

Key points of interest as the Panthers put rookies and veterans on the field together

THE VOICE OF THE BLACK COMMUNITY SINCE 1906

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JOHNSON C. SMITH UNIVERSITY

A bill introduced in Congress earlier this month would pave the way for federal funding that would upgrade infrastructure at the nation's historically Black colleges and universities like Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte.

## Adams and Scott reintroduce HBCU infrastructure measure

US Rep. Alma Adams and Sen. Tim Scott back federal investment in campuses

Herbert L. White  
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Federal lawmakers have introduced bills to fund infrastructure upgrades at historically Black colleges.

U.S. Reps. Alma Adams, a Charlotte Democrat and Arkansas Republican French Hill introduced HR 8791, the Institutional Grants for New Infrastructure, Technology, and Education for Historically Black College and University Excellence Act. Sens. Chris Coons, a



Adams

Maryland Democrat, and Tim Scott, a South Carolina Republican introduced a companion legislation in the upper chamber.

HR 8791, filed on May 13, would authorize federal investment to rebuild and modernize aging campus infrastructure at HBCUs across the country. State and federal governments have historically underinvested in Black colleges, and many have deferred maintenance for infrastructure, equipment and dormitories.

"For generations, HBCUs have educated students who went on to lead in every corner of our country, often while operating with far fewer resources than their peer institutions," Adams, founder and co-chair of the Bipartisan HBCU Caucus said in a statement. "The IGNITE HBCU Excellence Act is about making sure these institutions have the facilities and infrastructure needed to continue serving students and competing in today's higher education landscape. From academic buildings and research labs to student housing and technology

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## More time to bargain on airport lease

City, airline extend current terms for year; workers urge review

Herbert L. White  
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The city of Charlotte and American Airlines are giving each other a year to strike a long-term lease to use Charlotte Douglas International Airport.

The two sides agreed to continue negotiating a 10-year deal between the city and American after the current contract expires on June 30. The airport and airline agreed to use terms and conditions of the existing pact and will have no impact on customers or operations at the world's sixth-busiest airport.

"Both the airport and the airlines remain deeply committed to Charlotte and maintaining CLT's role as a critical driver of connectivity and economic growth for the region," a statement from Charlotte Douglas reads.

"American has been committed to Charlotte for decades and supported \$4 billion worth of infrastructure improvements at the airport in just the past decade," an American spokesperson said in a statement. "We are proud of the vital role our hub plays in connecting the region to the world - driving more than \$30 billion in economic activity annually across the state and supporting more than 150,000 jobs. We continue to make meaningful progress toward a long-term lease agreement, and this extension will support continued discussions."

According to American, the air carrier employs more than 16,500 people in Charlotte, with an annual payroll in excess of \$2 billion.

Meanwhile, the local chapter of Service Employees International Union, which collaborates with airport contract workers, is calling on City Council to implement a 45-

Please see **MORE** | 2A

## Top Senior pours into building community

By Cameron Williams  
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Jade Mungai is determined to help others. The Post's 2026 Top Senior of the Year runner-up, Mungai plans on studying neuroscience and political science in college with a concentration in international and foreign affairs.

"I've been accepted to UNC Chapel Hill, University of Rochester and Northeastern University to name a few," said Mungai, a senior at Palisades High School who picked UNC. "Academics, obviously, are very important. Which college is going to give me the best opportunities academically and research wise is important. But, at the same time, I also look at how the feel of the school is and the community - how student life will help me, especially with different clubs and things like that. Chapel Hill has one that would help me with my international relations, and they also have a neuroscience honor society. So, it is really important that the university has extracurriculars that will help prepare me for my future."

Mungai is a member of Health Occupations Students of America due to her interest in medicine. Her experiences in HOSA have affirmed her passion. "After competing and going to different health science colleges and everything, that has purely helped me focus more on my medicine career in the future," Mungai said, "and it has helped me narrow down what I wanted to do."

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Mungai



LEVINE MUSEUM OF THE NEW SOUTH

Good Samaritan Hospital, North Carolina's first health facility for Black patients, in an undated photo. The building was demolished in 1996.

## Good Samaritan Hospital gets state recognition with historic road marker

By Herbert L. White  
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Good Samaritan Hospital's legacy has a new recognition.

The Charlotte hospital, the first in North Carolina to treat Black patients, will be commemorated May 28 with a state road marker sponsored by the N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources. The dedication is 11 a.m., at Ebenezer Baptist Church,

2020 W. Sugar Creek Road. The installation is later in the day.

"For many of us, this moment is deeply personal," said Juan Whipple, founder and owner of Queen City Tours and sponsor of a marker petition for the hospital since the mid-1990s. "Some were born there, some worked there, and others simply knew it as a symbol of dignity and

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## Advocates: Jim Crow 'never ended'

By Christine Zhu  
NC NEWSLINE

Black community leaders and lawmakers in the state legislature said voting rights are under attack across the nation, including in North Carolina.

"Many have made the assumption that we are now far removed from the grip of Jim Crow," said Javita Lee Miller, policy director for Advance North Carolina. "However, I would like to humbly submit to you today that the era never ended for our communities. It's just being spearheaded by the children and the grandchildren."

Lee Miller drew parallels throughout history.

In 1870, Tennessee — the same state that, earlier this month, removed all House Democrats from their committee assignments for protesting a racial gerrymander — led the charge of implementing a poll tax disenfranchising Black voters for decades, she said. Now, federal lawmakers are pushing for the SAVE America Act, which would require voters to provide

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## Bill would fund reinvest in HBCU infrastructure

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infrastructure, this bill makes long-term investments that will strengthen our campuses, support workforce development, and expand opportunity for future generations."

