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STOCK PHOTO

The North Carolina Senate approved a criminal justice overhaul bill Monday that includes an amendment to return the state to advocating the use of capital punishment.

NC lawmakers prioritize return of the death penalty

Senate leader's amendment is part of GOP criminal justice overhaul proposal

By Herbert L. White

herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

A North Carolina bill touted as criminal justice reform includes returning capital punishment as a key cornerstone.

The Republican-controlled state Senate on Monday passed House Bill 307, or Iryna's Law, which includes a measure to revive the death penalty as part of the package by removing barriers that have prevented executions. The bill, named after Iryna Zarutska, who was stabbed to death in Charlotte on a Lynx Blue Line

train, would require the review of death penalty appeals within two years of filing, and bar continuances unless a judge declares extenuating circumstances in a case.

Any appeal or motion filed more than two years ago must be scheduled for hearing by December 2026, and the hearing must take place by December 2027. Hearings related to a death penalty case would be required to be held in the county where the defendant was convicted.

North Carolina has 122 inmates on death row.

"For nearly two decades, judicial and administrative roadblocks have stopped true justice for victims, and it's time for that to end," Senate Leader Phil Berger (R-Rockingham) said in a statement. "During my time in the Senate, I've worked to

find ways to restart the death penalty.

Please see NC LAWMAKERS | 2A



Former Miss North Carolina battles cancer

BLACKDOCTOR.ORG

Throughout her year of service, pageant contestant and Miss North Carolina 2024 Carrie Everett touched countless lives across the state with her strength, grace and heart for others.

Shortly after crowning her successor in June, Everett flew home to visit family and began a different kind of journey she never saw coming.

"I visited my parents, and I started to experience intense bloating," she said. "It was every night. I couldn't really sleep. Then I was experiencing a lot of coughing."

Everett went to a doctor's visit at the end of July. After multiple visits to the doctor, she was initially told she had pneumonia. On July 2, scans found masses in her abdomen, a thickened stomach lining and enlarged lymph nodes. Blood work showed markers for cancer.

"I was told initially that it wasn't really anything serious."

Please see MISS | 3A

Will the national gerrymandering frenzy ultimately drag NC in as well?

By Sarah Michels

CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS

Across the nation, state legislatures are racing to redraw electoral maps to give their preferred political party an advantage in next year's midterm elections. Partisan gerrymandering is not new, but until recently, owning up to it has been taboo.

First, Texas heeded President Donald Trump's directive to find five more Republican U.S. House seats during a special session originally intended to address flood recovery. Then, California lawmakers put a ballot measure to voters, which will ask them to approve a map that would likely give Democrats five additional seats.

Most recently, Missouri advanced a redistricting plan that's expected to give Republicans one more U.S. Representative. Several other states, including Ohio and Florida, are reportedly considering joining the race.

While North Carolina is unlikely to join in this time around, it set the foundation for today's frantic mid-decade redistricting push nearly a decade ago in a landmark case that ended up in the hands of the U.S. Supreme Court.

How does redistricting work?

Each decade, the U.S. Census tallies the nation's population. Lawmakers — or in some cases, independent re-

Please see GERRYMANDING | 2A

Eastside wrestles with transit pros, cons

By Kylie Marsh

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Editor's note: Part of a series on Charlotte transit and its connection to the region's future.

What could November's proposed 1-cent sales tax referendum mean for east Charlotte?

One of the rail enhancements is a proposed expansion of the 10-mile CityLynx Gold Line streetcar route from Eastland Community Transit Center in the east to Rosa Parks Community Transit Center in the west. The 37-stop route, which launched in 2015, includes cultural and education destinations and major employers in Center City, including Novant Health Presbyterian and Central Piedmont Community College in the Elizabeth neighborhood to the east and Johnson C. Smith University in Historic West End.

In July, North Carolina lawmakers passed the Projects for Advancing Vehicle Infrastructure Enhancements, or PAVE, Act, which allows Mecklenburg County voters to adopt the sales tax increase to fund transit improvements over the next 30 years. If approved, Charlotte Area Transit System officials project just under \$20 billion in revenue, which will be used to buy new buses, hire drivers, add benches and shelters to bus stops, and initiatives like crosswalks and

Please see EAST | 2A

UNC system tops 250K enrollment for first time

By Clayton Henkel

NC NEWSLINE

The University of North Carolina System celebrated an important milestone this month with the state's public universities surpassing more than 250,000 students for the first time.

