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Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Supt. Crystal Hill has been placed on paid leave during an investigation into "matters of administrative and operational oversight" at the nation's 16th-largest school district.

Hill: I don't know reason for school district's investigation

Charlotte-Mecklenburg superintendent on paid leave during oversight probe

By Herbert L. White
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Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Supt. Crystal Hill isn't sure why she has been placed on leave while the district investigates "matters involving administrative and operational oversight."

In a statement released last week to CMS families and staff, Hill denied any violation of district policy and respects the school board's "responsibility to ask questions and to ensure accountability across a district of this size. That is their job, and I support them in doing it well."

"To this point, I have not been told

what specific concerns prompted this review, nor have I been given information about how the process will work or how long it is expected to take," Hill wrote. "I am not raising that as a complaint; I trust the Board will share those details, but I want our community to have an accurate picture of what I do and do not yet know. What I can say plainly is this: I welcome this review, I will participate in it fully and openly. I am not aware of any conduct on my part that falls short of the standards I have held myself to across twenty-eight years in public education, and I am confident that a thorough and

objective process will reflect that."

CMS announced its action last week in an email statement, adding Hill's leave is with pay. Deputy Superintendent Melissa Balknight has assumed Hill's responsibilities.

"The Board's responsibility is to ensure appropriate oversight and accountability across the district while supporting the continued operation of our schools," the district's statement read. "Because this is an active personnel matter, the Board is limited in what it can discuss publicly at this time."

Please see CMS | 2A

Packed agenda for interim mayor

Robert Harrington inherits major issues when Lyles bows out

By Herbert L. White
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Interim Mayor Robert Harrington is stepping into a cauldron of contentious issues facing Charlotte.

Harrington, a partner at Robinson Bradshaw law firm, was appointed Monday by City Council to succeed Vi Lyles, who is resigning on June 30. He'll finish the remaining 17 months of Lyles' term and told council members he doesn't intend to campaign for a full term in 2027.

"I think we've got an 18-month bridge here that's really important," Harrington said. "It is a bridge to the future. I'm excited to be a part of that bridge and to channel the great energy that you see in that room and move us forward."



Harrington

Harrington, who was one of five finalists for the job and among 114 applicants, is president of the North Carolina Bar Association, has no experience in elected office but has led the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Library board.

Although Charlotte's mayor can't for establishing ordinances, which is council's responsibility, or running city government - that's the city manager's job - the position is the highest-profile office on the council. Harrington will lead council meetings and cast the deciding vote in the event council votes result in a tie. Annual salary and compensation for the part-time position is \$80,000. The city manager is responsible for day-to-day operations and hiring and firing most employees.

Among the challenges facing Harrington and council:

Please see INTERIM | 5A

Uncertain fate for NC elections bill

By Sarah Michels
CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS

A wide-ranging North Carolina election bill seemed headed for passage at lightning speed last week in Raleigh. But now, it's stopped in its tracks.

Rep. Pricey Harrison, D-Guilford, told Carolina Public Press that the election bill is still headed to its final destination, but is taking a brief rest stop while she and several other lawmakers work behind the scenes with bill sponsor Rep. Hugh Blackwell, R-Burke, to fix what they see as some lingering issues.

House Bill 958, which now includes scores of election-related provisions, has gone through a handful of iterations since it was filed during the 2025 legislative session. Thus far, it's proven to be a rare example of bipartisan collaboration.

Blackwell doesn't have to let Democrats contribute; House Republicans have the votes to pass the bill without them, Harrison said.

But she appreciates being allowed to contribute, she said.

Please see UNCERTAIN | 5A

Opposition to I-77 toll reimbursement bill grows in tone and intensity

By Herbert L. White
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The pushback against a bill that would force Charlotte and neighboring jurisdictions to repay the state for design work on the I-77 South toll project is growing.

HB 1094 sponsored by state Sen. Vickie Sawyer contains an amendment that would require members of the regional transportation organization to reimburse the North Carolina Department of Transportation \$60 million for the project's design phase. Sawyer, a Republican who represents Iredell County and north Mecklenburg, announced her opposition to the toll project, insists the amendment is to inform local governments of potential consequences for withdrawing their support.

Charlotte City Council voted 6-5 on May 11 to rescind support for a private contractor to build toll lanes. Based on the proportionality of the Charlotte Regional Transportation Planning Organization, the city would be responsible for 41% of the reimbursement. Mecklenburg County and the town of Matthews also voted to oppose the project.

"I want to be very clear: the punitive provision in the amendment was not my idea," Sawyer, who co-chairs of the Senate Transportation Committee, wrote in a June 17 email. "It is part of the broader budget agreement supported by legislative leadership. I included it in my amendment so that you and other stakeholders would have complete and trans-

Please see OPPOSITION | 2A



Maryse Balthazar, a Haitian certified nursing assistant living in the United States with Temporary Protected Status.

Legal protections for Haitians at risk as the Supreme Court nears a ruling

By Kaitlin Bender-Thomas
MEDILL NEWS SERVICE

WASHINGTON — Even with a valid driver's license, Maryse Balthazar knows she lacks protection from what she dreads most: deportation back to Haiti.

Balthazar, a nursing assistant, often hesitates to leave her home in South Florida, worried that something as simple as a broken taillight could

upend the life she's spent 16 years building in the United States.

"If you get stopped for a traffic violation, what's going to happen to you?" Balthazar said. "It's a fear that lives with me every day."

Balthazar is one of nearly 350,000 Haitians living in the U.S. with Temporary Protected Status, or TPS. The program allows people from coun-

Please see LEGAL | 2A

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CMS chief ‘not been told’ reason for investigation

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Hill, who joined CMS in 2022 as chief of staff, was promoted to the top job a year later, making her the first Black woman to lead the nation’s 16th-largest school district at more than 143,000 students and a budget of more than \$2 billion. Her four-year contract pays \$300,000 annually.

CMS has struggled with administrative stability over the last two decades with nine full-time and interim superintendents since 2006 when Peter Gorman was appointed superintendent. Ironically, Gorman is the longest-serving superintendent during that stretch at five years.

Legal protections for Haitians at risk as high court nears a ruling

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tries facing armed conflict, natural disasters or other extraordinary crises to live and work in the U.S. temporarily.

Her fear comes as the Supreme Court weighs whether the Trump administration can end TPS for Haitians, as well as Syrians. Although protections remain in place while the case is pending, a Haitian TPS holder in Florida was recently detained during a routine traffic stop and deported, before being allowed to return to the U.S.

What is TPS?

Balthazar came to the U.S. under TPS in 2010, when Haiti was first designated for the program following a devastating earthquake that killed more than 200,000 people and destroyed more than 100,000 homes, including her own.

Congress and President George H. W. Bush created TPS in 1990 to protect immigrants from being deported to unsafe countries. The designation grants temporary legal status and work authorization for up to 18 months and can be renewed if conditions do not improve. It does not provide a pathway to citizenship.

Since 2010, the Department of Homeland Security has repeatedly extended Haiti’s TPS designation due to ongoing instability, including natural disasters, widespread gang violence and the 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moise.

The government had set Haitian TPS to end on Feb. 3, but on Feb. 2, U.S. District Judge Ana Reyes blocked the termination, finding it was unlawful and likely motivated in part by “racial animus.”