North Carolina has 10 accredited four-year HBCUs, the most of any state. Adams, whose district includes represents Johnson C. Smith University, is a graduate of North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, the nation's largest Black college with more than 15,000 students enrolled. South Carolina has seven four-year HBCUs and a private two-year college.

"HBCUs have long been engines of opportunity, but for far too long, too many have been asked to do more with less," said Scott, co-chair of the HBCU Caucus. "The IGNITE for HBCU Excellence Act will help modernize campuses, expand research and workforce training opportunities, and ensure students are prepared to succeed in a 21st-century economy."

HBCUs represent 3% of all four-year colleges and universities in the U.S., but graduate 17% of all bachelor's degrees and 27 percent of science, technology, education and math degrees awarded to Black Americans. Black colleges are also economic engines in

their communities, generating \$16.5 billion in regional economies.

Said Hill: "Central Arkansas is home to four outstanding HBCUs, and I have seen firsthand the difference these institutions make for their students and communities. "I have also seen how the lack of long-term investment and aging infrastructure limits what these institutions are able to offer their students. The IGNITE HBCU Excellence Act is a meaningful step toward addressing that. It would help ensure our HBCUs have the facilities and infrastructure to match the excellence of the students they serve."

**HBCUs have long been engines of opportunity, but for far too long, too many have been asked to do more with less.**

U.S. Sen. **TIM SCOTT** (R-S.C.), co-chair of the Bipartisan HBCU Caucus

## Advocates: Jim Crow era 'never ended' for Black Americans

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of citizenship and photo ID.

Sen. Val Applewhite (D-Cumberland) said she was part of a 2018 U.S. Supreme Court case, North Carolina v. Covington, where judges found that Republican state lawmakers had violated the federal Voting Rights Act by suppressing Black voters through gerrymandering.

"We can all agree that North Carolina has been ground zero for voter suppression tactics for years," Applewhite said.

The Supreme Court significantly weakened the Voting Rights Act in an April ruling this year, limiting the landmark civil rights law to only prohibit maps drawn with the explicit intent of racially discriminating against voters. This makes it nearly impossible to challenge gerrymandering on VRA grounds.

In recent months, states across the country have redrawn their congressional seats to add Republican seats at the request of President Donald Trump.

North Carolina Republicans passed a map in October that would shift the state's 14-member congressional delegation from 10 Republicans and four Dem-

ocrats to 11 Republicans and three Democrats. To flip the seat of Democratic Rep. Don Davis, Republican lawmakers "cracked" the historic Black Belt in eastern North Carolina, drawing criticism from Black leaders.

Senate Democratic Leader Sydney Batch (D-Wake) said it won't be possible to prevent further gerrymandering without changing the makeup of the elected officials in the legislative building.

"If we don't have courageous and brave Republicans to stand next to us to say that voters should actually have the right to choose their electeds versus the other way around, we're going to continue to be in this fight," she said. "Unless Democrats are in charge, I see no hope of having fair maps and actually being able to have a constitutional amendment."

When Democrats were in the majority in the North Carolina legislature, voting rights advocates and Republicans urged them to pass legislation to ban gerrymandering in North Carolina. Democratic leaders at the time did not allow votes on those bills.



Batch



Davis

## Top Senior runner-up leans into community building aspirations

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Mungai said she always wanted to study medicine at some level but attending a medical conference in Massachusetts confirmed her aspirations. Mungai's father Peter and mother Evageline are from Kenya and Ghana respectively. After seeing health disparities in other countries gave Jade a passion for international relations and foreign affairs.

"I've always wanted to be able to do surgery," she said. "By having a background with parents from different countries and everything, international relations also came into the fact when I was looking, when I would go to the different countries, and I would look saying, 'Oh my gosh, this person can't afford surgery, or this person can't get equal access to what they need to do.' And so, I want to be able to use not only my neuroscience and everything, because with neuroscience, when you go into surgery, you also learn a lot about other different surgical pathways as well. I want to use that as a way of helping other countries. ... My overall goal is also working with the World Health Organization."

Mungai credits several people who have helped shape who she is.

"One of the people that made a great impact on me, especially in my high school career is my English teacher Mrs. Rebecca Collins," she said. "Ever since freshman year, she has been one of the

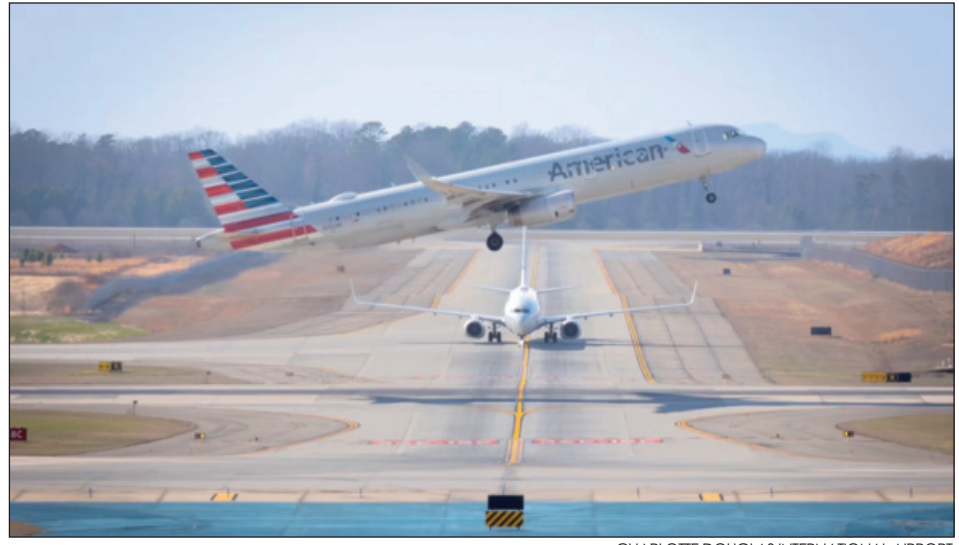
few teachers that I've had that has always encouraged me to do better because she knows that I can. She would always push me harder, and she is one of the biggest role models at school. Then another person that has impacted me is probably my grandma. She has always been there for me throughout my entire life, always encouraging me."

