claimed to be a “primary” or “co-primary” provider of emergency medical service in Forsyth County, but the company’s contract there actually showed it to be a non-emergency provider only authorized to perform emergency medical transport when specifically authorized.

Timeline of events

August 2021: After working with Central Carolina Hospital EMS for nearly 30 years, Lee County selects FirstHealth of the Carolinas to take over EMS services for the county.

October 2025: County votes 5-2 to select privately owned MedEx as its EMS provider, replacing FirstHealth.

November 2025: After questions arise following EMS decision, board votes to delay MedEx contract until further notice.

But commissioners still went the other way, and the concerns didn’t stop when MedEx and the county sat down to negotiate.

A day earlier, on April 16, it became public for the first time that negotiations between Lee County Government and MedEx were at an impasse. MedEx issued a statement indicating it remained open to an agreement, but that the parties were deadlocked over

December 2025: The county tells staff to prepare a draft ordinance that names MedEx as the county’s next EMS provider.

April 2026: The deal with MedEx falls apart after the company and the county are unable to finalize a deal.

June 2026: County agrees to a new five-year deal with FirstHealth of the Carolinas to handle EMS services. The \$21.2 million deal is roughly \$12 million more than the MedEx deal.

“provisions ... essential to ensuring operational stability, financial certainty, and the consistent delivery of high-emergency services.”

Lee County Government followed suit the next day, issuing a statement that covered much of the same ground, but with more finality.

“MedEx ultimately indicated that they could not agree to the terms the

County felt were essential,” the county wrote on April 17. “At that point, it became apparent that we were not going to find common ground on these outstanding issues, and negotiations could not continue further.”

For most of the public, it just meant MedEx wouldn’t be the county’s next EMS provider.

The county indicated in the April 17 statement that it was ready to engage with “another provider” for EMS provision going forward, and that’s what happened — by the start of June, the board of commissioners had awarded a franchise for the EMS contract to Pinehurst-based FirstHealth, and within weeks those parties — already more than familiar with one another on account of the existing contract for EMS which ran from 2021 through June of this year — had an agreement in place to work together for another five years.

But April 17 wasn’t where it ended.



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Records obtained by *The Rant* show MedEx submitted another contract proposal to the board of commissioners on April 25, eight days after the county said negotiations “could not continue further.” The company submitted a version containing a minor correction the next day.

The documents were among more than 200 pages of contract drafts released by Lee County in late August after a public records request. The documents themselves didn’t shed much light on why there was a new contract proposal days after both parties announced they couldn’t come to an agreement.

But MedEx CEO Dillon Lowe had an explanation.

Lowe told *The Rant* the late proposal came after two commissioners, whom he declined to identify, contacted MedEx following the April 17 announcement and asked to meet “without county staff involvement.”

“They expressed that they still wanted MedEx to provide the service and wanted to better understand why an agreement had not been reached,” Lowe said.

According to Lowe, MedEx explained its position on the remaining disagreements, and he said the commissioners told the company their understanding of several issues, based on information provided by county staff, was “materially different” from what they’d heard from the company.

Lowe said the commissioners went further, questioning “whether this was done intentionally by the county staff in an attempt to derail the negotiations.”

“After discussing the actual concerns and the practical effect of the disputed provisions, the commissioners present indicated that they agreed with the resolutions MedEx was requesting,” he said.

Lowe said the commissioners also spoke on the phone with other members of the board, and that MedEx left

the meeting believing there was agreement among those members that the remaining issues could be resolved. The commissioners then asked MedEx to prepare a new agreement incorporating the resolutions discussed at the meeting and submit it to the county, Lowe said. That agreement was submitted April 25, with a corrected version following the next day.

Republican Commissioner Samantha Martin — who is the board’s chair, but wasn’t at the time of the meeting — confirmed commissioners met with MedEx after negotiations stalled, but declined to say whether she was one of those who attended. She also declined to address Lowe’s account that commissioners came away from the meeting believing county staff had given them a materially different understanding of the disputed contract provisions.

“The commissioners met with MedEx to better understand the factors that stalled the agreement. This was an attempt to save the taxpayers \$12 million, which is equivalent to a 2-cent tax increase on property taxes,” Martin said.

A review of contract proposals exchanged by MedEx and Lee County from January through early April shows the parties began negotiations fairly far apart, but narrowed the gap considerably through the late winter and early spring.

MedEx’s first detailed response to the county objected to or sought changes in a wide range of provisions governing how the company would operate in Lee County. Those included staffing, ambulance deployment, operating locations, medical oversight, training, reporting requirements and other aspects of the service.

Many of those disagreements disappeared as the parties continued exchanging revisions. But the scope of those early disagreements is notable because of what MedEx had told commissioners about the service it

proposed to provide.

Months before negotiations began, lobbyist Sam Shumate, working on behalf of MedEx, had sent commissioners materials promoting the company’s proposal as both substantially less expensive than FirstHealth and capable of matching or improving on several aspects of the existing service. The county provided those materials to *The Rant* in response to a public information request in November 2025.

The materials promised MedEx would “meet or exceed” existing response times, provide a second operating location to better serve remote areas, and offer newer ambulances, additional staffing and other improvements while saving the county more than \$12 million over five years.

“At the heart of the issue is quality of service and a \$12 million difference in taxpayer money,” Shumate had written to members of the board a month earlier.

Lowe said the differences weren’t evidence MedEx had backed away from the service it proposed. Instead, he said the county’s contract included requirements he believed nobody had discussed when MedEx responded to the county’s request for proposals and developed its price.

“The remaining disagreements were relatively minor in number, but the provisions themselves mattered because they materially changed the operational and financial requirements contemplated when MedEx responded to the County’s RFP,” Lowe said. “Certain provisions would have imposed additional operational constraints and costs that were not part of the procurement upon which MedEx developed its proposal.”

The drafts illustrate the kind of differences Lowe described. MedEx initially sought changes to county requirements involving where ambulances would operate, how they would

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be staffed, training and medical oversight, among other provisions.

More specifically, the differences ranged from how many employees MedEx would have available for each ambulance and where those ambulances would be based, to requirements for employee training and how frequently medical supervision would be on site. In several areas, MedEx initially sought more flexibility than the county's proposed contract allowed, while the county sought to spell out specific operating requirements.

Those and many other operational disagreements largely disappeared from later drafts. By early April, the dispute had mostly boiled down to what financial consequences MedEx could face if it failed to meet the county's requirements.

Lowe said MedEx didn't consider those remaining differences insurmountable. Instead, he believed they were the issues the commissioners

were trying to resolve when they re-engaged with the company after negotiations had apparently ended.

"The post-April meeting resulted in an understanding that those remaining issues could be resolved. MedEx was therefore asked to put the agreed-upon resolutions into a revised contract, which we did," he said. "That makes what happened afterward particularly difficult for us to understand."

Lowe said that following the meeting and MedEx's submission of an updated proposal, the company didn't get a response.

"MedEx made one additional effort to determine what was happening," he told *The Rant*. "When MedEx's representative contacted members of the Board seeking an update, we were told that they had been advised by the county manager and county attorney not to speak with us. We cannot explain why the process stopped there."

Whatever happened to MedEx's final proposal, it didn't change the ultimate outcome. The county returned to FirstHealth, which had continued providing EMS service throughout the negotiations, and commissioners approved a new five-year agreement with the company in June — an agreement that cost the county just over \$21.2 million, slightly more than the \$20.8 million FirstHealth had originally proposed.

Lowe also said the contract FirstHealth was ultimately awarded differs significantly from the one MedEx was trying to negotiate with the county, claiming the county "demonstrated through its agreement with FirstHealth that material changes to that contract framework were possible" when MedEx had been told otherwise.

FirstHealth disputed that characterization.

Jonathan S. Davis, chief operating officer for FirstHealth of the Caroli-

nas and president of Moore Regional Hospital, said there was "no substantial difference" between the company's original proposed contract and the agreement ultimately signed with the county. He said the only difference was FirstHealth's request for \$347,459 to cover workforce costs incurred after MedEx was initially selected, including retention incentives, transition planning and later recruitment when FirstHealth was awarded the contract on short notice.

Lee County Government declined to respond to Lowe's account of the meeting, his characterization of the disputed contract provisions, or his comparison of the MedEx and FirstHealth agreements.

The EMS controversy prompted calls for outside scrutiny before the existence of the new contract proposals became public.

At a June 1 commissioners meeting, Lee County Republican Party

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Chairman Jim Womack called for the North Carolina State Auditor’s Office to investigate the county specifically over the failed MedEx negotiations.

“I think we need to get the state auditor down here and sort out how the process got screwed up,” Womack said.

The State Auditor’s Office did become involved with Lee County Government that month, sending the county an “engagement letter” that typically marks the beginning of an auditor’s work with a government entity. But neither the auditor’s office nor the county has disclosed whether the auditor’s engagement is connected to the EMS issue at all or something else entirely.

The sequence of events described by Lowe and documented in part by the records produced in August — individual commissioners re-engaging with MedEx and the exchange of additional contract proposals that fol-

lowed — also differed from the public process through which the county had selected MedEx and negotiated with the company for months.

Under North Carolina law, county governance is generally exercised by the board of commissioners as a body, while the county manager serves as the chief administrator responsible for carrying out the board’s direction.