The Trump administration has argued that TPS has become a “de facto asylum program” and that conditions in Haiti have improved enough to end the designation. It appealed the ruling to the Supreme Court in March, and the justices heard oral arguments on an emergency basis.

The court is expected to issue a ruling by the end of the term in late June or early July. The decision will determine whether the administration acted lawfully in its attempt to revoke TPS, including whether it consulted with the State Department when reviewing the country’s conditions.

An uncertain future

Immigration attorneys and advocates say the uncertainty surrounding TPS and immigration enforcement has heightened fears within the Haitian community.

“Everyone is scared across the board,” said Tremaine Hemans, founder and managing attorney of an immigration law firm in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. “But specifically our Haitian clients.”

Balthazar said she no longer feels entirely safe here, either.

She said she used to fly to Massachusetts for months at a time to care for a patient. Now, she would refuse any nursing assistant job that required air travel, even if it paid \$50 an hour, because she fears encountering Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents at the airport.

“They handicap you, make you uncomfortable to live here, to be here,” Balthazar said.

Violence and humanitarian instability continue to worsen throughout Haiti, said Brian Concannon, a human rights attorney and executive director of the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, a non-profit focused on advancing human rights and justice in Haiti.

By U.N. estimates, armed gangs control approximately 90% of the capital, Port-au-Prince, and hunger and displacement have risen sharply in recent years.

“There’s literally no metric by which you can say that conditions in Haiti are improving or are in any way safe,” Concannon said.

In Ohio, troubling phone calls

For Rose-Thamar Joseph, a Haitian TPS holder and community advocate in Springfield, Ohio, that reality hits close to home.

Joseph came to the U.S. under TPS in 2021 after former President Joe Biden re-designated the program for Haiti. She said she speaks with her family back home almost every day, including her 12-year-old son. Calls rarely end without her hearing gunfire in the background.

She recalled her family sending photos of bullets that landed in their yard.

One night, Joseph said she stayed on the phone with them until the morning, unable to sleep because she was worried about their safety.

“It was a real, real challenging and stressful situation for me,” Joseph said.

Sometimes the violence becomes so severe that her son cannot go to school.

Hill succeeded Earnest Winston, who was fired by the school board in 2022 after two years on the job.

Hill thanked the Mecklenburg community for “for the trust it has placed in me” during her time leading the district, adding she looks forward to the probe’s conclusion and reinstatement.

“The work we have done together over the past three and a half years, for our teachers, our staff, and most of all our students, has been the honor of my career,” she wrote. “That work is not finished, and the needs of our children do not pause for a process like this one.”

What worries her even more, she said, is when the country’s poor network service prevents her from reaching her family at all.

Although Joseph has asylum status to fall back on if TPS ends, which would allow her to continue living and working in the U.S, she said many Haitian TPS holders don’t have that option.

“It is so heartbreaking for me to see or to know that a lot of people will be out of work, will be laid off... because of TPS,” Joseph said.

Consequences in the US for families, employers

Concannon at the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti said the Supreme Court’s decision could have immediate consequences for TPS holders and their families.

Of the 350,000 Haitian TPS holders in the U.S., about 200,000 of them are already in the U.S. workforce, according to FWD.us, an immigration and criminal justice advocacy organization.

Many send money home to support relatives in Haiti because ongoing violence and economic instability have left many families struggling to get by.

“It’s literally thousands of families that are being kept afloat by remittances from TPS holders,” Concannon said.

But the impact would also be felt by employers across the country.

Many Haitian immigrants work in critical industries throughout the United States. FWD.us estimates that about 15,000 work in agriculture, 13,000 serve as nursing assistants, and another 8,000 work as caregivers.

Todd Andrews, senior vice president for Asbury Communities, a retirement services organization with campuses in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware, said immigrant workers play a critical role in caring for elderly adults.

Asbury employs about 2,800 workers and serves more than 4,000 residents across its senior living communities. At the organization’s Gaithersburg, Maryland, campus alone, Andrews said employees represent more than 90 nationalities.

“These jobs are very important, they’re very difficult, and they’re very, very integral in the care management of the residents,” Andrews said.

He added that providers already face staffing shortages and warned that losing TPS workers could create disruptions similar to those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Employees that are employed today won’t be there tomorrow,” Andrews said. “So we’ll have to figure out a way to provide that care.”

Lawmakers remain divided over the program’s future.

Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., declined to explicitly say during an interview at the Capitol whether he believes TPS for Haitians should continue. Instead, he noted that Florida is home to “a lot of wonderful Haitians” and said the broader immigration system needs reform.

“TPS was never a permanent program,” Scott said. “What I’d rather do is focus on, okay, so how do we fix the program where people can come here that are fully vetted that want to add to our economy.”

Sen. Raphael Warnock, D-Ga., said immigrant communities make significant contributions to the U.S. economy and criticized the Trump administration’s efforts to end TPS for Haiti.

“How can you deny Haitians who are here Temporary Protected Status, while at the same time put Haiti under the travel ban?” Warnock said. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

Painful conversations

While lawmakers remain divided over the future of TPS, Balthazar said the uncertainty has forced painful conversations with her daughter, a U.S. citizen and college student, about what might happen if she is deported.

“That will affect her a lot,” Balthazar said. “She will be more at ease, more relaxed, if mama is around because she knows that she can rely on me...but if I’m not around, she will have to take care of herself.”

For now, Balthazar said she is focused on living in the present. She spends her time caring for elderly patients, running her small online hair care business, and being with her family.

Like many Haitians living under TPS, she said she still hopes for the day her country is stable enough to return.

“As Haitians, we all dream, we all are dreaming to go back because we love our country. We just don’t have a system like here.”



AMAZING AERIAL AGENCY

An amendment in a bill authored by state Sen. Vickie Sawyer would require Charlotte area municipalities to reimburse the North Carolina Department of Transportation for \$60 million in design work on the scuttled I-77 South toll lane project. Under the bill, Charlotte, which has 41% of the vote on the Charlotte Regional Transportation Planning Organization, voted to re-

Opposition to I-77 bill grows in tone, intensity

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parent information as you plan for the future.

“Please also keep in mind that the Towns of Davidson and Cornelius, which are also in my district, stand to lose significant funding once the budget passes. My goal was to warn and inform our communities.”

Opponents of the toll project, however, see the bill as an unlawful attempt to force municipalities to reverse course under threat of sanctions that includes withholding future state and federal transportation funding until NCDOT is repaid.

“State transportation dollars are intended to serve the people of North Carolina, regardless of where they live or whether local leaders agree with state officials on every issue,” Sean Langley, president of the McCrory Heights Neighborhood Association, wrote in an email to Sawyer.

“Efforts to withhold funding from specific communities appear less like sound transportation policy and more like retaliation against municipalities whose elected leaders have taken positions you oppose.”

“North Carolina’s transportation system is a shared asset that supports economic growth, public safety, and mobility across the state. Funding decisions should be based on objective needs, established formulas, and the public interest—not political disagreements. What legitimate transportation purpose is served by denying taxpayers in Charlotte and other affected communities access to funds that they help generate and support?”

North Carolina Transportation Secretary Daniel Johnson notified Mayor Vi Lyles in a May 15 letter that withdrawing support for the initiative would prompt the state to remove Charlotte from the state’s long-term transportation plan, which would divert at least \$600 million to other

projects across the state.