With the future ahead of her, Mungai said there is one thing she would tell her younger self.

"It's not about what people tell you that you should do," she said. "It's what you should do for your own love and passion for it. I've had people tell me, 'Oh, you need to do this, oh, you should do this and everything.' I tried it, I never had a love for it. But when I finally realized I had a love and passion for medicine and foreign affairs, that has always been in my mind ever since."

In 15 years, Mungai hopes to be leaving a lasting impact on the world.

"I'll be working on patients and everything and having a connection with patients, but at the same time, still constantly doing research about different and cognitive disabilities," she said, "but at the same time, working with either the state or federal government or international government at that time to help improve the health care system in different places."



CHARLOTTE DOUGLAS INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

American Airlines and the city of Charlotte have agreed to extend their current lease by as much as a year while the sides hammer out a new long-term agreement. The current deal expires June 20.

## More time to bargain on long-term airport lease

Continued from page 1A

day public review period before approving a long-term lease. Workers, who rallied ahead of the May 26 City Council meeting, contend American underpays service personnel amid staffing shortages and negligible benefits.

"We are glad to see the City of Charlotte and the airlines agree to extend the current lease-term agreement up to a year on a month-to-month basis to allow for continued negotiations," said Chris Baumann, Southern Region director for SEIU Workers United. "We have been calling for a closer look at the terms since last year. Charlotte Douglas International Airport is one of Charlotte's most important public assets, and a lease agreement of this magnitude will shape airport operations, passenger experience, safety, and workforce standards for the next decade."

A survey conducted by SEIU of subcontractors at Charlotte Douglas and published last month found respondents reporting chronic understaffing, high turnover rates and unsafe equipment - long-standing complaints among workers. The report was based on re-

sponses of cabin cleaners and wheelchair assistance workers at ABM and Prospect Airport Services, both American contractors.

Among the results: 53% of subcontractors have been employed less than a year, 67% say they are pressured to work too quickly due to staffing gaps and 71% report going to work sick due to lack of paid time off.

"Additional time is an important step forward, but transparency and meaningful public input must follow," Baumann said. "Charlotte residents have made clear they want stronger pay and working conditions for the frontline workers who keep CLT running every day. Many of these workers are still earning poverty wages without basic benefits, despite serving as the backbone of one of American Airlines' most important and profitable hubs."

We continue to call for a formal 45-day public review period once negotiations conclude so City Council and the public have an opportunity to fully review and weigh in on the final agreement before any long-term deal is approved."

## Good Samaritan earns historical NC highway marker recognition

Continued from page 1A

hope during difficult times. After a 30-year journey, I am grateful that future generations will finally see Good Samaritan Hospital recognized as a permanent part of Charlotte and North Carolina history."

Good Samaritan, which stood at the corner of Mint and Graham streets from 1891-1996, is now the site of Bank of America Stadium. A local historic marker sits next to the stadium.

Jane Renwick Smedberg Wilkes, Good Samaritan's benefactor, moved to Charlotte around 1855 and treated Confederate soldiers as a volunteer nurse during the Civil War. Afterward, she was elected president of the Women's Aid Society of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, where she co-founded St. Peter's Hospital, a whites-only facility.

In 1882, Wilkes launched a campaign to raise money for a hospital to serve Black patients and by 1888 had the funds to buy land for Good Samaritan, which opened three years later to house 20 patients. In 1903, the hospital opened North Carolina's first nursing school for Black students and in 1925, capacity was doubled. Construction of a new wing in 1936 increased it to 100 patients.

"Good Samaritan Hospital served generations of Black Charlotteans during segregation, yet for decades its story remained largely invisible," Whipple said. "This dedication is more than a marker - it is a permanent public acknowledgment of the patients, workers, nurses, doctors, and families who helped build Charlotte despite enormous barriers."

Good Samaritan became a temporary large-scale trauma center on July 27, 1911, when a passenger train packed with 912 Black passengers crashed into a freight train in Hamlet, about 80 miles east of Charlotte. Eighty-three of the most seriously injured people were transported Good Samaritan - the closest hospital for Black patients - for treatment. Black and white doctors and nurses treated the injured, saving 80 patients.

Two years later, Good Samaritan was the scene of one of Mecklenburg County's three confirmed acts of racial terror lynchings. On Aug. 21, 1913, John McNeely as admitted to the hospital for treatment for a gunshot wound after exchanging fire with a police officer. Five days later, 35 armed white marauders raided the hospital, dragged McNeely outside and shot him. No one was arrested.

In the 1950s, Black Charlotteans pushed to desegregate hospitals - and close Good Samaritan, which was considered substandard compared to Memorial Hospital (forerunner to Carolinas Medical Center) and Presbyterian Hospital.

In 1959, Good Samaritan's medical school was closed and two years later, the hospital was sold to the city of Charlotte, where it was renamed Charlotte Community Hospital. Like Charlotte Memorial, Charlotte Community treated Black and white patients, albeit in segregated wards.

