



Panthers rookie cornerback Will Lee III seizes opportunity to live up to his nickname: "The Blanket"

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WC CONSTRUCTION

Durham-based M&F Bancorp Inc. and Columbia, South Carolina-based Optus Financial Corporation announced a merger that creates the nation's largest Black-owned financial institution with more than \$1.27 billion in total assets. M&F Bancorp, which operates eight M&F Bank branches, including one in Charlotte, will transition their branding to Optus in two years.

Black-owned Carolinas bank merger largest in US history

NC-based M&F Bank and SC-based Optus will control \$1.27 billion in assets

Herbert L. White
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The Carolinas' two largest Black-owned community banks are merging.

Columbia, South Carolina-based Optus Financial Corporation and Durham-based M&F Bancorp Inc. have announced a merger agreement under the Optus Bank banner that makes the company the nation's largest Black-owned financial services institution with \$1.27 billion in total assets as of March 31.

Under terms of the deal, which is expected to exceed \$105 million, Mechanics & Farmers' eight branches will operate under its current name for two years before transitioning to Optus. M&F's Charlotte branch is on Beatties

Ford Road in Historic West End.

"Shareholders, directors, and employees of both institutions can take pride in this partnership, which honors and advances our shared mission and legacy," M&F chairman James Stewart said in a statement. "The combined organization will allow us to serve more communities and operate with greater scale and effectiveness."

MFBP shareholders earn an expected \$53.30 per common stock in cash, including \$46.57 per share payable at closing and \$6.73 per share contingent upon the repurchase of outstanding shares of M&F preferred stock prior to or within 12 months following closing. The deal is expected to close by year's end.

"M&F Bank was founded on the belief that every community deserves a financial institution that understands and serves its unique needs," M&F president and CEO James Sills III said. "That principle has guided us for more than a century and led us to this partnership with Optus. We share a common mission, aligned values, and a steadfast commitment to our customers and communities."

Sills will continue the CEO role with the combined company, while Optimus chairman Paul Mitchell, keeps that role.

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Sills

Howard University fixing enrollment crisis

By Tega Egwabor
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Howard University has successfully reenrolled 46 first-year students following a significant enrollment crisis that initially left more than 500 students without a spot at the historically Black university.

The situation has raised broader concerns about the school's enrollment management processes and whether adequate resources exist to support students navigating complex financial and administrative requirements.

How the enrollment crisis began

On July 24, Howard confirmed it had notified 502 first-time students their accounts did not meet the enrollment and financial obligations required by previously communicated deadlines. The announcement sent shockwaves through the student community, prompting an outpouring of emotional reactions across social media, where many students

Please see **HOWARD** | 2A

Initiative recovers school food waste into hunger relief for kids, families

By Will Atwater

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At Olive Chapel Elementary in Apex, students are learning that what they leave on their lunch trays can help feed someone else.

Since joining SHARE — Stop Hunger and Restore Earth — in 2025, the Wake County public school has turned food waste into a hands-on lesson in fighting hunger and protecting the environment.

The SHARE program "ensures that all kids are fed," said Ashley Charles, one of the school's assistant principals. "For kids who maybe don't have snacks or [who] need extra food, it's a way that we can save food and make sure they're getting what they need."

That need became clear in the cafeteria, where staff saw how much unopened and unpeeled food was being tossed each day. Teacher assistants assigned to lunch duty had voiced concerns for years about the volume of uneaten food waste ending up in the trash.

"When we found out that this program existed, we were like, 'Okay, it's time. We're going to give this a try,'" she said.

SHARE is a food recovery program created by Toward Zero Waste, a North Carolina-based nonprofit, alongside Wake County Public School System. The goal is to "capture wholesome leftovers from Child Nutrition Services and feed students,

Please see **INITIATIVE** | 3A

NAACP launches \$20M voter registration initiative

By Erick Johnson

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With just over three months before the midterm elections, the NAACP at its 117th annual convention in Chicago announced an unprecedented \$20 million voter registration campaign ahead of the midterm elections.

The announcement kicked off the NAACP's national convention at McCormick Place where thousands of visitors and delegates participated in workshops and seminars that stressed the organization's theme of "We the People" and purpose of educating Blacks about their constitutional rights.

Throughout the week-long convention, vendors sold merchandise, media organizations held onsite interviews in "The HUB," and visitors signed a massive "We the People" mural.

Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker and Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson were among the dignitaries who reinforced the NAACP's message during the convention's opening plenary.

Black voting rights have been under attack in the last several months when Louisiana, Tennessee, Alabama and Florida gutted historic Black congressional districts after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled such districts were unconstitutional and were no longer needed in modern times despite protections under the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The NAACP, the nation's oldest civil rights organization, is concerned those decisions will roll back political and economic gains Blacks have made in the last six decades.

NAACP board chairman Leon Russell told the opening session that the NAACP would undertake a \$20 million voter registration and mobilization drive "to motivate 6

Please see **NAACP** | 2A

Educators: Raises won't change much

By Clayton Henkel

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Just weeks after the North Carolina General Assembly passed a \$34 billion state budget that included 8% average raises for teachers over two years, the state's Blue Ribbon Commission on Public Education said it's not enough.

The bipartisan panel, assembled in March by Democratic N.C. Gov. Josh Stein, Senate President Pro Tem Phil Berger, R-Rockingham, and House Speaker Destin Hall, R-Caldwell, has been working on recommendations to improve teacher training, student advancement,

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Please
Recycle



Black-owned bank merger largest in US

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"This partnership with M&F Bank represents a defining moment — not only for our organizations, but for mission-driven banking in America. M&F Bank has a proud legacy of supporting entrepreneurship, fostering generational wealth, and expanding access to capital in underserved communities," Mitchell said. "Together, we will create a stronger institution with greater scale, enhanced capabilities, and an expanded capacity to advance economic mobility throughout the Carolinas and beyond."

Both banks have longstanding corporate roots. M&F, founded in 1907,

was a mainstay of Durham's Black Wall Street and eventually opened branches in North Carolina's largest cities during a time when white-controlled financial institutions didn't invest in Black communities. Optus, founded in 1921 as Victory Savings Bank, is one of the nation's leading minority depository institutions and a certified community development financial institution.

"Shareholders, directors, and employees of both institutions can take pride in this partnership, which honors and advances our shared mission and legacy," M&F chairman James Stewart said. "The combined organization will allow us to serve more communities and operate with greater scale and effectiveness."



