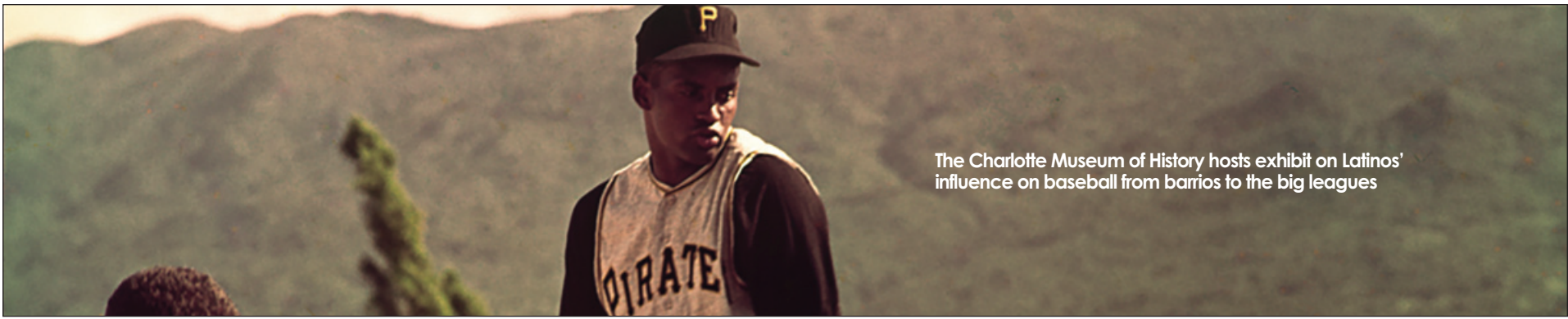




The Charlotte Museum of History hosts exhibit on Latinos' influence on baseball from barrios to the big leagues

The Charlotte Post

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PHOTOS BY TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

The Historic Excelsior Club, which was converted from an Art Moderne-designed home by entrepreneur Jimmie McKee in 1944, was a social and entertainment mainstay in west Charlotte until it was shuttered in 2016. The building was demolished on July 15.

Excelsior Club memories

Patrons of the historic west Charlotte venue recall connectivity and community

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

The Historic Excelsior Club is no more, but the memories live on.

The original Excelsior Club, a social and entertainment mainstay in west Charlotte for more than seven decades, was torn down on July 15. The Art Moderne design house – a rarity in today's Charlotte – was converted by entrepreneur Jimmie McKee into the Excelsior in 1944 during a time when segregation was enforced by law and custom in the South. The club was the epicenter of entertainment and community in Black Charlotte as well as political and social equity as Jim Crow-era barriers fell in the 1960s.

The Excelsior closed in 2016.

"The old Excelsior will always be in our hearts," Patricia Anderson wrote on The



A wooden fire escape is the lone remaining piece of the Historic Excelsior Club on Beatties Ford Road after its July 15 demolition.

Post's Facebook page.

Charlotte developer Shawn Kennedy and partner Tim Sittema are leading an \$8.3 million project to build a new Excel-

sior – as a two-story gathering space on the .84-acre site on Beatties Ford Road.

The Kennedy-Sittema project includes Please see **FOND** | 2A

Bonding civics to political literacy

Toxic discourse and social anxiety lead to flagging enthusiasm

By Jaslynn Vorachith

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

For democracy to work, it needs participation.

Politics is everywhere and affects all of us, whether it's lawmakers approving legislation, or appropriations for programs ranging from the military to roads. In America, voting and engagement are civic responsibilities.

In the 2024 presidential election 73.6% of the voting-age U.S. population was registered to vote and 65.3% cast a ballot, according to the Census Bureau. In North Carolina, 65% of registered voters cast ballots, and participation was nearly even by gender, with 65% of women voting compared to 64% of men. Sixty-nine percent of white non-Hispanics participated, followed by Black voters at 61%, and 49% among Hispanics.

Voter participation generally falls dramatically for off-year and municipal elections. In Charlotte's 2025 municipal elections, in which voters decided on a contentious 1% transit tax 22% of registered voters cast ballots.

North Carolina Sen. Mujtaba Mohammed contends there are many reasons for the lack of political engagement, including economic stress.

"For the vast majority of North Carolinians, it's the rising cost of housing," the Mecklenburg County lawmaker said. "It's their groceries being expensive, gas prices being high, access to healthcare being super expensive. I don't think people are disengaged or that they don't care. I think they're often jugged."

Please see **POLITICAL** | 2A



Mohammed

Reimagined Concord church has a new life as affordable housing

By Cameron Williams
cameron.williams@thecharlottepost.com

CONCORD — Tania VanDyke is on her way to home ownership.

VanDyke is the first resident of The Sanctuary apartments on Kerr Street which was once Kerr Street Baptist Church. The complex features studio, one-bedroom and two-bedroom apartments each unit with its own thermostat and washer/dryer connections.

"My long-term goal has always been to own a home, but even more importantly, I wanted to create stability for myself and my daughter," she said.

WeBuild Concord's mission is to build affordable workforce housing. On July 14, the nonprofit held a ribbon cutting ceremony for The Sanctuary.

"I am honored to be the first resident of the Sanctuary Apartments," VanDyke said. "I first learned about WeBuild [Concord] through my work at Cooperative Christian Ministries where I have served the last five years as the program manager... I work closely with single mothers experiencing homelessness and helping them secure stable housing. Through this role, I see firsthand the housing challenges that face our community every day."

Affordable housing is an issue across the country, including greater Charlotte. In Concord, the median home price is between \$365,000 and \$380,000. In Charlotte, the median price rose \$443,850 in 2025 and the city has a shortage of more than 40,000 units that the lowest-income households can afford.

To afford a median-priced home in Charlotte, a Please see **REIMAGINED** | 2A



TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

The seventh annual Queen City HBCU Cookout Scholarship Fundraiser returns to Johnson C. Smith University on July 25.