Charlotte Community was converted into Magnolia Rest Home in 1982 and was demolished 14 years later to make room for the Carolina Panthers' 75,000-seat stadium.

## Communications executive leans on military experience

By Cameron Williams

cameron.williams@thecharlottepost.com

Ken Cooper has a passion for people and telecommunications.

The new area vice president of field operations for Spectrum for Western North Carolina, Cooper has more than 20 years' experience in the industry. Prior to his telecommunications career, Cooper was in the Navy, where he learned about life skills leadership before his discharge in 2000.

"I was never on a ship, which could probably be shocking to some people, but I was stationed in Italy for my time at the NATO base," he said. "We worked with different nationalities. ... I think in that time, of course, you learn the core values like structure, discipline and stuff. But more than that I learned more of a communication style to be able to work with people with all kinds of different personalities, different backgrounds."

Cooper said as he has grown in the industry, he has a deeper passion for diver-

sity as key in life in and business.

"I think that diversity is a big part of society and just the world we live in today," he said, "and the more diverse we become, the stronger we become. ... My team is a mixture of all races and is diverse. Charter [Communications, Spectrum's parent company] is very big on diversity and making sure that everyone has an opportunity. I don't worry about color or race or language or anything. I think we all have to work together, and that's the way I like to lead."

Before moving to Charter, Cooper was with a different cable company for 16 years but was looking for more.

"Charter has a lot to offer their employees," he said. "I started nine years ago as a supervisor in maintenance ... in the New York area. Let me tell you, this is how bad I wanted this job - I would commute from my home in [New] Jersey to Charter in New York for my work for nine years. It was three hours each way, but the opportunity was there. The reason I left my previous company was because there was no opportunity. I needed to work for a

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Cooper



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# The Charlotte Post

The Voice of the Black Community

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## Access to a good education is a civil right

When I was 16, I heard a story that changed everything.

I was attending a youth leadership conference and the speaker was Evelyne Villines. Ms. Villines was a powerful figure in the fight for disability rights who had advised U.S. presidents, served on national commissions, and was a public advocate for the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act, signed in 1990.



KIMBERLY JONES

Confined to a wheelchair by polio, Evelyne won the lead singing role in a school production. But when the time came, she was forced to remain off-stage, singing from the shadows. Instead of having the spotlight, a non-disabled peer, one who "looked the part," stood center stage, lip-syncing to her powerful voice.

That visual, a talented young woman deliberately veiled, a voice separated from its rightful owner struck me, even as a teenager. It showed me that exclusion is not always loud; sometimes it's a seemingly innocent policy change that separates a child's gifts from the opportunity to share them.

Ms. Villines's story planted the enduring seed of my commitment to equity: our work must be to tear down every curtain of exclusion and relentlessly affirm every child's right to the spotlight.

This memory is precisely what alarms me about the recent, sweeping layoffs in the U.S. Department of Education, particularly those gutting the Office of Special Education Programs and the Office for Civil Rights.

The U.S. Department of Education provides essential services that directly affect North Carolinians. It's not just a far-off bureaucracy; it's a major source of funding, with federal money making up about 20% of our state's public school budget.

This means over \$3 billion annually helps pay for programs for low-income students and those with disabilities. The special education office and the civil rights employees are key parts of this. Special education ensures that students with disabilities get the education they're legally entitled, and the civil rights office makes sure our schools don't discriminate.

Gutting these offices puts vital services and protections for our most vulnerable students at risk. This could mean fewer teachers and resources for students in high-poverty or rural districts, and a lack of oversight for civil rights issues, leaving families with little recourse if their children face discrimination.

This is a direct assault on the principles of equity and civil rights that form the bedrock of our public education system.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is not an optional suggestion; it is a law that guarantees a "free appropriate public

education," which is mandated by federal law, to millions of students. Special education employees were the keepers of this promise, monitoring states, managing billions in grants, and providing the guidance that ensured compliance. Without this oversight, FAPE risks becoming a fragmented "guideline" dictated by local budgets, rather than a child's legal right.

I have spoken with special education teachers who are deeply concerned that this lack of federal accountability will leave the fate of student protections in the hands of local school boards, whose members may prioritize political agendas over legal obligations, causing students to suffer.

This unraveling of accountability will fall heaviest on the shoulders of our most vulnerable students and families, especially those in underfunded, rural school districts. These communities often lack the local resources and expertise to navigate the complex legal requirements of special education. They depend on federal oversight.

We risk perpetuating inequalities and enabling a system where a student's access to a quality education is determined by their ZIP code, a reality we've fought to overcome for decades. This is a moral issue, a test of our national commitment to civil rights. The cuts to the Office for Civil Rights, which has already lost significant staff, make it even more difficult to investigate discrimination complaints. This leaves families with fewer options for assistance when a student's rights are violated, pushing them toward expensive and often inaccessible legal battles.

*Kimberly Jones is an English and Humanities teacher for Chapel Hill Carrboro City Schools. She is the 2023 Burroughs Wellcome Fund North Carolina Teacher of the Year.*

## Time to sing a new song, Donald

Dear Donald, the jig is up.

You have no ideas, no strategy, no vision. You have revealed you are not very smart and are uninterested in becoming better informed.

Perhaps it is because you got rid of all the people around who might have advised you better. Perhaps your hubris is so overwhelming you can't listen to anybody anymore. You have become very dangerous in the world, and the world is paying for your lunacy.

In case you haven't noticed, your poll numbers are tanking, and your beloved stock market is increasingly volatile. Your congress remains

unwilling to remove you from office. We are watching all of you implode on the world stage. You have become fodder for late night comedians. Saturday Night Live is having a revival in mocking you and the stooges around you.