The record enrollment of more than 256,000 represents a 3.4% increase over 2024. The total is significant. It comes at a time that higher education is facing a demographic challenge caused by falling birth rates in the United States.

North Carolina's historically Black universities saw some of the largest percentage increases this year. Fayetteville State University saw enrollment rise 7.3%, North Carolina A&T State University was up 6.7%, with North Carolina Central University up 6.8%. Policies raising the enrollment caps for out-of-state students may have helped those HBCUs excel.

Only UNC Asheville experienced a decline in enrollment. But officials acknowledged the 6% decline could be related to the ongoing Hurricane Helene recovery. The

Please see UNC | 3A



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Please Recycle




NC lawmakers prioritize return of death penalty

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but judges, activist doctors, and weak-on-crime politicians have placed hurdle after hurdle in the way."

Every Senate Democrat opposed the amended bill, criticizing it as death penalty overreach after most walked out of the chamber. Republicans and Democrats last week pledged a bipartisan bill to overhaul pretrial release for violent offenders, strengthen sentencing protections, and improve staffing and resources for prosecutors.

"Unfortunately, the Senate floor amendment changed this bill," said Sen. Caleb Theodos, a Charlotte Democrat. "Instead of keeping the focus on victims and public safety, it added sweeping new provisions on the death penalty. These provisions revive archaic execution methods, including the firing squad, the electric chair, and completely ignore what is truly needed for public safety."

Samuel Flippin is the last person executed in North Carolina when he was put to death by lethal injection on Aug. 18, 2006. Since then, litigation over execution procedures and the Racial Justice Act put executions on hold. There is, however, no official moratorium on executions in the state.

Research shows that juries – especially all-white panels – are more likely to convict and sentence defendants in capital trials to death, including people later found to be innocent. At least 12 people have been exonerated in North Carolina, including 11 men who are Black, Hispanic or indigenous. North Carolina has the fifth-largest death row in the United States and nearly half were sentenced by predominantly white juries.

Former Gov. Roy Cooper – who is running for North Carolina's open U.S. Senate seat in 2026 – commuted 15 death sentences on his last day in office in 2024, which resulted in life sentences without parole. Those commutations were triple the number granted since passage of the state's death penalty law in 1976.

The previous five commutations were declared shortly before sched-



Theodos

uled execution and no previous governor reduced the sentence of more than two inmates.

The Senate bill includes a Berger proposal that would establish lethal injection as the default method of execution and instructs the Department of Adult Correction to adopt alternative methods of execution in the event a court or administrator blocks its use. The amendment stipulates that any case where a trial declares a method of execution unconstitutional is directly appealed to the state Supreme Court.

The bill would also:

- Resolve that a judge or magistrate must review and consider a defendant's criminal history before setting pretrial release.
- Require written explanation why a judicial official determined the conditions of release.
- Allows the removal of judges or magistrates who fail to make findings for release.
- Allow the state Supreme Court's chief justice or the chief District Court judge to initiate suspension proceedings for magistrates.

• Require a study of the intersection of mental health and the justice system for both adults and juveniles, as well as the availability of house arrest as a condition of pretrial release as well as alternative methods.

As a lawmaker, Berger, a death penalty proponent, voted against the Racial Justice Act as well as a bill to repeal the once Republicans gained a majority in the General Assembly in 2010.

The RJA, a state law that was in effect from 2009-13, gives people sentenced to death an opportunity to be resented to life without parole if they can prove racial discrimination played a role in their case. The law has been seldom used since 2020, when the state Supreme Court ruled that all RJA claims remain valid despite the law's repeal in 2013.

"The real challenges our justice system faces are court backlogs, shortages of prosecutors, and gaps in victim services," Theodos said. "Those are the issues that deserve attention, not whether the state should bring back execution methods from another era."



CHARLOTTE AREA TRANSIT SYSTEM

The CityLynx Gold Line, which tracks east to west, has brought new development to neglected eastside neighborhoods as well as debate over displacement in lower-income communities.

East Charlotte weighs pros, cons of transit initiatives

Continued from page 1A

pavement markings. Rail projects will receive 40% of projected revenue.

In recent years, residents and community groups have raised questions about sustainability and equity as part of public transit expansion. Communities spotlighted for historical disinvestment, like Charlotte's six Corridors of Opportunity, might face significant impacts if the referendum passes. One of those corridors, Albemarle/Central Avenue, is home to immigrant communities established in the early 21st century.

