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Mecklenburg County's business and nonprofit communities are rallying support for a 1-cent sales tax referendum to fund transportation initiatives. Grassroots advocacy groups, however, oppose the measure for transparency regarding the tax's length and makeup of the board that would oversee the investment.

Transit tax referendum has supporters, skeptics

Businesses back 1-cent levy, but grassroots advocates not sold on transparency

By Herbert L. White

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Backers of Mecklenburg County's transportation tax referendum are rallying support as critics demand transparency.

A coalition of business and civic leaders announced their support for the measure, which Mecklenburg commissioners were scheduled to vote Aug. 6 on whether to place it on the November ballot. The referendum would commit Mecklenburg to a 1-cent sales tax for roadways and public transportation. The

proposed tax, which would raise Mecklenburg's tax from 7.25% to 8.25%, is projected to generate \$19.4 billion over 30 years.

"Charlotte-Mecklenburg is growing rapidly, and our infrastructure must keep pace," former Charlotte City Council Member and former NCDOT deputy secretary David Howard said in a statement. "This referendum represents a rare opportunity for residents to directly shape the future of mobility, safety, sustainability, and economic opportunity across every corner of our county."

The Charlotte Regional Business Alliance is collaborating with nonprofits to back the referendum. Corporations like Bank of America and Atrium Advocate Health as well as nonprofits Crisis Assistance Ministries and Urban League of Central Carolinas are supporters.

"We know transportation is more than just getting from Point A to Point B, it's about opportunity, freedom, and a higher quality of life," said Sherri Chisholm, executive director of Leading on Opportunity, a referendum advocate.

Please see TRANSIT | 2A

Reception honors life and legacy of attorney and advocate James Ferguson

STAFF REPORTS

A special memorial reception honoring late civil rights attorney James Ferguson will be held at Club Nile after his funeral on Aug. 7.

The reception, which is free and open to the public, will be held at Club Nile, 5741 N. Graham St. near the Derita community.

Organizers of "Closing Arguments: Honoring His Legacy-Remembering Our Friend" is a chance for friends and colleagues to share their experiences and joys of having known Ferguson, who died July 21 at age 82. They will reflect on his service to the causes of justice, equality, civil rights and friendship.

"Having first met Fergie when I was a television news reporter more than 50 years ago, we grew closer as friends and both of us at separate times even became owners of Charlotte's Historic Excelsior Club," event co-organizer Ken Koontz said. "It was under Fergie's ownership that we collaborated

Please see FRIENDS | 2A



Ferguson

Anita Earls leads GOP challenger in fundraising for NC Supreme Court

By Ahmed Jallow

NC NEWSLINE

With a four month financing head start, North Carolina Supreme Court Justice Anita Earls has raised four times as much as Republican challenger state Rep. Sarah Stevens ahead of the 2026 race, new campaign finance reports show.

Earls, a Democrat and the court's senior associate justice, reported raising more than \$580,000 for the first six months of the year, and entered July with nearly \$482,000 in cash on hand. Her campaign spent \$117,237 during the first half of the year.

Stevens, a state House member from Surry County and former House speaker pro tempore, reported raising about \$141,000 since announcing her run in May. Her campaign spent nearly \$14,500 and ended the reporting period with about

\$156,000 in cash on hand.

Earls' average donation was under \$300, with contributions coming from more than 1,900 individual donors. Over 80% of her fundraising came from within North Carolina, and she drew strong support from attorneys, professors, and social workers. Attorneys alone contributed more than \$54,000.

The North Carolina Democratic Party also contributed nearly \$129,000. Earls received more than \$80,000 from out-of-state donors, with notable contributions from Massachusetts, California and New York.

"Our team is proud of the record-breaking work we are doing on this campaign," campaign manager Mary Alice Blackstock said in a July statement. "Justice Earls is running this race in every corner of the state, and our fundraising is further proof of

Please see ANITA | 2A

NC jails as immigrant detention centers

Feds tap local lockups to scale custody space

By Herbert L. White

herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

North Carolina's county jails are playing a bigger role in detaining immigrants.

A study by the Prison Policy Initiative found locally run jails are essential in the Trump administration's mass deportation initiative, including in North Carolina, one of 25 states where county lockups are the sole detention platform for federal authorities.

"Many cities and states have tried to offer sanctuary for immigrants by refusing to rent jail space to ICE and opting out of the 287(g) program, but it is not enough," report author Jacob Kang-Brown said. "The Trump administration is leveraging jails at a new scale, using local contracts with the U.S. Marshals Service and existing policing practices in order to expand detention."

The research concluded ICE relies on local jails to carry out immigration enforcement in two ways: by arresting people after they've been booked into custody by local law enforcement and renting jail space to hold people with immigration cases.

Please see NC JAILS | 2A

Local Dems defect, doom Stein vetoes to override

By Lucas Thomae

CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS

Gov. Josh Stein last week called the North Carolina General Assembly's veto override votes a "divisive" distraction and called on the Republican-controlled legislature to instead pass a budget.



Majeed

State lawmakers did end up passing a "mini budget" bill in the Senate, but not before voting to override eight vetoed items of legislation during a legislative session that fractured the House Democratic caucus and challenged the political clout of the first-term governor.

State Republicans scraped up just enough Democratic defectors in the House to reach the supermajority needed to force those eight bills into law without Stein's approval.

In both legislative chambers 60% is the threshold required to override a governor's veto of legisla-

Please see MECKLENBURG | 2A



Cunningham

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Please
Recycle



Transit tax referendum has supporters, skeptics

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"This plan is a forward-looking investment in the systems that make our communities safer, stronger, and more connected."

The referendum has critics, too. Robert Dawkins, political director at Action NC, contends the legislation doesn't provide enough detail on what is included in the tax or whether it is permanent.

"We do not believe this is by accident," Dawkins said. "This entire process seems to be contrived, dishonest and downright unfair. We already have no idea of individual project cost, benchmarks or accountability measures but to not even give clarity on the ballot and expect the voter to be informed is horrible and Mecklenburg residents are advised to take note."

Grassroots advocates also have concerns about a lack of diversity on the Metropolitan Public Transportation Authority's board of trustees.

The Southern Coalition for Social Justice is pushing Charlotte City Council and Mecklenburg commissioners to appoint commuters from diverse backgrounds to the Metropolitan Public Transportation Authority.

Jacob H. Sussman, chief counsel for

justice system reform and chief counsel for environmental justice Anne Harvey David wrote a July 24 letter to the city and county that transit-dependent commuters should be appointed to MPTA's board, which create and execute the region's transit policy in the region.

"We urge you and the powerful lobbyists supporting this initiative to be transparent with the public about who will truly hold decision-making authority if the referendum is approved," they wrote.

Referendum supporters contend the transit tax is necessary to keep pace with growth for a county expected to add an estimated 600,000 people in the next 20 years. The investment in mobility is also seen as a vehicle to lifts economically underserved communities.

"This plan boosts economic mobility by opening up more pathways to opportunity," said David Longo, chair of the Charlotte Regional Business Alliance and CEO of CBI Workplace Solutions. "We will have the ability to connect people to jobs, schools and services. It will help our businesses tap into a larger labor force and provide more jobs for residents."

migration-related charges.

Those charges - which previously were civil immigration matters - have been upgraded to more serious federal crimes, which allows the Marshals to take advantage of contracts with local jails to house immigrants.

Jails and police departments play a role in criminalizing immigration by detaining people until ICE agents can make an arrest. The study suggests ICE has capitalized on local detention of immigrants on charges that would not lead to jail time for citizens like driving without a license to make more arrests. Jail arrests make up 45% of ICE arrests since Trump's inauguration.

