



JC Smith football kicks off spring practice next week. Here's what to look for.

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JON STRAYHORN

Wisdom and Cherie Jzar of Deep Roots CPS Farm hand out produce at First Baptist Church West as part of the Westside Wellness Collab. The collaboration received a \$2.4 million donation from CVS Health Foundation.

Nonprofits join forces for a healthier Historic West End

CVS Health Foundation donates \$2.24 million to Westside Wellness Collab

By Herbert L. White
herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

A nonprofit collaboration is widening access to health resources in Historic West End.

The CVS Health Foundation donated \$2.24 million to the Westside Wellness Collab as part of its Health Zone initiative. The local program led by Local Initiatives Support Corporation Charlotte expands access to health care, healthy food and support for people dealing with chronic conditions.

Health Zones bring together health

care providers and community organizations to make it easier for people to connect with essential services including primary care and healthy food options. The goal is to address real life challenges that affect health and help people get the care and resources they need.

"Families deserve access to quality care, healthy food and the support networks that make long term wellness possible," Jenny McColloch, president of the CVS Health Foundation said in a statement. "Our support helps strengthen the Historic West End's existing network of

trusted organizations and gives residents connected care that is accessible, community centered and designed around their day-to-day needs."

The donation will provide program funding for collaborators Care Ring, Charlotte Community Services Association and Deep Roots Farm Foundation, which operates a family-owned farm in west Charlotte. The partners will provide access to social service and health programming from a centralized hub at First Baptist Church West, 1801 Oaklawn
Please see **NONPROFITS** | 2A

Stein again calls for pause on tax cuts

By Ahmed Jallow
NC NEWSLINE

Gov. Josh Stein warned Monday that North Carolina could face a \$3.5 billion budget shortfall within two years, with public education likely to take the largest hit.

Speaking at an education conference hosted by BEST NC, Stein said the projected gap is tied to tax cuts approved in prior years that are set to continue.

He urged lawmakers to halt those cuts, saying they are reducing state revenue as the population grows and demand for services increases.



Stein

"Three and a half billion is real money," Stein said. "It's the equivalent of firing 35,000 teachers."

The \$3.5 billion estimate is based on the state's most recent 2025 state budget update released by the Office of State Budget and Management. It projects a revenue gap of \$2.5 billion to \$4 billion starting in the 2027-28 fiscal year. The shortfall is driven in part by automatic income tax cuts set to lower the personal rate to 3.49% in 2027. Under current law, income tax rates are set to drop automatically if revenue targets are met.

"This gap exists not because of any new programs," Stein said. "It exists because of the difference between shrinking revenues and

Please see **GOV. STEIN** | 2A

Court justices skeptical on late mail-in ballots

By Jonathan Shoman
STATELINE

The U.S. Supreme Court's conservative justices appears skeptical of the validity of mail-in ballots that arrive after Election Day, in a case that could potentially affect hundreds of thousands of voters during the upcoming midterm elections.

The high court heard arguments on whether federal law overrides a Mississippi law that requires mail-in ballots that are postmarked on or before Election Day to be counted as long as they arrive within five business days of the election. Fourteen states have similar laws, which extend a "grace period" to ballots that arrive through the mail after polls close.

Several conservative justices raised concerns with allowing ballots to arrive after Election Day, including whether voters could recall ballots once they've shipped them but before they arrive at election offices. Justice Brett Kavanaugh questioned whether late-arriving ballots risk undermining election confidence.

"The longer after Election Day any significant changes in vote totals take place, the greater the risk that the losing side will cry the election has been stolen," Kavanaugh said, quoting from an analysis by a New York University law professor.

The case comes before the Supreme Court at a moment of broader attacks against mail-in voting. Four Republican-led states eliminated their ballot arrival grace

Please see **COURT** | 2A

'Wandering officers' widespread across NC police agencies

By Lucas Thomae
CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS

In 2015, Mark Oakley, then an officer with the Roanoke Rapids Police Department, slammed a detainee at the Halifax County jail to the ground, then "tased him" while the man was "in handcuffs and posed no threat," according to a civil lawsuit later filed against Oakley.

An officer who is found to have used excessive force against an unarmed person risks losing his career in law enforcement. That didn't happen in this case.

The incident sparked an internal investigation, and the Roanoke Rapids police chief at the time would later tell attorneys that he was prepared to terminate Oakley for misconduct. However, Oakley resigned before that investigation concluded.

He would go on to work at three more law enforcement agencies over the next eight years, until eventually he landed in nearby Warren County at the Warrenton Police Department, which fired him in March 2024 following an SBI investigation into multiple complaints of Oakley unnecessarily deploying his Taser on civilians.

Before Oakley used the stun gun on them, all three individuals named in the lawsuit were "detained and immobilized." One woman was pinned to the front seat of her car and another was handcuffed in a patrol car. A third man was pinned against the back of a car with his hands visible.

Even the investigation into Oakley and his dismissal didn't mean the end of his career. He continued to work his part-time gig as an officer back in Halifax County with the Littleton Police Department, another small agency just 15 miles from Warrenton. Federal agents arrested him more than a year later for depriving the stun gun victims of their rights "under the color of law," according to the indictment.
Please see **WANDERING** | 3A



WNBA

The Charlotte Sting, led by North Mecklenburg High School graduate Andrea Stinson, were an original WNBA franchise. The Sting, who played for the 2001 WNBA title, ceased operations in 2007.

After two-decade absence, women's pro basketball returns to Charlotte

By Annika Duneja
UNC MEDIA HUB

Twenty-five years ago, the Charlotte Sting, one of eight original WNBA teams, played for a league championship. Six years later, the team folded.

The city of Charlotte has since been waiting almost 20 years for a women's basketball team to cheer for.

On May 21, when the Charlotte Crown takes the court against the Savannah Steel at Bojangles Coliseum for their first home game, the wait will be over.

Alexis Lee, a Charlotte native, said she's already planning to go with her

mom to opening night. She, too, has been looking for a women's team to support.

"I think as far as teams go, that's the one thing that we're missing," she said. "If you were a women's sports fan, you kind of just don't have that opportunity unless you go to a UNC Charlotte women's game."

That's where the Crown comes in, who along with three other inaugural teams, including the Greensboro Groove, Jacksonville Waves and Savannah Steel, make up the new Upshot League.

An 'opportunity league'

At a time when the Unrivaled
Please see **WOMEN'S** | 2A

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Nonprofits join forces for a healthier West End

Continued from page 1A
Ave.

The collaboration also includes mobile health clinics with access to screenings, preventive care and follow up support in addition to fresh food distribution and nutrition education, workshops and training for long term food solutions. There are also coordination programs to navigate medical, behavioral and social needs.

Historic West End, one of six Corridors of Opportunity in Charlotte, has historically faced significant health and social challenges:

- Several low-income neighborhoods have limited food autonomy as designated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture where residents live more than a half mile from a full service grocery store.

- Older adults are a fast growing demographic in the region. According to the North Carolina Office of State Budget & Management, Mecklenburg County's 65 and older population is

projected to nearly double - from 138,129 in 2021 to 262,579 in 2041.

Chronic conditions are widespread, as it is nationally, with nearly half of U.S. adults living with hypertension, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Improving access to quality health care for our residents is one of Mecklenburg County's top priorities, and partnerships like this play a critical role in advancing that mission, because we cannot be successful without the contributions of our corporate and private sector partners," Mecklenburg County Manager Mike Bryant said. "When trusted organizations, like the CVS Health Foundation and LISC Charlotte come together with our local nonprofits, we're not just addressing challenges; we're opening doors to opportunity, stability and long-term wellness."



Bryant

Women's pro basketball returns

Continued from page 1A

League, a 3-on-3 women's league, just set a regular-season record for attendance at a women's professional basketball game, and the WNBA announced plans last year to expand to 18 teams by 2030, it's clear the sport's only direction is up.

But even with the growth, there are only so many opportunities for players in the United States, Charlotte Crown President Shawn Lynch said.

"There's about 180 women that go on a draft board. Maybe 30 of them get drafted, and maybe 15 to 20 of them actually make the WNBA and everyone else's career, and the dream of playing professional basketball ends at that point," he said.