The toll is ticking up like a time bomb ready to explode.

Find a new song, Donald. The notes of your playbook are souring. You are a sad figure on the world stage. The damage you have done to America is irreparable. We have lost our north star. America is losing its influence on the world stage.

It is impossible to imagine you know what you are doing. Every step is misstep. You appear disinterested. You fall asleep like a lot of 80-year-old people do when they sit down. You wear us all out.

I remember Perry Como's final Christmas concert on television. I felt embarrassed for him. His voice was shot, thin and off key. His season in the limelight was over and we all got to see his failing ability to do what he had done so well all his life.

Bluster and bullying have been your go-to's. The Iranians are calling you bluff. You never thought they had a hand to play. This is a big failure for you, Donald. No ballroom or triumphal arch will erase it.

You would do us a big favor take your \$1.7 billion and skulk into the sunset. We would even put up with J.D. Vance for a while if you were gone.

You embarrass us on the world stage. The meeting with President Xi was abominable. If I weren't so sick of you, I would pity you. Having just turned 80

myself, I know first-hand that strength and stamina are in short supply some days.

I have retired twice and still find productive things to do. I find deep joy in family and friends. Tom and I still love working in the yard. We will host a gathering at the drop of a hat.

Finding the new song is our daily task. We enjoy our pups. We smell the roses. We enjoy each other and will till the end of the road.

Take a hint from the playbook of life that really is life. All creation sings praise. You should try it. This world needs much, and you aren't cutting it.

*Lib Campbell is a retired Methodist pastor, retreat leader, columnist and host of the blogsite www.avirtualchurch.com.*

## Online voter registration for all – it's time

State election officials have been talking a lot lately about cost cutting and modernization.

In February, citing financial concerns, the NC State Board of Elections quietly informed county election officials that they must soon start withholding voter registration forms from organizers of registration drives. (We're not happy about this new policy.)

Meanwhile, at meetings of the Modernization of Election Data Systems Commission, NC State Auditor Dave Boliek, who created and chairs the commission and whose office oversees the State Board of Elections, has spoken passionately about the need for secure, reliable, efficient, accurate, web-based, mobile-friendly election systems.

While there seems to be plenty of money for this effort

– the General Assembly has provided \$15 million to fund the modernization – we know that a lot of demands will be put on those funds from a lot of different stakeholders.

For two of the most important groups of stakeholders – elections officials (both the cost-conscious and tech-forward ones) and voters (the most important group) – there's an innovation out there that would provide mutual benefit: online voter registration for all North Carolinians. (Read the letter we sent to the N.C. State Board of Elections here.)

Currently, only voters with an NC driver's license or DMV-issued state ID can register online. Everyone else – including new citizens, new residents, young voters without a license, and voters with disabilities that prevent them from getting a license – has to register on paper.

For voters who can't visit a voter registration event organized by You Can Vote or other groups, register-

ing on paper can be problematic. It can require money to pay for printing and postage, or access to transportation and time off work to visit a county elections office during business hours. In this day and age, those are totally unnecessary barriers to North Carolinians trying to exercise their Constitutional right to vote.

While the benefits to voters of universal online registration are obvious, there are also plenty of benefits to elections officials. As detailed in our letter to the State Board of Elections (see sidebar) those benefits include:

- Better data integrity: No more errors resulting from unclear or illegible handwriting. Fewer duplicate entries since the system could check for an existing registration before creating a new one.

- Reduced costs: Less staff time, printing, postage and materials used to collect correct information from voters. Less staff time used to manually input info from paper forms,

which could be scanned into the system.

Of course, the primary beneficiaries of universal online registration would be North Carolina voters – the 7.8 million who are registered, the 1 million who are eligible but unregistered, and the incalculable number who will register in years to come.

For all of them, registering to vote – the first step toward exercising the most fundamental right of citizens in a democracy – could be done in a few clicks from the comfort of home.

Online voter registration for all NC voters is what we deserve. As election officials look to save money and modernize systems, there's no better time for us to get it.

*Kate Fellman is the founder and executive director of You Can Vote, a North Carolina nonpartisan nonprofit that educates and registers voters across the state.*

## Communications exec leans into leadership charge

**Continued from page 2A**  
company that's about giving back to the community and taking care of their employees."

Cooper said he received several promotions over nine years in the New York region before coming to North Carolina. His new role entails everything from technicians who make service calls to managing construction coordinators who build and expand the network.

Cooper's passion for his work and his employees is evident in the drive to make a difference.

"I think it all just comes from wanting to succeed," he said. "I am always trying

to do what is best for my family. When you have a family, I think you learn early that you want to do everything the right way. The same way for my career, you want to do everything the right way and the best way you can be able to continue to excel."

Despite his job title, Cooper said he doesn't interact with people like he has one. He says that is probably what makes him unique among executives.

"When I introduce myself to people, I don't use my title," he said. "A title is a title; it doesn't make you who you are. What makes me unique is that I am personable. If you see me out

talking to an employee or a tech, 70-80% of the time we aren't talking about work. I want to know them and how they are doing, how their family is doing and what is going on in their world."

"I respect everyone that worked with me or for me. I think the leader that goes

the extra step to learn about the people that work for them and really learn about that person, you can get more out of that person. ... I want the people that work for me to believe I care because I really do. We all have families and I think that is the most important thing in our lives."

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CAROLINA ASCENT

Lily Nabet (right) and her Carolina Ascent mates will take on Lexington SC May 30 in the Gainbridge Super League final in Kentucky.