The proposal to require local governments to repay planning costs, prohibit the use of locally approved transportation revenues for that purpose, and withhold future state and federal transportation funding until repayment is made would establish a troubling precedent for North Carolina. It would effectively penalize communities for participating in the transportation planning process and reaching conclusions that differ from those of state officials.

Sustain Charlotte executive director
SHANNON BINNS

“The proposal to require local governments to repay planning costs, prohibit the use of locally approved transportation revenues for that purpose, and withhold future state and federal transportation funding until repayment is made would establish a troubling precedent for North Carolina,” said Shannon Binns, executive director of Sustain Charlotte.

“It would effectively penalize communities for participating in the transportation planning process and reaching conclusions that differ from those of state officials.

“If local governments can be punished for removing a transportation project today, they can be punished for modifying or removing any transportation project tomorrow. That should concern everyone, regardless of where they stand on the I-77 South project itself.”

Opponents of the toll project – especially in neighborhoods that would be directly impacted through the loss of property – argue transportation officials have been less than forthcoming in their presentation as well as seeking alternatives. State officials contend public-private collaboration is the only path to alleviating congestion on one of North Carolina’s busiest roads.

The toll initiative was criticized over concerns of a lack of transparency by NCDOT, in addition environmental impacts of elevated lanes and displacement in Charlotte’s historically Black neighborhoods. The Brooklyn community in Second Ward, for instance, was razed in the 1960s to make way for the I-277 loop. Portions of Historic West End neighborhoods were seized to accommodate interstate construction.

“That is why we have repeatedly called for an independent study of the available alternatives,” Langley wrote. “This request is not intended to obstruct progress but to ensure that decisions affecting thousands of residents and commuters are based on comprehensive, objective analysis. Before committing substantial taxpayer resources to a single course of action, the public deserves confidence that all viable options have been thoroughly evaluated and compared.

“At the same time, the communities most affected by this project have made clear that they want to see reconnection, not further division. An elevated toll-lane structure adjacent to historic neighborhoods and established communities is not an acceptable solution. This concern is grounded in longstanding analysis and public experience with managed toll lane projects, including the I-77 North toll lanes, which have been widely debated regarding their effectiveness in addressing congestion and safety outcomes.

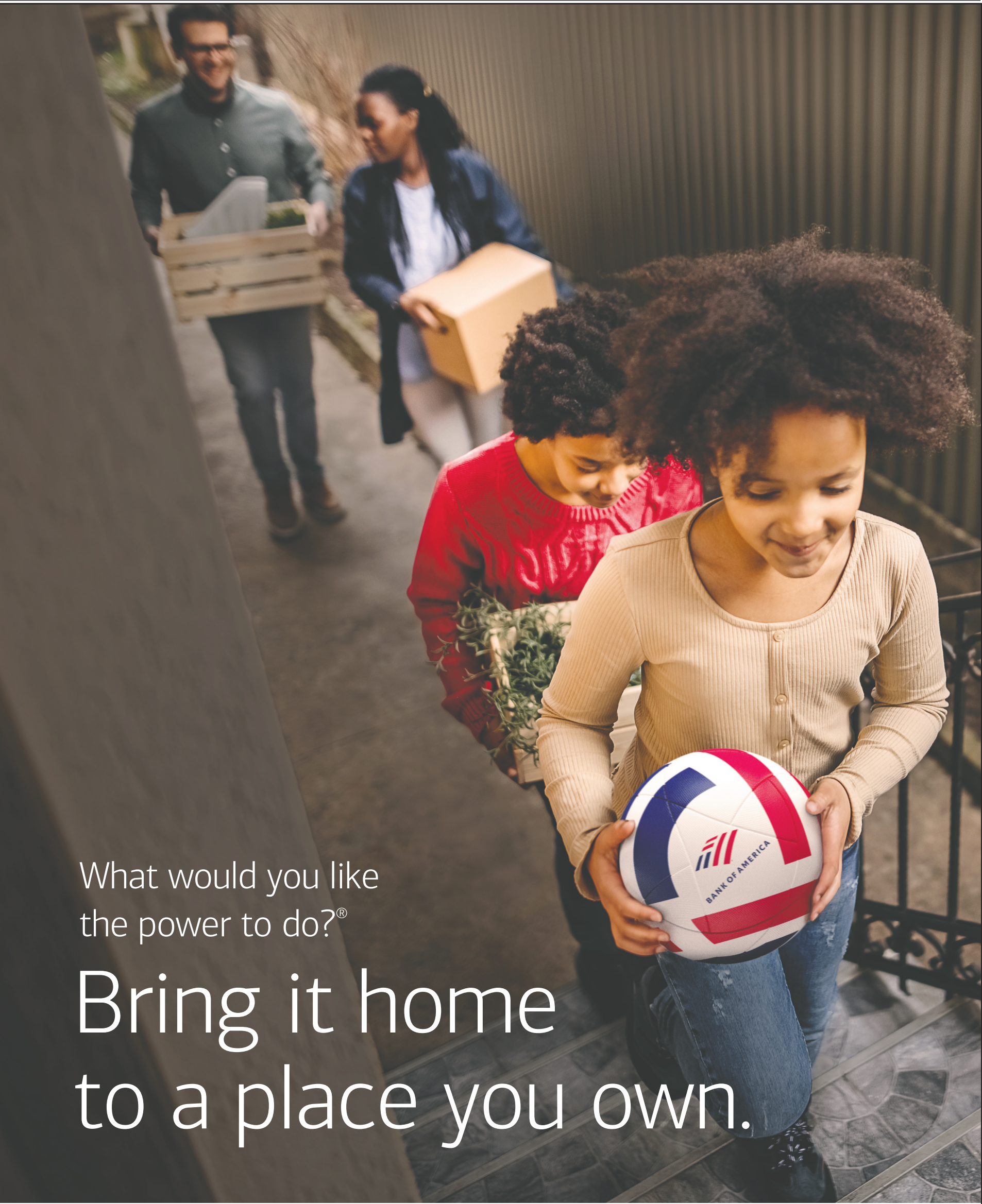
“Evaluating and implementing alternative transportation options should not come at the expense of neighborhoods that have already sacrificed so much in the name of infrastructure development.”

State Rep. Laura Budd, a Mecklenburg Democrat whose state House district includes South Charlotte, Ballantyne, and Pineville, said Budd’s amendment is a misguided attempt at circumventing municipalities’ independence.

“If we are committed to building and preserving the public’s trust in us as representatives of the State, elected or appointed, we must reject efforts to punish local governments for exercising their democratic authority,” she said in a statement. “Leadership requires us to defend the integrity of our democratic institutions, even if one disagrees with the decision they produce.”



Budd



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Without SNAP, more Americans go hungry

By Kevin Hardy

STATES NEWSROOM

The days of ground beef and chicken legs are long gone at the Ritenour Co-Care Food Pantry just outside of St. Louis.

The nonprofit has swapped out those staple proteins for cheaper ground chicken and hot dogs as it faces higher food costs and surging demand.

"We have to adapt just like everybody else," Executive Director Angela Gabel said.

Last year, Ritenour spent about \$120,000 on food. The pantry budgeted \$180,000 for this year, though Gabel said that may not be sufficient.