Some players who aren't drafted choose to play abroad, and even Unrivaled has only signed established WNBA stars.

Former WNBA president Donna Orender said she and Zawyer Sports CEO Andy Kauffman wanted to create a way for more players to continue their basketball careers at home.

They specifically wanted to grow the sport to areas of the country that weren't expected to see expansion teams anytime soon.

"If you look at the trajectory of the growth, it's still going to take a longer time to build out," Orender said. "And even after it's built out, there's always room for more. And why shouldn't markets like Jacksonville or Savannah or Charlotte or Greensboro or Baltimore — why shouldn't they have women's basketball now?"

The result was what Orender, Upshot's first commissioner, called an "opportunity league", a place where these players can grow their skills, get paid and just keep playing the sport they love.

With four founding teams with 11-player rosters, and an expansion team in Baltimore already announced for next year, that's 55 more jobs for women's basketball players.

"Every queen deserves a crown"

But even as the teams give players a chance to continue their careers, Charlotte Crown coach Trisha Stafford-Odom said Upshot isn't just a developmental league or a minor league for the WNBA.

"It's not like this is the fall-back league and everybody gets to come," she said. "No, no, no, there's going to be criteria. There's going to be standards. So you have to compete on every level and then see what's afforded to you after you've done your best."

As someone who's coached women's basketball at UCLA, North Carolina Central University, Duke and UNC-Chapel Hill — "I'm from California. I didn't know any better," Stafford-Odom said — she wants to help players and members of the organization make a name for themselves and put themselves in a position of having options for career growth.

For the team itself, the immediate goals are, of course, to win this first season. But more than that, there's a longer-term brand to build.

"I want to be the organization that looks different, stands out in a positive way," said Stafford-Odom, who was head coach at NCCU from 2017-23. "And again, I want all of my counterparts to excel and succeed. But in this market, I think just the Crown City in general, the Queen City, my mindset is going to be that every queen deserves a crown, and everyone that's involved with our organization, I want them to esteem themselves on a platform of

royalty, meaning you work with excellence, you expect excellent results, and the wins will come, the opportunities will come, the notoriety will come."

Pushing city limits

Back in her playing days with the WNBA, Stafford-Odom said she recalls the enthusiasm of fans in Charlotte and their support for the women's team.

"I remember being in training camp or coming to try out for the Charlotte Sting of the WNBA, and I remember the intensity of the fans," she said. "I got cut from the team, but I remember the success that the team had, and then the disappointment when it folded. Like people are thirsty and waiting, it's just the climate of our country. People want new loves. People want to fall in love with something that will be sustainable."

With the Crown, Lynch hopes to take advantage of that void, and built a team culture that lasts.

"You're at the, probably the crux of college fandom at North Carolina, right? Because [North Carolina] State and Wake Forest and Duke and collegiate athletics is so big here," he said. "If you walk around the city of Charlotte, there's Georgia fans, South Carolina fans, Clemson fans, UNC fans, N.C. State fans. But the professional sports, I think the fandom is really up for grabs."

He also said he wants the team to really become a part of Charlotte's city culture by having the players integrate with the community. That means going out and teaching basketball in neighborhoods, holding camps and clinics and staying involved in the off-season.

Lee also said she's excited to see how the team can help the city grow.

"I think also bringing some sort of steady audience to that facility also is going to be great for Charlotte," she said. "It'll bring more traffic to that side of town and encourage them to develop that side of town a little more. So I think it will also be really good in that regard for the people who live over there to kind of start seeing some real investment and development in that area."

There's also an opportunity for home-grown talent to play in Charlotte. On March 1, open tryouts were held in Greensboro for players to showcase their skills in front of league executives and coaching staff.

"I would love it if we had girls that are drafted from North Carolina, girls that are drafted from UNC, Charlotte, here locally, or Davidson, that are great basketball players that we can tell their story, that maybe they're not from here, but they came here for college, and then they get to the city of Charlotte, they get to play basketball, then they become a resident of Charlotte, and then grow their career from there through connections that they need in our community," Lynch said.

In the coming months, the team will draft and announce players, with a final roster announced on May 9, and even give fans a chance to name the mascot.

The season will run from May to September, with 17 home games. Lynch says his goal is to sell out as many games as possible in Bojangles Coliseum. The first time the team plays will be an away game against the Jacksonville Waves on May 15.

"When you come, maybe you don't remember if the Crown won or lost, but you remember who you're with, and you remember you had a great time and that you were entertained," he said. "And you get to meet the mascot, and you walk out with our special designed basketballs, you walk out with some merch, and you walk out proud to wear that logo around the city of Charlotte."

Court justices skeptical on late mail-in ballots legality

Continued from page 1A

periods last year. And Congress is mulling proposals that would restrict voting by mail amid a sprawling debate in the U.S. Senate over legislation demanded by President Donald Trump that would impose sweeping new voter restrictions nationwide. That legislation, known as the SAVE Act, is unlikely to pass because of the filibuster.

The Republican National Committee is challenging Mississippi's grace period law. The party contends a longstanding federal law that sets the Tuesday after the first Monday in November as Election Day for federal offices preempts state laws that allow ballots cast by Election Day, but received later, to count.

Paul Clement, an attorney for the Republican National Committee, argued the prospect that the outcome of an election could change because of ballots arriving after Election Day would be unacceptable to losing candidates. After the 2020 election, President Donald Trump demanded election officials not count ballots that came in after Election Day. States kept counting ballots.

"If you have an election and the election is going to turn on late-arriving ballots in a way that means what everybody kind of thought was the result on Election Day ends up being the opposite a week later, 21 days later, the losers are not going to accept that result. Full stop," Clement told the justices.

Mississippi Secretary of State Michael Watson, a Republican who is defending the state law, argues that federal law allows ballots cast by Election Day to be received later. In legal filings, attorneys for the secretary argue both legal and historical precedent support his position. States may decide that voters have made their final choices when ballots are submitted to state officials rather than when they're received, according to Watson.

On Monday, the justices appeared divided along ideological lines, with conservative justices skeptical of the grace periods and liberal justices more sympathetic. Conservatives hold a 6-3 majority on the court.

"It seems to me that we have a very long history of states having a variety of different ballot receipt deadlines, to include after Election Day," said Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, one of the court's liberal members.

Mississippi Solicitor General Scott Stewart told the court the dispute is over whether Congress in an 1845 law blocked states from counting ballots cast by Election Day but received later. "No one challenged it until now," Stewart said.

At least 725,000 ballots were post-marked by Election Day 2024 and arrived within a legally accepted post-election window, The New York Times has reported, citing election officials in 14 of 22 states and territories where late-arriving ballots were accepted that year.

About 30% of voters cast a mail ballot in 2024, according to data gathered by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission.

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in October 2024 that federal law re-

quires ballots to be received by Election Day. Trump likewise issued an executive order last year that attempted to require that mail ballots be received by the end of Election Day and to impose other election changes, but much of the order has been blocked by federal courts.

Rick Hasen, a professor and director of the Safeguarding Democracy Project at the University of California-Los Angeles School of Law, wrote on his Election Law Blog that it was clear from Monday's arguments that the Supreme Court will be closely divided, "and the case could come out either way." A decision is expected later in the spring or early summer.

Caleb Hays, chief policy counsel at the Center for Election Confidence, a conservative-leaning legal advocacy group that opposes ballot grace periods, said his organization was pleased that the justices appeared to pick up on the need for a clear end to the voting period. He also welcomed the justices raising the issue of recalling ballots when they are delivered through the mail or by a third-party service like FedEx.

"That brings into question some of the arguments we saw from (Mississippi) on a ballot being final when it is cast and cast includes when it is deposited in a mailbox," Hays said in an interview.

As the legal challenge made its way through the courts over the past two years, some Republican-led states moved to eliminate their grace periods. Kansas, North Dakota, Ohio and Utah last year moved to require all or nearly all ballots to be in the hands of election officials on Election Day to count.

The states that continue to extend grace periods for ballots arriving after Election Day are Alaska, California, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, Washington and West Virginia, along with the District of Columbia.