HBCU alumni gather for fellowship and scholarship at annual cookout

By Ashleigh Fields

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

It's always a good time for Black college homecoming.

The seventh Queen City HBCU Cookout Scholarship Fundraiser on July 25 brings alumni from the nation's historically Black schools to Johnson C. Smith University's Humanities Lawn for food, music and vendors. General admission tickets are \$35, and children's general admission is \$15. Proceeds will

go to the nonprofit's scholarship fund.

The cookout, which goes from 4-8 p.m., promotes awareness about HBCUs while raising scholarship funds to support students. This year's cookout will take place on the campus of Johnson C. Smith University on their humanities lawn, which will serve as a space for food trucks, vendors, tug of war contest, spades tournament. Please see **HBCU** | 2A

On The Net
queenci-tyhbcus.org

NC push to improve reentry services

By Clayton Henkel

NC NEWSLINE

It is hard to imagine finding hope in a steel cargo container. But Shirley Grandy sees life, fellowship and beauty in the metal box that sits on the Dix Park campus in Raleigh.

Grandy served nearly six years in the North Carolina Correctional Institution for Women, but now holds the title of public arts project coordinator for Arise Collective, a Raleigh nonprofit dedicated to helping incarcerated women across the state.

Grandy told members of the N.C. Joint Reentry Council last week that her life was profoundly changed in 2019 when she joined a small group of women at NCCIW crocheting items to be donated and sold. The proceeds were used to help parents on the outside bring children to see those who were incarcerated.

But when COVID-19 hit, everything changed. Prison visits and classes were canceled. There was no outside work. In the minimum Please see **PUSH** | 2A

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Fond memories of the Historic Excelsior Club

Continued from page 1A

event space for community meetings, outreach programs and job creation through free culinary certification training. It'll also include a restaurant, live entertainment space and a museum.



Kennedy

Excelsior fans took to social media as news of the building's demolition spread. Their experiences ranged from childhood birthday parties in the 1950s to wedding receptions, rubbing shoulders with famous entertainers and weekly staples like "Dirty 30 Thursday" parties for more mature adults and Tuesday fish fries.

"I have several great memories of the Excelsior Club," James Gregory recalled. "On one occasion I was playing bass in a trio band there. Gary Mumford was on drums, and we had a keyboardist whose name I can't remember. We had just finished playing a set, when a gentleman came to the microphone and announced that there was a special guest in the audience. Well, the special guest was Wilbert Harrison (a Charlotte-born

singer who recorded several hits over a three-decade career). He made his way to the keyboard and started playing his hit song 'Kansas City' and he asked me and Gary to play along with him!"

Alison Montgomery's Excelsior connection started in her mid-20s.

"I was actually 25 when I first experienced the Excelsior," she wrote. "My best friend's mom was having a 50th birthday party, and because of that we got in. ... After that experience I couldn't wait to turn 30 to get in there. I literally had 4 birthday parties upstairs. I met Ronnie [DeVoe], Bobby [Brown], Ricky [Bell] and Mike [Bivins], and had a lot of fun with Ralph [Tresvant] lol.

"I'm 58 now, so I spent about 20 years of my life in the Excelsior."

Wrote Brent McSwain: "I was very fortunate to be taken there and onto the dance floor by some of my DSS co-workers sometime in the mid 2000s. ... It was an awesome, cool place. I remember feeling the history."

Nancy Sims wrote: "Every time we bought our daughter to JCSU for school we'd stop there and eat and drink. I loved that place. Glad to hear they will be rebuilding it."

Political, social anxiety blamed for flagging voter participation

Continued from page 1A

gling life. Every day I think families are just trying to make ends meet."

Rafael Alcazar is a 79-year-old veteran. Originally from Cuba, he has lived in five countries and in Charlotte the last two decades. He has seen the city change before his eyes,

"I've been in Charlotte now since 2007," he said. "I've seen it grow - I think a little bit out of hand. [It] used to be a place where you could buy a house a lot easier than in a lot of other places in the country. Now it's really catching up very quickly to where the cost of living here in Charlotte has done quite a bit in the last five years."

For many, there are mixed feelings and mistrust about politics. Alcazar understands why some may not be disinterested.

"It's very difficult to sit down and look at somebody who is giving out a message based on a concept that may or may not happen, even if they do get into office," he said.

Niles Randol is a 21-year-old student at Central Piedmont Community College. A broadcasting major studying audio and visual design, he believes politics can be overwhelming and dislikes how government is conducted.

"When it comes to more local government or state government, I don't follow as much, just because, as someone who's not a big fan of the current [federal] administration, I am constantly on the lookout for whatever moves they're making and how I need to adjust my daily life around that," he said. "I think the hardest part is someone who wants to stay up to date with all of those...just because there is so much happening in so many different places."

Randol adds economic concerns add another layer of anxiety and frustration.

"Someone who's...entering true adulthood and doing things like looking for jobs and someone who's recently got their license, having to worry so much about the price of things, how likely I am to get a job, and how likely I am to afford food, housing, and all this other stuff - it's very important to me," he said.

Terza Lima-Neves, a Johnson C. Smith University political science professor and chair of the Department of Social Sciences and Interdisciplinary Studies, said the nation's contentious political and social landscape is a deterrent to free expression, especially in public.

"It hasn't always been like this," she said. "Things are a little bit different in the United States right now because of the racism, the history of oppression in this country. White supremacy has impacted the United States. ... Folks are tentative to have conversations, because emotions and feelings are really high right now."

Fear and resentment aren't the only reasons for political disengagement. There's also a lack of communication between political leaders and their constituents, which Lima-Neves believes civics education can address.

"I'm particularly interested about young people and political literacy, and voters," she said. "I think that we're not getting information to young people."

"Political literacy should begin somewhere around middle school. Maybe we don't describe it as political literacy. We say what it is. We say that we want you to be knowledgeable about your community, who's making decisions."

Mohammed contends it's important to close the knowledge gap with clear information and make it accessible to connect with and engage voters.