Residents in the Corridors of Opportunity are often stuck between a rock and a hard place. Lack of economic opportunity have led to concerns about crime and concentrated poverty, while more investment could lead to displacement and gentrification by pricing working-class and elderly homeowners out of their neighborhoods.

Juan Diego "J.D." Mazuera Arias, the Democratic nominee for Charlotte City Council's District 5 seat, has been critical of the referendum. In a statement to WBTW, Arias determined "as written, this plan is inequitable and regressive." Arias said Albemarle/Central is home to a large swath of low-income Black and brown families with average household incomes under \$56,000 while adding safety is a major concern for residents.

Other referendum critics include the local Housing Justice Coalition, Robert Dawkins, political director of non-profit organization Action NC, and co-chair of North Carolina Poor People's Campaign Bishop William J. Barber II.

In a membership newsletter, Housing Justice Coalition wrote that "Charlotte's working class would bear the full weight of the cost." The organization was critical that "real estate lawyer Larry Shaheen helped craft" the PAVE Act, which requires that a new transit authority be made, wherein "three of the appointees from Charlotte must be handpicked by an entity like the Charlotte Regional Business Alliance."

"This, once again, would leave transit decisions in the hands of unaccountable appointees, many of whom will have ties to real estate development," the newsletter read.

Dawkins told The Post the Gold Line "is



Arias

a tool of development and not mobility."

"The Gold Line will help gentrify one of the most diverse areas of Charlotte into a cookie cutter collection of coffee shops, microbreweries and dry cleaners, but do little for the average resident except displace them," he wrote.

Dawkins pointed to Eastland Yards' sticker price: "Starting in the mid \$500,000s? That's not for original east-side residents."

Eastland Yards is a senior-living residential development with an outdoor and indoor sportsplex that has already received \$41 million in investment from the city. CATS officials assured reporters last month that 30% of the referendum's estimated revenue would come from people who live outside Mecklenburg County.

State Rep. Jordan Lopez, whose House district includes east Charlotte, told The Post the tax could add an estimated \$180-\$240 to families' annual tax bills and "does have a real impact on families."

"It's a tricky conversation to have," said Lopez, who supported the PAVE Act. He cited safety improvements that could be generated through the referendum, like sidewalks and pavement markings for bike lanes, since the area has some of the highest incidence rates for bike collisions.

Lopez also recalls that when the Gold Line was developed, closures to storefronts along the route caused issues for small business owners. He looks forward to Eastland Yards' sports facilities opening as another push for connectivity.

"It's a massive infrastructure project," Lopez said. "How soon will people be able to feel the impact of this is not a question I get very often."

Greg Asciutto, executive director of CharlotteEAST, a non-profit advocacy group for eastside communities, highlighted opportunities for economic mobility, noting more small businesses have acquired properties in recent months than closed.

"Business is booming," he said.

Asciutto told The Post negative impacts of rail construction possibly won't be seen for another 15 years. The improved connectivity coming from the Better Bus plan would also offset the decline caused by closure of Eastland Mall, which was a retail anchor to satellite communities and businesses in the area.

Gerrymandering has all but carved out legislative districts

Continued from page 1A

districting commissions – must redraw maps to account for any population shifts.

The U.S. Constitution gives state legislatures the right to regulate their elections in the way they see fit, which means that rules vary across the nation. For example, in North Carolina, the governor cannot veto a redistricting plan. Meanwhile, in Arkansas and Ohio, the governor is on the redistricting committee.

However, two federal requirements exist. First, districts should represent nearly equal populations, to ensure that every vote counts about the same. Second, the federal Voting Rights Act bans dilution of racial or ethnic minority votes.

Historically, politicians have tried to suppress minority voters through two strategies: "packing" and "cracking."

"Packing" crams minority voters into one district when their proportional population merits representation in more than one district, while "cracking" splits a concentrated area of minority voters between several districts with a majority of non-minority voters to reduce the odds of the minority voters' preferred candidate winning.

North Carolina does not enforce any additional criteria for congressional maps.

How NC greenlit partisan gerrymandering

In North Carolina, redistricting litigation is a way of life.

Between 2011 and 2020, the state had to draw three congressional maps, four state Senate maps and four state House maps due to court mandates.

Gerrymandering is also a permanent fixture in North Carolina's political environment. Gerrymandering refers to the practice of drawing electoral maps in a way that intentionally benefits one group of voters over another. Gerrymandered maps do not reflect the actual preferences of voters, and instead aim to manipulate election results.