Immigration officials rely on collaborations with local law enforcement. According to an analysis of ICE arrest data from Jan. 20-June 26, 45% of agency arrests were transfers from local jails.

Federal detention data recorded 57,200 people on average in June, but the count of people behind bars is likely higher because ICE data doesn't account for people facing criminal immigration charges, those held on detainees, in some state detention facilities, or in overnight holding spaces.

Friends, colleagues gather to remember, salute 'Fergie'

Continued from page 1A

and hosted similar memorial reception after the 2013 funeral service of his late law partner, friend and civil rights legal icon Julius Chambers. It's only befitting that 'Fergie' is awarded the same memorial courtesy. And I am certain there will also be renewals of acquaintances and a range of memories and stories shared," Koontz expressed.

Co-host attorney Harold Cogdell met Ferguson as a young upstart lawyer.

"Fergie took me under his wing in a mentor/mentee relationship that grew

much deeper over the years," said Cogdell, a former Mecklenburg County commissioner.

Ferguson's longtime law partner, Geraldine Sumter, joins Koontz and Cogdell in the venture. In addition to speakers of various backgrounds and relationships to Ferguson, the event plans to offer opportunities for others to record brief video condolences to be compiled and presented to the family. Consistent with Ferguson's penchant for entertainment and hospitality, refreshments will be available.

Mecklenburg Democrats doom Stein vetoes with override votes

Continued from page 1A

tion. Republicans hold a supermajority in the Senate, but are one member shy in the House of Representatives. However, a small coalition of conservative Democrats spoiled moderate and liberal Democrats' hopes of sustaining Stein's vetoes of the legislation in the House.

The four Democrats who voted with the Republican majority on one or more of the override votes were Carla Cunningham, D-Mecklenburg; Shelly Willingham, D-Edgecombe; Nasif Majeed, D-Mecklenburg; and Cecil Brockman, D-Guilford.

Cunningham also drew criticism from her Democratic colleagues Tuesday for an incendiary floor speech in which she accused immigrants of "destabilizing" communities.

The most controversial of the newly-passed legislation will allow private school teachers to carry firearms, require law enforcement to work with federal immigration agents, expand the power of the Republican state auditor, eliminate a state goal to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and allow lawsuits against medical providers over gender transition treatments.

A more detailed breakdown of those bills and how state representatives voted on each piece of legislation follows:

HB 193 allows authorized employees and volunteers at private schools to carry firearms, permits concealed handguns at dual-use school/worship locations during religious services, increases penalties for assaulting or threatening public officials and provides new protections for relocated law enforcement shooting ranges. The veto override passed 72-48. Willingham was the deciding vote on this legislation.

HB 318 requires local jails to notify ICE and temporarily hold prisoners when an immigration detainee and administrative warrant are issued and modifies pretrial release conditions to include an immigration status inquiry for certain offenses. Veto override passed 72-48. Cunningham was the deciding vote on this legislation.

HB 402 makes it harder for agencies run by governor appointees to enact regulations by requiring legislative approval if the estimated cost exceeds \$20 million in five years. Veto override passed 73-47.

Cunningham and Willingham were the deciding votes on this legislation.

HB 549 expands the state auditor's power to access records of state agencies and groups that receive public money. It also authorizes the Department of Revenue to forcibly collect certain debts owed to state agencies if the auditor identifies them as fraud or mismanagement. Veto override passed 72-48.

Willingham was the deciding vote on this legislation.

HB 805 was once a bipartisan bill targeting revenge porn that was changed to include several controversial provisions decried as harmful to transgender people. Veto override passed 72-48. Ma-

jeed was the deciding vote. SB 266 eliminates a previous state goal to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from electric public utilities while keeping the long-term goal of carbon neutrality by 2050. It also changes how utilities charge customers for fuel and related costs. Veto override passed 74-46. Cunningham, Majeed and Willingham were the deciding votes on this legislation.

SB 416 prohibits state and local government agencies from forcing nonprofits to provide personal information about their members, volunteers or donors, and prevents these agencies from publicly releasing such private information. Veto override passed 74-46. Brockman, Cunningham and Willingham were the deciding votes on this legislation.

SB 254 gives more control and rulemaking authority over charter schools to the Charter Schools Review Board and reduces the role of the State Board of Education. Veto override passed 74-46. Brockman, Cunningham and Willingham were the deciding votes on this legislation.

Two additional House bills were on the agenda but left unconsidered. Those included H.B. 96, a bill addressing squatters that included an unrelated amendment that would prevent local governments from regulating pet stores. That pet store provision was the reason Stein vetoed the bill.

The other is H.B. 171, a bill which targeted diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in state and local governments. House Speaker Destin Hall, R-Caldwell, has maintained that vetoed legislation set for an override vote will linger on the agenda until Republicans determine they have the majority needed to pass.

Four more controversial bills passed override votes in the Senate without issue but might face an uphill battle in the House. That legislation includes SB 50 which would allow people over 18 to carry a concealed handgun without a permit, SB 558 and SB 227 which target DEI in schools and universities and SB 153, which is another bill requiring law enforcement to cooperate with ICE.

Cunningham speech slammed

Cunningham was the lone Democrat holdout for the vote on HB 318, the bill which requires jails to check the immigration status of detainees and potentially hold them for longer if they are not citizens.

Stein called the bill unconstitutional in his veto message and cited past federal court rulings that local law enforcement officers cannot keep people in custody solely based on a suspected immigration violation.

In a floor speech, Cunningham defended her position on the legislation and derided immigrants in a major break from the rest of her party. She said the country's immigration system has been "exploited and abused" and accused immigrants of "destabilizing" communities, all while invoking her ancestry as the descendant of American slaves.

"Yes, I was degraded for

my vote," she said. "Yes, I was called racist for my vote. And, yes, (it) was said I was trash."

"However, I figured it out. They want me to stop elevating my ancestors' history. They want me to be silent in my country. They want me to line up to hand (out) their priorities while my people and communities continue to struggle in our country."

"It was my ancestors who came over as slaves, built this country with a strain on their backs. Their sweat poured from their bodies in the rice fields, the cotton fields and the tobacco farms for this country. Lived as servants, and was the footstool — I said the footstool — for far too many feet to step on. So today, if you ask me to line up behind another group of people to raise awareness about their plight, I unapologetically say no."

Rep. Marcia Morey, D-Durham, a former judge who is one of the more progressive members in the House, rebuffed Cunningham's remarks about the immigration detention legislation in a response on the floor.

"We all agree we want safe communities," Morey said.

"That's no longer the issue with this bill — it is scapegoating. It is scapegoating immigrants. Research has shown us that the immigrant community is less likely to commit crimes than the U.S. citizen. That is a fact. We need to work towards finding solutions, not creating divisiveness and ignoring community concerns. This is furthering an anti-immigrant agenda no matter the cost. And when police act as immigration agents, witnesses or victims of crime are going to be less likely to report crime."

Cunningham's speech also drew criticism from Senate Democratic Leader Sydney Batch, D-Wake, who called the rhetoric "ridiculous" and "absolutely uncalled for."

Batch told reporters that she expects an apology from Cunningham, but she fell short of calling for more serious disciplinary action against the seven-term incumbent. Cunningham did not respond to a request for comment before the publication of this article.

Mini budget passes Senate

The Senate reconvened to vote on a mini budget bill, which emerged out of negotiations between the House and Senate. The two chambers had previously been deadlocked over disagreements about tax policy and raises for teachers.

This newest appropriations legislation, HB 125, is not a full spending plan for the next two fiscal years, but it does include key components of the previous budget proposals.