This doesn’t mean commissioners can’t talk with constituents, vendors and others about county business. But Lowe’s account describes something more than two commissioners simply seeking information.

Instead, there was a meeting to discuss specific, disputed provisions in a contract, there were communications with other commissioners, and MedEx was asked to draft and submit a new proposal to the county for consideration — and the public was never invited to attend.

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DEPUTY DESCRIBES LOCAL DISTRICT JUDGE 'WAVING GUN' IN LEE COUNTY COURTROOM

By Gordon Anderson
gordon@rantnc.com

A Lee County sheriff's deputy wrote that District Court Judge Brian Lewis was "waving" a firearm while demonstrating its laser sight during an open court session in July, with the laser scanning across the face of a clerk working in the courtroom.

The statement, obtained through a public records request, was written by a deputy who said he witnessed the July 17 incident inside the courtroom. WRAL reported on July 24 that allegations Lewis had displayed the gun in court were referred to the North Carolina Judicial Standards Commission, but specifics about the incident – including Lewis' name – were attributed to "a source."

Deputy Blake Oldham's statement provides details of the alleged incident that weren't available when it was first made public.

Oldham wrote that Lewis was behind the bench around noon on July 17 during an open session of court when the judge took a holstered firearm from his pocket. As the two discussed firearms and holsters, Oldham said, Lewis removed the gun — described in the statement only as "small" — from its holster and said, "I love the LED on this."

Lewis then pointed the firearm in the direction of the courtroom clerk and activated its laser, according to Oldham.

"While waving the firearm around to show the laser's projection, the laser in fact scanned across the face of (the clerk), also meaning the barrel of the firearm did as well," Oldham wrote.

Oldham said Lewis apologized: "Oh, Sorry about that."

The Rant reached out to the North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts Tuesday seeking comment from Lewis and will update this story if he provides one.

The statement is undated. *The Rant* requested public records relating to the incident on July 24.

Lewis is a Republican who serves Lee, Harnett and Johnston counties and was first elected in 2024 without opposition. According to his campaign website, he served in the Air Force and became an attorney in 2013, prosecuting cases in Durham and Cumberland counties before his election to the bench.

Proceedings of the North Carolina Judicial Standards Commission are confidential under North Carolina law unless disciplinary action is taken. State law allows judges to carry firearms in courtrooms under certain conditions.

Commissioners reject attempts to pause data center project

By Richard Sullins
richard@rantnc.com

The Lee County Board of Commissioners turned back two separate attempts in August to slow down a proposal for a data center facility on Lower Moncure Road, rejecting calls from residents who packed a meeting demanding immediate action.

More than 150 people crowded into the county's meeting space, filling seats, aisles, and doorways as 21 speakers addressed commissioners over a two-hour public comment period.

Board Chair Samantha Martin, a Republican, opened the meeting by presenting a surprise resolution — not listed on the agenda and not shared with the press beforehand — urging the North Carolina General Assembly to "research and enact legislation for data centers of all sizes" to address construction and operational concerns statewide. Copies were to be sent to Sen. Jim Burgin and Rep. John Sauls.

But with the legislature nearing the end of its 2025–26 session and unlikely to take up new issues before the November elections, the resolution landed poorly. A visible wave of frustration swept through the room, followed by jeers.

"This resolution is just bullcrap," said Lower Moncure Road resident Donna Evenson. "You know it could be years before state government ever does anything. Y'all need to do something now."

MORATORIUM STOPPED COLD

A second attempt surfaced near the end of the meeting, after most of the crowd had left.

Eric Davidson, a Republican newcomer appointed last month to replace outgoing Commissioner Taylor Vorbeck, said he was struck by residents' concerns about constant noise from 24 hour data center operations and its potential effects on human health and wildlife.

"I'm wondering if there is a way, using the latest technologies, to mitigate those sounds while we do our research on setting standards that are appropriate," he said, before offering a motion to impose a 90-day moratorium on new data centers.

County Attorney Whitney Parrish advised that commissioners lacked authority to enact a moratorium without following state-mandated procedures.

"There are specific facts that have to be stated, there has to be a public hearing, there have to be notices published," she said. "Those things that have yet to be done prevent the board from voting on a moratorium this evening."

Davidson withdrew his motion.

RESIDENTS VOICE ANGER, FEAR AND FRUSTRATION

Speakers throughout the night reflected a mix of longstanding concerns and new anxieties. Ron Hewitt of Rosemont Lane said he and his wife moved to Lee County 50 years ago for its quality of life, which he feels has eroded as companies are recruited for reasons other than community benefit.

Eric Evenson accused local officials of keeping residents in the dark about a proposed 90-megawatt data center near Cummock, asking, "is there a secret government going on in Lee County?" Debbie Hall raised alarms about the Enbridge natural gas pipeline planned for eastern Chatham County, citing company literature linking the project to the proposed CyrusOne data center on Lower Moncure Road and plans to drill beneath Deep River.

But the most heated remarks came from Mark Mansfield, a third generation resident of Lower Moncure Road.

"You can end this thing right now by enacting a moratorium," he erupted as he pounded the podium. "I'm thinking about selling every damn thing I've got because of y'all. I know it's hard to wait."

Worth the Wait

Parent chronicles daughter’s softball journey in book

By Jonathan Owens
jonathan@rantnc.com

Like most travel ball parents, Carl Bryan spent a large part of the past 11 years waiting around.

Waiting for softball games to start. Waiting for his daughter, Carrie Ellen, after a game. Waiting for schedules so he could plan out the many trips he’d make each season.

He decided to put his idle time to good use, taking notes on his travels in the world of youth softball. He recently compiled those notes into his first book, “Softball Dad,” chronicling his family’s journey from tee ball to a college scholarship.

In the book, Dr. Bryan, a longtime educator and coach who taught and coached basketball at Central Carolina Community College and now works at Central Carolina Academy, details the eleven years he

spent hauling equipment bags and chasing tournaments from Kansas City to Colorado to Florida.

His daughter landed a scholarship, signing with Wingate University after an arduous and sometimes frustrating recruiting process that Bryan calls “the world’s longest job interview.” Not for him — for her.

“They’re literally advised and taught from a young age, if that’s their goal — mom and dad are to be out of it,” Bryan said. “You carry your own bag. You do this, you do that. Everything’s independent.”

The book isn’t just about softball. Bryan says it’s built around what he calls a “moral thermometer,” the idea that youth sports test a family’s character as much as any athlete’s swing.

A chapter is devoted to his wife, Wendy, and the cancer diagnosis that led doctors to advise against more biological children. The couple turned to international adop-



Carl Bryan signs copies of his book, “Softball Dad,” at a recent speaking event. His book is available at MonkeyKat Books in Sanford and online at Amazon.

tion and brought Carrie Ellen home from China before her first birthday.

“It’s an odd thing, if you pull the helicopter view back out, that cancer gave us Carrie Ellen,” Bryan said. “That’s crazy to say out loud. But what a blessing she’s been.”

Bryan also writes about smaller, stranger moments that come with being a Chinese daughter raised by white parents: mall security stopping him mid-scolding because a white man was seen pulling a crying Asian girl by the arm; hotel clerks doing a double-take when he and his daughter check-in. It reached a point where Carrie

Ellen kept baby photos on her phone just in case anyone ever asked whether he was really her dad.

Bryan says the book isn’t a how-to guide for landing a scholarship — it’s a guide, as he puts it, to surviving the travel-ball years with a family still intact.

“It’s a beach read,” he said. “I joke that it’s meant to be read between games.”

Bryan said proceeds from sales are going toward Carrie Ellen’s NIL fund at Wingate, and he is already at work on a sequel covering her college years.

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SLHS EMPLOYEE,
DEPUTY CHARGED IN
EMBEZZLEMENT CASE

Sanford police on Aug. 25 charged two people — one a former Southern Lee High School employee and the other a former Lee County sheriff’s deputy — on charges stemming from the embezzlement of nearly \$30,000 from the school.



Police charged both Brandi Wicker, 44, of Phil Johnson Road in Sanford, and Xavier Johnson, 29, of Spring Lake in connection with the embezzlement from Southern Lee, which the district reported to authorities in May.



Wicker faces a felony count of embezzlement and Johnson is charged with a felony count of receiving stolen goods. According to warrants on file at the Lee County Courthouse, Wicker is believed to have taken cash and made fraudulent Amazon purchases while employed at the school. The warrant against Johnson alleges he received \$5,780 in cash, which the warrant says was “the personal property of Southern Lee High School.” The warrant doesn’t say from whom he received the money.

The warrants list the date of offense for Wicker as Nov. 7, 2024 and Jan. 1, 2025 for Johnson.

Johnson was employed by the Lee County Sheriff’s Office as a school resource officer when the school reported the money missing on May 18. According to Lee County Government, that was the last day Johnson worked for the sheriff’s office.

— by Gordon Anderson



Carolina Indie Fest returns for its ninth iteration Sept. 25 and 26 in the beer garden at Hugger Mugger Brewing in downtown Sanford. Photo by Ben Brown

Indie Fest reveals its fall line-up

The ninth Carolina Indie Fest will come to Hugger Mugger Brewing in downtown Sanford on Sept. 25 and 26, bringing 10 acts from a variety of genres to the stage over two days.