"I think the burden of unelected officials to get out and meet people where

they are," he said. "It's more important for elected officials to explain to the people in plain, simple language about what's happening in their government and how it's affecting their everyday lives.

"I think people deserve those clear, honest answers, and not just like complicated jargon or things that they aren't interested in, but I think more importantly, that's when you're going to get more engagement."

Majeed Ederer, an intern at Queen City Community Law Firm, contends U.S. political culture leaves constituents cut out of the decision-making process and taken for granted.

"They're under the false belief that their voice couldn't matter," said Eder, a junior political science and cultural studies major at JCSU. "Our system is designed to make the average person believe that because that is how the system perpetuates itself. "Even if you don't care about politics, [it] for sure cares about you."

That's where collective advocacy is key to democracy. Ederer encourages people who are politics-curious or newcomers to the voting process to reach out connect with organizations that can amplify their voice.

"Your representative won't care ... if you come as an individual," he said. "Having small house meetings, especially if they're part of...a local nonprofit, you'll actually see much greater results because individually we have political power, but only as a collective."

Mohammed adds organization boosts community involvement as well as the work of resolving issues.

"These are good ways to understand the issues because there's some people that are your friends and your neighbors and other parents that are already working and care about these same issues," he said. "You might find community there, where you can support one another in order to accomplish your goals."

Mohammed believes focusing on local politics can be much more manageable to digest than at federal. Focusing on the nation's capital, where bureaucracy slows decisiveness even under ideal conditions, means seeing limited progress.

"I think people have to first of all begin to think about what's happening locally before even Washington D.C., or the federal government," he said. "I think that's some of the biggest frustrations that people have with Washington D.C. is that their lives don't change what's happening between the president and Congress."

Lima-Neves advises reading beyond headlines and to not to take everything at face value. In terms of social media, "it's more about how many views and likes" posts tally for algorithms, making disinformation and misinformation dangerous.

"I'm going to say for people to fact-check as much as they can because there's a lot of wrong information being disseminated," she said. "I would ask people to be very mindful of where they're getting information. I think many of us are quick to believe what we read in the headlines. Don't just see a headline and say this tells me the whole story."

Even during a tense period in America's political and social history, Alcazar still stands by U.S. democracy, which in his experiences with different forms of government in multiple countries, is still better.

"I believe in the systems that uphold this country," he said. "We may not like it sometimes, but it does continue to work, so I believe in that, and I believe in the country because of that."



CAMERON WILLIAMS | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Tania VanDyke, the first tenant at The Sanctuary apartments in Concord, speaks at the complex's ribbon-cutting on July 14. The Sanctuary is the former Kerr Street Baptist Church.

Reimagined church takes on a new life as housing

Continued from page 1A

household needs an income of \$138,000, while the actual median household income is roughly \$80,000.

Only 2% of houses sold in Charlotte went for under \$150,000 in 2024, and about 19% sold for under \$300,000. Homeownership is elusive for Black people in Mecklenburg County, where the rate is 43% compared to 68% for white households. In North Carolina, the rate is 47% for Black households compared to 75% for their white peers.

VanDyke said moving into The Sanctuary will help her save money to buy a house of her own.

"As a single mother, home ownership can feel out of reach, but We Build Concord has given me hope and a clear path forward," she said. ... "Living at The Sanctuary apartments will allow me to save money, build a stronger financial foundation, and prepare to purchase a home within the next two years. ... I look forward not only to achieving home ownership but also helping other hardworking single mothers in our community to pursue the same dream."

WeBuild Concord CEO Patrick Graham recounted driving by the shuttered church in 2022 and seeing a real estate agent leave the building. He realized an opportunity to convert the church into housing and placed a call to contact the realtor and make an offer.

"I said to myself, 'Wouldn't this be a

great place to have the resurrection of the church to serve a purpose for the people still, instead of being empty?" he said. "I sat in the car with a hotspot on my laptop and within two hours we had a contract on the building. Since then, it has been one of our dreams ever since and today, we are here to witness it. ...

"I love this place, and I want to see it serve as an example to everyone of what communities can do when we decide that everybody deserves an opportunity to take people from cost burden to home ownership, from cost burden to stability and wealth, from dreams to new realities that make our neighborhoods better through its people."

Concord Mayor Pro Tem John Sweat Jr. said the Sanctuary's conversion has been a long time coming but the work of improving access to housing is far from over.

"This project, overall, it's amazing," he said. "There was a lot of blood, sweat, and tears that went into this, and a whole lot of sore knees for prayer. ... When Dr. Graham talked to us, his last words were, 'We have much work to do,' and that is true in all things that we do in our community. So, this isn't about one person, a title, any of that. This is about our community. This is about everyone coming together, voicing their opinions, their wishes, their needs, and this is so historic. I feel so great that we're on hallowed ground today, and I am really excited to be here."

On The Net
webuildconcord.org

HBCU alumni cookbook for fellowship and scholarship

Continued from page 1A

ment and line dance competition.

"It happens to be the largest HBCU event here in the Queen City in addition to the largest scholarship collaborative scholarship fundraiser in Charlotte," said Jerome Brooks, a graduate of Jackson State University and the cookbook's co-organizer with Tia Boyd (North Carolina A&T State University) and David Thomas (Alabama A&M University). "So, of course the revenue that is generated is dispersed among the participating HBCU alumni chapters towards the scholarship funds to assist deserving students here in the Charlotte metro area."

Brooks said the cookbook came about after the CIAA moved its annual basketball tournament from Charlotte to Baltimore and the National Battle of the Bands relocated to Houston. The first cookbook was held at Bojangles Coliseum in 2019, a year after Brooks and Boyd met at a North Carolina A&T State University football watch party. Boyd, an A&T alumna, was the host.

"We wanted to create a space where the HBCU community [could gather] since these two large events left, so we decided to form this collaborative effort and we were able to loop in all 53 HBCU chapters

here in Charlotte and we kicked off our inaugural cookbook that same year," he said.