Those include step salary increases for public school employees, a \$600 million infusion into the state's Medicaid program to address potential changes in federal funding, \$142 million for a crop-loss program and \$3 million for additional DMV positions.

All but two Senate Democrats voted for the legislation. One of those "nay" votes was Sen. Natalie Murdock, D-Durham, who told reporters that the bill "doesn't go far enough."

Please see DEMOCRATS | 4A

NC jails grow in importance as US immigrant detention centers

Continued from page 1A

The report, "Hiding in Plain Sight," which used data obtained from public records requests and the Deportation Data Project, found that:

North Carolina's jails are the sole provider of detention capacity to the U.S. Marshals and Immigration and Customs Enforcement. In April (the most recent month where data is available), the state's jails held 52 more people for the U.S. Marshals than in January, an increase of 8%.

Data from 32 local jails and two federal lockups in North Carolina were included in the data set. Mecklenburg County, where Sheriff Garry McFadden has been a vocal opponent of holding people beyond their release date for federal authorities without a detainer request, was not listed.

Federal agencies can refer people for federal prosecution on immigration-related charges and use local jails' contracts with the U.S. Marshals Service in so-called sanctuary jurisdictions.

There has been a spike in detention by U.S. Marshals Office, which is responsible for holding federal pretrial detainees since Trump took office in January. Most bookings by the Marshals Office since have been of people facing federal im-



Associate Justice Anita Earls said she would never forget the attempts to overturn the results of the 2024 Supreme Court race.

Anita Earls leads GOP challenger in fundraising for NC Supreme Court

Continued from page 1A

that. North Carolinians know how important this election is and what's at stake."

Stevens reported fewer overall contributions but a much higher average, about \$1,500 per donor. She contributed \$7,624 to her own campaign and received the maximum \$6,800 from former state Rep. Harold Brubaker, who served as a House speaker in the '90s and now runs a lobbying firm. She also received donations from GOP lawmakers' political committees including "Citizens for Destin Hall" and "Committee to Elect Brenden Jones." Hall is the current House speaker and Jones is the House majority leader.

Professionally, Stevens'

donor base included attorneys, business executives, retirees, and individuals, listed their job titles as "president" and "business manager." She raised \$13,000 from out-of-state donors, mainly in Virginia and California.

The 2026 election will decide one of seven seats on the state's highest court, which currently has a 5-2 conservative majority. Earls, first elected in 2018 after a long career in civil rights law, is the court's most senior Democrat and a frequent dissenter in rulings involving redistricting, voting rights, and public education.

Democrats kept the Supreme Court seat held by Justice Allison Riggs after former Court of Appeals Judge Jefferson Griffin

conceded his 2024 race earlier this year. The concession followed a month-long legal challenge in which Griffin had questioned the eligibility of about 60,000 absentee ballots, primarily from military and overseas voters.

State and federal courts rejected his claims, and a federal judge ordered the election certified.

The victory was a key step in the Democratic strategy to reclaim a majority on the court before the next round of legislative and congressional redistricting in 2030. Given the high likelihood of legal challenges to that process, it's widely assumed that the composition of the court will be extremely important.

Democrats kept the Supreme Court seat held by Justice Allison Riggs after former Court of Appeals Judge Jefferson Griffin



The loss of commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives in government and the corporate community threatens economic opportunities in Black communities according to a brief by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

Black workers at risk as equity investments slow

By Stacy M. Brown

BLACK PRESS USA

A new 16-page issue brief by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies warns that federal industrial policy investments aimed at advancing economic opportunity for Black communities are under threat, as the Trump administration eliminates key diversity, equity, and inclusion provisions and slows the disbursement of funding.

Authored by policy analyst Dr. Gabrielle Smith Finnie, the report, "Shifting the Narrative on Industrial Policy: Opportunities for Genuine Economic Mobility and Good Jobs for Black Communities," examines how recent federal investments—through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, CHIPS and Science Act, and Inflation Reduction Act—offered a historic opportunity to increase Black access to "good jobs" in high-growth industries like manufacturing, clean energy, and technology.

"These investments offer a window to increase Black workers' access to 'good jobs'—jobs that offer family-sustaining wages, benefits, wrap-around supports, and career advancement opportunities," Smith Finnie wrote.

The IIJA, signed into law in 2021, authorized \$1.2 trillion to modernize roads, bridges, and broadband infrastructure. The CHIPS and Science Act of 2022 invested \$280 billion to strengthen the semiconductor industry and build a skilled workforce. The IRA, also passed in 2022, used tax credits and grants to support clean energy projects, particularly in low-income areas and communities harmed by pollution.

The report notes that these laws included intentional equity components—such as labor protections, apprenticeship incentives, environmental justice programs, and wraparound workforce services—but many of those components are now being rolled back or underfunded.

"In 2025, the Trump administration eliminated many of the diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in industrial policy legislation," the report states. "Currently, significant funding is being slowly dispersed, paused, or clawed back, impacting the economic mobility of Black workers."

According to the Joint Center, the programs have already reached over 99% of high-poverty counties. Cities with large Black populations, including Baltimore, Augusta, New Orleans, and Raleigh, were among those set to receive millions to improve infrastructure and launch workforce development hubs through community colleges.

In Detroit, IIJA funding is being used for the I-375 Community Reconnection Project to reconnect two historically Black neighborhoods severed by highway construction. Under the CHIPS Act, the Department of Com-

merce awarded \$184 million to six Recompete Pilot Program finalists, including \$20 million to Reinvest Birmingham, which is scaling up workforce development and transportation access to reduce the city's high Black unemployment rate. The IRA directed approximately \$55 billion to reduce local pollution and support environmental justice efforts. Seventy percent of clean energy investments under the law have been in counties with lower employment rates, 78 percent in areas with below-median household incomes, and 86 percent in regions with below-average college graduation rates.

In Prince George's County, Maryland, a majority-Black jurisdiction, ten communities will receive \$20 million through the Environmental and Climate Justice Program to support climate resilience, reduce energy costs, and grow a clean energy workforce.

Despite the investments, the Joint Center found that many Black-led and allied organizations remain under-informed and under-resourced. A foundational network of eight such organizations participated in the project, with 60% engaged in federal policy. Yet most expressed unfamiliarity with the industrial policy agenda and cited barriers, including limited staff, insufficient technical support, and a lack of targeted outreach.

Participants had applied for broadband grants and climate-related funding but struggled to navigate the complex process or receive adequate guidance. To address the gaps, the Joint Center hosted virtual sessions with policy experts from academia and the Biden administration, providing opportunities to learn about funding pathways, federal priorities, and equity initiatives.

The report provides a set of messaging principles for Black-led and Black-allied organizations, including the importance of highlighting Black workers' economic contributions, addressing historic exclusion from skilled trades, and advocating for place-based investments and better data tracking.

"Industrial policy must ensure our communities have clear access to good jobs, high wages, and meaningful training opportunities," the report states.

It also calls on funders to support Black-led research, researchers to track equity outcomes, employers to implement fair hiring and advancement practices, and training providers to build accessible career pathways in technology and manufacturing.

"Funding and workforce development opportunities must be accessible for Black workers and Black-led and allied organizations," the brief states. "Defunding industrial programs now would reduce opportunities for Black workers to thrive and take part in the industrial sector before these initiatives take root."

Poll downplays US racism

By Stacy M. Brown

BLACK PRESS USA

A new poll from the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research shows growing public skepticism toward the effectiveness of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs.

Conducted July 10-14, the survey of 1,437 U.S. adults revealed that only about one-third believe DEI efforts reduce discrimination against women, Hispanic people, or Asian Americans. Four in 10 say DEI initiatives help address bias against Black people. Yet nearly 30% believe the initiatives increase discrimination, including against white people.