# One final mountain to climb

*Carolina Ascent, unbeaten in 12 straight, take on Lexington SC in the Gainbridge Super League final*

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

Carolina Ascent is a win away from its first Gainbridge Super title.

The Climbers beat Sporting JAX 1-0 on Sunday in the postseason semifinal for the franchise's inaugural playoff win. Mackenzie George scored her fourth goal of the season in the sixth minute and goalkeeper Sydney Martinez made seven saves to earn a clean sheet.

The Ascent play Lexington SC May 30 in the final. Kickoff is at 7 p.m. and will be streamed live on Peacock.

Lexington earned the Supporters' Shield as the GSL's best record, but Carolina has been more than competitive in the season series at 1-1-1.

"I think Lexington built a really strong team this year, so they're very different

from the group they had last season," Ascent coach Philip Poole said. "They're a good club with a great coach and a lot of quality players, so it's going to be another tough test. We beat them at home a few weeks ago, and then we drew 1-1 at their place when they equalized in the 98th minute. We know we can compete with them, and we know we can handle them."



Poole

Said forward Riley Parker: "We're just so excited and so grateful for the opportunity to have another chance at winning the championship."

The Ascent jumped in front in the sixth minute when George won the ball in the midfield and completed a pass

to Parker at the box's edge. Parker and George connected on a give-and-go, with George finishing the game-winner.

"It means a lot, especially since I hadn't scored all spring," George said. "The way the goal happened with Parker made it even more special. To have it come in a game like this and then for the team to battle and hold them off for another 84 minutes feels incredible. It was a total team effort."

Said Poole: "It was great to score early in such a back-and-forth game.

There were moments where I thought we were going to find a second goal, and moments where it felt like they might grab the equalizer. But overall, it

was a strong performance and a hard-fought win."

Mia Corbin sparked Carolina on set pieces in the first half. In the 24th minute, the forward's service to Jenna Butler at the back post resulted in a header that bounced off the crossbar.

Sporting JAX controlled possession and tallied seven shots by the 32nd minute. Jacksonville's best chance of the half came late in the second half when Baylee DeSmit connected on a blast that Martinez turned away. Martinez turned in another gem two minutes into the second half when she stopped Baylee DeSmit with a diving save.

In the 75th minute, Martinez again extended to turned away Georgia Brown's header at the bottom corner with a one-handed stop.

The moment has come to say goodbye but I just wanted to thank Charlotte and the city for welcoming me and my family with open arms and allowing me to fall in love with the game again.

Charlotte FC winger WILFRIED ZAHA

## Zaha with Charlotte FC: Good time while it lasted



CHARLOTTE FC

Wilfried Zaha confirmed his exit from Charlotte FC with a social media post on Sunday. He arrived in 2025 on loan from Turkish side Galatasaray.

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

Wilfried Zaha's time with Charlotte FC is over.

The winger and club announced Sunday he'll leave the club at the end his loan on June 30. Over a year and a half with the Crown, Zaha played 46 times in MLS matches and playoffs with 27 goal contributions (13 goals), fifth-most in Crown history. Before Charlotte, Zaha was under contract to Turkish side Galatasaray, which loaned him to the Crown. He also played at Crystal Palace in the English Premier League and Lyon in France.

"The moment has come to say goodbye but I just wanted to thank Charlotte the city for welcoming me and my family with open arms and allowing me to fall in love with the game again," Zaha posted on social media, "... there's been many highs and many lows but it's about the journey in the end and i loved every minute."

Zaha's exit means Charlotte FC will have an opening for a designated player and international roster slot for the summer transfer window July 13-Sept. 2. The window's close is in sync with the world's top leagues.

"Wilfried has been an important part of Charlotte FC since his arrival on loan last winter and has played a key role in our attack since joining," Charlotte general manager Zoran Krneta said in a statement. "Last season, Wilf helped us reach the top four in the Eastern Conference

Please see ZAHA | 6A

## Knueppel put fine point on 1st season

NBA First-Team All-Rookie pick

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

Charlotte Hornets forward Kon Knueppel capped his first NBA season with a spot on the All-Rookie First Team.

Knueppel, the fourth overall pick in the 2025 draft, had an immediate impact, averaging 18.5 points, 5.3 rebounds and 3.4 assists per game to finish second to Dallas' Cooper Flagg in Rookie of the Year voting. Knueppel, who started 80 of 81 games and became the first rookie in league history to lead the NBA in 3-point shots made with Hornets' record 273, topped all rookies in 20-point games with 36.

He earned four straight Eastern Conference Rookie of the Month awards, the most in franchise history.

Knueppel created more NBA rookie history by becoming the third to average 15 points and five rebounds per game while shooting 40% from 3-point range (Larry Bird and Paul Pierce); Michael Jordan's mark for most games with 20-plus points on 65% true shooting (32), and Stephen Curry's standard for most games with 20-plus points on 50/40/90 shooting splits with 21. Knueppel is the only player in Charlotte history to average 18 points per game on 63 percent true shooting in a season.

Knueppel is the seventh Hornet to earn First-Team All-Rookie and the first since Brandon Miller in 2023-24. He joins Miller and LaMelo Ball as First-Team All-Rookie picks on Charlotte's roster.



Knueppel

## Four reasons to pay attention to Panthers vets, rookies at OTAs

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

The Carolina Panthers are looking for investments to blossom.

Rookies and veterans are on the field together for the first time at the Bank of America Stadium campus, and with it is a first peek for coaches and players to evaluate the potential for a successful season. Carolina won the NFC South last season despite an 8-9 record, so there's room for improvement.

Training camp is still a couple of months away, but there's much to consider as the battle for roster spots becomes more urgent.