In the 1940s, a Democratic legislative majority politically gerrymandered Western North Carolina Republicans out of all Congressional representation, and continued partisan redistricting until Republicans gained full legislative control in 2011. The new Republican majority not only flipped the Democrats' script, but also used rapidly improving technology to enact even more effective gerrymanders, he said.

Their first go at redistricting predictably ended up in court. It was struck down as an unconstitutional, racially gerrymandered map.

Their second try would end up changing the redistricting landscape across the

country. In 2016, North Carolina lawmakers entered a special session to redraw the congressional map.

Former State Rep. David Lewis, who chaired the House redistricting committee, made no secret of his motives: "I propose that we draw the maps to give a partisan advantage to 10 Republicans and three Democrats because I do not believe it's possible to draw a map with 11 Republicans and two Democrats," he said at the time.

Before the Republicans took over, North Carolina had seven Democratic districts and six Republican districts.

After the maps passed, a group of North Carolina voters, Common Cause and the North Carolina Democratic Party sued the Republican redistricting leaders. They argued that the partisan gerrymander was unconstitutional because diluting the non-Republican vote violated equal protection and First Amendment rights.

The 2016 case, *Common Cause v. Rucho*, ended up at the U.S. Supreme Court.

In a surprise ruling, the justices decided 5-4 that while extreme partisan gerrymandering is unconstitutional, federal courts cannot resolve the issue.

It's beyond their purview, Chief Justice John Roberts wrote in the majority opinion. Deciding when partisan gerrymandering has gone "too far" is a political question, intended for states to decide, he explained.

Now, the brakes are off. The federal courts are "agnostic" about partisan gerrymandering, so it's up to state courts to decide whether to allow partisan gerrymandering, Western Carolina University political science professor Chris Cooper said.

In Republican states like Texas, that might make partisan gerrymandering, even unprompted in the middle of the decade, seem like a safe bet.

This mid-decade redistricting is different from the centuries of gerrymandering that preceded it, Catawba College political science professor Michael Bitzer said. It's gerrymandering "on steroids," he said.

With the geographical political sorting voters have done by moving to places with people with similar views, as well as technology that allows map-drawers to zero in on how a particular street block or household votes, it's much easier to manipulate electoral outcomes through redistricting, he said.

Will NC join mid-decade redistricting?

By all measures, there's only one competitive U.S. House district in North Carolina's 2026 election. That's the 1st Congressional District, currently represented by Democrat Don Davis.

First Black SEL Hub launches

By Freda Freeman

TRIANGLE TRIBUNE

responsibility.

Trawick said Durham is fertile ground for Black SEL.

"We're really nurturing our students. We're asking them, 'what's in your emotional and invisible backpack?'

When they come into the room, we ask them to unpack that, and we discuss some of the things they're going through and work through some of those emotions," Trawick said. "We're really taking the time to understand them and equip them with the resources they need to really move in the world.

We'll have speakers come in to talk about what it looks like to work against community violence, what it looks like to bring in resources to help other youth and what it looks like to be a leader."

The Hub's launch will include a full day of activities, featuring keynote speaker Gianna Peterson, Black SEL club president at Hillside High, and a panel discussion on innovative leadership and grounding.

Speaker Eric Moore, Black SEL's research lead, will discuss the lived experiences of Black youth, their

emotional and social needs, and what parents and teachers can do to make sure their voices are heard.

"We have a responsibility for each other. It's about owning our own collective power as a Black community. We have our individual actions, but we also have our collective actions, and that's how we make systemic change," he said.

Moore said SEL helps Black youth navigate systemic racist systems and institutions.

"A key reason why social emotional learning becomes really important is because the way we emotionally engage things impacts our ability to be successful; it's managing our emotions. Black SEL gives both youth and adults a framework for how to engage and overcome," he said.

The evening will culminate with a Dress to Defy Gala (Black Dandyism in the South) at the Durham Armory, and awards ceremony honoring community partners.

On the Net:
blacksel.org



SIMPLYXCARRIE VIA INSTAGRAM

Carrie Everett is crowned Miss North Carolina 2024. Everett was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer in July after her reign ended.

Miss North Carolina 2024 faces rare cancer

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vere, but then I went back a week later, because I just knew something wasn't right," Everett said in an interview from her parents' Seattle, Wash., living room.