Mitchell



HOWARD UNIVERSITY

Howard University is addressing an enrollment issue that pushed 500 first-year students off the Washington, D.C., campus.

Howard fixing enrollment crisis

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shared videos expressing distress after learning they had been unenrolled from the university.

According to school officials, students had reportedly been informed about enrollment requirements, payment expectations and key deadlines as early as March, through channels that included emails and orientation sessions. Despite that earlier communication, the sudden enforcement of these policies left many students and their families scrambling to resolve the issue in a short window of time.

Families rush to campus seeking resolution

In response to the unfolding crisis, numerous families traveled to Howard's campus in Washington, D.C., hoping to rectify the situation and secure their students' enrollment ahead of the upcoming fall semester. The urgency behind these visits reflected both the emotional weight and financial stakes tied to attending a university with Howard's long-standing academic legacy.

University acknowledges gaps in its process

Howard University's senior vice president for enrollment management addressed the situation publicly, acknowledging that some students had in fact submitted documentation or made genuine attempts to meet the school's enrollment requirements before the deadline.

University officials indicated they are now working through a review process, examining student records and submitted documentation to determine whether reinstatement or re-enrollment is appropriate on a case-by-case basis.

The university's leadership also acknowledged that the situation revealed a need for greater investment in enrollment support resources going forward, signaling an openness to reassessing how the

school communicates and enforces its enrollment policies moving forward.

How can affected students get help?

Howard officials are encouraging impacted families to reach out to the appropriate university offices for support. Families with questions about a student's enrollment status have been directed to contact the Enrollment Management Office directly.

Separate channels have been established for financial aid inquiries, as well as questions related to pending scholarships or outstanding student account issues, allowing families to route their concerns to the office best equipped to assist them.

A broader reflection on higher education access

The situation at Howard serves as a pointed reminder of the challenges many students continue to face while navigating the financial and administrative complexities of higher education. As the university works through its review process, the events highlight the importance of clear communication and consistent support systems, particularly at historically Black colleges and universities that play an outsized role in educating Black students across the country.

What comes next

Moving forward, Howard administration faces mounting pressure to implement lasting changes that ensure students remain properly informed and supported throughout the enrollment process.

How the university addresses these underlying resource and communication gaps is likely to shape both the immediate outcomes for affected students and the institution's broader reputation as it continues serving future generations of students.

The Associated Press and WJLA-TV News contributed.

Golf tournament for college preparation

By Cameron Williams

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Cultivating and developing the next generation is at the forefront of BEAM Foundation.

The foundation, established in 1997, will host its annual Donald W. DeBouse Honorary Golf Tournament on Aug. 8 at Rocky River Golf Club in Concord. Proceeds will go to the foundation to move its mission forward as well as honor DeBouse, a community leader and avid golfer who died in 2021.

"He was a dynamic individual," said Darryl Ince, the tournament's co-chairman. "He went to Cornell University, came to Charlotte, did a lot of good in the community. But he was an avid golfer. He always wanted to try and get some of the [Alpha Phi Alpha] fraternity brothers out to play some golf, and that's why we decided we would name it after him. But his engagement in the community was deep and broad."

Ince said the foundation's mission is to help at-risk young men by providing tools and resources to help them go to college. In 2025, the foundation awarded more than \$150,000 in scholarships.

"We have a program called the Alpha Beautillion, which engages these kids with mentors, and we get about 15 to 20 kids a year," Ince said. "We put them through opportunities to develop their oratory skills, opportunities to see college campuses to understand which colleges they're going to and the majors you're going to go to. Also, we have a variety of

different programs which bring the kids into meaningful representation. They get a chance to engage with dedicated mentors and community partners."

Ince added the foundation is in the process of trying to engage and have a larger impact which means having more community involvement and leadership. The foundation has 20 young men in its cohort, and the goal is to get more.

This is where the tournament comes in.

"What our attempt is, is to raise enough funds so we can reasonably engage and develop more inroads into communities where there's deeper risk," Ince said. "And if we have enough funding for that, if we get enough corporate partners engaged in this, I think we will have a much more significant impact in the community. Instead of 20 kids, we're looking at 40 or 50 kids, and that's where we really want to get to."

Sustainability is the goal - not just for the tournament but the foundation itself. Ince is excited for the immediate and distant future.

"Over the last three years we've been trying to reinvigorate the way we do the tournament," Ince said. "We set up a five-year plan, and we are in year three right now. Our goal is to have instead of it being a Charlotte region based event, we want to go up and down the East Coast with this. We want it to be a multi-day activity as well where people can engage with the community around them one day then play in the tournament the next."



BLACK PRESS USA

Attendees at the NAACP's national convention in Chicago sign the "We the People" mural. The civil rights organization launched a \$20 million voter registration initiative ahead of the November elections.

NAACP launches \$20M voter registration initiative

Continued from page 1A

million to 10 million voters" who did not cast ballots in the last two elections to do so. As part of the campaign, the NAACP plans to recruit "tens of thousands of volunteers to join the crusade to turn out millions of us this November."

The plan will target voters in 14 states and 33 congressional districts, with the full list expected to be disclosed later.

"We must move 60% or more of all eligible voters to the polls," Russell said.

The NAACP has a history of leading voter registration drives in Black neighborhoods across America.

In his speech, Pritzker said, "In Washington and across the country, extremists holding high office are working to erase Black history rather than learn from it, to take away voting rights instead of strengthening them, to divide us rather than unite us," he said.

He added: "These are not simply disagreements over policy. These are challenges to the very idea that democracy belongs to all of us. Challenges to the very idea that we are all created equal."

Pritzker said the phrase "We the People" reflects America's ongoing effort to expand equality, noting that the nation's founding ideals initially excluded enslaved people, women and other groups.

Mayor Brandon Johnson said, "For 117 years this incredible organization has helped bend the arc of history towards justice. And not because progress was inevitable, but because ordinary people made the extraordinary decision to organize, advocate and refuse to accept injustice as the reigning form of governance. That work has never been

easy, and today it remains as urgent as it has ever been.

"Across this country we are witnessing wicked efforts to undermine fundamental rights, weaken Democratic institutions, and to turn neighbors against one another.

"We see attempts to silence the truth and erase our history and convince people that somehow division is stronger than solidarity. But history has taught us something very different. Every time people have been told to accept injustice, they have risen together to reject it."

During Trump's second term, the NAACP has filed more than 70 lawsuits to stop his grasping and often unconstitutional moves to grab total power.