Here are four points to watch:

**Bryce Young's backup**  
Andy Dalton, Young's backup, mentor and occasional starter the last three seasons, is gone and with him a steadying influence in the huddle and classroom. The well-traveled Kenny Pickett is supposed to be QB2, but could undrafted rookie Haynes King play his way into consideration? How about Will Grier, an oldie but goodie who suited up for Carolina back in the day?

No way Carolina carries more than three quarterbacks this season and quite likely just two. Will the Panthers go for perennial (and

not necessarily the best kind of) NFL backups, or do they kick the tires with King, who may be the best athlete in the group despite a lack of experience?

**Linebacker stability**  
Carolina strengthened this group on paper with the arrival of Devin Lloyd via free agency, in what might be general manager Dan Morgan's best off-season signing. Next up is getting someone - anyone - to stay healthy long enough to contribute. Trevin



Lloyd

See FOUR | 6A



CAROLINA PANTHERS

Running back Jonathon Brooks, who missed all but three games in his first two seasons with the Panthers due to knee injuries, is expected to compete for carries in 2026 along with A.J. Dillon behind starter Chuba Hubbard.

## Four points of attention during Panthers OTAs

Continued from page 5A

Wallace has been inconsistent over his first two seasons but has the physical gifts. Veteran Claudin Chereilus has played in spot duty but primarily excels on special teams.

Adding a bit of intrigue is seventh-round pick Jackson Kuwath, a tackling machine at Miami (Ohio) who might have a shot at challenging for playing time.

### Jaelan Phillips investment

Morgan earned praise for snatching up Lloyd, but there's no consensus on Phillips, a pass-rushing specialist who signed a four-year, \$120 million free agent deal. The physical prowess is abundant, but his production has been hit-and-miss, which explains why Philadelphia was OK with letting him go.

If defensive coordinator Ejiro Evero can maximize what's good about Phillips, it'll be a massive upgrade for Carolina, which was middle-of-the-

pack defensively last season. If not, skeptics will circle Morgan to criticize him for overpaying.

### Running back rotation

Carolina has its workhorse in Chuba Hubbard, who was slowed by injury last season but still a capable starter. Coach Dave Canales is a big believer in sharing carries, which is why the Panthers are excited by Jonathon Brooks' progress from a pair of ACL injuries that sidelined him for all but three games his first two seasons.

If Brooks still has the explosiveness that made him the first running back taken in 2024, Carolina benefits mightily. A.J. Dillon, a free agent pickup who was limited to 12 carries for 60 yards over seven games last year with Philadelphia after spending four seasons in Green Bay, will certainly be in the mix as a big back (6-0, 247 pounds) who can move the sticks. Fun fact: 23.6% of Dillon's 609 NFL carries have resulted in first downs.

## Bryce Young shows 'passion'

By Jeff Hawkins

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

The Carolina Panthers went back to work Tuesday and Bryce Young established an immediate tone.

Following a brief "monsoon" at the practice fields behind Bank of America Stadium, the Panthers' fourth-year quarterback took acceptance to the effort he witnessed during the first day of NFL offseason-training activities.

The sloppiness continued after the brief hard rain and that was unacceptable to Young, who appears to be maturing as a team leader.

Young paused and exuberantly expressed his expectations.

"It's not raining anymore," Young said, standing before his teammates, arms extended. "Clean this (expletive) up. It's not (expletive) raining. We need better execution."

Canales smirked when asked about Young's flare-up.

"I love it," Canales said via Panthers.com. "I heard him get a little passionate. I love it that he's taking ownership of that, and the guys see that and rally around that."

Young's outburst may have proved to be the highlight moment from the off-season's first 91-man squad practice that featured several intriguing storylines:

### Devin Lloyd building trust

Tuesday marked the debut of the Panthers' two top-tier free-agent signings: outside linebacker Jaelan Phillips and inside linebacker Devin Lloyd, who appears to be embracing the region's entertainment offerings.

Lloyd attended Sunday's NASCAR Cup Series event at Charlotte Motor Speedway and previously took in the Charlotte Hornets' NBA play-in game and a concert. More importantly, though, he approves of the area's taco industry.

"I'm a taco lover and I've tried so many," Lloyd said after practice. "It's cool having different events out here. I try to get in the best mix I can."

Lloyd's primary OTA concerns center on building trust with the new coaching staff.

"Trust is built over time," he said. "It's a day-to-day

process."

Lloyd is expected to start alongside Trevin Wallace in the 3-4 base defense. Wallace continues to work his way back from last season's shoulder injury, but has started developing a rapport with Lloyd.

"Trevin's super sharp, really smart," Lloyd said. "Obviously, he's been in this defense for some time now, so he's very familiar with that. It's been really easy working with him. Encouraging. I look forward to him taking that next step in his career and having a great season."

"Injuries have hindered his performance, so it'll be great for him to be healthy and just have a season of 100% or as close to it as possible. But it's been great working with him."

### Rookies standing out

Speaking of wide receivers dropping passes, it'll be interesting to see where third-year player Xavier Legette is listed on

the depth chart.

Is he a WR3? Or is it third-round draft pick Chris Brazzell II's role to lose? Brazzell displayed his speed on a "go" route Tuesday, drawing a pass interference call from cornerback Corey Thornton.

Lee Hunter is another rookie to watch. The former Texas Tech standout could earn early-career snaps with Turk Wharton out indefinitely following neck surgery. Canales said the Panthers didn't know about Wharton's neck injury at the time of April's draft.

Some NFL insiders initially questioned Morgan for trading up to draft Hunter, a run-stuffing nose tackle. Few question the move now.