Within a few days, she started coughing up blood, was rushed to the hospital and was admitted. A biopsy was done, and she was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive gastric cancer, metastatic signet ring cell carcinoma.

"Initially, it was a lot of fear," Everett told ABC 11 News from her home in Auburn, Washington. "You never think that something like this could happen, especially at the age of 21, coming off of such an incredible year of serving the state of North Carolina."

Everett handed over the Miss North Carolina crown in June. One month later, she was on a journey she didn't see coming.

"I knew my life was going to change," she said. "I was shocked. I was also very scared because you hear that word and think of all these stories. I knew my life was going to change," said Everett.

She was diagnosed with signet ring cell carcinoma, a rare and aggressive advanced form of cancer.

Signet ring carcinoma is characterized by its distinctive appearance under a microscope, where the cancer

cells resemble signet rings. The exact cause is unknown, but it is believed to be related to factors such as helicobacter pylori infection, genetics, and environmental exposures.

Early symptoms of SRCC may be vague and nonspecific, including abdominal pain, indigestion, nausea and vomiting, weight loss, and fatigue.

As the cancer progresses, symptoms may become more severe and include jaundice, fluid buildup in the abdomen, difficulty swallowing, and swollen lymph nodes.

Treatment depends on the stage of the cancer and the patient's overall health. Options may include removal of the affected organ or tissue, systemic medications to kill cancer cells and radiation therapy.

SRCC has a five-year survival rate of less than 30%. The survival rate is lower for patients with advanced-stage cancer or those who do not respond to treatment.

"I was hooked up to machines all the time and wasn't able to breathe. I had to be on oxygen," she said.

Her mother, Mary Everett, shared the last few months have been difficult, but faith has helped.

"The Bible says it is better to put your trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man. The prognosis wasn't good. We turn our attention to God," she said.



NORTH CAROLINA A&T STATE UNIVERSITY

North Carolina A&T State University, the nation's largest historically Black college, reported record enrollment in the fall 2025 semester.

UNC System records more than 250,000 enrollment

Continued from page 1A

campus was closed for 33 days last year during the peak season for recruitment and campus tours.

The UNC System also credits the growth in part to policies that simplify the transfer and admissions process. NC College Connect offered automatic admission to more than 62,000 high school seniors with a weighted grade point average of 2.8 or above.

An era of financial uncertainty

In-state undergraduate tuition has not increased in the UNC System for nine straight years. Few states can make that claim.

But UNC Board of Governors Chair Wendy Floyd Murphy last week indicated that the system would not be able to continue holding tuition rates in place.

"Generous state funding has allowed us to keep tuition low, and we are grateful for the support of our leaders in the North Carolina legislature. Even so, we are now in an era of some financial uncertainty," she said. "Inflation has driven up the cost of operations at our institutions."

"Universities have absorbed those pressures while holding the line on tuition, but we cannot expect them to continue doing so without negative impacts."

Murphy said potential budget changes both at the federal and state level mean the system must strengthen financial positions at the campus level.

"After careful consideration, the board will allow our universities to propose modest tuition increases of up to 3% for

resident undergraduates," Murphy said. "But let me be clear, this doesn't change our existing policies around college affordability. We've guaranteed students that if they graduate in four years, their tuition will not rise."

Murphy said the system has built faculty teaching workloads to make sure students can earn the credits they need to graduate on time, taking on less debt.

UNC's fixed tuition guarantee will remain in place for students, and any increases in resident undergraduate tuition will only apply to new students who enroll in the fall of 2026.

The system notes that special fees may be considered, but only to cover inflationary costs for existing academic programs, or to pay for new programs approved by the Board of Governors.

North Carolina Promise Institutions — Elizabeth City State, Fayetteville State, UNC Pembroke and Western Carolina — will continue to offer reduced resident tuition rates set by the state legislature.

Murphy stressed that the tuition increase will not be automatic. Campuses will be required to develop proposals with input from their communities and boards of trustees and have their proposals reviewed by the system's Board of Governors in February 2026.

"Going forward, we will be judicious," she said. "We simply acknowledge the reality of rising cost and the need to protect our institutions, preserve quality of instruction and ensure student success."