The AP-NORC poll also noted a sharp drop in the number of Americans who acknowledge racial discrimination against Black and Asian people. In 2021, 61% said Black Americans faced a great deal or quite a bit of discrimination.

That figure now stands at 40%. For Asian Americans, it dropped from 46% to 30%. Despite this decline in perception, 74% of Black respondents say their communities continue to experience significant discrimination.

The polling results come amid escalating concerns about Project 2025, a sweeping 900-page policy blueprint published by the Heritage Foundation and widely viewed as a roadmap for a second Trump administration. According to the Legal Defense Fund's Thurgood Marshall Institute, Project 2025 poses a direct threat to Black communities by proposing to dismantle civil rights protections, privatize education, and expand executive power with minimal oversight.

The LDF's report, *Attack on Our Power and Dignity: What Project 2025 Means for Black Communities*, warns that the agenda would eliminate racial data collection in federal agencies, weaken anti-discrimination laws, and roll back protections for workers, students, and voters.

"The assault on Black communities envisioned by Project 2025 will almost certainly condemn us to demise," said LDF President Janai Nelson.

Education is a central battleground.

Project 2025 calls for eliminating the Department of Education and replacing fed-

Please see POLL | 4A

US job growth stalls in July, Black unemployment elevated

By Stacy M. Brown

BLACK PRESS USA

The U.S. economy added just 73,000 jobs in July, continuing a three-month trend of sluggish growth, according to the latest data released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The national unemployment rate held steady at 4.2%, with little movement across key sectors.

While health care and social assistance industries posted modest gains, federal government employment continued its decline, shedding 12,000 jobs in July and bringing total losses in the sector to 84,000 since January. The overall number of unemployed individuals stood at 7.2 million in July.

Black workers continued to face a disproportionately high unemployment rate at 7.2%—nearly double the rate for white workers, which remained at 3.7%. Hispanic workers saw a jobless rate of 5.0% while Asian workers had a jobless rate of 3.9%.

Teenagers experienced the highest unemployment rate of any group at 15.2%, while adult men and women reported 4.0% and 3.7% unemployment, respectively. The labor force participation rate remained at 62.2%, continuing a yearlong decline of 0.5 percentage points. The employment-population ratio also changed little, standing at 59.6%, down 0.4 percentage points over the past year.

The number of people unemployed for 27 weeks or longer rose to 1.8 million in July, an increase of 179,000, and now accounts for nearly one-quarter of all unemployed individuals. Meanwhile, the number of new entrants to the labor mar-

ket—those looking for their first job—rose by 275,000 to 985,000.

Wage growth continued modestly. Average hourly earnings for all private-sector non-farm employees increased by 12 cents to \$36.44, marking a 3.9 percent increase over the past 12 months. Production and nonsupervisory workers saw average hourly wages rise by 8 cents to \$31.34.

Job gains were most notable in the health care sector, which added 55,000 positions, including 34,000 in ambulatory services and 16,000 in hospitals. Social assistance added 18,000 jobs, primarily driven by a 21,000 increase in individual and family services.

But nearly all other major industries—including manufacturing, construction, retail, professional services, and transportation—saw little to no job growth.

The average workweek for all employees edged up slightly to 34.3 hours. For production and nonsupervisory workers, the workweek increased to 33.7 hours. Revisions to previous reports revealed a much weaker job market than initially reported.

The May payroll number was revised down by 125,000 to 19,000 jobs, and June's total was lowered by 133,000 to just 14,000. Combined, these adjustments wiped out 258,000 jobs from prior estimates.

The BLS noted that employees on paid leave or receiving ongoing severance are still counted as employed in their surveys.

The following employment report, covering August, is scheduled for release on Sept. 5.

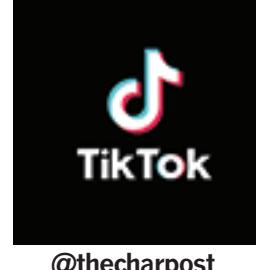
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Ortegaization of US: A real-time cautionary tale

As you read the headline, anyone with a sharp eye for spelling or a love of language is probably scratching their head and asking, "What the devil is 'Ortegaization'?"

No need to Google it or dust off your old Webster's, if you still have one. It's a term I coined to describe the creeping autocratic tint the United States seems to be adopting, one day, one law, one norm at a time, echoing the playbook of Nicaraguan strongman Daniel Ortega.

Once seen as a revolutionary hero, Daniel Ortega has turned Nicaragua into one of the most autocratic regimes in the Americas, rivaled only by Cuba and Venezuela. After helping oust the Somoza dictatorship in 1979, he served briefly as president in the 1980s, then returned to power in 2007. Since then, he has "won" sham elections, named his wife Rosario Murillo vice president in 2016, and by 2025, co-president. Constitutional changes removed term limits and gutted democratic checks, turning a revolution against tyranny into a dynasty of repression and fear.

The true face of the Ortega regime was laid bare in 2018, when student-led protests over social security reforms were met with brutal, deadly repression. More than 300 people were killed, and hundreds more were jailed, tortured, or driven into exile. Human rights organizations documented a systematic campaign to crush dissent, especially among the young. The message was chillingly clear: challenge the regime, and the state will make you disappear.

You might be wondering, what does this have to do with the United States? After all, Ortega has long been a critic of the U.S., and his regime is currently under American sanctions.

How did I come to this realization? I spent a year in Nicaragua as a USAID Foreign Service Officer until the Trump administration abruptly dismantled the agency. During that time, I spoke with exiled civil society leaders and independent journalists whose testimonies tore through the regime's carefully crafted narrative. I read exile-run newspapers that exposed the darker truths Ortega's government tried to erase. The dismantling of USAID felt chillingly familiar. The agency was smeared as a "viper's nest of radical-left Marxist lunatics" by the President and his then-head of DOGE, Elon Musk, and branded as disloyal.

Since January, the parallels have only sharpened. Hundreds of federal employees have been fired, many under the guise of cost-cutting, but with all the markings of political purges. Most recent and notable, Erika Lee McEntarfer, the Commissioner for Labor Statistics, was reportedly dismissed for releasing economic data that didn't flatter the administration's narrative. Her crime? Telling the truth. Just as Ortega eliminated technocrats and watchdogs who contradicted his regime's messaging, we are now watching expertise itself become a threat to power.

Public media, including NPR and PBS, which the president claims cover him unfairly, has been defunded. Universities face pressure to align with the administration's anti-DEI crusade. Those who refuse to toe the line are shamed on Truth Social or called "nasty" at press briefings. Once-neutral agencies are being hollowed out and weaponized. Dissent is treated not as part of democracy, but as betrayal. It's all straight out of Ortega's handbook. And yet, like so many others, I still catch myself thinking, "That can't be legal," as if the rule of law hasn't already bent past its breaking point.

I know, I know, it sounds dramatic. But any student of history will tell you: autocracy doesn't begin with tanks in the streets or mass arrests. It starts smaller. It starts with calling journalists "fake news" and banning them from press events. It starts with bullying critics, eroding checks and balances, and dismantling the institutions that get in the way.

It starts when government employees are told to report colleagues they deem suspicious or disloyal, accused of subverting the leader's will. It becomes unmistakable when the rule of law begins to slip, when term limits vanish, when courts echo the executive, and when the constitution bends not to serve the people, but to protect the powerful.

This is how it happens, not with a bang but with a shrug. Institutions bend. Norms are quietly rewritten. And too many people insist, "It can't happen here." If you examine the early days of any authoritarian regime, you'll hear the same refrain. Many thought their country was different, until it wasn't.