The free music festival runs from 5 to 10 p.m on Friday, September 25 and 2:30 to 10 p.m. on Saturday, September 26 at Hugger Mugger, 229 Wicker St. The stage is situated in the beer garden area behind the brewery.

The event also features a full array of food trucks and craft vendors. For more information, visit www.carolinaindiefest.net.

The fall 2026 lineup is as follows:

□ **5 p.m. Friday – David Michael Miller:** A solo performance from the frontman of David Miller & the Other Sinners, Miller is known for a style of “southern soul” music comprised of “a sweet blend of blues/gospel/america/r&b.”

□ **6:15 p.m. Friday – Ghosts of Liberty:** An americana/folk rock act based in

the foothills of North Carolina, bringing together roots, blues, rock and soul influences.

□ **7:45 p.m. Friday – Trash Van Fever:** Billed as “the sonic folk music your parents warned you about,” Trash Van Fever hails from Pittsboro and plays “PunkGrass,” which they say is “a genre that roots-music lovers, punks, cowpokes, and rockers can all agree on.”

□ **9 p.m. Friday – Charlsee & Cam:** A husband and wife indie rock/americana duo blending country, blues, folk, and rock with a distinctive retro flair. “Their sound feels like the 60s had a baby with the 90s – dreamy, soulful, and just a little unconventional.”

□ **2:30 p.m. Saturday – The Pinkerton Raid:** Folk rock artist from Durham singing poetic songs about labor, COVID rent strikes, his family, the world, and “a fair number of songs about trees.”

□ **3:45 p.m. Saturday – Modern Moxie:** “Indie pop rock” led by multi-instrumentalist and singer Madison Lucas,

a songwriter who tends toward narrative, first-person experiences that are immediately relatable with catchy, memorable melodies.

□ **5 p.m. Saturday – Oort Patrol:** “Temporally ambivalent punk rock” hailing from Sanford and Cary. Oort Patrol’s songs cover urgent, important topics like time travel, aliens, and crushing bureaucracy. (Full disclosure: The Rant’s Gordon Anderson plays in Oort Patrol).

□ **6:15 p.m. Saturday – Julia:** “A funky five-headed beast from Raleigh” which combines surrealist psychedelic rock and funk.

□ **7:30 p.m. Saturday – Twurt Chamberlain:** A soulful vocalist and guitarist who plays a fusion of blues, rock and hip hop with a revolutionary sound driven by uplifting and positive lyrics.

□ **8:45 p.m. Saturday – DAZR:** Classic hard rockers from Greenville, S.C. playing songs with strong melodies, big riffs, and the kind of energy that connects with audiences from the first note.

STERIS to invest \$600M, create 335 new jobs

Manufacturer to build at Helix Innovation Park; marks largest project in county history

By Gordon Anderson
gordon@rantnc.com

Health care manufacturer STERIS will locate a new facility in Sanford, investing \$600 million in the local tax base and creating 335 jobs, state and local leaders announced Wednesday.

STERIS will locate its manufacturing and distribution Chemistries Manufacturing Center of Excellence at the Helix Innovation Park on Hawkins Avenue. The company will receive economic incentives — essentially a partial rebate for seven years on property taxes once fully paid — from both Sanford and Lee County governments.

The total value of the incentive package — approved by the Lee County Board

of Commissioners and the Sanford City Council in July, when the company's identity was still publicly unknown — is about \$24 million. If STERIS fails to meet the job creation metrics laid out by local government, the incentive agreement can be clawed back.

The tax base investment by STERIS, which provides “products and services that support patient care with an emphasis on infection prevention,” makes it the largest economic development project in Lee County history. Founded in 1985 and based in Ohio, the company employs more than 18,000 people at about 250 locations in more than 35 countries. The facility in Sanford will be a 600,000-square-foot campus for advanced manufacturing, R&D, lab, warehouse, and distribution operations.

Although salaries for the positions will vary, the average annual salary will be \$68,704, exceeding the Lee County average of \$59,903.

Reactions from local and state leaders:

□ Sanford Mayor Rebecca Wyhof Salmon: “Our city is thrilled to partner with a company so strategically focused on providing products and services that support patient care with an emphasis on infection prevention. This project brings significant capital investment and hundreds of good-paying new jobs. We have worked hard as a city to create a community that is both business-friendly and a place where company team members can live, work, and flourish, and this announcement validates that effort.”

□ Lee County Board of Commissioners Chair Samantha Martin: “While many smaller communities in our nation struggle to find good job opportunities, forcing some locals to search elsewhere for

work, Lee County is instead adding to its roster of high-quality employers. This announcement by STERIS is great news for this generation of job seekers, and a signal to all who come after that Lee County has strong prospects right here at home.”

□ Sanford Area Growth Alliance Board of Directors Chair and Sanford Contractors Senior Vice President Richard Oldham: “We are thrilled to welcome STERIS to Lee County. A healthcare manufacturing project of this scale, bringing more than 300 jobs and an investment of at least \$600 million, represents a significant opportunity for our community and local economy. STERIS’s decision to expand here also reflects Lee County’s growing presence in the life sciences industry and our continued attractiveness as a place to invest and do business. We look forward to seeing STERIS grow and thrive in Lee County for years to come.”

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**BROADWAY’S PERRELL
NAMED DISTRICT’S
TOP PRINCIPAL**

Lee County Schools named Wendy Perrell, principal of Broadway Elementary School, as the district’s Principal of the Year for 2026-2027. Perrell was recognized for her leadership, commitment to students and staff, and the role she has played in helping transform the culture and academic momentum at Broadway.

“I was definitely shocked as Dr. Dossenbach was reading out all the traits and qualities for this particular person. I never expected it to be me,” Perrell said, describing the moment she found out she had been voted to the award by her peer principals during Convocation. “I was very honored, but really my first thought was about Broadway. Yes, I walked up there. Yes, the award has my name on it. But the recognition goes to my team, the team in this building.”

Lee County Schools Superintendent Dr. Chris Dossenbach praised Perrell’s impact on the school. “In just a few short years, Mrs. Perrell has helped transform the feeling, focus, and academic momentum of Broadway Elementary. We are incredibly proud of her work.”

Under Perrell’s leadership, Broadway Elementary earned the Head of Class Award for the first time in school history and made significant gains in proficiency and growth on state testing.

— Lee County Schools

**FANN-SMITH
EARNS DISTRICT’S
TEACHER OF YEAR**

Courtesy of Lee County Schools

Lee County Schools announced Scott Fann-Smith, a fifth-grade teacher at Tramway Elementary School, as the 2026-2027 Lee County Schools Teacher of the Year. The award was revealed during a districtwide convocation ceremony in August prior to the start of the school year. The announcement came as a surprise to Fann-Smith, who described himself as someone who prefers working behind the scenes.

“Pure shock. I am not an in front of the crowd kind of guy. While I know in the back of my mind that it was deserved and I’m honored, I was definitely out of my comfort zone,” he said.

His recognition comes after a school year marked by unexpected challenges. Following the resignation of a fifth-grade teacher at the beginning of the second quarter, remaining classrooms, including Fann-Smith’s, absorbed additional students, increasing class sizes from 22 to 29 students. Despite the added demands, Fann-Smith remained focused on ensuring every student continued to learn, grow, and feel welcomed each day.

For Fann-Smith, teaching extends far



Scott Fann-Smith, a fifth-grade teacher at Tramway Elementary School, learns of his award as Lee County Schools’ Teacher of the Year during the district’s convocation ceremony in August.

beyond academics. His greatest hope is to instill resilience, character, and confidence in every student who enters his classroom.

“I hope students learn from me that it is ok to make mistakes. I hope they learn that it is ok to be challenged and not know an answer right away. Really, I hope they learn the significance of perseverance and to remember to be a good leader, a good friend, and a good person.”

Tramway Elementary Principal Andrea Profio said Fann-Smith embodies the qualities that define exceptional educators.

“Scott is the kind of teacher every principal prays they are hiring. He is humble,

servant-hearted, and unwavering in his commitment to students,” she said.

As the 2026-2027 Lee County Schools Teacher of the Year, Fann-Smith received a new GMC Terrain courtesy of Wilkinson Chevrolet Cadillac GMC. Wilkinson has partnered with Lee County Schools to provide a new car to the district’s Teacher of the Year for 23 consecutive years.

Fann-Smith also received a \$500 award from 3D Community Church and will serve as an ambassador for the district and represent Lee County Schools in the North Carolina Regional Teacher of the Year selection process.

East Lee’s Peace earns AVP honor

Courtesy of Lee County Schools

Jenee Peace, assistant principal at East Lee Middle School, has been named Assistant Principal of the Year for Lee County Schools, recognizing her servant leadership, commitment to students and staff, and dedication to creating a positive school culture.

The honor came as a surprise to Peace during the district’s Convocation last week. As Superintendent Dr. Chris Dossenbach described the qualities of an effective school leader, Peace said she

recognized many of the words, but did not realize he was speaking about her.

“I was floored,” Peace said. “I was listening to Dr. Dossenbach, and a lot of the words sounded familiar, like ‘being a total person’ ... that’s something we say at my church and how I try to lead.”