Pritzker said "Illinois has been at the forefront of the struggle for freedom and equality" ever since Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, a non-white, was the first permanent resident of what is now Chicago, Pritzker noted.

Pritzker also said Illinois also gave the nation the crusading African American journalist Ida B. Wells and elected more African American members of Congress than any other state. He said Illinois gave the nation the late civil rights leader Jesse Jackson and "a young community organizer" who eventually went from Chicago to the White House, Barack Obama.

"But such progress is not inevitable," Pritzker warned. "It requires people willing to sacrifice. None of this is by accident. It is because Black America shows up, reminding us of the painful part of our history while giving us hope for the future."

Educators: NC raises won't make much difference in the long run

Continued from page 1A

and administrative operations.

At Monday's meeting, the commission devoted much of its discussion to strengthening the state's teacher pipeline and its compensation schedule.

"Very simply, we need to pay our teachers more," state Superintendent Mo

Green said.

Hall said the new budget offers "historic raises" for teachers, though the largest percentage gains heavily favor early-career educators. Veteran teachers' salaries have remained relatively stagnant over the past few budget cycles.

Green said teachers at all levels of experience need to be paid more for the state to become the top state for educators in the Southeast.

According to the N.C. Department of Public Instruction, more than 9,100 teachers decided to leave the state's public schools in 2024-25. That represents a little more than 10% of the public school teachers employed statewide. Beginning teachers left at a much higher rate of 14.7%.

Lisa Godwin, a former North Carolina teacher of the year, told her fellow commission members the state should revisit retention bonuses for each year of service. Currently, teachers with 15 to 24 years' experience don't get an annual raise for nearly a decade.

"I'm one of those [whose salary] is frozen," said Godwin, a beginning teacher coach and mentor coordinator for Pender County Schools.

Godwin said North Carolina did not face a perennial teacher shortage in the past.

"See what worked and what was good in the heyday of teaching and education.

And let's bring these things back," she said.

Brenda Berg, president & CEO of BEST NC, criticized the state budget for eliminating recurring funding for TeachNC, an online platform used to recruit teachers and teacher candidates.

"Teach NC recruited 3,700 candidates last year to educator preparation programs," Berg said, "which was a 20% increase in EPP enrollment."

Berg said the commission should recommend that the program be fully funded in the next budget.

Edgecombe Early College High School Principal Matt Bristow-Smith said the panel should consider recommending the indexing of teacher salaries to inflation to help them keep up with the cost of living.

"What we've effectively done is we have lowered the quality of living for teachers because the earning power of what teachers actually make is less than it was a decade ago," said Bristow-Smith.

House Bill 1178, which proposed indexing teacher salaries starting in 2033-34, didn't get a hearing in the short session.

Robert Taylor, superintendent of the Wake County Public School System, summed up what many on the commission were thinking.

"There just needs to be an acknowledgment that if we are going to address teacher compensation, that it's going to cost us to fix the problem that has been built over the last several years," he said. "The longer we take to fix it, the harder the problem becomes to fix."

The Blue Ribbon Commission on Public Education did not take a vote. The bipartisan group, which is also discussing recommendations to strengthen literacy and modernize accountability, meets again Aug. 31.

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UNSPASH

Stop Hunger and Restore Earth, a Wake County initiative, fights food insecurity by repurposing school food waste into meals for children who might otherwise go hungry.

Initiative recovers food waste into relief for kids

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rather than landfills,” Megan Holler, director of food recovery and compost for Toward Zero Waste, wrote in an email to NC Health News.

The program started with eight Wake County public schools in 2025 and has expanded to 37, with more waiting to join, Holler wrote. She said early data suggest that about 41 food items are recovered daily from each school.

Food recovery, climate impact

The average person in the U.S. generates more than \$700 worth of food waste each year — and for a family of four, the average is nearly \$3,000, according to a 2025 EPA report. Yet in North Carolina, about one in five children don’t get enough to eat, according to a report by the North Carolina Poverty Research Fund.

The EPA estimates that wasted food makes up about a quarter of what ends up in municipal solid waste landfills. As that food decomposes, it generates methane, a potent greenhouse gas that accelerates global warming. SHARE works to disrupt this cycle by keeping more edible food available to students and out of the trash.

While the food recovery program can’t resolve Wake County’s food waste problem, it is reducing the food that enters the landfill, one school at a time. This could be an encouraging sign for county officials: The South Wake Landfill, where all of the county’s waste ends up, is expected to reach capacity between 2040 and 2045, according to the Wake County government.

“In our Wake County program and our 37 operational schools,” Holler said, “we’re finding that, by and large, the food that is donated to the SHARE collection carts in the cafeteria is either taken during meals or later in the day.”

She added, “On Friday, there’s almost nothing left to be reviewed or cleaned at all because it is going right back out to students.”

Grab and go

When students go through the lunch line and later decide they don’t want a sealed item, such as a bag of apple slices, baby carrots, a banana, a juice carton, an applesauce cup or a packaged snack, they can place it on a designated cart rather than throwing it away, Holler explained.

During lunch, other students can freely take anything from this supervised cart. After the meal period ends, leftover items are moved to a refrigerator and pantry cart stationed in a part of the building that’s visible to staff and easy for students to reach, such as the front office or a student services suite. Throughout the day, kids can grab something between classes, on their way to the bus or carpool line, or before after-school activities.

“Teachers ... can go and get the items themselves and take them back to the classroom for a snack later in the day, or they can just send their kids to pick out something — anybody can have access,” Charles said.

Because the program operates inside a regulated food environment, SHARE follows strict rules about what can and cannot be collected. Staff and students are limited to unopened items provided by the school’s Child Nutrition Services, Holler said.

They are not allowed to accept food from home, anything that’s been opened, or pop-top fruit cups that could be opened and reclosed. Under current state guidance, they also cannot recover milk, yogurt or cheese sticks — foods considered “time and temperature control for safety” items — even though these are some of the most commonly wasted products.

To stay within state and federal guidelines, SHARE focuses on shelf-stable packaged foods, whole fruits with non-edible peels (such as oranges and bananas), and a narrow set of cold items that regulators do not classify as time- and temperature-sensitive.

A user-friendly system

Toward Zero Waste assumes liability for the program through its agreement with Wake County Public

Schools. The nonprofit supplies the collection carts, fridges, signs and educational materials, trains school staff, and conducts regular check-ins to make sure the system is working as intended.