No one believed Ortega would become a dictator. Not after the revolution. Not after the democratic reforms of the '90s. Not even when he returned to power. He was elected, after all. He swapped fatigues for tailored suits. He spoke of stability, faith, and family. And like so many autocrats before him, he cloaked repression in the language of democracy.

Jared Bell is a former U.S. diplomat and scholar of human rights and transitional justice, dedicated to advancing global equity and systemic reform.

Dip's doors close, but joy continues

I'm sure you have heard the sad news: Mama Dip's in Chapel Hill is officially closing its doors.

Mildred Council was tall as a child and she had the job of using her long arms to dip into the rain barrel for water, earning her nickname, "Dip." She started cooking when she was 10, "cooking the corn when the corn came in" and frying chicken "as a form of love." She never stopped.

In 1976, she opened Dip's Country Kitchen with only \$64 in hand. She reveled in cooking for her customers. She said, "it was joy; you could feel it."

Mama Dip was legendary for more than just the meals she served. She was a true matriarch of southern cooking in her bustling restaurant kitchen and also on the printed page. Her storytelling and recipes reached far beyond Chapel Hill through two beloved cookbooks.

Mildred Council's restaurant and cookbooks epitomized comfort food at its finest and a link to a gen-

uine past. Her success as an author and restaurateur were due in large part to the appeal of her story of struggle.

In 1999 in her first cookbook, she shared her personal story of growing up in Chatham County and how it led to the success of her restaurant in the memoir/cookbook "Mama Dip's Kitchen," a best-seller for UNC Press. She wrote, "I was born a colored baby girl in Chatham County, North Carolina to Ed Cotton and Effie Edwards Cotton; grew up a Negro in my youth; lived my adult life black; and am now a 70-year-old American."

She continued, "I grew up and lived in poverty most of my life without knowing it. My children, too, grew up in poverty never knowing that they were poor. Our house just leaked. No screen doors. An outdoor bathroom and little money. Our family was happy to sit around the table at dinner time, eating, poking jokes, and having fun."

Mildred Council died in 2018, but her children and grandchildren kept the doors of Mama Dip's open and the spirit of her kitchen alive. The restaurant's website emphasizes

the importance of family throughout the span of the business: "Mama Dip taught her family all aspects of her southern restaurant business while sharing her wisdom about life and the importance of hard work and commitment." It wasn't just a business—it was a legacy, passed down with care, one plate at a time.

In announcing their closing, Dip's posted on social media: "Since 1976, we've had the joy of feeding Chapel Hill with love, soul, and Mama Dip's dump cooking goodness."

The joy of feeding Chapel Hill—the same joy Mama Dip once said "you could feel"—will live on, even as Dip's closes its doors for good. Earlier this year, her granddaughter Tonya Council opened Tonya's Café, a new venture just down the road, but deeply rooted in the same tradition.

On the menu, you'll find favorites that once filled plates at Mama Dip's alongside fresh takes on those beloved standbys. It's a place where the spirit of Mildred Council still lingers—in the recipes, the hospitality, and the love that goes into every

bite. For weeks, my family has been trying to get to Tonya's Café. In the meantime, my two grandsons have gobbled up most everything they can sample from behind the glass at Tonya's Bakery next to the cafe, and Tonya makes them feel like her favorite customers every time. We devour her pecan crisps by the dozens, which are reminiscent of Mama Dip's pecan pie.

Ask Tonya to share her recipe, and she'll smile and shake her head, but she's happy to share the story of how those cookies came to be when she experimented to fill the dessert case at Mama Dip's.

In a 2017 interview, Mildred Council said, "it's hard to find a cook, to find that somebody who does what they do at Mama Dip's."

While the end of Dip's is the closing of a chapter, the Council family's story continues with "that somebody" in Tonya at Tonya's Café.

D.G. Martin, a retired UNC System vice president, is former host of PBS NC's "North Carolina Bookwatch."

Black women shaping future of democracy

By Glynda C. Carr

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

In 2014, when Higher Heights for America and the Center for American Women in Politics released our first report on the status of Black women in American politics, the data confirmed what we already knew: Black women were underrepresented at every level of government.

But we were also organizing, running, and winning, often without the institutional support our leadership deserved.

More than a decade later, our just-released 2025 Black Women in American Politics Report shows how far we've come. The United States has seen a steady increase in the number of Black women running, winning, and leading in elected representation.

As of this year, eight of the 37 women leading America's 100 largest cities are Black. That's more than a third of all women mayors in major cities, clear evidence of not just progress, but momentum.

Black women aren't just running for office; we are building power, transform-

ing institutions, and governing through some of our country's most complex crises. In Charlotte, New Orleans, and Los Angeles, Black women mayors have led their cities through natural disasters, public health emergencies, and historic uprisings for racial justice—with calm, competence, and community at the center of their leadership.

This moment didn't happen by accident. It is the result of more than a decade of intentional investment in a leadership pipeline designed by and for Black women.

Many of today's Black women mayors previously served as city council members, council presidents, or congressional representatives. They now stand poised for higher office, backed by a strong, purpose-built pipeline.

In Charlotte, Mayor Vi Lyles, a former city council president, is seeking her fifth term after decisive reelection victories. In Jersey City, Council President Joyce Waterman is running to become the city's first Black woman mayor. In De-

troit, two Black women, current Council President Mary Sheffield and former Council President Saunteel Jenkins, are vying to lead one of the country's most iconic cities. And in our nation's capital and the birthplace of American democracy, Washington, D.C., Mayor Muriel Bowser and Philadelphia Mayor Cheralie Parker both began their political careers on city councils before rising to lead their cities.

These women are more than candidates; they are crisis-tested leaders who govern at the intersection of policy and lived experience. They center equity, engage communities, and address not just the symptoms but the root causes of systemic injustice.

Yet despite this progress, the numbers still don't match the need. Black women make up nearly eight percent of the U.S. population but hold a disproportionately small share of elected offices at every level of government. We are leading in spite of the system, not because of it.

So, we must ask: What

more could Black women do if we were fully resourced? Fully supported? Fully believed in?

The stakes are high. We are at a political crossroads where our democracy demands bold leadership grounded in accountability, justice, and vision. Black women are already doing this work, but we cannot do it alone.

This is a call to action for political institutions, donors, and voters: Invest in Black women. Not just when we are breaking barriers or making history, but every day in between.

Build and sustain the infrastructure that allows us not only to run but to win and to govern effectively.

Because here's the truth: The future of American leadership is being shaped in city halls across this country by Black women. And if we stay the course, if we keep building, supporting, and believing, the next decade won't just be defined by "firsts." It will be defined by Black women shaping a democracy as powerful, inclusive, and visionary as we are.

Poll downplays US discrimination as issue

Continued from page 3A

eral oversight with state control, even in states with a documented history of racial discrimination. It also seeks to defund school programs that address systemic racism or acknowledge white privilege. These efforts echo past segregationist rhetoric.

In a February 2025 Newsweek opinion piece, Dr. Stephanie R. Toliver of the University of Illinois cited former North Carolina Jus-

tice I. Beverly Lake's 1954 warning that inferior education was preferable to racial integration. Toliver drew a chilling parallel to the present: "Just as Justice Lake once saw inferior education as an acceptable price to pay for preserving racial purity, today's rhetoric proposes that substandard education is a small cost for maintaining racism, homophobia, trans violence, and antiblackness."

Human Rights Watch also

issued a 2025 statement linking the rollback of DEI initiatives to the broader global assault on anti-racism efforts. The organization called the Trump-era movement against DEI a "clear example" of mainstreamed racism, urging governments to reckon with the legacies of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid by adopting reparations and structural reforms. As perceptions of discrimination wane and support for DEI programs

declines, civil rights advocates warn that these attitudes reflect not progress, but apathy, denial, and a dangerous rewriting of history.