When her name was announced, Peace said, “It truly was a shock. It is just such a great honor to receive.”

Dossenbach praised Peace for understanding that school leadership is about more than schedules, data, and proce-



Jenee Peace has been with Lee County Schools since 2021.

CANDIDATE Q&A | 2026 ELECTION

Editor's Note: Answers received from candidates running for local and state offices are unedited. All candidates received equal opportunity to answer questions posed by The Rant.

LEE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

There are two contested races for the Lee County Board of Commissioners this fall. In District 2, which covers eastern and northern Lee County, Republican incumbent Kirk Smith, the board's chairman until mid 2026, faces unaffiliated write in candidate Jonathan Boyce. In District 4, which covers western Lee County, incumbent Republican Eric Davidson faces Democratic challenger Jamey Laudate. Davidson was appointed to the board to fill a vacancy; both he and Laudate are former members of the Lee County Board of Education.

Q: Introduce yourself, give your professional and educational background, and tell readers why you're the best candidate for the seat you're seeking. If you're an incumbent, describe some of the accomplishments you're proud of from your most recent term. If not, tell readers what you'll bring to the board that's currently lacking.

Jonathan Boyce: I'm Jonathan Boyce, running as a write-in candidate for Lee County Commissioner in District 2.



I never planned to run for office. But when I saw hard-working neighbors struggling to be heard about our county's future, I knew someone needed to step up.

Our county is changing fast, and the choices we make today decide our tomorrow. District 2 is special. From our working farms to the neighborhoods where we raise our children, we have a rural heritage worth protecting. We need leaders who take a calm, careful look at the facts before voting. If you elect me, I promise to study the details before making decisions, ask the tough questions others avoid, and keep you informed with honesty and common sense.

As an Unaffiliated candidate, I am not tied up in political noise. I can focus 100% of my energy on doing the actual work for you while never shying away from the hard conversations needed to protect our home.

I would be deeply honored to earn your write-in vote (fill in the oval and write in "Jonathan Boyce" on the line provided). Together, we can make sure our local government actually works for the people who live here.

Kirk Smith: My name is Kirk D. Smith, currently serving as the Lee County Commissioner for the 2nd District. I am a US Army combat veteran, First Sergeant (Retired) achieving a Master Parachutist Badge and recipient of the Bronze Star. I hold a bachelor's degree in history with the University of Maryland and master's degree in history from the University of Rhode Island. I have over 10 years teaching history at the high school and university level.



Oversaw the financing, planning, construction, and completion of a truly remarkable attraction, the Lee County Athletic Park (LCAP), our New Lee County Library, improvements of Horton, Kiwanis Children's, OT Sloan, and Temple Parks. Funded Cooperative Extension's Local Foods Coordinator overseeing the Farmer's Market at the new Pilgrim's Sanford Agricultural Marketplace. All improving and contributing to the quality of life in Lee County. Supported the purchase of the Magnetti Marelli plant for Central Carolina Community College to establish the E. Eugene Moore Manufacturing and Biotech Solutions Center, a one-of-a-kind facility on the east coast. Supported the incentives to attract Kyowa Kirin Pharmaceutical Company and the Health Care Company STERIS combining an investment of over \$1.1 billion in capital development bringing good paying jobs to Lee County.

Eric Davidson: My name is Eric Davidson, and I am asking for your vote and for the opportunity to represent you as a Lee County Commissioner for District 4. I believe government should be "of the people, by the people, and for the people." This idea is not original to me. Abraham Lincoln delivered this famous phrase on November 19, 1863, in his Gettysburg Address, following the Battle of Gettysburg. This quote emphasizes that political power originates from and serves the citizens. I believe in servant leadership, where government truly serves Lee County citizens and helps them achieve the best possible quality of life. I currently serve as the Commissioner representing District 4 on the Board of Commissioners, filling the unexpired term after your previous Commissioner resigned.



I resigned from the Board of Education near the end of my four-year term after being chosen to serve as the District 4 Commissioner until November 30, 2026. I have lived in Lee County for 40 years, so I know and understand our community. I will lead with common sense, character, commitment, collaboration, and Christian values. I have proven myself on the Board of Education and will continue to do so on the Board of Commissioners.

Jamey Laudate: My name is Jamey Laudate, I'm running for County Commissioner in District 4. I moved to Lee County 41 years ago in 1985, graduated from Lee County High School in 1994, attended NC State where I earned



a degree in Computer Science, and returned home to Lee County with my wife Kelli (also from Lee County) to raise our 3 children. I love Lee County unconditionally, and want to serve its residents. The people here and the county's character are truly special.

Professionally, I have a 25 year career with two Fortune 500 companies, and I currently manage a Software Development Team for SAS Institute, where I've been for 15 years. I've served on Lee County's Board of Education, coached middle school and high school golf teams, Served on NAF advisory boards for both high schools, and served as a deacon at First Baptist Church. While serving on the BOE, I was proud to hire a wonderful, home-grown superintendent — Dr. Chris Dossenbach. As chairman of the Facilities and Technology Committee, I worked to stabilize the technology budget and save Paul B. Gay stadium from demolition. Finally, I was proud to lead the charge and add Lee County Schools as a plaintiff on the lawsuit against Social Media platforms like Meta, X, and TikTok.

As commissioner, I'll bring a common-sense, data driven approach, focused on building Lee County for the Next Generation — with RESPONSIBLE growth, strong schools, and good jobs — that benefits our residents without sacrificing our resources and our character.

Q: For two consecutive years, the county manager has recommended a budget which increases property taxes. Twice now the board has held the line on taxes, paying for increased budgets using savings and money earmarked for debt service to pay for recurring expenses. This comes after a property revaluation that allowed the board to cut the property tax rate but still collect more from most property owners. What suggestions do

you have for the next year's budget that would result in neither a tax increase nor the spending of reserve funds on recurring expenses?

Boyce: Managing our county's budget is a balancing act. We want low taxes, but our growing community has real needs. I respect how hard our current board has worked to hold the line on taxes. Now, I want to build on that success with long-term strategies so we never have to just "hope" our savings last.

To keep taxes low and services strong, we must work smarter. Here is my plan:

- Track revenue closely to prevent budget crises before they happen.
- Review old county contracts to ensure taxpayers are getting the best deal.
- Have new businesses pitch in for the roads and services they use, so everyday taxpayers aren't stuck with the whole bill.
- Use the right technology in our county departments to get more done for less money.
- Most importantly, you deserve to know exactly where your hard-earned tax dollars go. When government explains the math clearly, it builds trust. I will bring a strong focus on clear facts and smart planning to keep our county financially healthy for generations to come.

Smith: During my tenure as Commissioner, the number one issue I receive the most criticism from citizens is our property tax rate. This has a dramatic effect on our growing fixed income community. The County Manager, as the experienced financial director for Lee County, has continued to advise the Board of Commissioners to increase the property tax to maintain our current and future expenses.

Earlier this year we had a surplus because we projected a 1% sales tax revenue increase for FY 2025-2026. We were able to direct this money to the Lee County School Board to partially cover a backlog of pay increases for the classified staff.

That said, we continue to see the growth in our retail sector. The redevelopment of the Riverbirch Shopping Center is attracting a Target as an anchor store with a yet named "new to market" grocery store, with the estimated \$60 million capital investment, compiling annual sales and property tax for Lee County estimates \$3 million. The LCAP is attracting out-of-town visitors thus increasing sales tax revenue at our local restaurants.

We have yet to factor the coming Ashby and Adams Village projects of mixed use residential and retail centers along the NC-87 corridor.

Davidson: People are concerned about high prices, which have forced many to make tough choices about how they spend their money. Disposable income isn't an option for many people, so local government must learn to operate within a fiscally conservative budget. Budgets include "wants" and "must-haves," and Commissioners must keep making hard decisions while finding the right balance without adding another expense for citizens by raising property taxes. And we can't keep spending from our reserves to fund recurring expenses.

One of the best things the Board of Education did immediately after selecting a new Superintendent was to authorize a Performance Audit. This action alone found about \$1 million that could be saved by implementing the audit's recommendations. I highly recommend the Board of Commissioners authorize a Performance Audit to determine how much can be saved of taxpayers' money, money that can fund the necessities in the budget. The Board must then ensure staff follows through on implementing the recommended changes in the County's operations. As we continue to add new businesses and industries that bring higher-paying jobs to Lee County, we can grow our tax base to the point where we can consistently reduce property taxes instead of raising them.

Laudate: Since we're currently spending from the county's savings account, cuts to programs will need to be made to keep the same tax rate. I think two things need to happen. First, I fully support the performance audit that has been proposed by the current commissioners. I think we need to be diligent and see how our spending compares to our neighboring counties and to other counties similar to us, and adjust spending where it doesn't align.

Second, if cuts from the audit don't go deep enough, then we'll have to have some hard conversations on what programs to keep and what to cut to balance the budget. In my conversations with constituents in District 4, they don't want to compromise on the services that they use... which are public safety/first responders, schools, and parks. These important services are needed when attracting new businesses (which will increase tax revenue without increasing the tax rate), and in turn build Lee County for the Next Generation.