And the number of people looking for food has increased: The pantry signed up seven new families on a recent weekday morning and expected to add 15 by the end of the day. Gabel said more people are traveling further to visit multiple food pantries each month to stock their shelves.

Families are facing rising grocery prices at the same time that many of the most vulnerable are losing access to the nation's largest food assistance program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. More than 4 million Americans lost SNAP benefits between February 2025 and this February, according to analyses of the most recent federal data. The numbers are expected to increase as states whittle the rolls further as required by the broad tax and spending law President Donald Trump signed last summer, known as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

"I'm absolutely terrified," Gabel said. "We will absolutely do our best, but I think we were meant to supplement SNAP or to help in emergency situations. I just don't think we can replace the government."

Since the fall, states and counties that administer SNAP have been notifying residents who rely on food stamps that they must meet new work requirements or lose their food assistance. The federal tax and spending law ended exemptions to work requirements for older adults, homeless people, veterans and some rural residents, among others. The changes will put more pressure on states, likely leading to further benefit cuts as they reevaluate eligibility and begin paying for more program costs. The new rules also will further stress the already-stretched charitable food system.

Gina Plata-Nino, SNAP director at the Food Research & Action Center, a nonprofit working to combat hunger, noted that children, older adults and people with disabilities are most reliant on the program. The left-leaning Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimated the average benefit per person this year would be \$188 per month, or \$6.17 per day.

"And a majority of them are making less than \$1,100 a month," she said. "So when you lose your SNAP benefit, it really does exacerbate your situation of having to choose between shelter, food, and other basic needs."

Rising need for food

National data on hunger is limited since the Trump administration terminated the annual Household Food Security report last year. But other measures indicate that more people are missing regular meals.

In May, the federal Reserve Bank of New York found a "remarkable" increase in food insecurity across the country, with more people struggling than during the peak of the pandemic. Its national surveys last October and this February found more households dipped into savings accounts, relied on food donations or had trouble finding enough food to eat or had kids who missed meals.

Democrats and anti-hunger advocates have been urging Congress to rescind SNAP cuts for months. Current negotiations over reauthorizing the federal farm bill, which includes SNAP, have put the issue front and center in Congress. The House has passed a version of that legislation that won't reverse the cuts.

Republicans have downplayed the effect of the changes and defended the SNAP cuts, arguing they are aimed at rooting out fraud and abuse.

U.S. Rep. Derrick Van Orden, a Wisconsin Republican, said he was raised in "abject, rural poverty," by a single mother who relied on food stamps, subsidized lunches and government cheese.

But in late April, he urged support of the farm bill that cements cuts to the food stamp program.

"We do have to know that there is a tremendous amount of fraud that takes place in SNAP," he said on the House floor, "and we want to make sure that every single dollar that is allocated to go to a hungry child or a veteran or one of our senior citizens goes to them."

Last week, 23 state attorneys general wrote to Senate leaders who are now considering the farm bill, saying the Senate has an opportunity to "re-

verse course and reaffirm a bipartisan commitment that no American should go hungry because they cannot afford food."

In Nebraska, where SNAP participation has dropped by about 11%, state lawmakers this year proposed legislation to ask the federal government for waivers from some of the new restrictions. Those bills, which did not advance, sought to protect benefits for veterans, former foster youth, homeless people and refugees.

But the problem demands a federal response, said Megan Hamann, the senior community organizer for food and nutrition access at Nebraska Appleseed, an advocacy nonprofit that works against poverty and discrimination.

"We're going to be working with patchwork solutions in the meantime," Hamann said. She described "a real reckoning as a result of loss of federal support and programming that has for a long time in our state and others offered stability and consistency that is no longer present."

She said putting food on the table has become a widespread challenge for many in Nebraska as the price of housing, utilities and other everyday necessities squeezes household budgets.

"I talk to people on the daily who say, 'I'm worried about the price of groceries, I'm worried about the price of gas, I feel like everything except for my wage is going up,'" she said.

Though generally focused on housing, the Omaha organization Restoring Dignity has launched a new food assistance program to help refugees who lost SNAP benefits late last year.

"A big chunk of what we do now revolves around food," said founder and executive director Hannah Vlach.

Community donations allow Restoring Dignity to provide grocery store gift cards to those refugees. But the organization, which generally serves about 5,000 refugees per year, is helping only about 200 of the most vulnerable.

"Right now we're just focused on the families who absolutely will be evicted and will be on the streets if they don't get any assistance," she said, "and I have no idea how those other families are surviving."

Vlach emphasized that the federal government has specifically sanctioned the arrival of refugees her organization serves, many of whom served with U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

"This can't become our new normal — this just can't," she said. "It's unethical, it's immoral."

States triaging needs

West Virginian Raine Gibbons said she relies more on cheap staples such as pasta and pasta sauce, trimming the amount of meat and treats she buys.

She said her family of five recently saw a reduction in monthly SNAP benefits, which now provide just over \$300 per month.

Gibbons supervises an in-home education program for parents at one of the state-run Family Support Centers, which provide parenting classes, baby supplies such as diapers and emergency food aid.

Aside from grappling with higher prices and reduced SNAP eligibility among clients, the West Virginians who rely on those 57 federally funded centers face an uncertain future because of unresolved state contracting issues.

"It's really, really stressful," Gibbons said. "It's so hard to stay present and be the parent that you want to be when you're worried about those daily struggles of just how to feed your family."

Gibbons said SNAP is not a luxury, but an essential support for many families.

"It's really what's keeping families like mine — who do work outside of the home, who do have a full-time job — afloat to be able to feed our families and our babies, and try to just get through this economy."

California lawmakers are trying to help fill some of the federal void in their state. Democratic Assembly member Alex Lee is pushing to add \$100 million to a state program that doubles the purchasing power of SNAP when used for fresh fruits and vegetables. Separate pending legislation would petition the federal government for a waiver, allowing California to maintain an exemption from work requirements for former foster youth.

In California, nearly one-third of all families with young children struggled to put food on the table between July 2024 and January 2026, according to survey results from the Stanford University Center on Early Childhood.

"States are in a position of trying to triage what is the most important need for families, when really families have all of these needs that are considered pretty basic," said Abigail Stewart-Kahn, managing director of the center.



NETWORK CABLING SYSTEM

North Carolina lawmakers are considering a bill they say will better regulate hyperscale data center, but foes contend it would allow the facilities to pollute and tax local resources.

Data center bill misses mark on rules, foes say

By Zamone Perez

NORTH CAROLINA NEWS SERVICE

The North Carolina General Assembly is considering a bill supporters said would better regulate hyperscale data centers across the state, while opponents argued it would still allow the facilities to pollute and draw heavily on local resources.

Senate Bill 730 would put some limits on noise pollution and on electricity costs being passed on to consumers. Supporters said it would require data centers to pay their fair share of electricity costs and further regulate incentives for development. Critics countered the bill would also require power plants to remain open until their energy output can be matched by nuclear power, excluding solar and wind energy generation and potentially hindering North Carolina's goal of becoming carbon-neutral by 2050.

Sophie Loeb, policy analyst at the Center for Progressive Reform, said the bill treats data centers as inevitable, even though they remain widely unpopular.