Some local election officials have urged the Supreme Court to uphold ballot grace periods. A decision that strikes down state laws' grace periods would increase the administrative burdens on many election officials, said a collection of election officials and local governments in California, Massachusetts and Washington in an amicus brief.

"(Grace periods) enable administrators in large and small jurisdictions to do their essential work in a timely and reasonable manner," the brief says.

If the Supreme Court requires that ballots must arrive on or before Election Day, Clement suggested election officials would have enough time to prepare ahead of November. He said such a decision wouldn't violate the Purcell principle, a Supreme Court doctrine holding that major changes to election policy and practice shouldn't be made just before an election because voters could get confused.

The federal law at issue pertains to general elections, not primary elections, he noted — meaning the court's decision would apply only to the November election.

"There's plenty of time," Clement said.

Gov. Stein calls for pause on tax cuts as NC faces budget gap

Continued from page 1A

maintaining services for a growing population."

The governor said he was not calling for a tax hike, but a pause on the current policy. "I am not talking about raising anyone's taxes," he said. "I'm just saying that I urge our legislative leaders to reexamine the current fiscal policy in light of the growth and population."

North Carolina already ranks near the bottom in per-pupil spending, Stein noted, and 43rd in average teacher pay. Starting salaries are lower than in neighboring states, he said, making it harder for dis-

tricts to recruit and keep teachers.

In one example, Stein described a district near Virginia where higher pay across the border draws teachers away from North Carolina schools.

"We are bearing the fruit of an orchard that was planted a long time ago," Stein said. "But today, we risk hollowing out the institutions that have helped to create our success."

Stein tied the warning to his proposed "critical needs" budget, which he said would raise teacher pay by an average of nearly 6%. The plan would also restore extra pay for teachers

with master's degrees and provide larger raises for veteran teachers and school leaders.

He said the goal is to make starting teachers pay the highest in the Southeast.

He also called for more funding for school support staff, including counselors, nurses and social workers, saying schools have been underfunded in those areas for years.

North Carolina is one of the fastest-growing states in the country, Stein said, increasing pressure on schools, infrastructure and other services.

Voter registration groups cry foul over decision to end access to printed forms

By Sarah Michels

CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS

What State Board of Elections Executive Director Sam Hayes says he saw as a sensible cost-cutting measure has raised alarms among voter registration organizations across North Carolina.

In late February, the State Board of Elections told county boards they would no longer provide physical voter registration forms, free of charge, to distribute to groups holding voter registration drives. Whatever county boards had in stock at the time was all they were going to get, at least for the time being.

The decision did not impact election boards' ability to provide voter registration forms to individuals.

Voter registration groups, including the League of Women Voters, You Can

Vote and Democracy North Carolina, say shifting the burden of printing forms for registration drives from the state to private groups will restrict voting access — and may violate federal

Please see **VOTER** | 3A

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'Wandering officers' widespread across state

Continued from page 1A

Even then, the Littleton police never actually terminated Oakley. Instead, he handed in his resignation five days after being criminally charged.

Oakley was a prime example of what criminal justice experts call a "wandering officer."

While no agreed upon definition of a wandering officer exists, the one used by the late scholar Dorothy Moses Schulz is helpful: "a police officer who leaves one department after being terminated for misconduct or under a disciplinary cloud, and secures employment in another law-enforcement agency."

This article, the first in the three-part investigative series *Stray Cops* by Carolina Public Press, explores the extent of the wandering officer problem in North Carolina. Upcoming articles in the series will examine the systemic reasons for this phenomenon in North Carolina and potential solutions to increase transparency and accountability in law enforcement hiring.

NC data limits wandering officer count

CPP identified nearly 700 wandering officers in North Carolina as of the most recent data available, although several issues make producing a precise count of wandering officers across the state extremely difficult.

For one, the most recent statewide employment data kept by the NC Department of Justice is inadequate for the task. Since switching to a new database system in 2022, publicly available law enforcement employment data no longer gives a reason for why an officer separated from an agency.

That makes it impossible to distinguish between officers who leave their departments because they retired versus officers whom agencies terminated because of misconduct.

The second problem is identified in Schulz's definition of a wandering officer. An officer who resigns from one job "under a disciplinary cloud," as Oakley did in Roanoke Rapids in 2015, is much harder to track compared to an officer whom an agency fired outright.

Keisha James, an attorney with the National Police Accountability Project, a nonprofit that litigates instances of police misconduct across the county, including North Carolina, said the public often has difficulty getting detailed information about what happened at a previous agency if an officer resigned.

"Even in situations where an officer was engaged in misconduct at a previous employer, you might not be able to get any information about what actually happened, because the investigation essentially closed before it can really begin," she said. "What would have been a termination ends up in a resignation."

So, the total number of wandering officers CPP identified likely undercounts the total cases because it doesn't include anyone without a dismissal on their record, even if they resigned due to accusations of misconduct. It also wouldn't include officers who were fired from an agency in another state or those dismissed for misconduct while working for a federal agency, such as the Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Even so, this problem persists throughout North Carolina and can still be quantified in a few valuable ways.

Known wandering officers cases

CPP's analysis showed that as of 2022, at least 679 active law enforcement officers whose previous agencies had dismissed them were working again at 327 agencies in North Carolina.

That means that a previous agency had fired about 2%, or one out of every 50, of the 31,898 active North Carolina officers in the 2022 DOJ employment dataset.

Of those wandering officers, agencies had dismissed 69 of them at least twice during their careers. The most egregious of them had been fired at least five times from five different agencies and still managed to find work carrying a badge and a gun.

Wandering officers are located in all regions of the state, from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Piedmont to the Coastal Plain.

The harm they cause is difficult to measure, but lawsuits, administrative court filings and archival media reports reveal the potentially devastating consequences of allowing them to remain in law enforcement.

Mark Anthony Russell currently works as a Transylvania County sheriff's deputy. The Henderson County Sheriff's Office fired Russell in 2011 after he was charged with violating a domestic violence protection order. The Brevard Police Department dismissed Russell again in 2014, DOJ data shows.

Douglas Strader joined the Graham Police Department in 2021, after the Greensboro Police Department had previously fired him for discharging his firearm at a fleeing vehicle. Strader was also one of eight Greensboro of-

ficers involved in the 2018 death of Marcus Smith, who died in police custody after officers used a "hogtie" restraint to subdue him.

In the case of Jeffrey Edwards, the State Highway Patrol fired him in 2010 for misconduct, only for Edwards to end up as a deputy at the Washington County Sheriff's Office.

Washington County later fired him in 2022 after he made a violent arrest, dragging a handcuffed detainee down the stairs of the courthouse.

The detainee in that case, who received treatment at a hospital for injuries sustained during the arrest and later had his charges dropped by the district attorney, sued Edwards in 2024 with the help of the National Police Accountability Project and eventually settled out of court.

Edwards still works in law enforcement today as a deputy with the Tyrrell County Sheriff's Office.

Some who wander become boss

In some cases, wandering officers failed upwards into leadership positions, often at small departments. Such was the case with both of Oakley's bosses in Warrenton and Littleton, who hired him after he resigned from Roanoke Rapids.

Former Warrenton Police Chief Goble Lane lost his job with the Franklin County Police Department in Franklin County in 2005, then went on to work at three more agencies over the next five years before settling in Warrenton.

A 2025 civil lawsuit accuses Lane of protecting Oakley despite persistent complaints from civilians and fellow officers. According to the lawsuit, Lane once instructed another police officer to alter paperwork related to a separate incident to make it appear that Oakley was not at fault.

The lawsuit, which brought legal claims against not just Oakley and Goble but the Town of Warrenton itself, accused Goble of retaliating against other officers who reported Oakley's misconduct.

"There's many instances where there's a 'rogue officer,' or someone who acts alone and the supervisors have a very good case to make that they really didn't know what was happening," said Abraham Rubert-Schewel, the attorney representing the plaintiffs who claimed Oakley used excessive force against them.

"But here, the facts really show something different."

Certification records indicate that Lane currently works at the Middlesex Police Department in Nash County and in Henderson with the Vance-Granville Community College Police Department.