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Gerald O. Johnson | CEO/PUBLISHER

gerald.johnson@thecharlottepost.com

André P. Johnson | CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

andre.johnson@thecharlottepost.com

Herbert L. White | EDITOR IN CHIEF

herb.white@thecharlottepost.com

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Dems need wall to wall engagement with voting public

By Kevin Harris and Richard McDaniel

SPECIAL TO THE POST

Last week marked national voter registration day and Democrats sure could use the help. Between 2020 and 2024, Democrats lost 2.1 million registered voters while Republicans gained 2.4 million across the 30 states that track party registration. That's a net swing of 4.5 million voters—adding to Democrats bleeding as more Americans already have negative impressions about our brand.

Democrats' approval ratings have dropped below 35 percent among white men, Hispanic men, and working-class voters across the board. The party's advantage among Black adults has shrunk to its smallest margin since 1999, while Donald Trump nearly doubled his support among Black voters and drew even with Democrats among Hispanic voters in 2024.

These numbers hold strong implications for the Democratic Party's ability to win national elections. In the battleground state of Pennsylvania our voter registration lead has collapsed from over 500,000 to just 53,000 today. Similar trends exist across several other key battlegrounds needed to recapture Congress and the White House.

Like our brand, the key infrastructure Democrats need to win is crumbling.

Democrats have made fatal assumptions about voter loyalty among key groups. For too long, we assumed working class white, Black and Brown voters would always be there. We stopped meaningfully organizing these communities. Our engagement is relatively tepid, simply investing resources late in the game just before an election. Voters are right to ask where have we been?

To win again, Democrats must re-engage the working class from the ground up 365 days a year. Democrats need permanent staff conducting monthly drives at community centers, churches, barbershops, and college campuses—not just during campaign season.

We need year-round organizing that connects our policies with the daily struggles working class voters are experiencing. Registering voters without educating them about Democratic policies is political malpractice.

We have to remember that politics is relational and not every objective can be achieved through a splashy advertising campaign alone. Democrats need consistent presence supporting local causes and community events that build trust over time across communities.

And Democrats must make digital organizing and texting a permanent fixture, particularly in reaching young working-class voters.

Regular town halls and listening sessions must happen year-round to maintain coalitions, not just when Democrats need votes.

The bottom line is that 4.5 million voters didn't swing away from Democrats overnight. This resulted from years of Democratic neglect while Republicans methodically engaged in voter manipulation and intimidation to lock in a governing majority.

Trump's attacks on the democratic process and integrity of our elections are well documented. He's pressuring red states to redraw congressional maps before the 2026 midterms to ensure a GOP majority before a single vote has been cast.

When Republicans control redistricting, they eliminate competitive districts. When they suppress civic engagement through intimidation, they reduce Democratic turnout. All of this adds up to the working class losing more and more ground and Democrats falling farther behind.

The only counter to systematic voter suppression is systematic voter engagement—infrastructure that works 365 days a year.

Republicans are playing the long game while Democrats play election to election. The GOP is investing in permanent infrastructure while Democrats rely on temporary and transactional mobilization. Republicans are building sustained relationships while Democrats send texts every two years asking for votes.

Democrats are treating voters as numbers instead of building genuine relationships. The path forward requires admitting the old model failed and committing to year-round organizing—showing up consistently, investing in communities, and earning trust through sustained presence must be central to how Democrats regain relevancy in the lives of working-class voters.

Democracy isn't a spectator sport, and neither is voter engagement. Democrats must stop analyzing our problems with working class voters and start acting to bring those voters back into the fold block by block and one registration at a time.

Kevin Harris and Richard McDaniel are veteran Democratic strategists with over 100 political campaigns between them including the last five presidential elections and several congressional races. They co-host "Maroon Bison Presents: The Southern Comfort Podcast."

President can't take a joke, so we suffer



BENJAMIN JEALOUS

A Midwestern schoolteacher once told her class that a sense of humor is a sign of intelligence. "Look around the classroom," she said. "The smartest kids always get the joke right away. The others might struggle."

I've never confirmed that theory with a doctor. But I believe it. Humor takes quick thinking. It takes perspective. It takes freedom.

That's why it matters when our presidents can laugh at themselves. For generations, they have. Reagan turned questions about his age into a punchline. Obama roasted himself at the Correspondents' Dinner. Even George W. Bush, the butt of endless

late-night jokes, learned to grin and roll with it.

That humility has always set us apart from the monarchy we broke away from. Kings demand silence. Presidents in a free nation are supposed to be able to laugh along with the people.

Donald Trump doesn't get that. He can't take a joke—and worse, he tries to punish the people who make them. First Stephen Colbert. Now Jimmy Kimmel. Using the power of the presidency to go after comedians isn't just petty. It's dangerous.