Since then, the cookbook has grown and gained support from small business owners as well as the Charlotte Hornets, which is sponsoring the showcase.

In addition to the outdoor event, there's also a free financial literacy session on Thursday at the Allegra Westbrooks Branch Library on Beatties Ford Road to provide guidance on budgeting, wealth building and home ownership.

"The entire organization is not just about fellowship and fun; it's kind of a party with a purpose," Brooks said. "We want to of course raise scholarship money, raise awareness about HBCUs, but also provide financial knowledge for our community."

Brooks said his experience at Jackson State gave him a "sense of support" and "philanthropy" in addition to a foundation for giving back.

"Everything that we did at Jackson State as students with respect to things being embedded in us by the administration, our mentors, etc. It laid that foundation essentially for what I'm doing today here in the community," he said.

Push to improve NC reentry services

Continued from page 1A

custody unit where Grandy and the other women were housed, more than 100 prisoners contracted the virus in one week.

"But what that did was it brought us together as sisters in incarceration," Grandy said. "It turned into something much larger. It showed that we are determined, we have life, and we are not giving up."

The women of H.A.T.S. - that's Handmade and Totally Special - used each week to crochet. Each colorful section joined together represented a year that a woman served behind bars.

Grandy recalled carefully crocheting six squares to mark her own sentence.

"My friend Faye Brown, who passed away from COVID, had 40," Grandy told the council.

When the 25-foot-long prison quilt was finished just before Mother's Day 2021, other incarcerated women were invited to tie ribbons to the squares to recognize the children they left behind and the lives lost by family and friends while they were in prison.

According to research by The Sentencing Project, the U.S. has seen a 52% increase in the number of incarcerated women between 1980 and 2021, roughly twice the rate of increase for men. Eighty percent of incarcerated women are mothers.

Grandy lost her own mother during her incarceration.

Jennifer Jackson, chief executive officer for Arise Collective, says opportunity for the crocheters struck two years later when the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation and the Mellon Foundation issued a grant proposal to create permanent public art to tell the stories of historically marginalized communities.

"There's a community of people who have been touched by incarceration across our state that has been hidden," said Jackson. "We made a pitch that they consider this a community, as we were defining it, as one that fit within their grant guidelines."

The foundations selected Arise and the Stitching Stories Quilt to be reimagined and transformed for the public.

Four artists — Carlos González García, David Wilson, Eliza Redmann and Owens Daniels — spent the next three years transforming the crocheted quilt into a durable mosaic that captures the lives of the often-forgotten women. On the opposite wall of the shipping container, a mirrored wall portrays the original artists with the phrase, "We are you."

The project is also an opportunity for the public to learn more about mass incarceration and the challenges that arise after leaving prison.



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Stand up to toll threat; support recission vote

Charlotte's debate over the I 77 toll lane project keeps circling around one claim: that the process had "clear public involvement."

Anyone who watched this unfold knows that isn't true. Public involvement requires public information, and the public didn't get the actual design until October 2025. Everything before that was a carefully staged performance meant to look like engagement without actually being engagement.

People were invited to meeting after meeting where the most important piece of the puzzle — the design itself — was nowhere to be found. Calling that transparency is like taking two years to

pass a state budget and then bragging about finishing it just in time for it to be outdated.

For years, residents were asked to weigh in on a project that existed only in vague descriptions and conceptual sketches. Then, last fall, the NCDOT finally pulled off the tarp to reveal a blueprint that looked nothing like what people had been led to expect.

Transparency isn't about counting meetings; it's about giving people the information they need to participate. If you spend five years showing citizens a blank poster board and then drop a fully baked, deeply unpopular design on them at the last minute, you haven't engaged the public — you've ambushed them.

The financial argument against buying out the toll contract collapses just as quickly. The \$60 million buyout is tiny compared to what residents will pay in tolls over the next 50 years. Even modest toll usage, multiplied across hundreds of thousands of drivers, easily surpasses \$60 million — and that's before toll hikes, dynamic pricing spikes, or population growth.

A buyout is a one-time cost. Tolling is a 50-year subscription, and Charlotte drivers pay it every single day. The return on that investment is non-existent. Managed lanes don't fix traffic; they create a premium lane for people who can afford it while everyone else sits in the same bottleneck.

Congestion won't disappear, yet the region is still being asked to accept a system that charges residents indefinitely for a problem it won't solve.

The state's threat to withhold billions in future funding if Charlotte rejects the toll lanes also deserves scrutiny. There is no guarantee that those funds won't be withheld later anyway.

Once a government uses withholding as leverage, it becomes a threat to compel adherence. The NC legislature has been trying to take Charlotte's Powell Bill money for years. They've floated bills to strip it, redirect it, shrink it, or "reform" it — all of which somehow end with Charlotte losing money.

When they say they'll punish Charlotte financially, it sounds less like a warning and more like what Charlotte already endures: neglected infrastructure, dark roads, and potholes on state roads that never seem to get fixed.

If the governor is going to instruct his NCDOT on anything, the directive should be to stand with CRTPO and rescind the department's support for the I 77 plan. That is the action that would actually reflect the will of the region and the people who will live with the consequences.

The state's fiscal posture only deepens the contradiction. They are cutting the corporate tax rate to zero and slashing the personal income tax rate while warning Charlotte that billions might be withheld.

At some point, the math stops being political theater and becomes simple arithmetic: if you cut your own taxes to the bone, you're going to run out of money. When that happens, guess who they'll come to for help? The same city they keep threatening. The same city they keep trying to strip of Powell Bill funds. The same city that provides 30% of the state's GDP.

The irony is unavoidable. They will likely need to borrow money from Charlotte just to pay their own bills. Threatening the city that keeps your books balanced is not fiscal discipline.

Charlotte deserves better than this. It deserves real transparency, honest planning, and infrastructure decisions that respect the people who pay for them.

Robert Dawkins of Charlotte is political director at Action NC and coalition organizer at SAFE Coalition NC.