Meanwhile, Oakley's other boss, Phillip Trivette, who isn't named in the civil lawsuit, had been dismissed from three departments before becoming chief of police in Littleton.

In 2016, an administrative law judge affirmed a decision by the NC Sheriff's Standards Division to deny Trivette's application for certification with the Halifax County Sheriff's Office, based on four prior misdemeanor convictions for worthless checks. He was later hired in Littleton.

In an interview with the News & Observer, Trivette defended his decision to retain Oakley after he'd been fired from Warrenton, claiming that he'd never had any problems with Oakley at his department.

Trivette announced his retirement as chief in 2025, several months before Oakley was arrested. Littleton's website shows that Trivette still works there as a police officer.

In another case, Orlando Rosario Jr., an officer who had been dismissed from three different agencies in his career, became the police chief in the tiny town of Statonsburg in Wilson County.

The Goldsboro Police Department hired Rosario in 2008, after four short stints at other police departments, one of which fired him. In 2009, the Goldsboro News-Argus reported that Rosario caught heat from the local NAACP chapter for telling a trainee during an arrest at an apartment complex to "shoot (anyone in the crowd of onlookers) in the f—ing head if he gets any closer."

Goldsboro later dismissed Rosario in 2011. The Black Creek Police Department then fired him from his next job in 2015. But he managed to stick with Statonsburg, where he worked for 10 years before resigning as chief in 2025.

Employment records indicate that Rosario currently works as an officer with the Knightdale Police Department, his eighth agency in 25 years.

None of the departments where Rosario, Trivette or Lane currently work responded to CPP's request for comment before the publication of this story.

The data shows that all types of law enforcement agencies hire wandering officers, including sheriff's offices, municipalities, state agencies and specialized departments within college campuses, hospitals and airports.

Voter registration groups cry foul over printed forms

Continued from page 2A

law. Hayes, on the other hand, maintains that the state board's decision is within the letter of the law, and makes fiscal sense in a digital world.

"I've got to be very careful," he said. "We're playing with state money here, and this is the taxpayers' money. We've got to be prudent stewards of those funds."

Budgeting for voter registration

Hayes learned that the state elections board was bankrolling the printing and distribution of voter registration forms to third parties at a recent staff meeting. The printed forms were about to run out, and the board needed to decide what to do.

Hayes said it didn't make sense to him to continue printing forms for organizations requesting hundreds or thousands at a time. The voter registration forms are on the state board's website; groups holding registration drives could find and print them from there.

"I mean, we do live in the information age, where things are readily available online, and these groups that conduct these registration drives are very sophisticated," Hayes said. "A lot of them receive quite a bit of funding, so they've got resources to do this."

Some groups do have the money, like the League of Women Voters of North Carolina.

LWVNC President Jennifer Rubin said it will make their finances tighter, but it's manageable. She isn't so sure if smaller organizations can say the same. She thinks the State Board could have absorbed the cost themselves.

In 2024, the State Board supplied nearly 1.3 million voter registration applications to voter drive organizations and government agencies that requested them, according to Jason Tyson, state board director of external affairs.

The printing cost was more than \$269,000, not including shipping costs or staff time, he said.

There's context to that figure, according to You Can Vote Executive Director Kate Fellman. During the 2024 cycle, new parties were added and removed, the form changed multiple times and it was a major presidential year.

"But \$269,000 seems like a little tiny portion of the state board's budget for voter registration, especially when they have all these new positions that they just hired as well," she said.

Now, the cost burden will shift to groups conducting voter registration drives. It's not as simple as printing a regular sheet of paper, Fellman said. The North Carolina voter registration form is double-sided, on thicker paper than normal printer paper and includes color-coding.

A two-sided color copy might cost as much as \$1.50 per copy, she said.

While color is recommended — the form highlights required sections in red — state board chief of staff Brian LiVecchi said they'll accept black-and-white forms.

In Fellman's experience, the policy of county election boards has been to cap requests at 100 forms a day. Those limits may have been established by boards to fulfill everyone's requests, LiVecchi said.

"The physical forms were never intended to be in endless supply," the February email to county boards stated.

Registration Repair Project

The State Board has incurred significant costs recently as part of the Registration Repair Project, an effort to collect missing data from over 100,000 voters across the state. The project is part of a settlement with the U.S. Department of Justice.

For a period of time, North Carolina's voter registration form was unclear about a key requirement: registrants applying after 2004 must provide either a North Carolina driver's license number or the last four digits of the person's Social Security number, or otherwise check a box affirming that they don't have either identification number.

In late 2023, the State Board of Elections fixed the form, but elections staff declined to go back and contact all voters who registered using the unclear form to collect missing identification numbers. In court, the State Board's attorneys argued that there were enough steps to ensure voter eligibility without taking that step.

But that decision came to a head after the 2024 election, when North Carolina Court of Appeals Judge Jefferson Griffin made the missing numbers the foundation of his election challenges in his bid for state Supreme Court. While the court denied his request to discard all votes from voters who lacked the required identification numbers, the DOJ pressed

the issue.

As a result, the board has sent mailings to the impacted voters, which didn't come cheap.

Hayes said it was important for the state board to incur that cost as opposed to county boards or voters, since it was the board's fault.

The board also recently sent letters to 241,000 voters who are not part of the Registration Repair Project, but also lack identification numbers. Many registered before 2004, when that became a required step.

The timing of the decision about printing ballots a few weeks after those mailings is "particularly concerning" to Joselle Torres, Democracy North Carolina communications manager.

"Why are there budgetary concerns when there are additional spending measures being made to inform voters of an issue that necessarily won't impact their ability to vote and did not during the primary?" she asked.

Done forever or just for now?

The state board is currently working on a set of administrative rules to govern voter registration drives, addressing a number of issues staff have noticed.

First off, there's a lot of waste, Hayes said.

"It's my understanding that a significant number of these registration forms are never returned," he said.

Second, there have been instances of fraudulent voter registration forms being submitted from drives with made-up information. One such case is currently under investigation, LiVecchi said.

While the rules are still in draft phase, LiVecchi said the goal is to add "guardrails" around voter registration drives.

"You have to let us know who your canvassers are," he said. "You have to mark on the forms themselves who collected that, who in your organization, so there's an audit trail we can get back to if we do find a problem."

LiVecchi left the door open for a potential renewal of the board's printing practices once those rules are in place.

Hayes didn't completely dismiss the idea, but isn't inclined to go back on his decision.

"It's not my intention to go back to supplying these groups with printed forms again," he said. "They are available on our website. They are available to counties. We do send them to individual voters."

Is it legal?

Voting groups argue that the decision to stop providing bulk voter registrations violated the National Voter Registration Act.

The federal law requires state elections officials to make voter registration forms available for distribution, "with particular emphasis on making them available for organized voter registration programs."

On those grounds, the State Board has a legal obligation to distribute forms, said Patrick Williamson, Fair Elections Center policy counsel.

"If the result of this decision is that community-based organizations doing this work can't shoulder the cost burden of printing these forms and ultimately wind up unable to run community-based voter registration programs, I don't really see how that's not directly at odds with what federal law is requiring of the State Board," he said.

Hayes argues that the forms are being made available.

"They're available online," he said. "We send them to the counties. I think we fulfill our requirement there."

Voter registration groups have a few options if they cannot print their own forms. One option is to tell people how to vote without having them do it on the spot. Rubin said doing that creates a "missed opportunity."

For prospective voters with a Division of Motor Vehicles ID, online registration is another option.

However, Fellman said online voter registration through the DMV is a "clunky" process, especially when trying to walk people through it at a registration drive on their mobile devices.

Plus, not everyone eligible to vote in North Carolina has a DMV ID. College students, new North Carolina residents and voters who don't own vehicles may not have them, and rural and elderly people may not have easy access to a DMV.

"Paper forms are just the gold standard, and always have been for voter registration in North Carolina," Fellman said. "It would be great if we had universal online access and a better designed, universal online voter registration system embedded within the State Board of Elections, but we don't have that."

Lawmakers take aim at hospitals' perks

By Michelle Crouch

CHARLOTTE LEDGER

As North Carolina lawmakers search for ways to reduce the tax burden for state residents, they're taking aim at the generous tax breaks the state's nonprofit and public hospitals have long enjoyed.