Authoritarians hate humor because humor exposes them. Stalin, Mussolini—every strongman fears the comic more than the critic. A joke spreads fast. A sharp one can cut through a wall of propaganda. That's why free countries protect comedians. They keep leaders honest by refusing to let them take themselves too seriously.

We forget: America was born on satire. Franklin drew cartoons mocking the British crown. Revolutionaries cracked jokes as easily as they fired muskets. Laughter was proof that no king could control the American spirit.

But when presidents can't laugh at themselves, citizens stop laughing too. And when citizens stop laughing, they stop questioning. That silence is the first step toward submission.

This isn't about whether you watch Jimmy Kimmel or Stephen Colbert. It's about whether you want to live in a country where the president decides which jokes are allowed. Today it's late-night hosts. Tomorrow it could be a car-

toonist, a college kid, or you for what you post online.

The strength of America isn't that our leaders are above mockery. It's that they can survive it. A president who can't take a joke can't take criticism. And a president who can't take criticism can't be trusted with freedom.

That Midwestern schoolteacher was right: humor is a sign of intelligence. But more than that, it's a sign of liberty. And if we want to keep our democracy strong, we better insist on leaders who can laugh—even, and especially, at themselves.

Ben Jealous is a professor of practice at the University of Pennsylvania and the former head of the NAACP. He is a direct descendant of the youngest combatant at the Battle of Lexington and Concord.

How to improve public safety in NC

The tragic death of Iryna Zarutska has brought sharp focus to public safety and the role of government in protecting its citizens.

The assassinations of former Minnesota House Speaker Me-

lissa Hertman and her husband, along with right-wing political commentator Charlie Kirk, further underscore the urgent need to rethink public safety in today's world.

These events also highlight a broader reality facing North Carolina's metropolitan areas: we are growing rapidly.

Charlotte, in particular, is evolving beyond its identity as a Southern city into a modern, globally connected urban center. Our approach to public safety must reflect and keep pace with that growth.

My career in law enforcement spans more than 30 years. I began as the first Black female sworn member of the Asheville Police Department and was later recruited by the North Carolina State Highway Patrol, where I became the first Black female trooper in the history of our state. I ultimately retired from that organization as the first female to complete 30 years of service in law enforcement—a testament to my dedication.

Since 1985, I have worked in Mecklenburg County, where I spent my time working with courts, crime prevention, traffic safety, and my community.

Even in retirement, my commitment to public safety and criminal justice has remained unwavering. I continued to contribute by teaching classes at several community colleges, mentoring the next generation of professionals. I became an active member of multiple law enforcement associations and served on the Mecklenburg County Commissioners' Citizens' Criminal Justice Advisory Committee.

Additionally, I worked for seven years as a traffic incident management coordinator with the North Carolina Department of Transportation. In 2018, I ran for the state House of Representatives, representing District 101 in Mecklenburg County.

During my four terms in the House, I introduced a wide range of bills focused on improving public safety

in Mecklenburg and across our state. These included efforts to increase the number of magistrates in Mecklenburg, expand the presence of State Highway Patrol troopers in the county, make death by reckless boating a crime, increase the penalties for illegally passing a stopped school bus, and authorize the use of highway cameras to record traffic violations.

I also worked to raise salaries for those who serve in juvenile justice and advanced many other initiatives designed to strengthen safety, accountability, and trust.

As a state representative, I served on multiple committees regarding public safety and criminal justice. I was appointed by then-Speaker of the House Tim Moore to serve on the Select Committee on Community Relations, Law Enforcement, and Justice, established in the wake of the murder of George Floyd.

I also created the Bipartisan Justice and Public Safety Caucus with membership from both parties.

With steadfast resolve, I am determined to honor the commitment that the family of Iryna Zarutska has asked of us—all the leaders of Charlotte, Mecklenburg, and North Carolina—that we advance meaningful reforms to ensure such a tragedy never happens again.

Therefore, I propose several paths forward—to follow through the family's wishes and strengthen public safety for every community and every family across North Carolina.

Improving local police

We must begin by strengthening our local police. Across North Carolina, every law enforcement agency is facing staffing shortages, and too often, these shortages mean that police forces do not fully reflect the communities they serve.

At the state level, we should provide grants to local governments to help grow their departments with a force that is truly representative of the communities they protect. These grants should also raise salaries, so that officers can afford to live in and be part of the communities they are sworn to protect.