ROBERT DAWKINS

NC school voucher audit planned

By Kate Denning

CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS

The long-awaited state budget signed by Gov. Josh Stein this month included a number of provisions for the state's private schools and Opportunity Scholarship Program, including reallocating some funds from the voucher program back to public schools.

Researchers and critics of North Carolina's private school vouchers have long said the state uses the scholarship to drain public schools of their funds, which they say is particularly problematic because of the few accountability and oversight efforts the state follows compared to other voucher programs — one highly cited report from Duke University's Children's Law Clinic calls North Carolina's accountability measures for vouchers "among the weakest in the country."

With Republican State Auditor Dave Boliek also announcing an audit into the Opportunity Scholarship in June, to be completed sometime this fall, is North Carolina boldly committing to more accountability measures for the heavily criticized and costly program?

Supporters and detractors both say it's not so simple.

Funds back to public schools

The budget states public schools will be reinvested in utilizing savings from the Opportunity Scholarship. The legislature says the state saved money the last two years by expanding access to vouchers and making more students eligible, including those who were already attending private schools on their own dime, because the scholarships often cost less than what the state would spend on a public school student.

"The General Assembly finds that the state has realized a savings from students formerly enrolled in a nonpublic school unit of the state using scholarship grants to enroll in a private school due to the expansion of eligibility for the scholarship grants awarded from the Opportunity Scholarship Grant Reserve Fund ..." the budget bill reads.

"The Department of Public Instruction has identified a savings of thirty-five million seven hundred fifty-one thousand four hundred nine dollars (\$35,751,409) for the 2024-2025 and 2025-2026 fiscal years based on the difference between the total amount of funds used for an opportunity scholarship grant award that is less than one hundred percent (100%) of the average state per pupil allocation for average daily membership for a student in a public

school unit."

The \$35 million, the estimated amount public schools lost because of voucher expansion, will go toward one-time bonuses for nutrition and custodial staff, middle school literacy professional development and acquisition of "mathematics curriculum from another state that has developed its own mathematics curriculum and to conform those materials to align with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study."

But when more than \$600 million went toward a voucher program sending kids to private schools rather than investing in public schools from the get-go, \$35 million doesn't feel like much, said Heather Koons, director of communications and research at Public Schools First NC.

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ANDREW STEIN | CAROLINA PANTHERS

Carolina Panthers linebacker Jaelan Phillips (5) pursues quarterback Bryce Young during a drill June 9, 2026, at Atrium Health Training Facility in Charlotte. Phillips is expected to give Carolina a pass-rushing boost when after signing a four-year, \$120 million free agent deal in the offseason.

Panthers put pressure on Phillips

Pass-rushing linebacker aims to add juice to a Carolina defense that was middling at best in 2025

By Jeff Hawkins
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Jaelan Phillips stood up to quarterback Bryce Young. After an otherwise routine no-contact play during the opening of mandatory minicamp on June 10, the defenders celebrated the potential of a big hit, if the players were fully padded. Young jogged over to put an end to the festivities, pointing out that the offense earned a first down. "We had a little 5-yard gain, like a first down, and everyone (on defense) is cheering, acting like it would have been

a big tackle, a big hit," Young said. "So sometimes have to give them a little reality check." When Phillips, a linebacker, took the post-practice podium, the pass-rush specialist pushed back. "He came over there chirping because ... I don't even know why," Phillips said with Young in attendance. "It was like a quick little out route. And he's, 'Oh, it's a first down.' "We were like, 'We don't care. It's practice. You turned (up), yelling. It was like a calm chirping. You know him, he's a chill dude. But he was talking."

Phillips' presence has NFL insiders talking. **Forging a role in Carolina** After agreeing to a franchise-record, four-year, \$120 million free-agent contract, Phillips continued to learn about and embrace his new surroundings throughout the team's offseason training activities. Phillips looked - and acted - at ease. With the Panthers scheduled to open 2026 NFL training camp Wednesday, the early summer scene could be seen as a moment when the defending NFC South champions started to bond.

"That's what it's all about," Phillips said. "It's infectious. So, what can start as a joke, everybody will actually be fired up." The Panthers (8-9 in 2025), who finished with a losing record for eight straight seasons, focused the offseason on infusing the defense with proven, high-priced talent. They needed it. Two seasons removed from yielding an NFL all-time worst 534 points, the Panthers turned to Phillips to provide what the unit needed most - consistent

Please see **PHILLIPS'** | 6A

A familiar look for Golden Bulls: No. 2 in preseason CIAA poll

By Herbert L. White
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For the second straight season, J.C. Smith is second in the CIAA preseason football rankings. The Golden Bulls, who won the 2025 title, finished second to Virginia Union in a poll of conference sports information directors and coaches. JCSU, which finished a school record 10-2 (7-1 CIAA) last year, beat the Panthers 45-21 in the conference final. Both teams advanced to the NCAA Division II playoffs. Fayetteville State was picked third followed by Virginia State.

Six JCSU players were named to the preseason all-conference squad, second only to Fayetteville State. Elizabeth City State was third with four players. Five Golden Bulls are on the offensive side: linemen Jamari Mason, Marcus Andrews and Robert Early, along with running back Bobby Smith and receiver Brian Lane. Smith, Lane and Mason were first-team all-CIAA in 2025, along with linebacker Vincent Hill, who also earned a spot on the preseason squad.



Lane



Hill

New for 2026 is an expanded title weekend with a game between the third- and fourth-place teams a day ahead of the Nov. 14 finale between the top two finishers. The 3-4 game gives those teams an 11th game and a chance to qualify for the post-season. "Last year's championship reminded us how competitive this conference has become, and we expect that momentum to continue this fall," CIAA Commissioner Jacqie McWilliams Parker said in a statement. "Ex-

panding Championship Weekend allows us to celebrate even more of our student-athletes while creating an enhanced experience for our fans, member institutions and partners." **Predicted order of finish** 1. Virginia Union 2. Johnson C. Smith 3. Fayetteville State 4. Virginia State 5. Winston-Salem State 6. Livingstone 7. Elizabeth City State 8. Bowie State 9. Bluefield State 10. Shaw 11. Lincoln (Pa.). **Preseason All-CIAA** Quarterback: Rahsaan Matthews Jr. (Virginia State).