With help from Wake County’s community services and solid waste staff, they periodically inspect school sites, talk with personnel and students, and review how food is being handled and distributed.

At least once a week, designated staff or supervised students go through the fridge and pantry cart, check dates and freshness, remove anything that no longer meets program guidelines, and clean the equipment.

Elizabeth Hannah, principal of Apex’s Lufkin Road Middle School, said that the support provided by SHARE helps ensure the program’s success.

“They gave me great messaging to send to our families to help them understand what we are doing and why we are doing it,” Hannah said. “You really can’t ask for a more organized process or plan — and a tremendous amount of support in terms of anything that you need or any questions that you have. They’re very quick to answer, and they’ll give us little tips along the way.”

Charles agrees that the Toward Zero Waste team provides the support needed to make the SHARE program successful.

“This program directly targets a need that we had already observed; we just didn’t know what to do ourselves,” Charles said. “Megan Holler and her team do the work for you. They provide the cart you use to collect the items, the mini fridge and the signs you put around the building — plus slide shows and videos that teach students and teachers how to use it.”

For Charles and Hannah, the program’s open design — any student can take food from the cart — is central to its success.

The two administrators said the program teaches children that keeping uneaten food out of the trash ensures that more food is available to others and helps protect the environment. They also pointed out that making food available to all students eliminates the shame that can be associated with being identified as a kid in need.

Holler sums it up this way: “If you pull a banana out of your fruit bowl and you sit down to eat lunch, and then you decide, ‘Oh, I don’t really want this banana after all,’ you’re not going to throw it away. You’re going to put it back for someone else in the family to grab later — and that’s the concept, right?”

“It’s giving students a chance to learn, to empathize with their peers,” she added. “They’re learning environmental stewardship by learning that we don’t have to throw everything away.”

The next chapter

While the SHARE program is growing, with more schools wanting to participate, Holler would like to see more food items saved from becoming food waste. Saving milk and other dairy items is not supported because of food safety regulations from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services.

In an email to NC Health News, Holler said that if regulators support it, Toward Zero Waste would collaborate with other local food recovery stakeholders to develop guidelines for schools to collect and store dairy and other time- and temperature-controlled foods safely — using cooling trays, ice baths or coolers in the cafeteria and refrigerators for longer storage once meal service ends.

Toward Zero Waste is asking the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services to update their guidelines so schools can safely collect unopened dairy items, such as milk and yogurt, on sharing tables. Other states, including South Carolina and Virginia, have adopted similar approaches.

NC elections board vote makes it easier to toss mail-in ballots

By Christine Zhu

NC NEWSLINE

The North Carolina State Board of Elections approved on Monday a measure to disqualify certain absentee ballots ahead of the 2026 midterms.

Members voted 3-2 along party lines.

The measure allows county elections board staff to take further action on ballots with “irregularities.” Examples include not properly sealing a ballot or using the wrong type of envelope. Staff should contact voters, but without appropriate action, the ballots may be tossed.

Republicans say the change would enhance election security. Democratic critics say it would disenfranchise legitimate voters, and could be applied arbitrarily with political motives.

“I think it’s confusing,” Democratic board member Siobhan Millen said. “We’re going to lose perfectly sound ballots due to over-fussiness.”

“I don’t think it’s fussy. I don’t think it’s picky. I don’t think it’s hard,” responded Republican board member Angela

Hawkins. Hawkins says voters confused by the container return envelope used in absentee voting may contact their local elections board for clarification.

She pointed out the proposal is legal under current state’s laws.

“If the General Assembly wants to change it, then that’s fine,” Hawkins said.

At the national level, President Donald Trump has slammed mail-in voting, claiming it contributed to “fraud” in the 2020 election. His allegations have not been proven.

North Carolina’s Rules Review Commission, made up of Republican appointees, needs to approve the change before it takes effect.

Last week, the elections board voted in favor of a rule to make it easier to throw out voters’ ballots if they don’t show photo identification.

Under the measure, an elections board could toss a ballot by majority vote if they think a voter is lying about their lack of photo ID. Current rules require bipartisan agreement.

« OUT & ABOUT »



DANIEL COSTON | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Alexandria Carter, from left, Brian Carter and Brian Carter Jr. bicycled together for the 25th anniversary edition of the 24 Hours Of Booty, held in the Myers Park neighborhood on July 24-25.

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You’re already paying for the AI boom

Pull up your electric bill. Somewhere in that number, you are paying for a building you will never enter.

Data centers are going up everywhere. They need enormous amounts of electricity. Somebody must pay to connect them and build the plants and lines they need.

In state after state, that somebody is you.

Not everywhere. Texas requires the largest new power users to pay more of their connection costs and cut demand when the grid is strained. The data centers came anyway.

Ohio now makes large new customers pay for much of the electricity they reserve, whether they use it or not. Projections for new demand then fell sharply. Much of the emergency was companies holding space they might never fill.

Virginia chose differently. It gives data centers a tax break on their equipment. Good Jobs First estimates that subsidy cost Virginia schools \$267 million in one year. Illinois lawmakers let a similar bill die without a vote.

Neither list sorts cleanly by party. Before you file this as a new problem, meet my great-great-grandfather. Edward David Bland was born into slavery in Dinwiddie County, Virginia, in 1848. Thirty-one years later, he was helping write that state’s laws.

He served three terms in the House of Delegates and sat on the Committee on Schools and Colleges. That was not a coincidence. That was the point.

Virginia was fighting over debt borrowed before the Civil War for canals and railroads. With interest, it had passed \$45 million. One side said pay every penny, whatever it took. They were called the Funders.

Here is what it was taking.

Virginia was starving its public schools to pay bondholders. The bondholders lived in New York and London. The children lived in Petersburg and Danville. The other side said the debt would be paid, but not out of the schoolhouse. They were the Readjusters. Black and white together. Farmers, freedmen and a former Confederate general named William Mahone.

A man born into slavery and a man who wore gray were counting the same votes on one floor. They ran Virginia for four years. In 1882, they cut the state’s share of the debt by roughly a third and refinanced the rest over 50 years.

Then they spent the difference. They put money back into public schools. They repealed the poll tax. They tore down the whipping post. The Readjusters knew something we forgot. Whoever profits should not get to send the bill to whoever cannot say no.

I am not against data centers. This country cannot afford to fall behind in artificial intelligence, and the reasons are not all about money. I am against making working families subsidize the world’s richest companies. It does not always take a governor. A small town in Illinois capped a data center’s water use, with penalties if it went over.