"The bill kind of seeks to force communities to accept the inevitability narrative around data centers, which is that these data centers have to be here in your community, so you must accept the terms and conditions that are led by the utility, that are led by the tech com-

panies," Loeb asserted.

A Gallup poll in May found more than 70% of Americans at least somewhat oppose the construction of data centers to meet AI demands. More than 20 towns and counties across North Carolina have enacted their own data center moratoriums to further study their impact.

Supporters of data centers contends they contribute to economic development, tax revenue, and investment in local communities. The bill passed the House in a largely party-line vote.

Kevin Wilson, co-chair of the Edgecombe Neighbors for Data Center Accountability, said any half measures on hyperscale data center regulation would still have major effects on nearby residents.

"Any compromise is going to cause pollution, it's going to allow for an extreme amount of water usage for cooling, the noise," Wilson outlined. "There's just so many factors that — to even find a compromise — still leaves the environment and the people that live near that site in jeopardy."

Attempts to regulate water usage were removed from the bill. Instead, it would only require closed-loop or reclaimed water cooling "as necessary."



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Uncertain fate for NC elections bill

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"I prefer bipartisan elections legislation, because everybody's so skeptical about elections legislation being meant to favor one party or the other," she said.

A different controversial election bill was pulled from the schedule.

House Bill 1038 would shift Jacksonville's elections from a hybrid system with some ward-based districts and some at-large districts to all at-large districts. The city's Black residents say it would dilute their voting power.

It's unclear why the bill was removed, or whether it will return.

Onslow County NAACP president M. Kenyatta Euring said it was a positive sign but remains focused in case the bill comes back around.

Stop, collaborate and listen

This year's election omnibus isn't the worst election bill Harrison has seen, she said.

A 2013 omnibus that implemented photo ID voter requirements, eliminated same-day registration, reduced the early voting period and removed pre-registration for 16- and 17-year-olds — although some of those provisions were struck down by courts — was much worse, she said.

So was 2024's Senate Bill 382, which transferred election appointment power from the governor to the state auditor during the lame duck period after Democrats picked up seats in the 2024 election but before they could take office in January. That bill flipped the state's election boards from Democratic to Republican majorities.

"If we can fix the worst parts, we might get a place where a lot of people could vote for it," Harrison said of the current version of the election bill.

From the beginning of the process, Blackwell has been open to discuss the bill with his colleagues, including Democrats.

Blackwell hasn't just listened; he's incorporated some changes. For example, he stamped his approval on additional due process for people identified as potential non-citizens when registering to vote, and various other minor changes in a bill amendment.

Now, ongoing discussions about further changes are holding up the bill, Harrison said.

Several election activists conducted a press conference sharing their opposition to the election bill.

Brian Kennedy, Democracy North Carolina senior policy advisor, outlined several things the bill doesn't do.

"This bill does nothing to protect lawfully cast ballots from being thrown out after an election because politicians are unhappy with the results," he said.

"This bill does nothing to address the concerns that counties have on how to pay their election officials and how to ensure that everybody has access to the ballot. This bill has done nothing to protect the people of North Carolina from voter suppression or from voter dilution."

Turnout statements ban State and county election board members would be barred from making public statements "encouraging or promoting turnout in any election," under the current election bill.

Election staff and activists expressed concern that the ban was too vague and would end up penalizing board members for benign acts like posting early voting schedules on social media.

The ban is like owning a restaurant and not being allowed to go online and encourage people to eat dinner, said Kat Roblez, Forward Justice senior voting rights counsel. During a committee hearing, Blackwell said they were still trying to find agreement on the issue.

"For them to be engaged in turnout-the-vote efforts runs the risk that some-

body feels that the board in charge at the time is targeting constituencies that are favorable to it," Blackwell said. "So, the idea here is we let our separate parties and candidates be responsible for trying to gin up the turnout, which is not a bad thing, but that we say the State Board doesn't get involved in the turnout process."

Harrison is fine with a related provision in the election bill that would ban public statements influencing voter turnout for a particular political party, but not general turnout encouragement.

She believes they've found a fix. Blackwell may take out the ban on general turnout encouragement while keeping the partisan turnout part in, she said.

State Board political hires Harrison said Blackwell has agreed to reduce the number of employees that State Board Executive Director Sam Hayes can hire based on party or personal loyalty.

In the current election bill, there are 25 of these so-called exempt positions or political hires. Harrison said they've agreed to bring it back down to seven exempt positions.

Hayes has previously told Carolina Public Press that exempt positions give him more flexibility in filling out senior leadership positions without as much bureaucratic red tape.

Less time for post-election challenges

Under current state law, certain election challenges must be filed by Election Day. The omnibus adds five days, but Harrison would like to make it shorter.

During committee, she raised her concern, citing the case of Jefferson Griffin, who filed various election protests after his narrow 2024 election loss for state Supreme Court, seeking to remove thousands of ballots from the count.

"We've got a lot of local elections that might be decided, or even state legislative elections that can be decided by less than 50 votes, and it just seems like there's an incentive to go out and hunt down when maybe there's nothing there," Harrison said. "We just saw that happening with Griffin."

There could be movement in that part of the election bill, Harrison said.

Venue for appeals

One part of the election bill reverses a longstanding tradition where all appeals of State Board of Elections decisions go first to the Wake County Superior Court.

Instead, petitioners could take the appeal to whichever county they were from. Harrison said this could encourage venue

shopping, the practice where people try to win court cases by picking a venue where they believe they'll find the most amenable judge.

"I just want to point out that we've got pretty powerful national parties, Republicans and Democrats," Harrison told committee members. "You could get Marc Elias coming down here and picking the best venue, and vice versa. And whoever's in charge here changes a lot."

Harrison said the venue provision may get revisited.

Private counsel

Finally, the current draft of the omnibus election bill allows the State Board of Elections to hire private counsel when it gets involved in litigation.

Before, the attorney general typically provided that counsel. Harrison wants to make sure that the attorney general is not completely shut out of the process.

Also, documents associated with private counsel would not be public record under the bill. Harrison said they're working on at least having publicly available information about who is getting paid and how much.

Roblez also expressed opposition to this provision.

"It is not normal for taxpayers to be paying for private counsel for government agencies," she said.

Less likely changes in election bill

Harrison expects talks to continue through the weekend.

While it's less likely, they're still working on changing the auditor's ability, under the current bill, to select whichever counties he likes for post-election audits. Harrison thinks it should be random.

"The auditor's ability to randomly audit is really problematic for a partisan office when he's been campaigning," she said.

She also is pushing for the list of acceptable photo IDs for voters casting ballots in the U.S. and overseas and military voters to be the same. Currently, military and overseas voters have fewer options. While Blackwell did expand the list a bit during committee, he said some forms of ID still don't make as much sense for abroad voters, like college IDs.

Veto math: 3 potential fates for election bill

Rep. Shelly Willingham, D-Edgecombe, voted for the omnibus to progress out of the House Elections committee without any of the revisions that Harrison and other Democrats have been pushing since then.

He told members of the North Carolina Black Alliance that he is likely to vote for it again when it

makes it to the House floor for a full vote, NCBA executive director Marcus Bass said.

Willingham was one of a trio of Democrats who lost their primary elections after siding with Republicans on veto override votes. Since Republicans are one seat shy of a supermajority in the state House, they need just one Democrat's support to override any governor veto.