Q: The Lee County Board of Education has signaled that the need for a new elementary school is on the horizon, and the need for new middle and high schools is likely to become apparent within the next decade. What is your plan for putting the county in a position to meet these needs as growth continues?

Boyce: We all agree our children deserve a great education. As our county welcomes new families, making sure we have enough space in our schools is essential.

We cannot wait until classrooms are overflowing to figure out how to build a new school. We must plan ahead, rather than waiting for a crisis.

Here is how we stay ahead of the curve:

- I will work side-by-side with our School Board, teachers, and business leaders to predict exactly where new families are moving so we can prepare right away.
- When new industries bring growth, they must be part of the solution. We need to guarantee our schools are ready before new development arrives.
- We shouldn't scramble to catch up. I will aggressively look for grants and fresh funding so the money is waiting the moment the School Board needs it.
- Our children's future is too important to leave to the last minute. By looking ahead, we can turn our county's growth into a huge win for our students and teachers.

Smith: The Board of Commissioners Capital Improvement Plan for 2026-2030 has future school projects beyond Fiscal Year 2029-2030, projecting \$51,700,440 for a new elementary school, \$61,077,412 for a new middle school, and \$31,398,575 for High School capacity expansion project.

Of course, inflation in the future could increase the projected construction costs. In the meantime, our private and charter schools provide a pressure valve on the pending student population increases. We should strive to grow our industrial and manufacturing base with the goal of providing 35% of our total tax revenue. The FY 2026-2027 annual public education portion that the county pays per student is \$2,522. The average single-family dwelling in Lee County pays annually \$1,558 in property taxes, not enough to cover the cost of one student living in the home.

This does not include the children living in the numerous apartment complexes throughout the City of Sanford. The County needs to expand our industrial base in order to reduce the impact of a potential tax rate increase necessary to meet future school needs.

Davidson: After four years on the Board of Education, I am certainly aware of the need for more classroom space in Lee County Schools. The process for a new elementary school has begun, as this has been identified as the greatest immediate need.

What most people don't consider is that from start to completion, a new school will take approximately two years, or more, to build, depending on everything progressing as anticipated. In the meantime, the Board of Education is looking at alternative and perhaps creative ways to find student space, teachers, staff, buses, etc. I believe the relationship between the Board of Education and the Board of Commissioners is much better than it was four years ago. Many people have been working to make this improvement, and there is on-going discussion to better understand the schools' needs and the challenges local government faces in providing money and resources.

We must keep working together for the good of our students and our community. I hope to be a helpful "bridge" for both Boards. Lee County's 2027-2031 Capital Improvement Plan was adopted June 15, 2026. This plan will guide Lee County Government's Capital Projects. The plan includes 11 projects for Lee County Schools. Funding is outlined in this plan.

Laudate: The residents of District 4 want schools they can trust. As chairman of the Facilities and Technology Committee from 2022-24, I'm very aware of the need for a new elementary school. Deep River Elementary and J. Glenn Edwards Elementary are bursting at the seams. I led the charge to get a new elementary school site added to the CIP in 2024, and commissioners approved funding for a new site... but later pulled funding mid-year. Middle schools and high schools have capacity, at least in the near term.

My core approach is one of fiscal responsibility for the residents of Lee County. For the middle schools, I'd prefer to enhance the current campuses and increase capacity if needed. At the high school level, Southern Lee was originally planned to have 3 wings, and only 2 were built... I'd prefer to expand Southern Lee (with an auditorium) vs. building a new high school campus. This would save the county money. As for funding, there are several state level grants available and our Board of Education has done everything they can to lobby for those grants to offset school construction costs. I think the county can be a better and more active partner in the Board of Education's lobbying efforts.

Q: Name two or three unexpected issues you think the Board of Commissioners may have to deal with in the next four years.

Boyce: Our county is growing fast, and my goal is to make sure we are fully prepared. To protect our home, we must get ahead of three big challenges:

Government decisions can be confusing, especially when we are talking about highly technical topics. I promise to break down complicated technical details and always educate on the "why" behind the choices we make.

Massive projects, like the proposed 11-building data center, change our community forever. We must protect the water we drink and the air we breathe. We must shield our neighborhoods from 24/7 noise and vibrations so you can sleep well at night. We must also enforce outside developers keeping their promises, ensuring our roads and power grids can handle the extra weight.

The economy has ups and downs. By planning for tough times today, we protect taxpayers from surprises tomorrow.

We do not need to fear growth, but we do need a steady hand at the wheel. By demanding accountability and keeping everything in the open, we can build a strong county our children will be proud to inherit.

Smith: Unexpected issues the Board of Commissioners may have to deal with in the next four years:

1) A Court Order demanding we reduce the overcrowding in our current jail by moving inmates to neighboring facilities or accelerating the building of a new Law Enforcement Center that combines the Sheriff Department and a Correctional Facility.

2) Any natural disaster on the scope of a hurricane, tornado, floods, or snowstorm that would cripple the County.

3) A manmade terrorist attack, or sabotage of our utilities on the level of the December 2022 attacks on Moore County electrical substations, or any major employer closing operations in Lee County creating severe economic disruption.

The primary responsibility of our Constitutional Republic is to protect life, liberty, and property. As a member of the Local Emergency Planning Commission and the Fire Advisory Board for nearly 12 years, I have the background and experience of working with our community partners to overcome any emergency challenges Lee County may face. We can only pray that GOD spare us such calamities.

Davidson: This is a tough question to answer because we don't have a crystal ball to show us what lies ahead. For example, we didn't know data centers, Flock cameras, or our animal shelter would be hot topics right now. I believe we must first be hyper-aware about what is going on in the world, in the United States, in North Carolina, and in areas surrounding Lee County. I will focus on listening and learning so that, as a Commissioner, I will be prepared to lead to the best of my ability. I am committed to being as transparent as possible with whatever the Board of Commissioners will be dealing with in the days ahead. I am pro-education, including workforce training and development. I am pro-smart growth, pro-business, and pro-environment. I am "A New Voice with a New Vision" for Lee County. I believe that as citizens and elected officials working together, we will not only survive, but thrive in the years and decades ahead. This formula has brought Lee County this far and will continue to help us face whatever lies in our future together. We are so much better together than we are apart. Here's to Lee County's future!

Laudate: The data center on Lower Moncure Road is certainly a hot topic, and will continue to be a hot topic for the foreseeable future. I fully support the data center moratorium put forth by Commissioner Reives. We need to get that UDO right and protect our residents and our resources as much as we legally can.

In addition, the first thing I hear from almost every resident I speak with is "growth is out of control." Government should represent the people and I think we need to re-evaluate our county's growth model and make sure we're growing in a way that is sustainable and responsible, and preserves what makes Lee County so special.

LEE COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION

Three at-large seats on the Lee County Board of Education are up in November. Republican incumbent Alan Rummel, first elected in 2022, is seeking re-election, and Republican incumbent Laura Stryffeler, who was appointed to the board upon the death of former member Marcus Mason, is seeking a full term. Former two term Democratic member Patrick Kelly and Republican Karla Koballa are also seeking seats.

Q: Introduce yourself, give your professional and educational background, and tell readers why you're the best candidate for the seat you're seeking. If you're an incumbent, describe some of the accomplishments you're proud of from your most recent term. If not, tell readers what you'll bring to the board that's currently lacking.

Patrick Kelly: My name is Patrick Kelly, and I was born and raised in Sanford, North Carolina. I grew up on a family farm and graduated from Lee Senior High School in 2003. I earned my undergraduate and master's degrees from Western Carolina University in 2007 and 2009.



I spent 14 years working in education and previously served two terms on the Lee County Board of Education, with my most recent term ending in 2024. I am also a volunteer firefighter and the owner of The Pint Sized Pasture, a local agritourism business. Most importantly, I am a parent of two children currently attending Lee County Schools.

My background gives me a unique perspective as an educator, former board member, business owner, community volunteer, and parent. I understand our school system from multiple sides and know both the progress we have made and the work that remains. I am seeking this seat again because I believe my experience, commitment to Lee County, and understanding of our schools will allow me to continue making thoughtful decisions that put students, staff, and our community first.

Karla Koballa: Karla Koballa did not respond to questions posed by *The Rant* in time for publication. If we receive answers beyond our deadline, we will include them in the online version of this candidate Q&A.



Alan Rummel: I'm Alan Rummel, a current member of the Lee County Board of Education. I spent nearly my entire adult life working at Caterpillar in various roles that translated very well

to board governance. While working, I earned an associate degree in Machining Technology from CCCC and a bachelor's degree in Industrial Technology from ECU.



There are several things I've been a part of on the Board that I'm very proud of. I helped bring in new district leadership with a renewed focus on student achievement. I worked with that leadership team and a diverse group from across the county to create the district's first strategic plan in more than 10 years.

I made the motion to bring in a third party to audit district performance, which led to millions of dollars in savings, streamlined operations, and more consistent instructional materials across the district. I championed initiatives to reduce student screen time, increase physical activity, and return to printed textbooks and workbooks to help students focus on learning.

I've also joined board members from across North Carolina to advocate for better education policies and funding formulas at the state level.

I'm excited for the opportunity to continue this work for another term.