Proposals discussed by a House committee on March 18 would significantly scale back two key tax exemptions. If passed, they would mark one of the most significant efforts in

years to reduce hospital tax breaks and could send millions to the state and local governments.

Under current law, nonprofit and government hospitals are exempt from property taxes and can receive up to \$45 million a year in sales tax refunds. The proposed legislation would cut the property tax break in half, meaning only 50% of a hospital's property would remain tax-exempt. A separate bill would lower the sales tax refund

cap from \$45 million to \$14.2 million.

The Ledger/NC Health News has spotlighted both types of tax breaks:

• Our analysis of property tax exemptions in 2023 found that hospitals own exempt property valued at \$6.3 billion in North Carolina's five most populous counties, based on 2022 assessed values. That includes more than \$2.4 billion owned by Atrium Health and Novant

Please see **STATE** | 4A

The Charlotte Post

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What supermarket civil rights teaches

By Bobby J. Smith II

WORD IN BLACK

The recent release of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025-2030, by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services poses a challenge for communities and individuals struggling with food insecurity.

The new guidelines flip the traditional food pyramid on its head, recommending increased intake of costly red meat, whole dairy products, healthy fats, and whole grains. But these guidelines create several blind spots, overlooking the prevalence of poor-quality food and limited grocery store choices in low-income communities — a reality for the 18.3 million households facing food insecurity. For these Americans, the real question is not what to eat, but whether they have access to safe, high-quality food — a question of food justice.

This concern is not new.

Expanding the meaning of Black protest

During the civil rights and Black power movements, Black communities across the country pushed to expand the meaning of Black protest to include access to a reliable, nutritious food supply. From the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to the Black Panther Party, food emerged as a critical site of social, political, and economic struggle.

In Chicago, food came into sharp focus through the work of the Women of Operation Breadbasket, the direct-action unit of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Operation Breadbasket in the North. The team of Black women placed the quality of food available in grocery stores in their neighborhoods at the center of their fight for racial and economic justice.

Founded in 1967 by Rev. Willie T. Barrow, a co-founder of Operation Breadbasket alongside Rev. Jesse L. Jackson Sr., the Women of Operation Breadbasket launched a Bad Meat Campaign that same year. Members included prominent figures such as civil rights activist and international labor leader Rev. Addie L. Wyatt, who helped mobilize Black mothers and community members on the South and West sides in protests against grocers who sold rotten meat and inadequate produce in Black neighborhoods, transforming grocery aisles into battlegrounds for civil rights.

Supermarket civil rights

This campaign reveals what I call supermarket civil rights: a highly visible form of consumer activism through which Black communities challenged and exposed grocery stores as contested sites of power, where food access was routinely compromised and negotiated during the civil rights era.

Robert Culp's 1969 documentary "Operation Breadbasket" provides footage of supermarket civil rights. In the film, the Women of Operation Breadbasket confront a grocery store owner and a meat manager about hazardous conditions in the meat department at a D&S Super Markets store.

The documentary included a scene of Rev. Calvin Morris, Associate Director of Operation Breadbasket, giving a speech in front of the meat section, as the camera showed maggots flying around spoiled meat in brown boxes and on dirty floors, and unclean machinery with meat stuck in it.

The group's campaign made clear that bad meat was a significant health concern at the intersection of race, economics, and community well-being. The supplying of bad meat in Black neighborhoods reflected how white grocers valued Black patrons: unsafe working conditions, heightened risk of food-borne illness, and the manipulation of Black purchasing power.

Food, power politics

But the bad meat campaign offered Black neighborhoods a site to navigate what I call food power politics — the struggle over how food is weaponized in Black communities during times of social unrest and how they fight back.

In one of the documentary's final scenes, Barrow and Morris returned to tour the same D&S store months later. The transformation is unmistakable: high-quality meat, stocked meat display fridges, new machinery, updated cleaning systems, and cleaner aisles.

Although the Women of Operation Breadbasket's Bad Meat campaign did not dismantle racism and food disparities in the city, it dramatized how Black women could fight for civil rights in the least likely of places — inside the supermarket.

Operation Breadbasket closed in Chicago in 1971, and its founder, Jackson, converted it into Operation People United to Save Humanity — later changed from "Save" to "Serve" — which became the Rainbow PUSH Coalition in 1996, and is still operating.

Right to safe, nutritious food

By demanding dignity in Black food experiences, the Women of Operation Breadbasket asserted the right to safe and nutritious food, a central pillar of today's food justice movement. Learning from their practical actions expands the blueprint of methods that can help food justice activists and organizations today as they struggle to redress systematic inequity at the nexus of food disparities, poor diet quality, and environmental degradation.

Bobby J. Smith II is associate professor of African American studies at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Americans live at the same address

Recently, I drove from my father's birthplace in Biddeford, Maine, to my mother's birthplace in Petersburg, Virginia. Two different towns. Two different states. Two different regions. And yet,



BEN
JEALOUS

oddly, just different ends of the same sad street. Most Americans now live at the same address: "We live where there used to be a factory. And when it shut down, what shot up was joblessness, hopelessness, meth, opioids, homicide and suicide."

That is not just the story of one town. It is the story of a wounded nation.

Factories were never just factories. They gave whole towns their rhythm. They filled lunch pails and church pews. They paid the mortgage. They kept the corner store open. They let a mother or father look a child in the eye and say, "You can make it here."

Then the factory closed. The people did not disappear.

They stayed. They stayed by the same schools, the same porches, the same

churches, the same graves of the people who raised them. They stayed and watched storefronts empty, tax bases shrink and hope grow thin. Families are burying their too-young dead again and again. Meanwhile, the pundits who get rich dividing the nation keep working overtime.

The suffering caused by deindustrialization does not stop at racial lines, state lines or the old border between North and South. It reaches across most of the lines that people on television and social media work so hard to inflame. This one stokes racial resentment. That one blames immigrants. Another turns rural against urban, white against Black, native-born against newcomer. And most Americans suffer for it.

Divide and conquer has always been the surest way to blunt the ability of working families to rise together. It keeps our votes divided and canceling one another out.

Since NAFTA took effect in 1994, the United States has lost well over 65,000 manufacturing plants and factories. NAFTA was not the only reason. Automation mattered. China mattered. Corporate

consolidation mattered. But NAFTA still stands as a warning bell in our history. It reminds us what happens when we confuse what is good for corporate profits with what is good for the country.

Communities lose. The nation suffers.

Most Americans now live at the same address. They live in the places the economy left behind. They live where the factory closed, the jobs vanished and the pain stayed.

But there is a road to a better day.

We became a great nation because we planned. We looked ahead. We decided what we needed to build, what we needed to make, what kind of work would support families and what kind of country we wanted to become. Then we trained our people, built our strength and did the work.

We need that spirit again.

We need an industrial plan county by county, state by state and for the nation as a whole. We need to know what jobs will be needed 10 and 20 years from now, where they should be and how we will prepare our people to do them. Our schools are still too often preparing young people for an economy

that is already gone. They need to do a better job preparing them for the jobs of the future. And as artificial intelligence starts doing more of the work people once thought would always need a person, we need to be ready to rethink the future for every worker and every community.

A nation is not a stock chart. A nation is not a quarterly report.

A nation is built on belief — belief in each other and belief in our future. And in America, we believe that if life has knocked you down, you deserve a chance to rise again.

Most Americans now live at the same address: "We live where there used to be a factory. And when it shut down, what shot up was joblessness, hopelessness, meth, opioids, homicide and suicide."

The question is whether we will keep accepting that as normal. Or whether we will choose to love this country, our children and each other enough to make sure we all rise again.

Ben Jealous is a professor of practice at the University of Pennsylvania, a nationally syndicated columnist, and the former president of the NAACP.

From Reconstruction to the SAVE Act

Frederick Douglass did not know the day he was born.



JULIANNE
MALVEAUX

Like many enslaved people, he was denied even the dignity of documentation. Birth dates were approximately 10 years severed. Identity existed in property ledgers, not in public record.

His mother, Harriet Bailey, called him her "little Valentine," and Douglass later chose February 14 as his birthday — an act of self-definition in a country that refused to define him as fully human.