Please see **JCSU** | 6A

NC football programs have work to do in ACC



MATT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Darian Mensah, who quarterbacked Duke to the 2025 ACC title, transferred to conference rival Miami, leaving an unexpected hole behind center for 2026 for the Blue Devils.

By Cameron Williams
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The 2026 college football season is around the corner. North Carolina is home to four ACC programs that all have set lofty goals for the upcoming season. Here are their outlook on 2026. **Duke (2025 record 9-5; 6-2 ACC)** The Blue Devils won the 2025 ACC title but were hit by a mass exodus to the transfer portal. Third-year coach Manny Diaz is excited about the players he has and is ready to repeat. "I do think in an era of the game becoming transactional, you can be very cynical about the state of college affairs," Diaz said. "I think these three guys represent the connection that we have in our locker room that no matter if the names change, that the culture - and I know coaches throw that word around too much - that the culture is so strong that when we bring in new transfers, they become us." Former quarterback Darian Mensah left in the offseason for Miami and that left questions about whether Duke is becoming a steppingstone program. Diaz didn't mince words. "Listen, if people want our players, that

Please see **NORTH CAROLINA'S** | 6A

CIAA title weekend is a four-team spectacle

CIAA Commissioner Jacqie McWilliams Parker always has the last say to close out Football Media Day. McWilliams Parker not only had the last say, but she also, arguably, had the best quote of the day. "Win your games and then we don't have to break ties," she said directing her comments at the head coaches. The party in CIAA football has made the last weekend of the regular season a suspenseful thriller instead of "so, who's playing Fayetteville State?" Coaches hate tiebreakers. Fans hate tiebreakers. The team that loses is going to cry foul and blast the tiebreaking system. The winner is under more pressure to prove it's the better team. McWilliams Parker decided to nip in the bud any late-season whining now. Win or SHADDUP! **Weekend expansion** Media day at the Durham Hilton Hotel began by answering the question on everyone's lips since word leaked that championship football weekend was expanding. The weekend will begin Nov. 13, 6 p.m., with a matchup between the third- and fourth-place teams in the final standings. The championship



BONITTA
BEST

Please see **CIAA** | 6A

The WNBA's racial divide is wider than the Grand Canyon

By Charles Hallman
BLACK PRESS USA

The Alyssa Thomas-Caitlin Clark on-court kerfuffle late last month sparked, for many, a Marvin Gaye "Make You Wanna Holler, Put Up Both Your Hands" moment. Phoenix's Thomas made contact with Indiana's Clark's throat during a loose-ball scramble during Indiana's June 24 111-109 loss to Phoenix. League officials later reviewed the play, upgraded it to a Flagrant 2 foul and suspended Thomas for one

game. Social media and media know-it-alls afterward went bonkers. Rob Knox admitted last week that he experienced a Gaye moment and shared it on his Substack post. He's a longtime Black journalist and friend with whom we both share a passion for women's basketball. "I've noticed a troubling pattern. Whenever something nega-



Clark



Engelbert

tive happens to Clark, a wave of people emerges from the darkest corners of the internet. They weaponize the moment to spread racism, demean Black women, attack the WNBA, and say things they would likely never utter face-to-face," wrote Knox. Amidst the noise, Thomas and her family have since received death threats. Make you want to holler.

And finally, WNBA Commissioner Cathy Engelbert released a "We don't tolerate hate" statement, though she always seems to be a dollar short when it comes to such matters, which often does nothing to quell things. America loves heroes and villains, good vs. evil. In the W, are Black female players bad, non-Black players good? Furthermore, the WNBA didn't properly prepare for Clark, who quickly became its great white

Please see **LET'S** | 6A



PHOENIX MERCURY

Phoenix Mercury player Alyssa Thomas has been the subject of online hate and death threats after pushing her fist against Caitlyn Clark's neck during a June WNBA game.

Let's face facts: The WNBA has a racial divide problem

Continued from page 5A

hope, the so-called All-American girl that advertisers and fans have waited so long for upon her arrival two seasons ago. Definitely, they weren't prepared for a sudden influx of WB (W bandwagon) fans that the Indiana guard attracts, along with the racial divisiveness on social media and a Clark obsession among some.

Some fans and media blindly gave Clark credit for the new seven-year CBA over WNBA Players Union President Nneka Ogwumike, who is Black, and her negotiating team, many of whom are also Black, including Minnesota's Napheesa Collier.

Instead of talking about the many great performances we've seen thus far this season, the Thomas-Clark affair has become the talk of the town. Instead of talking about inconsistent officiating, we're talking about the continued racial divisiveness that grows wider than the Grand Canyon in the W.

Akilah Carter-Francique, now dean of Benedict College's Education, Health and Human Services school, and Ajhanai (A.J.) Keaton, an assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts, both spoke to us last week in separate phone interviews. The two Black women regularly study the intersection of race, gender, social politics and sport.

"There's no scholarly evidence that I know of where we actually have a representative sample of who Caitlin Clark fans are," said Keaton. "I think there's kind of an imagery or a caricature that we kind of assume comes with her. We've had other star white female players.

"I think in this era, the sociopolitical context of Trumpism, I think what's happening in the context with white nationalism."

Carter-Francique added: "I think it's on the court and off the court. Black women, whether they are players or in

the front office, are always under a different level of surveillance and scrutiny that other women and men do not have to essentially endure."

"You have her face," Keaton said of Clark, "along with the faces of Black women. We know that the WNBA at this point is predominantly African American, and so it's easy to go into that conversation, provide those comparisons and then begin to pit player against player. ..."

"I think all those things, in many ways, are coming together, are overlapping and are creating a conversation around this sport, around the professionalization of women in this space. I think in many ways this incident can create some challenge, some additional conflict that is taken out of context fully with one incident like this."