"Our democracy stands at a crossroads," Nelson said. "A path of infinite promise towards a more inclusive, equitable, and durable democracy on the one hand, and one of immeasurable and, potentially, irretrievable demise on the other."

Democrats criticized for votes, comments

Continued from page 2A

and called for additional disaster relief funding in the wake of Tropical Depression Chantal, which battered her district last month.

Batch said she appreciated the progress the chamber made in passing a budget but agreed that the bill falls short of meeting the needs of North Carolinians.

"It keeps the lights on for only a little bit longer," she said.

The House was expected to pass the budget bill and send it to Stein's desk.

After that, Republican leadership said there will be very few voting sessions between then and the start of the short session in April 2026.

"What we've done is address sort of the more immediate pressing concerns that are out there," said

Senate President Pro Tempore Phil Berger, R-Rockingham. "We will continue to have conversations between the House and the Senate to see if there are other matters that we would be able to agree to take up, but that's where we are."

Lawmakers' override of Stein's anti-DEI veto fails

By Eric Tegethoff

PUBLIC NEWS SERVICE

An attempt to override Gov. Josh Stein's veto of a bill, which would have prohibited diversity, equity and inclusion practices in higher education, was unsuccessful in the General Assembly.

Senate Bill 558 was aimed at barring DEI in the University of North Carolina system and community colleges. In his veto letter for the bill, Stein

wrote, "Rather than fearing differing viewpoints and cracking down on free speech, we should ensure our students learn from diverse perspectives and form their own opinions."

Deborah Maxwell, president of the North Carolina State Conference of the NAACP, pointed out the state has the second most Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and the schools were created to provide opportunities for

people of color.

"Those schools were formed because there was a need for a school that elevated the diversity and the equity of people of color, not only in the state of North Carolina," she said. "We have multitudes of students who come from all across the country to attend our historical colleges."

There are 10 HBCUs in North Carolina. Supporters of SB 558 said DEI initia-

tives stifle academic freedom and the state could lose federal funding for failing to comply with the Trump administration's orders on DEI in schools. While an attempt to override failed, the bill has been placed on the General Assembly's calendar for the end of August.

"The promise of having a sound, basic education, which is part of the state Constitution, is under threat," Maxwell said.



CAROLINA PANTHERS

Jimmy Horn Jr., the Carolina Panthers' sixth round pick in April's draft, is among a group of young receivers pushing veterans for roster spots during training camp.

Young Panthers receivers press vets

An infusion of speed and athleticism opens big play possibilities in Carolina's passing attack

By Jeff Hawkins
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Sprinting down the sideline during a training camp practice, Panthers rookie receiver Jacolby George raced past cornerback Tre Swilling.

After gaining separation of about 5 yards, quarterback Andy Dalton delivered something rarely seen in the past few seasons - a completed downfield pass.

Swilling tackled George at the 3, but the undrafted free agent's speed off the line likely caught the eye of coach Dave Canales.

The Panthers ranked No. 30 in aver-

age passing yards per game (187.5) last season. Part of the paltry total can be traced to quarterback Bryce Young's early struggles. He rebounded in the second half, igniting offseason optimism over a retooled offense.

Wide receiver depth is becoming a major training camp talking point.

Bolstered by April's first-round draft pick Tetairoa McMillan, speedy sixth-round pick Jimmy Horn Jr., and undrafted free agents Kobe Hudson and George, the Panthers are beginning to build quality depth.

The Panthers already possess one of the NFL's top starting trios in Adam

Thielen, Legette and McMillan, according to Chad Ochoincinco Johnson. The retired three-time All-Pro receiver posted on X (Twitter): "Can we talk about the possibility of the Panthers trio of receivers being the best in the league w/ consistency week to week for Bryce Young?"

"He's my guy," Thielen said during a video conference call. "We've got to prove it. We all have a lot of things to work on."

"It's good to see we're not a laughing stock."

Veterans such as Hunter Renfrow and David Moore should be concerned with

earning a spot on the 53-man roster, general manager Dan Morgan said at the start of training camp July 22.

"(George and Hudson) are young, talented guys," Morgan said. "We signed them as UDAs and they're guys we're really excited about. They are going to create competition on the back end. They are going to be in the competitive mix."

The Panthers have 11 receivers in camp. Thielen predicted "five or six" will make the 53-man roster. Practice squad decisions will be determined after cut-down day Aug. 26. Morgan an-

Please see YOUNG | 6A



We all have a lot of things to work on. It's good to see we're not a laughing stock.

Carolina Panthers receiver ADAM THIELEN on the infusion of youth at the position.



Albin: 49ers 'on schedule ... not game ready'

By Cameron Williams
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Tim Albin's first fall practice is in the books as coach of the Charlotte 49ers.

While it was only day one, he wants his team to set the pace rather than react.

"Everybody's got [good] energy," Albin said. "I hope we have the same kind of energy day. We didn't do a very good job of being a thermostat, setting the temperature. We were kind of reacting, being a thermometer today, so that was kind of my message after practice, it will come. To get out in what we're in right now, the elements, it's going to take a little bit of work from spring to now. It's the first day with helmets. I'll know more as we progress."

From what bits of practice media were allowed to view, the quarterback position is still up in the air. Connor Harrell, Grayson



CHARLOTTE ATHLETICS

Charlotte return specialist Henry Rutledge is likely to get more touches at running back as the 49ers rely on a committee of tailbacks to carry the ground attack.

Loftis and Zach Wilcke all took snaps and had their good and not-so-good throws.

One player that will be a pleasant sight

for 49ers fans was the return of receiver Sean Brown. After an offseason where his

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« HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL »

Palisades ready to snag Southwestern Athletic title

By Cameron Williams
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The new-look Southwestern Athletic Conference promises to be one of the more balanced high school football races in Charlotte.

The conference is composed of Palisades, Ardrey Kell, Providence, Rocky River, East Mecklenburg and Ballantyne Ridge. Each team has their own goals, starting with winning the first SWAC championship.

Palisades (8-4 in 2024)

The Pumas are entering their fifth season as a program after opening in 2022. After winning five games in their first two seasons, 2024 was a big step in the right direction for coach Jonathan Simmons and his team.

Simmons acknowledged that to be considered a winner, you must consistently win. Last year was a building block, but this season is where they can prove themselves as a true winner.

"[We want] to prove that last season wasn't just luck," Simmons said. "You've got to do it over and over again to really be considered a winner. Just doing it once doesn't make you a winner. It means you won but it doesn't make you a winner, so we are trying to be winners at this time."

Ardrey Kell (5-5 in 2024)

The Knights, led by coach Greg Jachym, are focused on fixing the little things. A season ago, Ardrey Kell missed the playoffs, and

Jachym said they don't plan on doing that again. If the Knights fix the small things, Jachym believes they can be on the winning side of one-possession games.

To his point, in 2024 the Knights lost key games in October to Myers Park (27-24) and Olympic (14-13) that likely cost them a play-off berth.

"Last year, we were a missed field goal and a missed extra point away from probably winning the conference and making the playoffs," Jachym said. "We ended up 5-5 and didn't get into the playoffs. So, we talked about how things that seem like they're little things turn into big things. We've really fo-

Please see PALISADES | 6A

In the new Greater Charlotte 7A/8A, it's Hough vs. the field

By Cameron Williams
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The Greater Charlotte Athletic Conference features perennial winners and teams that have been rebuilding for a long time.

The conference is composed of Hough, Myers Park, South Mecklenburg, West Mecklenburg, Hopewell and Garinger. While Hough is the odds-on favorite, each team is hungry to be the one to play spoiler to the Huskies hopes.