That act matters. Douglass understood something fundamental: identity is not granted by paperwork. It is asserted through presence, voice and participation. He claimed authorship over his own life in a nation structured to deny it.

Today, we are debating whether documentation should determine access to democracy.

The SAVE Act would require documentary proof of citizenship to register to vote in federal elections. Passports. Birth certificates. Paper trails. Supporters frame it as administrative protection. But the history of American democracy teaches us that administrative mechanisms are rarely neutral. Paperwork has always been political.

After Reconstruction, when Black political participation expanded, new rules narrowed the electorate. Literacy tests. Poll taxes. Grandfather clauses. Each was presented as procedural. Each functioned as a barrier.

The methods change. The objective — control over who counts — does not.

Documentation requirements would fall hardest on those least likely to have ready access to formal records: seniors born

at home in the Jim Crow South, low-income Americans without passports, married women whose legal names no longer match their birth certificates. Even producing paperwork can become a test of belonging.

Documented cases of noncitizen voting are exceedingly rare. The question is not fraud prevention; it is access.

Reconstruction was not only about emancipation. It was about participation. Black men voted. Black officials were elected. Black institutions were built. And when those gains threatened entrenched power, backlash followed.

In 1898, in Wilmington, North Carolina, a legitimately elected multiracial government was overthrown. Black political power was dismantled. The ballot was replaced by the bullet. It was not disorder; it was organized suppression.

The lesson is sobering. When participation expands, resistance emerges.

Today's debates unfold in legislative chambers rather than in armed mobs. But the question remains: who has the authority to define citizenship?

Douglass claimed his identity in a system that denied him documentation. He did not wait for official recognition to assert his humanity. He understood that democracy depends not on perfect records, but on inclusive participation.

When paperwork becomes a prerequisite for political voice, we should ask whether we are strengthening democracy — or narrowing it.

The struggle over the ballot has never been merely procedural. It has always been about power.

Douglass defined himself when the state would not.

The question now is whether we will let the state decide who counts.

Julianne Malveaux is a Washington, D.C.-based economist and author.

What is war good for? Absolutely nothing

I haven't expected much of Donald Trump.

He has always been a grifter, bamboozler, predator and cheater. His sexual escapades are well documented. He has a conviction for at least one of them. Trump is working to keep the Epstein files under wraps.



LIB
CAMPBELL

Who knows what stories they will reveal.

The egregious miscalculation of the attack on Iran is proving deadly. Does he think he can bomb a sovereign nation — no matter how heinous it might be — and go completely unnoticed? Stupidity and malfeasance make a deadly cocktail. Does anyone think he might be asking himself, "what was I thinking?"

The answer is no. No strategic thinking or planning was behind the bombing of a girl's school. Over

150 women and girls were blown to smithereens. There is no apology on President Trump's lips. It is full steam ahead. Now the Strait of Hormuz, where over 20% of the world's oil finds its way to market, is closed to boat traffic.

Nicholas Kristoff, in the Washington Post, posed this question, "Does Trump think he can begin a war and think there will be no consequences? The enemy gets a vote on this."

With the Strait closed, prices are skyrocketing. Gas prices are soaring. Airplane tickets are more expensive. Goods and services, already priced higher because of Trump's tariffs, are rising even more. A public already squeezed by higher costs will be further financially punished. There are some economists projecting a recession on the horizon.

Where are the adults in the room? Here, on the eve of the 250th year of Democracy in America, the future is tarnished by the decision-making of a lu-

natic King.

In 1970, at the height of the Vietnam war, Edwin Starr recorded a song... "War," that became a sensation. In the lyrics, Starr asks, "War. What is it good for? Absolutely nothing."

War robs us of future generations of young people. It fills graveyards and leaves families with empty chairs at the table. It reveals leadership that cannot negotiate. What happened to the "Art of the Deal?" Was that theory another pitch that hasn't worked out?

Creating distraction and chaos is a gift Donald Trump has. I hear "Squirrel" coming from every port. One reporter called Trump's Modis operandi "cognitive dissonance." The leader claims up is down and down is up. In a cult, the sycophants believe what the leader says.

When I was working in the church, I would often tell people not to leave their brain in the Narthex. Test what you hear in scripture, tradition, reason,

and experience. If something seems off kilter, it likely is.

There was a time in American history when civic institutions, like Kiwanis and Rotary expressed their beliefs in creeds. These creeds outlined a way of living that is right with God and other people. Is it fair to all concerned? Is it the truth? Will it build goodwill and friendships?

There is no such thing as "alternative facts." Believe what you see with your own eyes. Stay informed with trusted voices relaying news.

Beware of charlatans — in the church, in the congress, in the news. Read broadly, reflect critically, and hang on for dear life.

Lib Campbell is a retired Methodist pastor, retreat leader, columnist and host of the blogsite www.avirtualchurch.com. She can be contacted at libcam05@gmail.com.

State lawmakers take aim at hospitals' tax perks

Continued from page 3A

Health in Mecklenburg County alone — which would bring in at least \$23 million a year to local governments if the land were not exempt from taxes.

A 2025 investigation revealed that Atrium Health sidesteps the state's \$45 million cap on sales tax refunds by filing refund requests as two separate

entities: Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist and a government entity that does business as Atrium Health. Atrium stressed that its filings were legal and that it invests billions in the community.

Rep. Julie Howard, R-Davie, who co-chairs the House Select Committee on Property Tax Reduction and Reform, cited the

Ledger/NC Health News's reporting on Atrium at a February committee meeting when discussing the need for sales tax reform.

At the March 18 meeting, she said that even though the practice of filing for sales tax refunds under two separate entities is legal, it's "a loophole that is costing taxpayers money." "It was not the intent,"

she said, adding that Atrium has "real good legal counsel. That was not the way it was supposed to be."

The proposed legislation would close the loophole by requiring all the affiliate organizations of a non-profit or public hospital to be treated as one entity when applying the refund cap.

Sports

THURSDAY, MARCH 26, 2025



MATT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Johnson C. Smith which advanced to the NCAA Division II playoffs for the first time in school history in 2025 along with the school's first CIAA title since 1969, must replace their starting quarterback and top receiver. Defensively, the Golden Bulls must replace nine opening-day starters from 2025.

Alteration season for Golden Bulls

JC Smith football opens spring drills with most of 2025 roster back and transition at quarterback

By Herbert L. White
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Spring football is the first step in Johnson C. Smith's drive to improve on its best season ever.

The Golden Bulls, who start drills on March 31, went a school-best 10-2 last year and won the CIAA title - their first since 1969 - but are under roster construction. The most notable spots are across the defense, receiver and quarterback, where graduation and transfers took a toll. The portal delivered short-term alternatives, but coach Maurice Flowers has a roster that retained most of its experienced underclass-

men. Practice concludes on April 25 with an intrasquad scrimmage, but in the interim, here are areas worth taking note before coaches begin their assessments.

Mr. Football behind center

Josh Jackson, a 6-foot-5, 215-pound former Tennessee Mr. Football who spent two years at FCS program Central Connecticut State, has impressive measurable. What he doesn't have is extensive game experience. Flowers has succeeded with inexperienced quarterbacks in the past, so Jackson will have every chance to put his skills to use.

Stacked at running back

All-CIAA pick Bobby Smith burst onto the scene as a redshirt freshman, rushing for 1,030 yards last year, becoming the first Golden Bulls back to crack the 1,000-yard barrier since Emanuel Wilson in 2019. He won't be alone when it comes to carries, either.



Smith

Fabian Duncan, a North Mecklenburg High graduate, transferred from Allen, where he earned SIAC player of the year as a sophomore.

Duncan, who has two years of eligibility remaining, led the SIAC with 1,301 rushing yards in 2025 (ninth in Division II) and 15 rushing touchdowns (tied for 14th). Kamarro Edmonds, who missed most of 2025 with a lower leg injury, returns to the fold along with Avante George and Antonio Crim.

Grab opportunity at receiver

All-CIAA talents Biggie Proctor (71 catches for 932 yards and 10 scores in 2025) and Brevin Caldwell are gone, but the cupboard isn't bare.