A town council did that. Now let me tell you how the Readjusters lost. That is the part we forget.

They were not beaten on the debt. They won that argument. In October 1883, their opponents warned that Black residents of Danville had gained too much power. On November 3, market day, a street fight became a shooting. Five men died. Four were Black. For three days, armed white men walked the streets and kept Black Virginians from the polls. The election came that week. Democrats took both houses.

They never took the schools back. The new legislature left the school money alone. It left the whipping post gone. It left the debt settled. They did not undo the policy. They undid the voters.

In 1902, a new state constitution stripped most Black Virginians of the ballot for more than 60 years. They were not defeated by a better plan. They were defeated by a campaign that made white farmers fear Black farmers more than the men taking money from both.

It is the cheapest trick in American politics, and it has never once been out of stock. The people paying for these deals live in Loudoun County and Memphis, in white towns in Iowa and Black neighborhoods in Atlanta, in union halls and farmhouses.

They are already paying the same bill. They just have not been asked to fight it together. Somebody will work hard to make sure they never do.

My great-great-grandfather learned his letters at a night school for freedmen after the war. He was 17. Then he sat on the committee that funded schools so other children would not wait. He knew exactly what a school was worth. Go find out what your state did.

Then find out who let it happen.

Ben Jealous is a professor of practice at the University of Pennsylvania and former president and CEO of the NAACP.



BEN
JEALOUS

We’re talking about extreme heat all wrong

By Ashley Ward

NC NEWSLINE

The first big heat wave of the year has come and gone, and the annual, mad-deningly short-sighted response to it will soon follow.

You’ll hear a lot about hydration and shade and cooling centers, heat action plans and the curtailing of sports practices. Those are all smart and necessary – though incomplete if we want to reach the systemic change needed to match the magnitude of risk.

There’s so much more to do to properly brace for these annual, increasingly severe heat waves, and we’re failing the moment by talking about heat mitigation as a moral obligation alone. It’s also a year-round economic problem that slowly erodes every system our communities rely upon.

I study heat policy. Since I began studying in the field, we have had 12 years of Democratic leadership and 6 years of Republican leadership. The recommendations I see today for dealing with extreme heat have not significantly evolved in all that time. And as much as we like to think it is true, politics isn’t only to blame.

In North Carolina and more broadly, heat is mostly presented as a seasonal public health crisis – a humanitarian emergency affecting the elderly, outdoor workers, and low-income communities. That framing is accurate, but in-

sufficient to meet this moment.

Heat is a public health issue, an operational risk, a issue of national security, and a strain on financial resources. We need to discuss it in all these ways.

Our current approach leaves important unanswered questions. Who owns the risk? Who pays? Who benefits financially from reducing it? What happens if nothing changes?

A city planner might read a heat action guide and find useful ideas. But what is a CFO supposed to do with it? What is an appropriations staffer supposed to insert into a must-pass bill? What is an insurance underwriter supposed to price differently? –

Too often, the advice floats below the levers of power.

Meanwhile, heat is already reshaping the American economy. Our research shows labor productivity losses from heat alone total \$220 billion per year. In some communities, that equates to more than a 4% annual loss in local GDP. Outdoor work slows or stops. Construction schedules shift. Agricultural yields fluctuate. Energy demand spikes place strain on the grid. Pavement buckles. Rail lines warp. Businesses face rising cooling costs.

This is not just a humanitarian problem. It is a systemic stress on American productivity. So, we should present it in language

every major American institution understands: risk management.

Extreme heat reduces labor productivity. It increases overtime and workers’ compensation claims. It accelerates asset degradation. It heightens the probability of power outages and cascading failures. It alters insurance pricing and long-term asset valuations.

If we want heat policy to evolve, three shifts are necessary.

First, move from vulnerability to volatility. Instead of only documenting who suffers, quantify how heat increases volatility in productivity, infrastructure performance, and public budgets. Decision-makers respond to volatility.

Second, link adaptation to return on investment. Cooling infrastructure, improved building performance, smarter scheduling, and grid flexibility are not merely protective measures. They can stabilize revenue streams, reduce downtime, and protect asset value.

Third, embed heat into the legislative bills and budgets that already move. It can be integrated into appropriations report language, infrastructure spending criteria, defense readiness standards, and procurement specifications. The question is not whether we need more plans. It is whether we are willing to tie heat risk to real decisions and real budgets.

The truth is that talking about who gets sick and who dies – while essential – has not, on its own, transformed public spending patterns or private-sector investment behavior.

The moral case for addressing extreme heat remains undeniable. But moral appeal without structural incentive rarely produces systemic change. If we continue to treat it primarily as a niche environmental or public health concern, we will continue to produce beautifully written reports that change little.

But if we frame it as a measurable, recurring operational risk to the American economy – we open the door to a different coalition: insurers, risk officers, military planners, infrastructure investors, appropriators, and business leaders who may never attend a climate conference but understand disruption when they see it.

The country does not need a new awareness campaign about extreme heat. It needs a strategy that aligns risk, responsibility, and reward. Only then will the conversation – and the policy – evolve.

Ashley Ward is a climate scholar who directs the Heat Policy Innovation Hub at Duke University’s Nicholas Institute for Energy, Environment & Sustainability.

America, please pass the firearms

As Donald Trump’s polls and popularity drop, as he is losing his MAGA base and a war he started in Iran, so he drops regulations on guns.



LIB
CAMPBELL

Nothing says “I love you” like an AR-15.

Bump stocks and rights for the mentally ill are in. To hell with gun control, it’s full steam ahead. And don’t go to Glenwood South in Raleigh at night without a flak jacket.

The number of guns in America remains staggering. There are a reported 393 million civilian firearms in the United States, some 120.5 per 100 people. Every Tom, Dick and Harry will have one, or two, or a cabinet full of weapons they call a “collection.”

Collecting stamps is far less dangerous.

Shootings and killings are part of the everyday fare. The Founding Fathers could not have envisioned the deadliness of modern

weapons. The percussive effect of today’s guns makes a hit even more dangerous. Torn skin, shredded muscles, broken bones and nerve damage happens even if no one dies. Muskets and lead balls were what the founders knew.

For all the originalists on the Supreme Court, interpretation of gun legislation is a no-brainer.