Willingham may cast that vote.

"I think that's a misuse of his political power," Bass said.

Gov. Josh Stein is very likely to veto the bill in its current version. He signaled his disapproval of the election omnibus in a statement posted on social media last week.

"People should be able to trust our elections and know their vote counts," he said. "Yet, this bill erodes trust by injecting more politics into the State Board of Elections and limiting access to the ballot box."

Stein specifically called out parts of the bill that require military and overseas voters to provide more documentation to vote, grant the ability for the State Board to make political hires and give the auditor more election oversight.

If a more collaborative election bill emerges, it's unclear what action the governor would take.

After a bill passes, the governor has 10 days to decide whether to sign or veto it or let it become law without his signature. However, if the legislature has adjourned for the year and the governor does nothing, the bill would not become law.

According to lawmakers' current schedule, session would adjourn right before the Independence Day holiday, on July 2 or 3. If lawmakers want to be able to override the governor's veto after that 10-day period, they must pass the bill by June 24.

The House was not scheduled to meet again until June 23, and the Senate is likely to want to amend the bill once they receive it, which adds a few procedural steps. It's possible lawmakers could run out of time to get the bill across the finish line.

So, lawmakers have a few options.

First, they could move back the end of session, giving themselves more time to pass a bill and wait for the governor to act so they can override his veto, if needed. However, many lawmakers have travel or vacation plans in early July that could interfere with veto override math.

Second, lawmakers could copy and paste the language of the omnibus into another bill that's further

along in the process, like the budget. That would require the governor to make a tough choice between signing a budget North Carolinians have been asking for, poison pills and all, or vetoing it, which could open himself and his party

up for criticism during a critical campaign season for Democrats.

Third, state senators could abandon the election bill once it makes it over to their side of the legislature, and lawmakers could try again next year.

Interim mayor has a full agenda of issues

Continued from page 1A

· I-77 toll lanes. A bill filed in the General Assembly contains an amendment that demands municipalities repay the state Department of Transportation for design work on the project after withdrawing their support. If Sen. Vickie Sawyer's amendment is approved, Charlotte — which controls 41% of the vote on the regional transit panel that rescinded its support, would be on the hook for the plurality of the \$60 million cost.

· Airport lease renewal. Council and American Airlines have yet to agree to terms on a new deal to use Charlotte Douglas International Airport. The two sides have until June 2027 to strike a new bargain. Contract workers at Charlotte Douglas are pushing the city for better wages and benefits concessions as a plank in the negotiations, although the municipality doesn't have authority to force American do so.

"Today, many airport workers are still earning poverty wages and rely on taxpayer-funded public programs for basic healthcare, food, and housing assistance," the Charlotte chapter of Service Employees International Union said in a statement. "Charlotte residents continue to pay some of the highest airfares in the country while passenger satisfaction remains near the bottom among major U.S. airports, and passengers with disabilities continue to face serious barriers ranging from delayed assistance to damaged wheelchairs and safety concerns tied to chronic understaffing and turnover."

"Research has shown that stronger wages, benefits, training, and workforce retention reduce costly turnover, improve customer experience, strengthen accessibility services, and save employers money in the long run. Workforce stability is not a threat to business success. It is part of business success."

· Relationships with the business community and Raleigh. The I-77 toll project and last year's close shave in a referendum that committed Charlotte to a 1% transit sales tax have rebalanced the dynamic between grassroots activism and business leaders who have long led the charge for growth.

How will Harrington's pro-business bona fides square with newly empowered activists looking to leverage more agency over the city's future? As for dealing with the Republican-led General Assembly, Harrington will be tasked with building on Lyles' track record of bridging regional and partisan divides.

· Housing affordability. Charlotte draws more than 100 people daily, which exacerbates the lack of workforce and low-income stock. Add the growing national economic pressures of higher energy and food prices and demands for growing the city's affordable housing account are increasing.

· Data centers. Council voted earlier this month on a 150-day building moratorium. What happens after the moratorium expires? Council is tasked with developing guidelines for construction of the centers, which have drawn opposition for their environmental toll well as pressure on infrastructure and consumption of water and electrical assets.

Mecklenburg County commissioners Chair Mark Jerrell praised Harrington's appointment "as a meaningful testament to the respect he has earned over the years through professionalism, integrity, and dedication to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg community. "Over the course of the next 18 months, we have a series of unique opportunities to strengthen and improve our community."



Jerrell

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TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Carolina Panthers receiver Jalen Coker went from undrafted rookie in 2024 to an established pass-catching asset with a three-year, \$35 million contract extension.

An underdog earns his payday

Receiver Jalen Coker went from undrafted rookie to a three-year, \$35 million payday with Panthers

By Jeff Hawkins
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

At a half-empty Highmark Stadium, most, if not all, starters and second teamers were safely stashed along the sidelines in the fourth quarter of a 2024 preseason game between the Carolina Panthers and Buffalo Bills.

To undrafted rookie receiver Jalen Coker, lined up opposite Bills rookie Kyron Brown, it was his time.

On third-and-3, Panthers quarterback Jack Plummer took the shotgun snap, prompting Brown to take a step back

and Coker to move forward with a hop-skip before bursting to the outside. Brown failed to divert the former Holy Cross standout, allowing Coker to cruise upfield. Plummer released a high-arching pass that Coker snared for what he considers his first NFL touchdown.

While only regular-season results are official, Coker doesn't care. He embraced a breakout moment, a catch that helped fuel his meteoric rise up the depth chart and

his first major payday – a three-year, \$35 million extension he signed on the final day of mandatory minicamp.

How big was that catch? “Personally, It was awesome,” said. “I mean, it was great. It was something I always wanted to do, (scoring) my first NFL touchdown. I know some guys might disagree, but, you know, preseason counts all the same. That was an awesome moment for me, personally.”



Coker

Focused on long-term improvement

With less than three minutes remaining in the NFC Wild Card game against the Los Angeles Rams in January, Coker lined up opposite cornerback Cam Kurl.

Most of the able-bodied competitors were on the field with under three minutes remaining and the Panthers trailing 27-24. To Coker, it was showtime. After beating Kurl to the corner of the end zone, Bryce Young lofted a pass Coker corralled for the go-ahead 7-yard

Please see **UNDERAPPRECIATED** | 8A

Your dream is to always go get to the NFL, of course, but to stay around and continue to contribute and make an impact every Sunday, that's always been my goal.

Carolina Panthers receiver **JALEN COKER**

West Charlotte football focused on process



CAMERON WILLIAMS | THE CHARLOTTE POST

West Charlotte High football coach D.J. McFadden is focusing on building a new identity for the Lions with a rebuilt roster after losing experienced contributors to transfer.

By Cameron Williams
cameron.williams@thecharlottepost.com

Summer is here and the new-look West Charlotte Lions football workouts are underway.

New coach D.J. McFadden is optimistic about the upcoming season despite losing several players to transfer.

“I think we are going to be just fine,” he said. “Of course we lost some guys, but I think with the talent we do still have we can win. We are big and still fast and athletic. We just have to go out there and do it. We have to get the young quarterbacks caught up and we’ve got an older guy, so we will see what he looks like. But, overall, I like where we are at. I think we still have enough to compete for the conference.”