And like a bad old movie, the beat goes on. And the nonsense of Black players being jealous of Clark is just that.

"The racist attacks directed at Black players are reprehensible," Knox said. "Those culture-war talking points. Healthy disagreement has been replaced by performative outrage."

"We have that racial conversation when we've got an individual like a Caitlin Clark that predates even her coming to the league," Carter-Francique said. "The overlap of this race, gender, sexual orientation conversation that is pitting a Black player or a white player versus Black women as a whole.

"I think [Clark] was placed on a pedestal about what she could do for the league that in some ways diminished the efforts and the accolades of the women before her, of even the white women before her, and I think that has created some challenge" for the W.

"At the end of the day," Carter-Francique said, "I believe those women want to play, want to participate without all of the additional commentary."

Phillips' mission: Put the pressure on quarterbacks

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pass-rush ability. Carolina ranked last with a 26.2% quarterback pressure rate last season.

Pro Football Focus graded the Panthers' No. 31-ranked pass rush at 60.4. Only the Miami Dolphins finished lower.

As a member of the Miami Dolphins and Philadelphia Eagles last season, Phillips generated 63 pressures, which ranked No. 11 in the league, per Next Gen Stats. The Panthers had 82.

Phillips also recorded 20 hurries, 14 quarterback hits and 10 knockdowns.

Generating pressure is one thing. Getting to opposing quarterbacks is another. Carolina hasn't ranked better than No. 25 in sacks over the past five campaigns.

The Panthers, who posted 30 sacks last season, tied with the Baltimore Ravens for the league's third fewest. In 2023, they ranked last with 27 sacks.

Panthers need more pressure

Phillips, who tallied five sacks in 2025, has yet to compile a double-digit sack season. He's targeting 13 in 2026 – at least. His career-high remains 8.5, which he established as a Dolphins rookie in 2021. Seventeen players collected at least 10 sacks last season.

"I do want to get those sack numbers up," Phillips said during his introductory press conference on March 16. "Turning all

that disruption into production. I've always known that I can be a 10-plus, 13-plus sack guy.

"When I get on that field, man, it's instinctive. It's fast. And like I said, it's balls to the wall, 100%, every time."

Phillips suffered a torn Achilles tendon and endured knee surgery in back-to-back seasons in Miami. He also has a history with concussions that dates to his college days. When healthy, Phillips proved his ability to infiltrate the offensive line, ranking No. 12 in pressures last season.

"I guess, really, the only knock you can say about me is that I don't have a bunch of sacks," he said. "Obviously, production matters, but at the end of the day, as long as you're being disruptive, as long as you're making an impact and making plays ... this game is about a lot more than sacks."

Like locker-room camaraderie.

The Eagles wanted Phillips to return, but he chased the Panthers' lucrative opportunity instead. He has people talking, including Young.

"I don't come in with any sort of arrogance," Phillips said. "For me, it's not about trying to come in and step on any toes or assert dominance or anything like that. It's just coming in as a humble worker, learning the system, learning the guys and putting my best foot forward."

North Carolina's ACC football teams have work to do in 2026

Continued from page 5A

means we're doing something well," he said. "If we stunk, nobody would want any of our guys. So, this is kind of a champagne problem when you win a lot of games and have a lot of guys perform at a high level, ideally the whole idea is that they'll have the opportunity to go straight from Durham to the NFL draft, right? We've had guys that have done that, that developed, and all got drafted this past spring. That's going to become a recurring theme at our program."

Duke will likely have to win a lot of games with defense. After losing Mensah and other key offensive weapons, the explosiveness on that side of the ball will likely not be there. Diaz didn't try to avoid the subject. Rather, he plans to embrace getting the defense back to a high level.

"I think the word that surrounds our defense this year is urgency," he said. "Somehow last year we just didn't – the sum of the parts wasn't quite there. I think we lost urgency. I think we had a little bit of entitlement that might have crept in. I don't know that we have a guy right now that knows for sure that he's a starter, and I think that's fantastic. That's not because we don't have good enough players. I think we have a two-deep that's as talented as anything we've had in the time that I've been there."

N.C. State (8-5, 4-4)

Wolfpack coach Dave Doeren enters year 15 with the program and he said he feels like he and his staff have built a consistent winning program.

"As the media, a lot of times your job is to talk about what we don't do well," he said. "Today I get to talk about what we do well. I think having staying power, being a consistent winner. We won the second-most number of games in the ACC in the last six years. We've won the second-most number of conference games and non-conference games. With that being said, I'm sick of being second. These guys know that. We're here to do more. That's what drives us. It's the competitive spirit of winning, the brotherhood that comes along with that that's so special."

The Wolfpack return 6-6 quarterback C.J. Bailey, who threw for over 3,000 yards in 2025 as a sophomore and looks to build upon it as a junior.

"I feel like a lot has improved since I first got into college, my first season in college," Bailey said. "I can honestly say in my first year I was winging it, I was just out there making plays, being an athlete. I really didn't know much about the game, to be honest with you. Going into that next off-season I learned a lot. It changed my whole perspective on everything about football, defense and everything like that. I learned a lot. Everything is slow for me right now. ... Everybody believes in me and I am just ready to make some plays for N.C. State."

N.C. State lost running back Daylan Smothers to the transfer portal in the off-season, but Doeren quickly gave running back Duke Scott the No. 1 jersey.

"[No. 1] obviously has to be a great player, which we all know Duke is," Doeren said. "It really wasn't hard, to be honest. I sat down and thought about a lot of guys on the team. It's really obvious when you get to know Duke. Duke doesn't talk a lot. Getting to know Duke is hard sometimes. He's a special young man. I know he's going to wear the number well."

North Carolina (4-8, 2-6)

The Tar Heels enter year two of the Bill Belichick era.

There was an enormous amount of hype surrounding the Tar Heels last offseason with the arrival of Belichick and despite the hype, the team never really found its rhythm winning just two games in conference and four overall. But it is a new year and a new team and even at 74 years of age, Belichick is ready to get started.