Tom and I have never had guns in our home. Our experience with guns is the accident that happened to a 10-year old neighbor’s son, who died when he found a handgun at a friend’s house. Nothing is sadder than seeing children die because a gun was not properly stored.

Sandy Hook should have taught us the lesson of protecting children from guns. Mentally ill people have no business having weapons.

Friends would say, “Keep a gun for protection in case someone breaks into your house.” At my age, I will live with wild abandon, taking chances, living life as it comes. Of course, it helps that we have dogs who bark as if they will

chew your leg off.

Daddy never had guns. Even though my cousins got BB guns and other rifles for Christmas, any gun was off limits in my house.

There was a time when I bought super-soaker water guns for our children. I decided that, too, was a bad idea.

Guns are violent. I will do everything I can to avoid violence. Riding in traffic around Raleigh and other places where everybody drives 15 miles above the speed limit, darting in and out of traffic is all the violence I can take.

Gun control saves lives. Over the years, that fact has been proven.

For a rogue, unpopular president to hitch his wagon to the gun issue shows how desperate he is.

He has never fought in a war, never even done basic training. Donald would be very dangerous with a gun. But of course, he has “people” for that.

Rampant gun issues indicate we have let the genie out of the bottle. The plethora of guns being sold today will be increasingly difficult to control. You can

even see ads for AR-15s on billboards on the side of the road.

As gun deaths rise, as innocents are killed in schools, places of worship and public gatherings maybe a hue and cry will rise for those times when we worked to protect life by controlling guns.

Surely Americans want to protect lives. Serve and protect is a mantra for those who guard our lives.

The North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church has formed a Gun Violence Prevention Task Force that is working with Moms Against Gun Violence. Their goal is violence reduction. View the YouTube video announcing the task force.

Gun advocates need to understand that de-regulating gun control is bad for America. This is not brain surgery.

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

Honoring Pauli Murray and transgender

Recently, I joined friends visiting the Pauli Murray Center for History and Social Justice, which is housed in Murray’s 19th century single family home in downtown Durham.



MARTIN
HENSON

I expected a simple story of Black hardship and triumph. I found so much more.

The center epitomizes the state of civil rights today because the private gender issues Murray navigated have become one of the most fraught political issues of our time.



Murray

Pauli Murray, the center’s namesake, was born in 1910 and died in 1985 — and she was a century ahead of the civil rights conversation dominating today. After exploring the Center’s exhibits, I realized Murray had a connection to trans identity, and if she were alive today, would be a ready target for conservatives obsessed with the gender lines.

In fact, the Trump administration found a way to target Murray well after her death. Last year, an expected \$300,000 federal grant, representing more than 20% of the Center’s funding, was cut and new exhibits and programming rolled back, according to WUNC.

The recent U.S. Supreme Court rulings on trans athletes in West Virginia v. B.P.J. and Little v. Hecox highlight how states are seeking to criminalize the existence of transgender kids by banning them from playing on sports teams that align with their gender identity. An earlier court ruling allowed the state of Tennessee to ban hormone blockers for trans teenagers in Tennessee.

The museum was enlightening, as Pauli Murray’s life represents the epitome of an activist as an agent for change. Murray was a founding member of the prominent civil rights organization Congress of Racial Equality. She coined the term “Jane Crow” in an effort to address the way gender and race impacted discrimination and co-founded the National Organization of Women.

Murray used all her skills to create social justice

wherever she could, while privately navigating a gender her time had no words for.

In her personal writing, she used he and she pronouns and sought gender affirming care throughout her lifetime. She dated women, never called herself a lesbian, and deeply identified with a masculine sense of self. Murray sought testosterone treatment in the 1930s, long preceding recent claims that “radical gender ideology” is being forced on children today. Murray was never the face of the multiple justice movements she existed across, and the posthumous revelations on her gender identity complicate how history narrates her impact.

Murray played basketball in high school as a young person navigating her own journey around gender. She also used both “she” and “he” pronouns. We can’t know for sure what pronouns Murray would have used publicly through her life if she had access to them, but we know that she used she/her at the end of her life. That’s the most recent record we have of her preferences, so that’s what I’m using here.

What can we learn from Murray today? Politicians weaponize vague gender fears about bathrooms, athletes, and pronouns, using many of the same tools they used to challenge desegregation.

Murray reminds us that bigotry doesn’t easily untangle from race and gender. Bigotry, and the so-called leaders who wield it, will find our children and make their bodies battlefields.

As a Black man, I understand that the racism I often face is gendered. That shared experience is a call to coalition to defend civil rights of all people. I do not know what it means to be trans, but I know that standing in solidarity protects those of us marked as different.

Today, conservatives dominate conversations about transgender lives, while so many others mostly stay silent for one reason or another.

We have the power to do something different.

We change that by demanding that people are not excluded from the communities they belong to. The only conversation we need to master is one that demands that inclusion is non-negotiable.

Sports

THURSDAY, JULY 30, 2026



CASSIE BAKER | CAROLINA PANTHERS

Carolina Panthers rookie Will Lee III is getting time with the first-team defense while starting cornerbacks Jaycee Horn (foot) and Mike Jackson (back) recover from injuries.

Blanket statement for opportunity

Panthers rookie Will Lee III is making the most of additional reps with starting cornerbacks sidelined

By Jeff Hawkins
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Wrapping up the second day of training camp with a two-minute drill, the Carolina Panthers' No. 1 offense was driving against the top defense.

"We needed a touchdown," coach Dave Canales said. "We were somewhere around 25 (or) 30-yard line ... knocking on the door."

On fourth down, rookie cornerback Will Lee III lined up against receiver Xavier Legette. Bryce Young called for a sideline route and after receiving the snap from new center Luke Fortner, the quarterback delivered a pass that Lee

anticipated, learning from a similar play about five minutes earlier.

A fourth-round pick in April's draft, Lee jumped the route for his first professional interception. He rose and unleashed a celebratory punt.

"He made the play of the day," Canales said. "It's fun to see."

Gaining NFL experience

Lee grinned after practice when asked about the interception.

"It feels good," he said. "That was my first pick of practice. Second day in the camp, getting a pick, starting it off early. It really helps build that confidence."

At the start of training camp, the Panthers need confident cornerbacks with starters Jaycee Horn (foot) and Mike Jackson (back) sidelined. While both are expected to participate in the preseason-opening Pro Football Hall of Fame Game in Canton, Ohio, on Aug. 6, Canales anticipates backups gaining experience from extended training camp runs.