Laura Stryffeler: I have been a resident of Lee County for 35 + years and raised 4 sons who completed K-12 here. My sons have gone on to complete undergraduate and graduate degrees. I have been a Pediatric Nurse Practitioner (PNP) for 20+ years caring for children and their families.



Working with this population, I see first hand the growth and development issues that occur and the impact of academics on these children.

My goal in being appointed to Marcus Mason's open position due to his untimely death, is to help the Lee County School Board work to improve and foster a thriving environment for children. I will also be on the ballot this fall for an open position on the School Board.

Q: Funding has continued to be a source of friction between the Lee County Board of Education and the Lee County Board of Commissioners. At what level should the county fund public education, and what actions would you take as a member of the school board to ensure that happens?

Kelly: County Commissioners have a difficult job of determining how to fund the many needs and priorities throughout Lee County. Those decisions are not always easy. The Board of Education faces many of the same challenges when determining how to best use the funding available while listening to the concerns and needs of teachers, staff, students, and families.

I believe Lee County should fund public education at a level that supports the actual needs of our schools while remaining responsible to taxpayers. The Board of Education also has a responsibility to carefully evaluate spending, prioritize needs, and be able to clearly explain where funding is going and why it is necessary.

As a school board member, I would work to strengthen communication between the Board of Education and County Commissioners throughout the year, not just during budget season. Both boards serve the same community, and neither will always get everything it wants. Open communication, transparency, and a willingness to work together are essential to making responsible decisions that provide our schools with the resources they need while respecting the county's other obligations.

Koballa: No response.

Rummel: When I joined the Board in late 2022, I took over the Finance Committee, which has now been rolled into the Operations Committee. I presented the school system's funding request to the County Commissioners twice and strongly advocated for additional funding, particularly to address local cost-of-living increases.

Although I wasn't successful in securing the full requested increases, we did receive greater funding increases than in previous years, when the Board and administration took a much softer approach to those requests.

I'm not satisfied with where we are, but there's no doubt that the relationship between the two boards is in much better shape than when I started. Commissioners also have better and more complete information about the state of the school system and the reasons behind our increased funding requests.

Given another term, I'll make sure we continue to refine our budget requests using relevant data to demonstrate to the Commissioners that what we're asking for is justified and necessary.

Stryffeler: In order to help Lee County schools meet their ongoing obligations to provide a basic education to our children, it is imperative that the School Board work with the Lee County Board of Commissioners to help align planning and monies to meet the demands of our growing county population. Only through open dialogue can we hope to meet the challenges this community has and will have in the future.

Q: Lee County is growing fast - faster even than many in recent years have been predicting. What steps do you think the school board should take to address needs in the public education space, both in the short term and the long term?

Kelly: Lee County's rapid growth is creating significant challenges for our infrastructure, and our schools are not the only area feeling the

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impact. Emergency services, roads, utilities, and other county resources are also being stretched. We have to be proactive about future growth while also being reactive to the challenges that are already here.

I know there are plans underway for new schools and a new bus garage, and those are important steps. But we also have to ask, "What's next?" Where will the next areas of growth be? Do our current schools have the capacity to handle additional students? What will our staffing, transportation, and facility needs look like five or ten years from now?

The school board needs to work closely with County Commissioners, planning officials, and other county leaders so that school needs are considered as Lee County continues to develop.

We cannot wait until schools are overcrowded or resources are stretched beyond capacity before responding. We need a long-term plan that is regularly reviewed and adjusted as growth occurs, while also addressing the immediate needs that growth has already created.

Koballa: No response.

Rummel: After completing an internal enrollment projection using information from the County Planner that was mostly ignored, the Board contracted with ITRE at NC State to conduct a similar study in hopes that independent data would be more trusted by the County Commissioners.

We've used that study to inform our long-term capital spending request, including the need for additional schools. We should be building an elementary school right now, but we're not. With a lead time of roughly three years from initial funding approval to opening the doors, we will have to purchase several mobile units to expand elementary capacity while we wait for approval to build a school.

Whether I'm re-elected or not, I'll continue to shout from the rooftops that our county is growing and our school system needs additional capacity to handle that growth. Waiting until our schools are overcrowded to act is simply too late.

Stryffeler: From recent projections there is approximately 16,000 new homes/dwellings that are in progress or soon to be in progress. This rapid growth in our area requires planning in 1 yr, 3 year, 5 year, and more predictions on our infrastructure, zoning, schools and community needs. Commissioners, Zoning boards, Health Departments, Social community structure, Businesses, Schools and School Board, etc will be impacted by recent historical events in the growth of our city/county and whether adequate forethought to this rapid growth was planned for appropriately. We must take inventory of what is working and what is not working and make corrective actions going forward. The team of people must not function in silos but work across groups to help this community to grow appropriately for its taxpayers.

Q : Both private and charter schools have proven popular locally, which has relieved some of the pressure traditional public schools face with regards to capacity. But private school vouchers and charter school funding have been demonstrated to direct tax dollars away from the traditional public school system. Do you believe traditional public schools should come first when it comes to education funding? Why or why not?

Kelly: Traditional public schools have a responsibility that is different from other educational options because they are required to serve every student who walks through their doors, regardless of ability, background, or circumstance. Because of that responsibility, we must ensure our public schools have the funding necessary to provide every student with a quality education.

I am not against school choice. I respect a parent's right to choose the educational setting they believe is best for their child. However, if public tax dollars are funding those choices, I believe there should be equal funding and equal

accountability for how those dollars are spent and for the educational outcomes we expect.

My concern is making sure school choice does not come at the expense of adequately funding traditional public schools. Lee County Schools must maintain facilities, transportation, specialized programs, qualified staff, and services for a diverse student population.

As a school board member, my responsibility would be to advocate for Lee County Schools and ensure our students and employees have the resources they need, and expecting accountability wherever public education dollars are spent.

Koballa: No response.

Rummel: I think private and charter options provide healthy competition that helps ensure the traditional public school system is operating at its best. My concern is that traditional public schools operate under stricter rules than their charter and private counterparts, putting them at a competitive disadvantage.

For example, charter schools have greater

spending flexibility and can choose to direct more funding toward salaries for recruitment. They also are not required to have every teacher licensed; state law requires only 50% of their teachers to hold teacher licenses. Traditional school systems also have responsibilities for identifying and providing certain services to eligible students with disabilities attending private schools within the district.

I'm not advocating against school choice. I'm advocating for a level playing field on which to compete. Regarding private-school vouchers, I liken the program to government-backed student loans for college.

When taxpayer money became widely available for higher education, tuition increased dramatically. I'm concerned we're creating a similar incentive in K-12 private education, where increasing taxpayer subsidies can contribute to increasing tuition rather than simply making existing tuition more affordable.

Stryffeler: It is my belief that parents are the ones to choose where their child(ren) should attend school. With public, charter and private school competition, it behooves the public schools to publicize why parents should select this choice and what the schools are doing to prepare our children for their adult lives. North Carolina has much work to do, as currently we are in the bottom rankings for per pupil funding, 46th in teacher pay and so we have to include our legislators, community boards to continue planning and fighting to improve our schools for teachers, support staff and our students. Lee County's rapid growth is creating significant challenges for our infrastructure, and our schools are not the only area feeling the impact. Emergency services, roads, utilities, and other county resources are also being stretched. We have to be proactive about future growth while also being reactive to the challenges that are already here.

I know there are plans underway for new schools and a new bus garage, and those are important steps. But we also have to ask, "What's next?" Where will the next areas of growth be? Do our current schools have the capacity to handle additional students? What will our staffing, transportation, and facility needs look like five or ten years from now?

The school board needs to work closely with County Commissioners, planning officials, and other county leaders so that school needs are considered as Lee County continues to develop.

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STATE HOUSE

In the race for District 51 of the North Carolina House of Representatives, Republican Charles Taylor, currently a member of the Sanford City Council, faces unaffiliated business owner April Montgomery. They are vying to replace Republican incumbent John Sauls, who has held the seat since 2016 but is not seeking re-election. There is no Democrat in the race. House District 51 includes all of Lee County and part of Moore County. Both Taylor and Montgomery are from Lee County.

Q : Introduce yourself, give your professional and educational background, and tell readers why you're the best candidate for the seat you're seeking. If you're an incumbent, describe some of the accomplishments you're proud of from your most recent term. If not, tell readers what you'll bring to the board that's currently lacking.

April Montgomery: I was born in Florida, earned a BA in History from Florida State University, and an MA in Urban and Regional Planning from the University of Florida. I moved to North Carolina in 1999 and have been a registered unaffiliated voter ever since. I married my husband, David, in 2000, and we moved to Sanford in 2003 when he was hired as the city's Downtown Development Director. We have three sons, ages 22, 20, and 16.

I'm running to give voters in this district — the majority of whom are unaffiliated, like me — a candidate who answers to them, not to a party. I intend to work from the middle, focused on compromise and solutions rather than blame. North Carolinians deserve a government that functions: one that delivers services efficiently and lets communities grow according to their own values.

If elected, my priorities will be affordability — including electric rates, childcare, and housing costs — along with restoring and increasing funding for public education. I'll also push for infrastructure investment in our district and others like it, particularly small to medium-sized cities and rural areas, and for economic development that raises wages and grows our tax base sustainably.