One thing that excites McFadden is the number of freshmen who showed up for the first day of workouts.

“The main difference I see with the incoming freshmen here compared to Independence is simply the numbers,” he said. “We had like 55 freshmen come out, which is just crazy. That was almost a little overwhelming. Then, too, just the overall size of them. We have had some big freshmen walk through the door whether that be o-linemen, D-linemen or skill guys. Just

Please see **MCFADDEN** | 8A

A reason for HBCU coaches to dream big

Five years ago, Vanessa Blair-Lewis dared to dream big.

Coming off a legendary 13-year coaching career at Bethune-Cookman, Blair-Lewis achieved what so few HBCU basketball head coaches had – a chance to lead a predominately white program.

The operative word here is “lead.” Not join a staff as an assistant or associate head coach but the... Head. Woman. In. Charge.

As successful as she was at B-CU, a familiar coaching adage in HBCU sports circles didn't skip by Blair-Lewis. You know, the joke that a PWC must be scraping rock bottom before hiring a Black head coach. The Patriots were scraping pretty low. The program was 3-19 overall, 0-14 in the Atlantic 10 when Blair-Lewis was hired on April 21, 2021.

Was she intimidated? After all, critics are quick to dismiss the accomplishments of HBCU coaches, and women's sports are placed even lower on the food chain.

But what did she do? At the first team practice, she had a banner, covered with a cloth, raised in the rafters that read “FUTURE WOMEN'S ATLANTIC 10 CHAMPIONS.” Only the players and staff knew what it said.

Please see **BLAIR-LEWIS** | 8A



BONITTA
BEST



Blair-Lewis

North Meck's Jennifer Baker 'grateful' for NC coach award

By Cameron Williams
cameron.williams@thecharlottepost.com

North Mecklenburg High's Jennifer Baker is the NCHSAA's female coach of the year.

Baker, who led the Vikings to the state 7A girls' basketball title in March – the school's first in 40 years – with a 29-2 record and unbeaten after Jan. 6. Baker, who has coached at North since 2008, said she was humbled when told she was selected but it is more of a team award.

“I am so grateful,” Baker said, “and just so humbled for that type of honor, definitely. I guess I always have tunnel vision, so I definitely didn't expect it, or even think that I was in the running. ... There's many great coaches out there but I just feel that I can't do what I do without the players that actually believe in me and believe in our vision and our goal and what we're trying to accomplish. I appreciate them more. I am humbled by the award, but I don't get there without the players.”

One of them is Lenise Joseph, the Vikings' star guard.

See **JENNIFER** | 8A



CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG SCHOOLS

Jennifer Baker (standing second from right), who coached North Mecklenburg High to the state 7A girls title, is the NCHSAA female coach of the year.



TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Jalen Coker, who overcame an early season injury in 2025 to establish himself as a viable No. 2 receiver in Carolina by the postseason, wants to be part of the Panthers' future. "I just want to continue to build, continue to do good things for this organization down the line," he said. "Hopefully, I stay for eight more years."

Underappreciated early, Coker earns big payday

Continued from page 7A

score. It wouldn't hold up as the Rams rallied to upend the Panthers despite Coker compiling a team-high nine catches for 134 yards. His life was about to change - again.

While keeping silent on contract extension talk, Coker's agent, Generation Sports Group's Matthew Glose, negotiated a \$41 million maximum value deal.

Coker, who missed the first six weeks last of the 2025 season because of injury, compiled 65 catches for 872 yards and five touchdowns during his two seasons with the Panthers, evolving into a piece of the future.

While drafted players inherit initial advantages, namely starting their professional careers with four- or five-year contracts, Coker helped pave the way for top undrafted players to receive early paydays. While most drafted players don't become free agency eligible until their age 27 or 28 seasons, Coker has the potential for a second haul at 29.

"My message to all those (undrafted) guys is to continue to keep working, continue to grind, trust the work and be prepared when your number is called," he said. "I think that's what sprung me into the position I was, where I was thrown in here and there. And then I would make a play here and there."

"That kinda got the ball rolling for me, I think."

All the way to the bank.

Mapping a long-term plan

With the Panthers on summer break until July 22, Coker enters training camp as the second option at receiver behind 2025 Offensive Rookie of the Year Tetairoa McMillan and ahead of 2024 first-round draft pick Xavier Legette. Coker said his goal is to remain in Carolina for another payday or two.

"It was a huge opportunity for me," he said. "Your dream is to always go get to the NFL, of course, but to stay around and continue to contribute and make an impact every Sunday, that's always been my goal. This wasn't the end of my story. This isn't where I want to be finished at."

"I just want to continue to build, continue to do good things for this organization down the line. Hopefully, I can stay for eight more years. I didn't want it to be like I finally made it; I can relax, I can take the foot off the gas a little bit. No, now I've got to prove it even more." Like he did in the 2024 preseason finale.

Coker didn't survive 2024's Cutdown Day, but he proved an interesting prospect. Panthers general manager Dan Morgan signed Coker to the practice squad when he cleared waivers after the other 31 franchises declined his services.

"I don't know what (the Buffalo catch) did up in the (front) office," Coker said. "I don't know how it affected anything, but I know for me, personally and my family, it was sweet."

Sweet enough to change his life.

McFadden, Lions football focused on rebuild process

Continued from page 7A

the overall build of them is something that we weren't used to. But, like I said, it is exciting to see the numbers we had come out, and these young guys are enthusiastic about coming to West Charlotte and are ready to get to work."

The Lions lost key players from last season like Davion Jones and Jamouri Nichols but the message from the coaching staff is that this year's team isn't going to dwell on that and focus on the players that come in.

"The good thing about a lot of kids that stayed is that they were on last season's undefeated [junior varsity] team," McFadden said. "They have kind of come up together. Sure, a lot of our guys are still friends with [those that left], and there's no hard feelings. ...

"There's no hard feelings with us as the staff or the kids. The kids jumped at the opportunities because had some of the other guys stayed, they may not have had the same opportunities they have now to play. ... We have sophomores right now that are rising juniors who were cut their

freshman year because over the years West Charlotte has been so loaded."

McFadden said these Lions are hungry to prove doubters wrong.

"[These players] have shown up with us day one," he said, "they've been out there every day in the spring, they bought into the discipline and accountability that we brought, and they've taken in and ran with it. They're just hungry for their opportunity, and they've seen the social media posts about how bad they're going to be this that and the third, and that's just been our message, let them talk and time will tell. We are saying the work's going to show at some point."

The motto is simple: West Charlotte is focused inward and let the chips fall where they may.

"It's about us, bro," McFadden said. "We're not worried about anybody that left anymore. The school year is over now. We wish them all well. We're not worried about anybody that left. We're not worried about any other program. We're not worried about any of that."

Jennifer Baker delivered state title at North Mecklenburg

Continued from page 7A

star forward.

"Playing for coach Baker is a mix of a lot of things," Joseph said. "She is like another mom who you know that she is somebody you can count on. She is a coach that pushes you, keeps you in check 24/7 no matter who you are. She is pretty easygoing as long as you communicate. The big thing with her is communication and just telling her what you need. She always has the players' best interest in mind. ... I have been playing for her now for four years. She is not the coach that will baby you or hold your hand. ... Communication is key."