Lee and sophomores Chau Smith-Wade and Corey Thornton were elevated to the first team Friday and showed Canales they competed with "a lot of confidence learning the scheme."

Lee may have ended the practice with

a career highlight, but earlier, the former Texas A&M standout nicknamed "The Blanket" experienced a lowlight after getting beaten on a deep pass by Chris Brazzell II. Lee, who was covering Brazzell tight, absorbed a left-shoulder bump that opened space for the receiver to catch Young's pass.

"Iron sharpens iron," Lee said. "I was really leaning on him. I was in good position, but it was a better ball for Bryce and a great catch by (Brazzell). Just seeing two guys go out there and compete is good to see."

While pointing to Lee's practice-end- Please see **WILL** | 6A

Aggies focus on playing like winners in Gibbs' second season

By Brian Holloway
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

North Carolina A&T football is no longer concerned about proving whether they belong in the Coastal Athletic Association. A&T opened practice on July 29.

"The first step is changing our mentality," coach Shawn Gibbs said. "For too long we've been trying to prove that we belong and that we can play in this conference. That's no longer our approach. Our approach isn't to

prove anything to anybody. Our approach is to honor and glorify who we've always been. We're a championship football program. We're going to start carrying ourselves and conducting ourselves like that."

The Aggies have two CAA wins over their first three seasons in the league, with both coming last season. But Gibbs and his staff transformed the roster during the offseason. They announced 38 signings on Signing Day in February, and there are 20 transfers on the roster.

What hasn't changed much is the Aggies' quarterback room. The Aggies will go into camp with a battle at quarterback with five

players vying for the job: junior Kevin White, sophomore Braxton Thomas, junior Champ Long, redshirt freshman Jy Walls, and graduate Alston Hooker.

Meanwhile, receiver Elijah Kennedy is one of the Aggies' most high-profile players. CAA head coaches voted Kennedy preseason first-team all-conference as a punt returner. He secured preseason honorable mention all-conference accolades as a kick-off returner. Senior center Andrew Dorsey also earned preseason honorable mention all-conference.

The Aggies were picked to finish 12th among the CAA's 13 teams. Rhode Island,

who will visit Truist Stadium on Sept. 26, is the favorite, earning 12 first-place votes and 144 total points. Monmouth (119), Elon (115), New Hampshire (106), and Stony Brook (105) round out the top five. Four of the top five teams in the preseason poll are on A&T's schedule.

Kennedy has accumulated numerous preseason honors ahead of the Aggies' debut against Morgan State on Aug. 29. Kennedy also earned preseason All-American honors from FCS Stats Perform, as well as second-team All-American recognition from FCS Football Central.

Please see **NC A&T** | 6A

Charlotte FC navigate schedule, transfer market



MATT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Transfer rumors attached to Charlotte FC wingers Kerwin Vargas (No. 18) and Liel Abada could transform the club roster as they await the arrival of French winger Allan Saint-Maxim.

By Herbert L. White
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The transfer window is a den of intrigue for Charlotte FC.

As speculation swirls around the end of Liel Abada and Kerwin Vargas' time with the Crown, the club awaits the arrival of French winger Allan Saint-Maximin. In soccer's global interconnectivity, it's business as usual.

"This is like the January window" in Europe," Charlotte defender Harry Toffolo said last week. "In England, that's mid-season as well. It happens. Four or five could go, and then you bring five or six back in, so football's forever changing. I think throughout the season, teams realize what they're missing or what they need, and they go and get those guys. But it's just part and parcel of the job."

The Crown (7-6-4, 25 points) needs to get on the job quickly. They topped Red Bull New York (6-4-7, 22 points) Saturday before embarking on August, which includes three Leagues Cup matches between Aug. 4-11 and eight games total. Depth and continuity will be tested under the best of circumstances, but with potential roster disruption added to the mix, there's uncertainty.

Please see **CHARLOTTE FC** | 6A

MEAC chief: 'Ivy League of HBCUs'

The MEAC Digital Network is now the MEAC Network.

Dropping the "Digital" expands the network to include more than just streaming games or student-produced studio shows. Like its FCS rival the SWAC, the MEAC plans to branch out to cover more live events, championship competitions, plus original programming and exclusive content from member institutions that fans can't find anywhere else.

"The evolution represents our continued commitment to enhancing the fan experience and showcasing the incredible stories, student-athletes and institutions that make this conference special," MEAC Commissioner Sonja Stills said at media day.

MEAC Network is available on Roku, Amazon Fire TV, Google TV, Android TV, Apple TV, iOS, Android and the network's website.

Stills was literally beaming on The Pivot podcast with co-hosts Ryan Clark, who was fired by ESPN the day before, Fred Taylor and Channing Crowder. Ironically, the event was streamed live on ESPN+.

Stills has every reason to glow. The conference took back its crowns from the SWAC last

Please see **MEAC** | 6A



BONITTA
BEST

NC native Eddie Pope joins MLS in senior leadership role

By Herbert L. White
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Eddie Pope's returning to Major League Soccer in an executive role.

Pope, a High Point native and a stalwart on the U.S. national team, is joining the MLS office as senior vice president of sporting development and senior vice president of competition and operations for MLS Next Pro. He'll

support strategic alignment of development pathways across the MLS ladder and oversee development and execution of the long-term sporting vision for second division MLS Next Pro. Pope will supervise sporting including competition, medical, player relations, and operations departments.

"I'm very proud to join Major League Soccer," Pope said in a statement. "Having spent my entire professional playing career in the league, this is a natural next step for me," Pope said in a

statement. "I've been impressed by MLS' tremendous commitment to investing in player development and strengthening the pro player pathway. I'm excited to join those efforts, build on that momentum, and contribute to the league's continued growth."

Pope will provide strategic leadership to advance MLS Next's long-term vision and continued growth across its business and sporting priorities, as well as support planning and execution of premier events, to

strengthening its role as the top pathway for elite youth talent.

Pope will also direct Major League Soccer's on-field innovation efforts through new sporting initiatives and rules across the MLS ladder of leagues.

"Eddie is an ideal fit for this role," said Ali Curtis, MLS' executive vice president of sporting development and president of MLS Next Pro. ... "Through every stage of his career - as a legendary player and as an executive - Eddie has always carried

Please see **EDDIE** | 6A



NORTH CAROLINA CENTRAL ATHLETICS

North Carolina Central football coach Trei Oliver used cooking class and tire changing instructions as life skill exercises for his Eagles.