Hough (12-2 in 2024)

The Huskies had a good season in 2024 by most team's standards, but not for Hough's. After dropping their season opener to Rock Hill Northwestern, the South Carolina 4A state champion, the Huskies rattled off 12 straight wins before losing to Greensboro Grimsley, the eventual

Please see IT'S HOUGH | 6A



HOUGH HIGH SCHOOL

Hough High, which went 12-2 and was unbeaten in the Queen City 3A/4A in 2024, transitions to the new Greater Charlotte Athletic Conference.

Spitzer, 15, signs with Carolina Ascent

By Herbert L. White
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The youngest player to appear in a professional women's soccer match has a contract to match.

Stella Spitzer, 15, signed a multi-year deal with Carolina Ascent FC pending league and federation approval, making her the youngest player to sign a professional contract in Gainbridge Super League history. Spitzer became the youngest player to appear in a professional match in the United States when she came on as a substitute for Carolina on Oct. 19, 2024, against Brooklyn FC at 14 years, 198 days old.

"This signing has been a long time coming," Ascent coach Philip Poole said in a statement. "Stella did exceptionally well in our environment last year and taking the next natural step to signing as a full professional makes sense for everyone involved. Watching Stella make her debut and the amount of growth we've seen in the last 12 months makes this decision easy for us."

Spitzer, who joined Carolina on an academy contract in June 2024, joins B Hylton as Ascent players to sign professional deals as development players. Hylton signed in June.

"Having the opportunity and the right people behind me to be able to sign this contract is honestly a dream come true," expressed Spitzer. "This is not just about me, but it's also about inspiring the next generation and showing everyone aspiring to be professional soccer players that it is a realistic goal worth chasing. I am so excited to see what the future holds for this team."

"As Stella takes the next step in her career - we are aware that the development of young players takes time and will undoubtedly have its ups and downs. We've got so much belief in Stella and the impact she can have on the future here in Carolina," Poole said.

Young receivers press the Panthers' veterans

Continued from page 5A

ticipates being forced into a few tough cuts.

"We're all at war right now, trying to get better," George said after Saturday's practice in near-100-degree weather.

Entering the final season of his three-year contract, Thielen is a 35-year-old veteran who paced the Panthers with 615 receiving yards and five touchdowns last season. He is a virtual lock to make the cut, but the former undrafted free agent admitted to looking over his shoulder at the youngsters.

"Yeah, you're always feeling pressure, right?" Thielen said. "Five, six guys ... maybe stick. You can't relax right now."

George certainly can't relax.

After struggling at the NFL combine, the former Miami (Fla.) standout went undrafted but signed a contract that included a \$215,000 signing bonus. George caught the attention of NFL scouts by working with quarterback

Cam Ward, the Tennessee Titans' No. 1 overall draft pick. Over his past two seasons, George collected 110 catches for 1,616 yards and 16 TDs.

Hudson, who started at Auburn before transferring to Central Florida, compiled 91 receptions for 1,670 yards and 12 TDs over two All-Big 12 honorable mention seasons with the Knights. In 2023, Hudson ranked No. 7 nationally with a 20.45 yards per reception average.

"We have a deep group," Thielen said. "With more depth, we have more competition. They're rookies and they're going to make mistakes, but both (George and Hudson) made plays."

To continue creating roster pressure, George said the newcomers need to continue "stacking days."

"It's up to them to go out on a daily basis and earn their stripes and gain the respect of our veterans out there," Morgan said. "They're already doing that."

Charlotte 49ers seek solutions

Continued from page 5A

status was in limbo due to waiting for an NCAA eligibility waiver, Albin says having Brown in the wide receiver corps is beneficial.

"It's big for the [wide receiver] room," Albin said. "I think without him, we're turned, I don't know, maybe 10 catches. It wasn't very many... so No. 1, he's got game experience on the big stage in the big arena, and so he's gonna have some leadership with the younger guys we got. It's all good."

Albin said he feels Charlotte is ahead of the curve compared to his previous teams thanks to organized team activities. Albin is used to running 24 period practices. He has scaled that back by five because the

team had OTAs to help the players take care of their bodies.

"These guys, they've got to stay hydrated, because if you miss that one day with heat, you're gonna be behind," Albin said. "It's important for us to utilize all the resources that we've got... since we don't have the indoor [facility] yet."

The biggest takeaway for Albin was the 49ers are unselfish and willing to do what it takes to win.

"What I mean by that is that they all accept their role," he said. "They are going to continue to be great teammates. We're not finished yet by any means but I like where we are mentality-wise as far as doing what is best for the football team."

put in the work, and help build on that foundation."

Bader was a two-time American Conference all-tournament team selection at Charlotte and earned first team all-conference last year after leading the 49ers with five goals. She finished her Charlotte career with 17 goals and 46 points in 73 matches (68 starts) and seventh all-time in with 181 shots taken.

Carolina Ascent, which won the Gainbridge Super League supporters' shield in its debut season, finished atop the table with 48 points and earned the top playoff seed with a 13-6-9 record.

Bader, an Apex native, spent the last two summers playing for the North Carolina Courage U23 team and won the finals MVP in the 2024 USLW Championship.

49ers women's soccer alumna Macey Bader signs with Ascent

By Herbert L. White

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Macey Bader isn't leaving Charlotte to play pro soccer.

Bader, who played collegiately at Charlotte, signed with Carolina Ascent FC last month, making her the third 49er to sign a professional contract in the last calendar year and fourth overall, joining Martha Thomas (Tottenham Hotspur), Tash Huson (Apollon Ladies F.C.), and Charlotte Harris (AFC Bournemouth).

"After my time at Charlotte, this city has truly become home and I'm so excited for the opportunity to represent it at the next level in my first year as a pro," Bader said in a posting on Carolina Ascent FC's website. "This organization set such a high bar in its first year and I can't wait to come in,

It's Hough against the field in Greater Charlotte

Continued from page 5A

North Carolina 4A winner.

Hough is in the 8A classification this year since the state association moved to eight divisions. Grimsley is 7A, so the Huskies won't have to go through Greensboro to win a title. Coach DeShawn Baker doesn't care about any of that. He wants his team to fine tune the little things that separates great teams from elite teams.

"It's championship or bust over here," Baker said. "I know we've lost to Grimsley the last three years, and I tell the kids all the time it's the mental things. We've got to be better with mental things. And like I tell them, I went and watched those games, all three games, and one thing that we did, they didn't do, was turn the ball over. We turned the ball over one time in each one of those games, and it came back to haunt us and so just being better mentally and making sure we focus on the small details."

Myers Park (4-6 in 2024)

Coach Chris James is heading into his third season with the Mustangs. After going 7-4 his first year, 2024 was a step back. James is hoping to get back to consistent winning soon.

"We are definitely going to be better than 4-6," he said. "It wasn't a great year for us last year and that is a part of the game. Things happen and I think you use things like that as fuel. I think you can find ways to push buttons of [the players] after a season like we had, so I am expecting us to continue to improve daily. I think that is the main thing."

Myers Park has 27 seniors and James said the goal is for them to be playing into December.

South Mecklenburg (3-7 in 2024)

Coach Joe Evans leads his Sabres into 2025 where they hope to improve on a season where they had one-possession losses to Olympic, Palisades and Ardrey Kell.

"We are definitely hoping for a big season," quarterback Carter Gillis said. "We have some playmakers on the outside. We have a solid group of linemen as well, a big group, so we are going to be solid. I will have some solid pieces around me for sure. I just have to take care of the football, limit interceptions and take advantage of the big plays when they are there."