Said Baker: "(Joseph) is just an all-around great kid. She is a great athlete and great player. She is just somebody who gets it, as in, 'hey, I might not have come in this way my freshman year. My ceiling was here and what I put in, not only in the classroom but in training, I can get to where I want to be.' She is a great learner who knows she doesn't know everything but is always willing to continue to learn and grow no matter what."

North Meck was on the cusp of a championship for several seasons under Baker before fizzling in the playoffs. For Baker and

Joseph, winning the title brought joy - and relief.

"It was just a great feeling of accomplishment for all our players," Baker said. "For all the ups and downs and all the players that came before who were left crying in the locker rooms. For all the work we put in and just the vision that we finally were able to get it done was gratifying and a really great moment. After the regional I remember standing there and my assistant coach who had passed away the previous year, I just was like, 'Man, we finally did it, let's go get the next one.'"

"We had to refocus, but when we won, I really wished coach [Geoffery Gillespie] could have been there. I know he was looking down on us."

Said Joseph: "For most of us, it was a great relief off our backs. We have been playing together for so long and gone through so many things and were always saying, 'When are we going to get past the third round?' So, it was big and I think it also took some pressure off coach Baker. She is a very tough lady... and it took pressure off her and she finally got the one she deserves. It meant a lot to me as a player to help her get what she deserved. It was a happy moment and overall,

a big relief to finally get it done."

Baker said what separates her from the average coach is lifelong learning.

"I am never going to come in and tell the kids I know everything, because I don't," she said. "I don't pretend to know everything. I come in and work every day to grow and get better as a coach. As a coach if you are willing to get better, why would the kids want to? I know I am good at the things I do well, but I always strive to continue to grow, whether that be from the kids, my coaches or maybe something else."

The Vikings will now look to add another championship. Joseph, who is going into her senior year, is confident Baker can get North ready to repeat.

"We just have to make sure everybody is in the right mindset," she said. "For me, I just want to win. I don't want to end my senior season with a loss. We have a lot of new freshmen coming in but also a good group returning. So, getting the younger players caught up with the process and making sure everyone is in the same mindset will be key. I know coach Baker will have us right before the season starts and I am excited."

Boys' volleyball more than a movement

By Lauren Schutter

UNC MEDIA HUB

He was just a boy who wanted to play volleyball for his high school.

That was the whole beginning of it. No sweeping mission statement, no statewide blueprint, and no guarantee that anyone else would care enough to help.

Just a son looking at his mom and asking a simple question: "Why doesn't this exist here?"

North Carolina did not have sanctioned boys high school volleyball - meaning the state didn't officially recognize the sport. Meaning there was no official funding, no guaranteed coaching support, no consistent scheduling structure, and no statewide championship under the North Carolina High School Activities Association umbrella.

For Sarah Conklin, that question became a catalyst - transforming a simple conversation into a mother's determination to create something that didn't yet exist.

"It was just a mom trying to create an opportunity," Conklin said.

That opportunity has now become something much bigger.

Conklin, founder and director of the North Carolina Boys Volleyball Association, has spent nearly a decade helping push the sport toward legitimacy in a state where interest has long outpaced opportunity. What started with four schools has grown into a statewide effort that has finally reached its goal on May 6

with the vote by the N.C. High School Athletic Association.

And for the people who have poured years of unpaid work, belief and family time into this sport, this feels both emotional and overdue.

"Our youngest is a senior now, so it will be a 10-year journey from start to finish of his older brother wanting to play and then his senior year and it being sanctioned," Conklin said.

In the beginning, Conklin was not trying to launch a movement. She was just trying to help her son find a place to belong. But as the game spread, the mission grew with it.

"I didn't start out with that mission," she said. "But very quickly it became apparent how much of a need there was for not only another sport, but kind of a welcoming environment."

What she saw, she said, was more than boys learning how to serve, pass and rotate.

"I just saw the confidence rise and the camaraderie and just finding a place to belong," Conklin said. "And that's when I realized we need to take this further because there's a real need for this statewide."

That need is no longer hard to prove.

Nationally, boys' volleyball has been the fastest-growing high school boys' sport over the past decade, with participation increasing by more than 76%, according to the National Federation of State High School Associations.

According to Conklin, the

North Carolina Boys Volleyball Association began with four teams in 2017. This season, she said, it expects close to 200 teams overall, including 133 public schools that count toward sanctioning requirements - well above the threshold needed to make a formal case.

"We're feeling - I don't want to say overconfident because that is not true - we feel like we're in a good place to present a strong case for sanctioning," Conklin said prior to the vote.

With the vote finally passing, it has marked the start of a new era. However, Conklin is quick to remind people that this growth did not occur because a major institution stepped in and carried it out.

"It's a labor of love," she said. "It's been a lot of work."

Most of that work has come from volunteers.

"It's just volunteers, right?" Conklin said. "We spend every moment of our free time figuring out how to spread the word about the game. How do we support schools?"

Last season, the association hosted its state championships at Queens University. Conklin said it felt real - officials, game operations, coverage, structure, all of it.

"It was a very professional feeling," she said. "I think they were like, wow, this is legit. It actually feels like a state championship."

That has been part of the point all along: build something solid enough that nobody can dismiss it.



GEORGE MASON ATHLETICS

Vanessa Blair-Lewis, who coached Bethune-Cookman to six winning seasons, four MEAC regular season titles and a tournament title in 13 years, successfully made the transition to George Mason, where she led the Patriots to four winning seasons in five years.

Blair-Lewis' success reason for HBCU coaches to dream big

Continued from page 7A

The cover came off four years later when GMU won its first-ever A-10 Championship and first NCAA Tournament appearance.

Blair-Lewis' five seasons have gone like this:

- 2021-22: 10-19 overall, 3-12 A-10. GMU hadn't won 10 games in three seasons.

- 2022-23: 16-15, 8-8. The Patriots' first winning season since 2017-18.

- 2023-24: 23-8, 14-4. First 20-win season since 2017-18; program records for regular-season and conference wins; and a postseason appearance in the inaugural Women's Basketball Invitational Tournament.

- 2024-25: 27-6, 14-4. A program-record in wins, first conference championship and a Big Dance appearance.

- 2025-26: 23-10, 16-2. A regular-season championship, a program record in conference victories, 400 career coaching wins and another postseason appearance.

Her reward: a two-year contract extension that will take her through 2031-32. IF, and that's a big IF, they can keep her.

GMU fans shouldn't be surprised at the Patriots' success after the job Blair-Lewis did at Bethune-Cookman before the uni-

versity left the MEAC for the SWAC.

She left the program with a 196-168 record, six winning seasons, four regular-season titles, a tournament championship and an NCAA berth.

But it was that 2018-19 season that made people sit up and take notice.

Bethune lost MEAC Defensive Player of the Year Ashanti Hunt, top freshman Kiana Williams and four additional players throughout the season from season-ending ACL injuries. It was the talk of the league.

Fingers were being pointed: were the coaches overworking the players, who was in charge of strength and conditioning, etc.

But what did Blair-Lewis and her staff do? Guide the team to its first tournament championship since 1984 and an NCAA berth.

Now, if that's not coaching, what is? The team could have easily folded during the season with a woe-is-us mentality.

So hardly anyone in HBCU country is surprised at Blair-Lewis' success. After what she did at Bethune, George Mason was gravy.

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