"We have a lot of new players here," he

said. "We have about 60 new players, so over half our team from last year. Excited to see how that comes along. It was a big freshman class because we kind of didn't have much of a freshman class in the '25 group. So, we kind of combined those two and brought in a lot of young players that are going to be good, but it's going to take a little bit of time. They're certainly working hard."

One key returner is receiver Jordan Shipp. The Providence Day graduate said it never entered his mind to enter the transfer portal. In the modern era of college football where players are always looking for the next best option or paycheck, Shipp stayed loyal to North Carolina.

"Carolina was loyal to me," he said. "Coach Belichick could have told me to leave, but he didn't. Also, I am Carolina through and through. There is nowhere else I would rather be. I was able to graduate this past semester, so there is just a lot Carolina sets you up for after football, like it wouldn't have made sense to leave. Then when people talk about the money, all the money will come at the next level. That is where real generational wealth is. If you are talented enough, you will make the pros from anywhere, so leaving was never an option for me."

Belichick said 2025 was a learning experience and the difference between coaching in the NFL and college is very different. He plans on using the lessons learned from year one to have a much better year two.

"I think the biggest thing is just the relationships and building with all the people that are involved in the school," he said, "whether it's academics, compliance, or different training things that we have to go through. ... We brought in some people that I was familiar with, but also, again, multiple other people in the university. Great people, people who have really done a great job of supporting us, but you just need to build that working relationship with. So, that's been good. It's been fun, and I appreciate the work that they've done."

Wake Forest (9-4, 4-4)

The Demon Deacons took a lot of people by surprise last year — the first under coach Jake Dickert – by going 9-4 after winning just four games the prior year. Dickert said he wants his team to have is about shutting out the noise.

"We have a new team," Dickert said. "We believe in the same standard. It's no secret our program is once again built in the dark. Built in the dark, to us, is a style of play that no one wants to face and a process that few can handle. On our team we have 105 different players, 105 different personalities, skill sets, and backgrounds. But we share one mentality, and that is built in the dark. ... At Wake Forest we don't believe in building robots. We invest daily into the best version of each individual and teach them that everyone's role on our team is vitally important."

Dickert said that while it is impossible to re-create last year's hunger, staying rooted in the process is key for 2026 success.

"The biggest thing that we need to be is be humble to the process," he said. "Take the habits, the energy, the connection of that football team, the way they showed up each and every day and prepared to go out there and win, right? Belief is powerful in our program. Last year we were selling belief of concept. Now we're telling our guys the belief of action, and it's driven through these guys."

Dickert's Deacons were a bit of a sleeper team in 2025 with few media expectations. He is hoping it will propel the program into the future.

"Everyone says, 'Coach, you won too fast,'" Dickert said. "There's no such thing in this game. It's allowed us to recruit better, retain better, and provide our team more resources. We're excited about the future of Wake Forest football."

CIAA football weekend grows

Continued from page 5A

game is Nov. 14, 3 p.m., between the top two teams, with the winner earning an automatic berth in the NCAA playoffs.

Both games will be played at Durham County Memorial Stadium.

Five of the 11 CIAA teams finished above .500 last season. Only Lincoln (Pa.) and Bowie State were never in contention for the title at some point during the season.

The Wild Wild West has officially begun.

First upset

The morning also began with the first upset of the new season.

Virginia Union was picked No. 1 overall by the conference coaches despite losing to Johnson C. Smith in the championship game. Coaches either have more respect for Panthers coach Alvin Parker or they think

the Golden Bulls' record-setting season was a fluke. JCSU did receive the No. 2 seed, but it's rare for a defending champion not to be ranked No. 1 in the preseason.

To add further insult, the inaugural Black College Football Poll has JCSU as the top-ranked DII team. See how your own (conference) folks do ya!

"Perfume is great to smell, but it's dangerous to taste," JCSU coach Maurice Flowers said about polls.

Y-E-A-H, but it's still a slap. And don't think for a moment anybody is fooled that it won't be used as bulletin board material throughout the season.

Lucky seven?

If Shaw, which was picked to finish next to last, advances to either Friday night or Saturday in November, head coach Lamar Manigo deserves an imme-

diate contract extension for winning with the smallest football staff ever.

A campus source said interim athletics director Randy McClure, who wants the job permanently, made several cost-cutting moves in the athletics department and football wasn't spared. Manigo's staff was trimmed to seven assistants – not including support staff.

I visited the other 10 schools' rosters and not one has a football staff in the single digits. Elizabeth City State comes closest with 10 personnel. Virginia State and Bowie State have the most with 16, more than doubling Shaw's roster.

Will seven be a lucky number for the Bears? Or will McClure be forced into witness protection?

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

JCSU places 6 on preseason list

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Running backs: Bobby Smith (J.C. Smith), Micah Robinson (Bowie State).

Receivers: Brandon Wiley (Bluefield State), Brian Lane (J.C. Smith). Marcus Fleming (Fayetteville State).

Tight end: Joe Griffin (Elizabeth City State).

Offensive line: Jamari Mason (J.C. Smith), Robert Early (J.C. Smith), Malachi Jones (Fayetteville State), Toriono Combs (Elizabeth City State), Marcus Andrews (Johnson C. Smith).

Defensive line: Dalan Johnson (Bowie State), Joseph Woodard, (Fayetteville State),

Christopher Gordon (Fayetteville State), Sir'Sean Ingram (Elizabeth City State), Deshawn Willoughby, (Bowie State).

Linebackers: Jaevon Branch (Elizabeth City State), Vincent Hill (J.C. Smith). Jatavien Taylor, Fayetteville State).

Defensive back: Amari Best (Fayetteville State).

Kicker: Jason Zapata (Livingstone).

Punter: Abdoulazim Bayor (Fayetteville State).

Kick returner: Shamar Sutton (Elizabeth City State).

Punt returner: Zyaire Tart (Virginia Union).