### Is Jonathon Brooks healthy?

One of the big questions is how the running back's knee will hold up after missing all of 2025 recovering from back-to-back right knee operations?

## By George, the Climbers push forward to GSL final

By Steve Goldberg

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

She came in like a wrecking ball.

After taking the ball off the feet of two Sporting Jacksonville players on the right touchline near midfield after a Carolina Ascent throw-in, Mackenzie George accelerated towards the Jax goal. She ran right at defender Georgia Brown, forcing her to commit. A few steps into the penalty area, George played the ball to Riley Parker, who matched her sprint further out on the right. Parker, who also beat Brown, let the ball run towards the endline before cutting back to the top of the 6-yard box with one pedicured touch.

Still crashing the goal, George smashed the orb into the net with her right foot five minutes and 19 seconds into the match for a 1-0 win in the Gainbridge Super League semifinal.

The two teams had met just a week earlier in Charlotte for the final regular season match. Jacksonville scored less than seven minutes in to take the early lead, only to see the Ascent come back with three goals, which effectively knocked the Florida side into second place, setting up the semifinal rematch.

Jacksonville were at home. They were angry about losing out on the Players' Shield and were down a goal. Surely, a team with three double-figure scorers and put a league record 54 goals into the net over 28 matches would find their way back with 84 minutes to play.

They controlled possession 58% of the game, took six more shots than Carolina (16-10), put more on target (7-4), and won nine corner kicks to four for the Ascent. But there would be no comeback for the first-year club, which had come out of the gate fast with a young and talented team.

"It means a lot, especially since I hadn't scored all spring," said George. "The way the goal happened with Parker made it even more special. To have it come in a game like this and then for the team to battle and hold them off for another 84 minutes feels incredible. It was a total team effort."

Carolina set the tone with their pressure and gang tackling to start the match, and their resolute defense won the day. The Ascent were far superior on that side of the ball, winning 57% of duels on the ground and 63% in the air. When needed, goalkeeper Sydney Martinez was there to make the save.

"I thought today was a battle," Ascent coach Philip Poole said. "It was great to score early in such a back-and-forth game. There were moments where I thought we were going to find a second goal, and moments where it felt like they might grab the equalizer. But overall, it was a strong performance and a hard-fought win."

With the victory, the Ascent improve where they fell short last season after being upset in the semifinal by fourth seed Fort Lauderdale after earning the Players' Shield in GSL's inaugural campaign. The victory was the seventh straight for the Ascent and 11th in the last 12 games, eclips-

ing the 11-game undefeated streak they began the previous season with.

They play Lexington SC in the championship final Saturday night.

We see you

George scored only four times this season, three of which came against Sporting. Along with the game-winner on Sunday, she netted twice in a 4-3 loss to Jacksonville in Charlotte in September. She also had just two assists on her season stat line, but George's body of work was recognized with a second-team All-League honor, announced by the GSL on Tuesday.

Coming to Charlotte from Brooklyn FC during the offseason along with goalkeeper Martinez and forward Luana Grabias, George's intensity and persistence meshed perfectly with the attitude and ethic of her teammates and made her a major pain in the backfield of every opposing team.

Endurance-wise, she's started 27 of the 29 games and is third in minutes played (2,422) behind Jenna Butler and Jill Aguilera.

"Mackenzie has been a great signing for us," said Poole. "From the moment she arrived from Brooklyn, she's been a positive influence in the locker room and within the team. We've been so happy with the level she's shown throughout the season. She's such a tough matchup for opposing teams because of how competitive she is. So much of Mackenzie's work can go unnoticed, but she's been sensational for us all year. I'm really glad she's getting this recognition."

### But wait, there's more

Also honored by the league were Ascent defenders Jill Aguilera and Sydney Studer, who were named to the All-League first team. It is the second straight recognition for both of them.

Aguilera, who also starred for Puerto Rico in CONCACAF national team play this year, originally came to the Ascent as an attacker and played on the wing for her first few games before Poole moved her to the left outside back position. A team player, she accepted the challenge and proved her worth on both sides of the ball, being acclaimed as both the GSL Defender of the Year and the Playmaker of the Year for the 2024-25 season.

"Jill has been an impact player for us since the day she walked through the door two years ago," Poole said. "She's a true professional, a great teammate, and someone who brings so much to the locker room. Coming off the season she had last year — winning Defender of the Year and Playmaker of the Year — to be able to replicate that kind of form this year with goals, assists, and leadership really speaks volumes about Jill and who she is as a player and person."

Along with her established defensive presence, Studer became an offensive weapon on set pieces this season, scoring three goals, all on headers, before being sidelined with an ACL injury that ended her season at the end of March after starting in 20 of the 21 games she played in.

## Zaha bids farewell to Crown

Continued from page 5A

for the first time, and he approached every match with a hunger and desire to perform for our supporters."

Drama was building regarding conversations on extending Zaha's time in Charlotte before the season started, but he insisted he'd put in his best effort on the pitch.

"To be honest, I can only speak for myself," he said in February. "I feel like the way I'm just made up is once I step on a pitch, I give 100% and then anything else that needs to be spoken about regarding the club, or whatever that can be done

after. But once I step on a pitch, I give 100% to the team, to my players, where we're all trying to reach one goal.

"I'm not the type of person that will be on a pitch and just be disinterested. I'm too passionate about the game. I want to win so much that loyalty to my teammates, that's 100% once we step out on a pitch. Whatever goes on with the club that's got nothing to do with the guys that I'm working day in, day out with."

MLS is on a two-month break for the FIFA World Cup. Charlotte FC's next match is July 22 against Atlanta United.

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