Smith added former UNC Pembroke receiver JaQuan Albright (6-0, 180)

Please see **TRANSITION** | 6A

Wes Miller's task: raise 49ers basketball profile

By Cameron Williams
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Wes Miller, the Charlotte 49ers' new basketball coach, is tasked with turning around a program that has not made the NCAA tournament since 2005.

After the dismissal of Aaron Fearnle on March 17, new Charlotte athletics director Kevin White moved quickly to find his successor. Miller, who was fired by Cincinnati on March 13 with three years left on his contract, agreed to a separation deal ending his five-year tenure with a \$3.1 million buyout.

"I'm incredibly honored to lead the Charlotte Basketball program," Miller said in a statement. "This is a university with tremendous momentum, a passionate city behind it, and deep basketball roots in the state of North Carolina. From the moment I began talking with Kevin White and Chancellor [Sharon] Gaber, it was clear there is a shared vision to build a program defined by toughness, passion, and relentless energy. We're going to pour everything we have into devel-

Please see **WES** | 6A



CINCINNATI ATHLETICS

Cincinnati basketball coach Wes Miller is returning to North Carolina as the Charlotte 49ers new coach. Miller previously was head coach at UNC Greensboro.

WSSU did HBCUs proud with campaign

Winston-Salem State women should've been in the NCAA Division II Elite Eight.

If any CIAA women's team was good enough to go all the way, it was WSSU.

Oh well, the Rams not only represented the CIAA with excellent play and even better class, but they also raised the bar for all HBCU Division II women's teams.

And let's not forget the free publicity and recruiting aspect that no amount of money can buy.

Eighteen Division I and II HBCU women's teams earned postseason bids via the NCAA, WBIT, WNIT and BCIC. Compare that to 10 for the men via the NCAA and BCIC.

At least DII teams can earn more than one spot in the NCAA Tournament, but it's one-and-done for DI men's teams.

Alabama A&M chose the Women's Basketball Invitation Tournament over the Women's NIT. The WBIT was founded in 2024 and fully funded by the NCAA.

It takes the top seeds denied a spot in the Big Dance for a chance at redemption. All expenses are paid, games are streamed on ESPN+, with the semifinals and championship broadcast live on ESPNU and ESPN2.

The competition is stiffer. AAMU travels to BYU as opposed to possibly hosting a WNIT game. But to be the best you got to...well, you know the rest.

But let's not put the WNIT out to pasture just yet. While teams must pay to host, it's still a respectable tournament that gives mid-majors a chance to shine.



BONITTA BEST

Please see **HBCU** | 6A

Panthers free agency haul changes team narrative

By Jeff Hawkins
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Streaming a message during a 2024 broadcast, ESPN presenter Pat McAfee informed Carolina Panthers owner David Tepper: "Your team sucks."

It was accurate at the time.

The Panthers were 1-6 and coming off a 40-7 rout by the Washington Commanders, who were led by backup quarterback Marcus Mariota. Carolina's QB of the future, Bryce Young, was on the bench for a fifth and, what proved to be final game. The defense went on to yield an NFL all-time worst 534 points during the

5-12 campaign.

The previous season, the Panthers went 2-15 as Young, the No. 1 overall draft pick, struggled as a rookie, absorbing a franchise record-tying 62 sacks. Ending with an interim coach for a second straight season, Carolina hit bottom. The Panthers were dysfunctional, and the fan base grew apathetic.

Among the lowlights were coach Frank Reich getting fired after 11 games and a video of Tepper tossing water at a Jacksonville Jaguars fan following a 26-0 loss on New Year's Eve, resulting in a league-imposed \$300,000 fine.

The Panthers went out with a whimper, failing to score during their final two games, a franchise first. On top of all that, the first-overall draft pick belonged to the Chicago Bears as part of the Young trade.

From the outside, the situation appeared dire.

Regime-altering culture

Enter another new regime - and culture - commanded by general manager Dan Morgan and first-time coach Dave Canales. Morgan initially struggled to convince top free-agent targets to relocate to Charlotte and join a fran-

Please see **FREE** | 6A

Morrison leans into learning from Charlotte FC teammates

By Herbert L. White
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Morrison Agyemang's blunder was unforgotten and sudden.

In his first MLS start with Charlotte FC, the defender scored an own goal in the 31st minute against Austin FC on March 7. In making a headed back pass, Agyemang miscommunicated with goalkeeper Kristijan Kahlina and the ball wound up in the net, gift short-handed Austin a 1-1 draw. Charlotte recovered with a pair of goals in a 3-1 win, and so did Agyemang.

"What helps is my teammates, Wilf [Zaha], the team, they helped me throughout," said

Agyemang, 21. "In football, it happens sometimes, like, what can you do? You just need to carry on - you know, heads up, and they kept me going."

That perspective is the result of maturity earned by playing in Europe with stops in Croatia with first division club HNK Sibenik before moving stateside with Crown Legacy FC in 2025 and promotion to the MLS first team in Charlotte. Agyemang joined HNK Sibenik from Cheeta FC, a second division side in his native Ghana.

"To play against the big teams (in Serbia), Dinamo Zagreb, Osijek - they're really good teams," Agyemang said. "I've got a lot of ex-

perience there too. I'm just coming through the flanks. I just need to keep developing myself. That's the main thing."

Agyemang's addition to the defense gives Charlotte a younger, athletic presence on the backline next to the veteran Tim Ream, a crafty defensive passer. With Nathan Byrne and Harry Toffolo on the flanks, Charlotte is developing consistency in the defensive third and stability in transition.

Agyemang is adjusting to the first team through the combination of coaches and experienced teammates who have been generous with their knowledge.

Please see **MORRISON** | 6A



DONALD WATKINS | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Johnson C. Smith defensive tackle Cadricus Stanley (22) linebacker Chris Jackson (48) and safety Tynan Tucker (25) tackle Virginia Union running back Curtis Allen in the CIAA title game on Nov. 15, 2025, in Durham. The Golden Bulls won 45-21 for their first CIAA title since 1969.

Transition kicks off for retooled Golden Bulls

Continued from page 5A

caught 64 passes for 895 yards and five touchdowns in 2025 as a redshirt junior. He also rushed for 132 yards on 22 carries.

Among the returnees, Brian Lane (46 receptions, 676 yards, 5 TDs), Reggie Daniel (18 catches, 345 yards, 6 TDs) and Reggie Brigman (11 catches, 165 yards, 2 TDs) are taking on expanded roles.

Offensive line returns

The group that started JCSU's playoff game against Frostburg State returns, anchored by All-CIAA right guard Jamari Mason.

The Golden Bulls are young and experienced with stalwarts Robert Early (left tackle), Brendan Arrington (left guard) and Daniel Caldwell (right tackle).

Defensive line remake

Defensive tackle Cadricus Stanley (32 tackles) is the most experienced returning player, but an overhaul is coming.

JCSU went to the transfer portal for edge Jason Romero (6-5, 250), who played at East Carolina. Another signing is 2022 All-CIAA defensive tackle Anthony Binyard (6-2, 290), who played on the Broncos' 2022 conference title team as a redshirt freshman.

As a sophomore in 2023, he racked up 29 tacks (15 solo) and five sacks - including a pair against Smith.

Linebacker stability

Vincent Hill earned All-CIAA as a junior and classmate Kristian Eanes is a capable running mate. The starters are likely set, but there's depth to establish.

Secondary

This group will take a hit. Strong safety Tynan Tucker is the only starter eligible to return for another season. Whoever steps in has big cleats to fill. Marque Vereen, a cornerback who played at West Florida last year, will have an opportunity to play immediately with a strong spring.

HBCU basketball disrespected

Continued from page 5A

Remember the success HBCUs had last year? Three of the four HBCU teams selected won their first-round games for the first time ever.

The creation of the WBIT opened more spots. The MEAC's Maryland Eastern Shore earned an automatic berth, but Norfolk State also received an at-large bid. This wouldn't have happened with no WBIT.

The Black College Invitational Championship is March 27-28 on Virginia State's campus featuring eight DII teams: Virginia State, Benedict, Bowie State and Central State on the women's side, and Bluefield State, Central State, Virginia State and Edward Waters on the men's.