West Mecklenburg (3-7 in 2024)

The Hawks have been in a rebuilding phase for some time. Coach Beady Waddell IV says there is excitement and players believe they are capable of more than what they have shown in past seasons.

"I'm excited," Waddell said. "I mean, the energy is high. There's a lot of great things just going on in our building in general. Being in the new conference is exciting. But the expectation is every year, of course,

you want to win the state title. That's everybody's expectation, right? But to win 10 games, to practice on Thanksgiving morning, to win our conference, those are the things that we're preaching in our program."

Waddell did not hold back on a nonconference schedule that will challenge his team. The Hawks face Ashbrook, Statesville, Olympic, Corvian Community School and West Charlotte.

Hopewell (3-7 in 2024)

The Titans are one of two teams in the conference with a new coach. Brandon Sneed knows what winning football looks like coming from Mallard Creek, where he was offensive coordinator.

Sneed feels the GCAC, which has several teams with similar struggles in recent seasons provides a chance for a program like Hopewell to separate themselves. The Titans haven't produced a winning season since 2010.

"When you really believe in something, believe that you have a shot, it's probably going to increase your belief," Sneed said. "It's hard to go out there if you feel like there's not much of a chance of success. But I don't think we feel that way right now."

Garinger (0-10 in 2024)

The Wildcats are coming off their fifth consecutive winless season. Garinger has also had as many head coaches as winless seasons in a row. But new coach Jupiter Wilson knows what winning football looks like coming from Hickory Ridge, where he took the Ragin' Bulls to the playoffs several times and a record of 9-3 in 2021.

His message to the Wildcats — who have a drastic increase in player turnout — is change.

"I told the coaches when we took this job, I've got to be the most consistent guy," Wilson said. "The one thing I tell my kids all the time to hear from me: you may fail yourself, and I don't feel like coming to practice, I don't feel like doing my work or whatever, but I'm never going to fail."

Wilson said one of the most inspiring things he has seen from his players is their appreciation. The Wildcats can see and believe he is bought in as their coach and, in turn, they are as well.

"I've enjoyed coaching here the most," Wilson said. "Sometimes being at different places, and I've coached conference champions, all that good stuff, things are just taken for granted. So, when you buy kids T-shirts and shorts, other places have the means and stuff to do that, and then you see the appreciative part of them saying, one, 'thank you, coach.' And then two, doing what you're asking because it makes it all worthwhile."

Palisades High aims to snag the inaugural SWAC football title

Continued from page 5A

cused on concentrating on those little things, and doing little things right because when it comes down to it, one play can cost you your season."

Providence (5-5 in 2024)

Coach Wes Ward and the Providence Panthers played a tough 2024 schedule against perennial powers like Charlotte Catholic, Butler and Independence. The 2025 schedule doesn't get any easier with Myers Park, 2024 3A state champion West Charlotte, Butler and East Lincoln.

The number of players on the roster is down from years past, which could pose a depth issue. On the other hand, it could strengthen camaraderie.

"Having a smaller roster can help a little bit," Ward said. "It varies from class to class. I've coached classes that are totally separate and don't hang out very much, and then I've coached two different classes as a senior and junior class, they're always together. I think this one is kind of one of those deals. It's something you can't ever tell, like, 'Oh, this is senior, this is junior,' and whatnot. A lot of them mix and mingle and all kind of hang out together."

Rocky River (3-7 in 2024)

The Ravens are 11 years removed from their last playoff berth and winning season. It's something coach Kenneth McClamrock is looking to change by first establishing a new culture.

"We are creating a culture where we care about each other," he said. "We had a staff meeting today... and before I bring any coach onto our staff, one of the things I tell them is you have to be invested in our young people's lives. Our young people need us more now than they ever have at any point in the history of high school football. And we've got some kids here that come from really tough situations, and so they need positive adults. They need positive men in their lives more than some other schools where I've been."

McClamrock believes the Ravens are doing the right things to get back to the program of a decade ago where they were making the playoffs regularly and deep runs when they got there.

"I think we're really close," he said. "To be honest with you, we don't put numbers on anything, a quantity, as far as wins go or anything like that. We have our goals that we talk about, and we'll refresh those goals tomorrow. But I think that we're really close to being the Rocky River of 10 plus years ago when [Baltimore Ravens cornerback] Jaire Alexander was here."

"I've said this before... I didn't come here to lose. I didn't come here to be 3-7. I didn't

come here to be 4-6 or 5-5. My expectation is for these guys to be the players in the football program that everyone across the city talks about."

East Mecklenburg (1-9 in 2024)

East Mecklenburg found themselves in a similar spot to the last several seasons — handful of losses and a win over Garinger. Coach Lennie Sanders said this year's group has a different feel.

"I made an adjustment this year," he said. "Normally it's always smash, smash, smash. I'm a very old school-spirited coach, but this year was like, 'I need to let them run their team.' I don't need to be one starting practice every day. I don't need to be one blowing the whistle every day."

Sanders is letting the seniors lead. Whenever an underclassman is late or not doing something right, team leaders handle the issue. The players are embracing responsibility, and Sanders said it is refreshing to watch the maturation process.

Ballantyne Ridge (0-11 in 2024)

Mecklenburg County's newest school had its fair share of growing pains in 2024. The Wolves scored just 37 points and were shut out six times, but coach Tyson Fernandez said he's encouraged by the number of players who've returned and the way they are buying in.

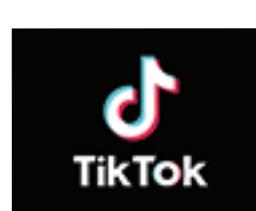
"It's something that not many coaches have that opportunity to do," Fernandez said about starting from the ground up. "So, you're creating a culture. You're creating a standard where you're hoping that this will carry on for 10, 15, 20 years down the line. Traditions that Providence and Ardrey Kell, some of these teams in our conference that have had the opportunity to go ahead and build, we're building them now."

"It's one of those things that's really exciting, and kind of like how we talked about it with these coaches. Man, it's a lot of firsts. A lot of these firsts that I'm able to see, I'm able to mold, I'm able to create with these young men. It's a lot of fun."

Fernandez said one of the biggest changes were the players' bodies. They are not small anymore and they are beginning to add muscle.

"They're starting to look like football players," he said. "For some of these guys, man, if you were to see the picture of our team last year against Fort Mill, you're probably scratching your head a little bit. I'm like, 'man, that's a varsity football player?' But these guys have been working. They've worked tremendously hard over the spring, throughout the summer, getting in the weight room and just starting to slowly transform their body."

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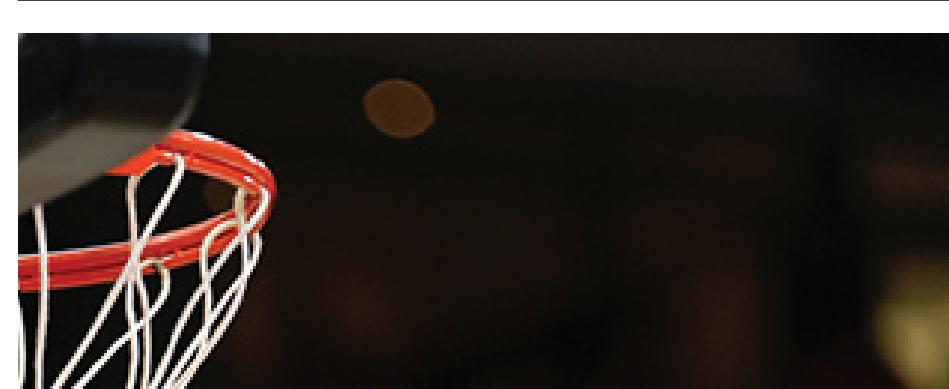
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