Charles Taylor: Eagle Scout 1987. 1991 Graduate of Campbell University BA Communications, Print Journalism. TV Producer August, 1988-Present Major Collegiate and Professional Sporting Events

Work includes: Apple TV, Raycom Sports, Fox Sports, Fox Sports South,



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CBS, NBC, ESPN, Comcast, CW as well as regional and local distribution. Various Roles in Manufacturing Including Global Market Manager (3M), Sales, Media and Lobbyist roles at Static Control Components 1993-2016.

I have been blessed to serve the citizens of Sanford as a City Councilman since 2007. At the midway point of my fifth term, I have served several roles including Mayor Pro Tempore as well as liaison roles including ABC Board, Parks Commission, Opioid Task Force, S3 Connect which I was one of the three founders.

I have served 5 terms as Chair of the Sanford-Lee County Joint Planning Commission where I was instrumental in leading a rewrite of UDO and Land Use Plan for Lee County. Appointed to North Carolina State Mining & Energy Commission (2012) Chair-Local Government Study Group North Carolina State Mining & Energy Commission CUOC board of directors 2023-2025.

Q: What are some unique issues that Lee County faces and can be addressed in the state legislature, and what do you propose to do about them?

Montgomery: Growth. Growth is constant in this district, and North Carolina is too diverse for a one-size-fits-all approach to land use. In 2024, the General Assembly passed SB 382, limiting local governments' ability to "down-zone" property — also constraining farmland preservation, agricultural conservation districts, and watershed protections. This is an example of what our legislature should NOT be doing. Local governments need the tools to manage growth in ways that reflect their communities' values.

Infrastructure. Growth strains roads, electric supply, water, sewer, and fiber. State funding should prioritize infrastructure that supports density in already-developed areas, not new roads, water, and sewer lines pushing growth into rural areas — making better use of existing infrastructure and preserving the rural character our communities value.

Affordability. The cost of living here has outpaced wages, and it's harder to make ends meet. Electric rates keep rising — the legislature oversees how our monopoly utility sets rates, and we need to ensure it isn't prioritizing shareholders over ratepayers. Quality, affordable childcare is hard to find, and housing costs are out of hand. As a parent of young adults, I worry whether my own kids will be able to start a life here.

Taylor: We need to have smart growth and greater affordability for our citizens and businesses. The way we address it is strategic planning, solicit community input and work closely with local elected officials to develop that plan that works for everyone.

We also need to develop growth and retention programs for the manufacturing sector — not just recruitment for new companies. Let's deepen the value proposition work with current manufacturing base to bring vendor support to our community. Currently the State Department of Commerce

does not have a retention program. I would work to develop a program not only tied to retention but growth to support our current manufacturing base.

We need to bring attention highlighted by the recent activity of youth crime and develop programs that keep 17-year-olds engage in school and not start the pattern of a lifetime of crime. That may mean a change in the age of youth crime statutes.

Q: Lee County is home to North Carolina's top recipient of state-funded education vouchers, and the General Assembly has only continued to expand the program which directs tax dollars to private educational institutions. Do you believe public dollars belong in public schools?

Montgomery: Yes, public dollars belong in public schools. Looking at how the voucher program has evolved, it reads less like students have gained more choice and more like schools are choosing their students.

All three of our boys have attended Lee County public schools — two have graduated and were well prepared for their futures, and our youngest is a junior at Lee Senior. Over 18 years in the school system, I've seen the impact of stripping funding from public schools and diverting it to schools not required to meet the same standards.

Public schools are required to take all students, administer state testing, and employ certified staff. Private schools receiving voucher money aren't held to those standards, yet they're funded the same way — including virtual schools, which get the same per-student dollar amount as schools providing transportation, classrooms, in-person instruction, cafeterias, and extracurricular activities. That's a for-profit scheme at our children's expense.

Our legislature should stop doubling down on vouchers and refocus on public education that meets students where they are and prepares them for productive lives in our community.

Their priorities show: North Carolina ranks top 5 in business and growth — and 46th in teacher pay. That's not an accident. It's a choice. We can do better.

Taylor: I 100% support excellence in public schools and I also support parents having a choice in where they send their kids to school. I believe that public dollars should be directed to schools that support children's educational excellence. Private schools have helped relieve school overcrowding regionally.

I support equal funding for children as well as parents' rights to choose the school program and environment that is best for their children.

I will engage and work for adequate funding for all areas of education, public or private. Children are not a political football to be used to get votes, I value them, and I will work for them and for their futures. Let us work together to do what is best for the student.

Lastly, we need to fully fund public teachers' pay raises throughout their career so we don't lose good teachers. We should be working together for the

best interests of children as they are the future of our community. I will not engage in attempts to pit private schools against public schools. Children are children, and should be equally valued, regardless of where they attend school.

STATE SENATE

In the race for District 12 of the North Carolina Senate, incumbent Republican Jim Burgin faces Democratic challenger Tanya White Anderson in a rematch of the 2024 race. Senate District 12 includes all of Lee and Harnett counties, and part of Sampson County. Both Anderson and Burgin are from Harnett County.

Q: Introduce yourself, give your professional and educational background, and tell readers why you're the best candidate for the seat you're seeking. If you're an incumbent, describe some of the accomplishments you're proud of from your most recent term. If not, tell readers what you'll bring to the board that's lacking.

Tanya Anderson: I am Tanya White Anderson, Democratic candidate for North Carolina Senate District 12. I am a U.S. Army veteran, retired federal employee, former educator, labor advocate, mother and grandmother with more than 42 years of public service. I hold a Master of Arts in Human Resources from Webster University, a Bachelor of Science in Psychology with honors from Campbell University, and associate degrees in Paralegal Studies and Arts. My career has included service in the Army, the U.S. Postal Service, teaching, labor representation and community leadership.

As a non-incumbent, I will bring practical experience, accessibility and accountability. I have worked inside the systems legislators make decisions about and understand how those decisions affect workers, veterans, families and students. I believe public service means listening before legislating, communicating with constituents and being present in the communities you represent. District 12 deserves a senator who will ask hard questions, work across differences when possible, and put the needs of Harnett, Lee and Sampson County residents ahead of political convenience.

Jim Burgin: Jim Burgin did not respond to questions posed by *The Rant* in time for publication. If we receive answers beyond our deadline, we will include them in the online version of this candidate Q&A.

Q: What are some unique issues that Lee County faces and can be addressed in the state legislature, and what do you propose to do about them?

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Anderson: Lee County is experiencing rapid growth, and the state must help ensure infrastructure and public services keep pace. Schools, roads, housing, childcare, water and sewer systems are all under pressure. Data centers are an immediate concern. The proposed Lower Moncure Road project would include a 300,000-square-foot facility with a 90-megawatt IT load. Residents deserve transparent information about electricity demand, water use, noise, backup generators, environmental impacts, tax incentives, infrastructure requirements and who ultimately pays those costs.

As senator, I would push for clear statewide standards for large-load developments, meaningful public participation, transparent energy and water planning, and protections against shifting major infrastructure costs onto residential customers.

I would also fight for Lee County's fair share of school-construction funding. The county sought \$44 million from the state for a needed new elementary school and was denied. We also need competitive educator pay, affordable childcare and housing, transportation investment, and strong support for Central Carolina Community College, career and technical education, and apprenticeships. Growth should create opportunity for Lee County residents without sacrificing affordability, resources or quality of life.

Burgin: No response.

Q: Lee County is home to North Carolina's top recipient of state-funded education vouchers, and the General Assembly has only continued to expand the program which directs tax dollars to private educational institutions. Do you believe public dollars belong in public schools?

Anderson: Yes. Public education dollars should first meet North Carolina's constitutional responsibility to provide strong public schools for every community. I respect parents' right to choose the educational setting that works best for their children. But when taxpayer dollars support private-school tuition through Opportunity Scholarships, taxpayers deserve accountability and transparency.

Lee County makes the issue especially important. Grace Christian School in Sanford received \$5.13 million in Opportunity Scholarship funding in 2024-25. Separately, Lee County Schools requested \$44 million from the state's Needs-Based Public School Capital Fund toward a needed new elementary school and was denied. These are different funding programs, but the contrast raises a fair question about the state's priorities. I support restoring a stronger needs-based focus to vouchers, nondiscrimination protections, academic and admissions transparency, and safeguards against tuition increases simply absorbing larger public subsidies.

Charter schools should not be confused with voucher-funded private schools. North Carolina charter schools are public, tuition-free schools. I support educational choices, but choice cannot become an excuse for the state to neglect the public schools that must serve every child.

Burgin: No response.



EVENT CALENDAR

SEPT 10-27

'1776' RETURNS TO TEMPLE THEATRE

Celebrate 250 years of American Independence with the Temple Theatre mainstage production of 1776 to kick off the 2026-27 season. Witness the “obnoxious and unlikeable” John Adams attempt to ignite a revolution in the Tony Award-winning musical that breathes fire into American history. Ticket info at templeshows.org.

SEPT 5: Grow and Flow Yoga at Kiwanis Park runs from 10 to 11 a.m. This free and rejuvenating yoga session will help you stretch, strengthen and center yourself in peaceful surroundings.

SEPT 6: Hugger Mugger Brewing will host Yoga & Beer from 11 a.m. to noon. Join Sanford Yoga & Community Center for yoga in the quiet of the beer hall the first Sunday of every month and finish it off with a beer among friends.