MEAC commissioner ‘Ivy League of HBCUs’

Continued from page 5A
season, winning both the MEAC-SWAC Challenge to open the season and the Cricket Celebration Bowl to close out the season. In between, MEAC teams went undefeated against their SWAC rivals to complete a 5-0 season sweep.
When asked by Clark what makes the MEAC so special, Stills referenced that it is the only conference with all research-based institutions. Howard is the crème de la crème in that area, with the remaining seven a step behind but also producing important work.
“I feel like we are the Ivy League of HBCUs,” she said. “They are eight (schools) and we are eight. And we’re strong together. We want those investors and those brands to understand how valuable MEAC football can be. It’s about the culture of who we are.”
Don’t forget who’s in charge
The head coaches were the stars of the podcast.
The Pivot crew interviewed North Carolina Central coach Trei Oliver, Delaware State coach DeSean Jackson and Howard coach Ted White in one roundtable 30-minute segment, and South Carolina State coach Chennis Berry, Norfolk State coach Michael Vick and Morgan State coach Damon Wilson

in the second.
The conversations didn’t center around who’s coming back, preseason rankings or other boring stuff the media will write about all season.
Instead, it was barbershop talk about what it takes to coach at an HBCU, how to engage with today’s student-athletes, how the landscape has changed with NIL, the continuous fight for respect within the coaching profession and much more.
Jackson, who enters his second season at DSU, admitted he had no idea coaching was going to be the least of his duties.
Oliver, now in his seventh season on the field (eighth overall), held cooking classes for players and even had them learn how to change a tire.
When Taylor jokingly asked if he was wasting his time, Oliver replied: “Somebody’s going to take out my granddaughter one day.”
White, proudly sporting a Howard jersey that said “Unapologetically HBCU Educated” recalled his close relationship with Howard coach Steve Wilson and how he wants to parlay the same with his players as the Bison’s new coach.
Bonitta Best is sports editor at The Triangle Tribune in Durham.

Will Lee III makes Blanket statement for opportunity

Continued from page 5A
ing pick, Canales also credited the rookie for rebounding from the earlier setback.
“He got beat on a deep one,” he said. “What I love, he bounced back.”
After prolonged struggles – and two seasons removed from yielding an all-time league high 534 points – the new-look defense is projected to play a key role in the Panthers drive to repeating as NFC South champions.
‘Cornerback room is great’
In his short time in the cornerback room, Lee continues to absorb the insights of Horn and Jackson, regarded as one of the league’s top duos. Horn earned a 2025 Pro Bowl berth and Jackson, entering a contract year, tied for the league lead with 19 passes defended.
“The cornerback room is great,” Lee said. “Having guys like Jaycee and Mike Jack in there to really feed off of is really great. You’ve got two real good veterans that really know how to get it done and dominate

in the South.
“That was our key thing, win the South.” Lee is confident the Panthers can repeat despite outside linebacker Nic Scourton (knee) suffering a season-ending injury during the camp-opening session. The injury to his former college teammate hit Lee hard.
“It’s real sad to see Nick go down,” he said. “That’s my buddy. That’s my dog. Seeing him go down was real tough, but I talked to him in the locker room. He said he’s gonna be good. Minor setback for a major comeback. We can’t wait to get him back next year.”
Until then, Lee continues to focus on taking advantage of his opportunities.
“You want to go out there and just be consistent for the vets,” he said. “You want to build that trust for them, make them understand that you want to go out here and work and it means as much to you as it does to them.”

Charlotte FC prepares for busy August and transfer activity

Continued from page 5A
“That’ll be across the league now, so everybody will be like that,” Charlotte coach Dean Smith said. “We’ve got so many games coming up, it’s about managing them. It’s nice that you’ve got Nathan Byrne coming on the pitch, [Djibril] Diani coming on the pitch, Idan [Tokloanti] coming on the pitch. It’s good to have that kind of that depth to come on.”
Saint-Maxim was signed

to replace Wilfried Zaha in the attack, but he’s awaiting visa clearance before entering the United States. Vargas, who has three goals and four assists in 12 matches in 2026, is the focus of a rumored transfer. Abada, a Designated Player who is the Crown’s second-highest paid player at \$2.6 million, scored his first goal of the season in last week’s 2-2 draw against Atlanta United and fourth assist in Saturday’s 2-0 win at Red

Bulls, has underachieved by comparison.
Regardless of who’s available, the Crown will try to build momentum that can push them up the Eastern Conference table from seventh place.
“You’ve got to build relationships fast,” Toffolo said. “We’ve got a good core group. They’ve been here a decent amount of time now that we can we can trust when we put them in, and they’ll do the job.”

Eddie Pope takes MLS role

Continued from page 5A
himself with class, professionalism, and integrity. He embodies what we aspire for players to be, both on and off the field. Eddie’s perspective and experience will be invaluable as we work to grow the game, evolve MLS, and develop the next generation.”
Pope, who played collegiately at North Carolina, was drafted second overall by D.C. United in the inaugural 1996 MLS Col-

lege Draft. A U.S. Men’s National Team defender and three-time MLS Cup winner, he earned 82 international caps and played in three FIFA World Cups and the 1996 Olympics. Pope was inducted into the National Soccer Hall of Fame in 2011 and the North Carolina Sports Hall of Fame in 2026.
Since retiring as a player, Pope has been director of player relations for the MLS Players Association and MLS Next Pro side Carolina Core FC’s chief sporting officer.

NC A&T focuses on winning

Continued from page 5A
Dorsey started 11 of 12 games for the Aggies last season after transferring from Fort Valley State, where he played for Gibbs.
“We’ve made a lot of progress in a num-

ber of ways,” Gibbs said. “We brought in a lot more talent. The guys that we had here last year have developed and have become better players, so we’re excited about where we are going.”

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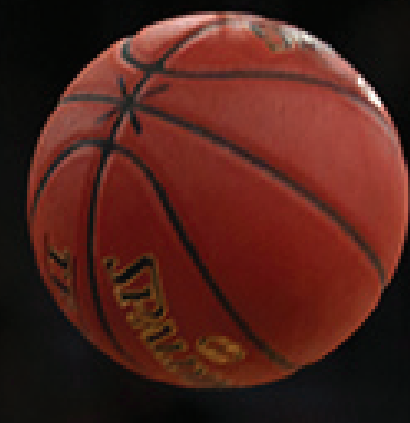
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