The top DI men's seeds snubbed by the NCAA can extend their season in the NIT, which used to be the top collegiate post-season tournament back in the day.

The joke is many of those teams don't want to play in the NIT. Some just flat-out turn down the invite, while others - pressured by the school - show up just to shut folks up.

The NIT was a gem for HBCU DI men's

teams. If the regular season champion got upset in the conference tournament, it knew it had a spot in the NIT.

Until it didn't.

Trying not to fall further behind the NCAA's shadow, the NIT revamped its selection process a couple of years ago and eliminated automatic berths for regular season champions. No HBCU team has been invited since.

The College Basketball Invitational, which selected HBCUs in the past, cancelled this year's tournament. And the College Basketball Crown was created by Fox Sports with the express purpose of focusing on Name, Image and Likeness benefits for teams. Interestingly, the Crown reduced its tournament from 16 teams to eight this year, some with losing records.

Both Howard and Prairie View A&M won their First Four matchups with some exciting basketball. The SWAC has won five of its last six First Four appearances. You'd think folks would get a clue.

Bonitta Best is sports editor at *The Triangle Tribune* in Durham.

MLS sprints to shorter 2027 schedule

By Herbert L. White

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Major League Soccer's 2027 season is a literal sprint into the future.

The league's truncated 14-game campaign is a transition to a 2028 summer-to-spring schedule that aligns with the world's top leagues. MLS teams will play 20 fewer regular season games when the season kicks off in February but keeps its postseason format, including MLS Cup. The 2027 schedule will be announced later.

The sprint season, which concludes in April, will also determine international competition, including qualification for the 2028 Concacaf Champions Cup and

Leagues Cup. Five Champions Cup berths will be determined by the sprint season's results, and 18 clubs will qualify for Leagues Cup, nine from each conference.

Regular season matches will consist of intra-conference play only, with one match between teams - seven at home and seven on the road. The top eight teams in each conference will qualify for a single-elimination playoff. The Eastern and Western winners will square off in a single match, winner-takes-all MLS Cup.

The 2027-28 campaign will kick off in July 2027 and end with MLS Cup played in May 2028. There'll be a winter break from mid-December to early February with no matches in January.

Wes Miller's new job: Put 49ers basketball on map

Continued from page 5A

oping our student-athletes, competing at the highest level, and building a team that our campus and this city are proud to rally around. The foundation is here for something special, and I can't wait to get to work because Charlotte's stock is rising."

Miller, who previously coached at UNC Greensboro, holds an overall record of 285-209 (185-135 at UNCG). He was fired after a 18-15 season and seventh in the Big 12. His final conference game with the Bearcats was a loss to Central Florida in the conference tournament.

Miller has seven 20-plus win seasons in his career and four losing seasons - all of which came between the 2012-13 and 2015-16 seasons.

In his time at UNCG, Miller made the NCAA tournament twice. He never made the tournament with the Bearcats but did reach the NIT quarterfinals twice.

"Wes Miller is a proven leader with a deep understanding of the game and strong ties to basketball in our state," White said. "Throughout this process, what stood out most was his passion, competitive energy, and clear vision for building a championship culture here at Charlotte. He embodies the toughness, resilience, and commitment to the total student-athlete experience that we value, and he understands the opportunity we have to build

something special for our university and our city. Charlotte Basketball has a proud history and tremendous potential, and with Wes leading our program, I am confident we will return to consistently competing for conference championships and postseason appearances."

A source confirmed to The Post that Red Ventures CEO Ric Elias was involved in the search process. Elias has been around the 49ers' athletic department after speaking on campus last year and building connections within the athletic department and beyond.

Miller played at North Carolina from 2003-07 with a national championship in 2005. He was a potential candidate for the Tar Heels opening after Roy Williams retired in 2021. The job went to Hubert Davis.

"I am thrilled by Kevin White's selection of Wes Miller to lead men's basketball and believe he brings the energy and focus needed to elevate our program," Gaber said. "[Miller] understands North Carolina, he understands this region's talent, and he brings a deep connection to the game that will resonate with our student-athletes and our community. His authenticity and commitment to building something meaningful make him the right coach to lead the Charlotte 49ers men's basketball forward."



CHARLOTTE FC

Charlotte FC defender Morrison Agyemang is logging first team minutes since promotion from Crown Legacy FC, the MLS Next Pro side.

Morrison leans into learning from Charlotte FC teammates

Continued from page 5A

"They really helped me throughout me coming over here ...most especially the senior players," he said. ... "They help me with the setup, so I obviously need to keep going."

Ream has been especially helpful, Agyemang said, by answering questions about

strategy as well as preparation. Ream, a fixture on the United States National Team, brings a wealth of knowledge from international and MLS perspectives.

"Tim has played a lot of big roles," Agyemang said. "I used to go to him to ask him a lot of questions, and

I felt he's been at the top and is already there, so, and I'm just coming through the flanks. I need to go to him to ask some questions that I feel I need to know about this, about that. I go to him every time and it's open to me to come to him, ask him whatever question that I have."

Free agency haul changes narrative

Continued from page 5A

chise consistently ranked near the bottom of the annual players' poll.

Morgan proved this month the Panthers' narrative is evolving by signing three of the top free agents on the market. Opening with a power move March 9, outside linebacker Jaelan Phillips signed early in the legal tampering period, sending a message throughout the league. Next came a three-year, \$45 million deal for inside linebacker Devin Lloyd, adding a playmaking presence to the center of the 3-4 base defense. Four days later, Rasheed Walker, the top-rated tackle, inked a one-year, \$10 million deal to fortify the offensive line. Walker fills a short-term role as starter Ikem Ekwonu recovers from a ruptured patellar tendon in his knee.

Unlike the 2024 free-agent period, Morgan noticed his sales pitch carried new promise.

"We felt like players wanted to be here, as opposed to when I first took over," Morgan said during Friday's teleconference. "It was a little harder. You feel that shift that guys really wanted to be here."

Delving deeper into the free-agent market, Morgan built up the roster's depth, adding, among others, a potential starting center (Luke Fortner) and backups in quarterback Kenny Pickett, running back A.J. Dillon and receiver John Metchie III, Young's prime target during his 2021 Heisman Trophy-winning season at Alabama.

"We're just trying to build that family atmosphere around here," Morgan said. "As we're trying to attract players from the outside, they know when they come into this building, they have full support."

"Coach has done a really good job in terms of the culture."

Devin Lloyd: 'Time to take that next step'

Born in 1995, the Panthers have endured tough times in the past:

- 2001, they lost 15 straight games, finishing 1-15.
- 2010, they started 1-5 and finished 2-14.

From 2018-23, they went 31-70 since Tepper became owner, the league's worst record during that span.

Players talk

It's little wonder why Morgan initially struggled to attract top free agents.

But Lloyd, who possesses All-Pro ability to rush the quarterback, cover receivers in the flat and remain stout on running plays, didn't pay much attention to the past decade. When the Jaguars decided not to offer him the fifth season on his rookie contract, the former first-round draft pick entered free agency without prejudice.

"(Rumors) can be different, depending on who you ask," Lloyd said. "That all depends on who you ask, who you talk to. It's something I never focused on until I was in free agency. Obviously, you look around and see who's doing what."

Despite the chatter, Lloyd recognized a prime opportunity with the Panthers (8-9), who won the NFC South title last season.

"Looking at the Panthers last year, from the outside in, (they were) a talented team that had a lot of really good pieces all over the place, an ascending team," he said. "Now it's time to take that next step."

The succeeding move could come if the Panthers post their first winning season since 2017 and focus on refining certain internal factors.

The 2025 NFLPA poll, conducted among 1,695 players, ranked the Panthers 25th among 32 franchises. While Canales earned an A-minus, the overall grade was dragged down by a D for team travel and D-minus for ownership.

Phillips, who signed a four-year, \$120 million deal, overlooked those concerns. He sees a "contender, a team that is up and coming."

"What they were able to accomplish last year was real impressive," Phillips said. "Dan did an awesome job with who he signed. I'm excited to come in an contribute."

That certainly doesn't suck.

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