SEPT 11: Tuesday Night Music Club will perform at The Smoke & Barrel in downtown Sanford at 8:30 p.m.

SEPT 12: An “extra special” day at the Sanford Farmer’s Market as “Art Meets Ag” presents a variety of family-fun activities involving food, art, dance, music and more, all centered around celebrating local foods and agriculture. The market runs from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Pilgrim’s Sanford Agricultural Marketplace in downtown Sanford.

SEPT 12: The 2026 North Carolina Enchanted Sweetheart state pageant will be held at the Mann Center for the Arts at 10 a.m.

SEPT 13: Second Sunday concerts at Kiwanis Park is free outdoor concert series held on the second Sunday of each month during the



spring and fall at Kiwanis Family Park. Live music starts at 5 p.m.

SEPT 14: Join Gabby Murillo, Reiki master and meditation expert, for Meditations on the Mat at 7 p.m. at Seva Yoga in downtown Sanford.

SEPT 14: Hugger Mugger Brewing will host its monthly Bier Garten Garden Club from 6:30 to 8 p.m. Turn that black thumb of death into a green, thriving thumb with their club led by Lee County’s NC Cooperative Extension office. These meetings are free and open to the public.

SEPT 16-20: The Lee Regional Fair marks the official kick-off of fall in Sanford and Lee County. Learn more about this year’s event at leeregionalfair.com.

SEPT 18: 80’s Unleashed will perform at Smoke & Barrel in downtown Sanford at 9 p.m.

SEPT 20: Quarters for CARA will be held from 3-6 p.m. at the Stevens Center. The event is a blend of auction/raffle/shopping party where you bid quarters to win prizes. Proceeds

benefit Carolinas Animal Rescue & Adoption in Sanford.

SEPT 25: Next Stop Comedy comes to Wild Dogs Brewing at 8 p.m. Each show features a novel line-up with acts seen on TV and heard on your favorite podcasts.

SEPT 25-26: Carolina Indie Fest is a free, two day music festival celebrating all original indie music in downtown Sanford. Hosted by Hugger Mugger Brewing, the festival features 10 bands, dozens of crafty vendors, food trucks and more. Every festival features the release of at least one brand new fest beer. Info on bands and more can be found on the festival website or Facebook page.

SEPT 26: Carolina Veterinary Hospital in Sanford will host Mutts, Makers & More Fest returns from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. for a day filled with vendors, food, handmade treasures, community spirit and adorable pets. \$10 rabies vaccines will be available for those who bring their pets.

SEPT 26: “Art Meets Ag” at the Sanford Farmer’s Market presents

a variety of family-fun activities involving food, art, dance, music and more, all centered around celebrating local foods and agriculture. The market runs from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Pilgrim’s Sanford Agricultural Marketplace in downtown Sanford.

SEPT 27: The Celebrate You Expo runs from 1 to 5 p.m. at Luminaries (200 Independent Drive in Sanford). Meet local vendors, explore the latest trends, and get expert advice to help plan your dream event. Reserve a spot at eventbrite.com.

OCT 2: Rec & Rhythm: An All-Star Celebration is a community-wide evening dedicated to honoring the volunteer coaches who build, encourage and inspire Lee County’s young athletes. This high-energy event features live music, family-friendly activities, youth sports recognitions and a fun festival atmosphere. The night brings together families, athletes, and the community to celebrate the spirit of teamwork, service and play. Event runs from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the Lee County Athletic Park in Sanford.

OCT 4: Calling all alumni of the former Sanford High School, Sanford Junior High School and West Sanford Middle School ... join them for Alumni Day 2026 from 1:30 to 4 p.m. Everyone is invited to this event whether you attended the school as a teacher or student, as a family member, or a passionate supporter of the community. Learn More and RSVP: manncenterarts.org/alumni/

OCT 10: Downtown Sanford Streetfest returns with a celebration of art, music, entertainment, food and more. Held the second Saturday of October every year.

OCT 10: Chris Cole will perform at The Smoke & Barrel in downtown Sanford at 8:30 p.m.

OCT 10: The 2026 Triple Crown Charity Car Show will run from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Dennis A. Wicker Civic Center. 1) Just like 2025, the show will feature three classes: Automotive Legends Exhibit — 31 Legendary Vehicles displayed inside of the climate-controlled main hall civic center. 2) Selects Display — 30 special vehicles that represent the best restored and custom built vehicles in the area. 3) Open Class Car Show — Open to all makes and models of cars, trucks, motorcycles and more. Anyone with a vehicle can drive in, make a \$20 charitable donation, park their vehicle and have it judged by knowledgeable judges.

OCT 11: Second Sunday concerts at Kiwanis Park is free outdoor concert series held on the second Sunday of each month during the spring and fall at Kiwanis Family Park. Live music starts at 5 p.m.

OCT 15: Downtown Sanford will host Third Thursday Downtown Trick or Treating from 5 to 7 p.m. Downtown Sanford will transform into a Halloween haven for families and little ghouls alike.

OCT 15-NOV 1: Little Women will be featured on the Temple Theatre main stage. Experience the soaring melodies and heart-wrenching jour-

ney of the March sisters as they navigate the trials of the American Civil War and the triumphs of finding their own voices. Ticket information at templeshows.org.

OCT 16: Colby Jack & The High Lifes will perform live at The Smoke & Barrel in downtown Sanford at 8:30 p.m.

OCT 17: Sanford Parks hosts Honey Talk with Jody at 11 a.m. at Kiwanis Park's shelter. Master Beekeeper Jody Moore will share how Sanford produces its honey and teach fascinating facts about these important pollinators. After the session, stick around for a bee-themed craft to take home. Event is free.

OCT 23: Erik Hawks will perform at The Smoke & Barrel in downtown Sanford at 8:30 p.m.

TUESDAYS: Hugger Mugger Brewing hosts Trivia Night with Trivia Master Zach at 7 p.m. every Tuesday night. Admission is free, and prizes await the winners.

WEDNESDAYS: 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.

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

SATURDAYS: Every Saturday night, the stage at Wild Dogs Brewing in downtown Sanford comes alive with incredible live music, featuring local talent and touring acts.

SATURDAYS: The Sanford Farmers' Market runs through Nov. 21 at the new Pilgrim's Sanford Agricultural Marketplace at 157 Charlotte Avenue in downtown Sanford. The market is dedicated to providing space for local food producers to connect with the community.



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

CROSSWORD: Back to School

- ACROSS**
- 1. Eye affliction
 - 5. Mowgli to Raksha in "The Jungle Book"
 - 8. Cured pork product, pl.
 - 12. *Every lap you run in gym class completes one
 - 13. Ripped
 - 14. Throw up
 - 15. Mythological ship
 - 16. Agitate
 - 17. Like worthless promise
 - 18. *Go to the ____'s office"
 - 20. Hatchling's home
 - 21. Wasted on the young?
 - 22. "Amazing!"
 - 23. *____ Core, academic stan-
 - 26. *Rock N'Roll High School" band
 - 30. Be obliged
 - 31. Orange ____ tea, pl.
 - 34. Of low density
 - 35. Earthenware pots
 - 37. Farm layer
 - 38. Bagpipes sound, in Scot-
 - 39. Vessel's "spine"
 - 40. "Mary, Mary quite contrary" place
 - 42. Radio knob, abbr.
 - 43. Blended family family member
 - 45. Trotters
 - 47. Owned
 - 48. San Diego baseballer
 - 50. Castle defense
 - 52. *a.k.a. lunch room

- 56. "____ little cubby all stuffed with fluff"
- 57. Knight's breastplate
- 58. Bit of smoke
- 59. Willow twig
- 60. Pub arrow
- 61. Popular street-lining trees
- 62. Post-deductions amount
- 63. Opposite of WSW
- 64. Somebody ____

- DOWN**
- 1. Dueler's blow
 - 2. Unit of pressure
 - 3. Jellystone Park denizen
 - 4. Amerigo to America
 - 5. *Plagiarize, technically speak-
 - 6. Heep of "David Copperfield"
 - 7. *School signaling device
 - 8. *Unwelcome load
 - 9. Current unit, pl.
 - 10. Catcher's catcher
 - 11. Chester White's home
 - 13. Three in one
 - 14. Animal toxin
 - 19. Poultry houses
 - 22. "It ____ a dark and stormy night..."
 - 23. Too many in the kitchen?
 - 24. Baby owl
 - 25. Free-for-all
 - 26. Tear
 - 27. Lacking guile
 - 28. Baseball fielding mistake
 - 29. "She ____ sea shells..."
 - 32. *____ Academy, online study aid
 - 33. " ____ the land of the free..."
 - 36. *Reading building blocks
 - 38. Stall call
 - 40. *Character in Greek Mythol-
 - 41. Firstborn
 - 44. Nymph chaser
 - 46. Diminutive
 - 48. Like nature worshipping, e.g.
 - 49. Flamb
 - 50. Dante's Beatrice, e.g.
 - 51. Passing mention
 - 52. Relinquish
 - 53. Small brook
 - 54. Doctrines
 - 55. Part of church
 - 56. *Unit in measurement and weight math lessons

CROSSWORD

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