Equally important, funding must support expanded in-service training that equips officers to meet the challenges of modern policing, including

training in de-escalation, situational awareness, ethics, and other evolving areas of community need. A well-supported and well-trained police force is vital to public safety and community well-being.

Transportation safety

There has understandably been greater attention on transportation, but it is essential to recognize that we must address two distinct needs: public transportation and road safety.

Investment in our light rail system should prioritize enhancing security by ensuring a stronger and more visible safety presence. To support this, certain state or local laws may need to be updated to allow official deputization of light rail security personnel.

The state should also provide funding to upgrade city bus fleets, ensuring they are equipped with stronger protections and other critical necessities for riders.

At the same time, we must increase funding to repair and modernize our roads, while ensuring that emergency responders are fully trained and equipped with the necessary technology and resources to quickly and effectively activate traffic incident management techniques. These steps will improve the quality of our transportation systems and make travel safer for all.

Court system

The General Assembly funds the North Carolina court system, and meaningful change must begin there.

By increasing the number of magistrates and strengthening their training, more cases can be heard fairly and with the knowledge needed to reach the right decisions.

Reforms must also include updating the technology used in our courts—so magistrates and clerks can enter information quickly, and attorneys on both sides can file what they need without delay.

Furthermore, the General Assembly should provide greater support for public defenders, including higher salaries. A well-resourced public defender system guarantees every person's constitutional right to due process while ensuring that cases move forward without unnecessary delays or errors.

In addition, district attorney offices across the state need more assistant district attorneys to manage their caseloads effectively. This will allow each

case to receive the time and attention it deserves, without overburdening the offices or risking the quality of justice delivered. Finally, the General Assembly should explore support for technical improvements that can address long-standing problems in our legal and court processes.

Prisons/jails

Our prison system must focus not only on punishment, but also on rehabilitation. Striking this balance is challenging, yet essential.

Investment in our light rail system should prioritize enhancing security by ensuring a stronger and more visible safety presence.

We need to increase salaries and compensation for those who work in our prison and juvenile systems, recognizing the critical role they play. At the same time, we must invest more in mental health services and addiction treatment within our prisons. Expanding support for rehabilitation and strengthening reentry programs will give individuals a real chance to rebuild their lives and will help reduce repeat offenses.

Social services

More funding should be directed to social services—such as mental health care, homelessness programs, and hunger relief—because these supports are essential to rehabilitation and reducing offenses.

This is not an exhaustive list, but rather a starting point. Many safety measures—such as establishing death by reckless boating, providing bulletproof glass for law enforcement vehicles, ensuring the Metrolina Transportation Center in Charlotte remains open 24/7, and more—can and should be strengthened to protect all North Carolinians.

My colleagues and I, as Democrats in the General Assembly, have introduced numerous public safety bills that the Republican Majority, as I put it, put the bills in File 13. Where Republicans repeatedly refuse to hear our bills (no matter how good they are) and leave them to die in the Rules Committee.

It is time for our colleagues across the aisle to stop blocking progress and embrace initiatives Democrats have advanced to support law enforcement and strengthen our criminal justice system. Democrats stand ready to work together to create and improve laws that serve the people and make our communities safer.

Carolyn Logan of Charlotte represents North Carolina House District 101.

Winston-Salem deficit highlights state education issues

By Ahmed Jallow

SNC NEWSLINE

North Carolina's Superintendent Mo Green is linking the \$46 million budget shortfall in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools to the state's underfunding of public education.

During a presentation last week on the state's new strategic plan, Green noted that North Carolina ranks 48th in the nation for education spending,

spending thousands less per student than neighbors like Virginia and South Carolina.

"While I think there was certainly mismanagement of resources in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools," Green said, "it also is the case that it's operated in a situation where we are underfunding our public schools pretty dramatically."

The district's financial turmoil has led to hundreds of job cuts this year, with assistant principals, support staff and employees in the Exceptional Children's program among those affected.

A state audit report released in August found the district used temporary COVID-19 relief funds to pay permanent salaries, approved spending without money in the budget and delayed basic account reconciliations. Auditors also flagged misuse of "suspense accounts," where at one point more than \$332 million sat without clear tracking.



TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Carolina quarterback Bryce Young runs for a first down in the Panthers' 30-0 win against the Atlanta Falcons Sept. 21, 2025 at Bank of America Stadium. Young completed 16-of-24 passes for 121 yards in addition to running for a touchdown.

Squeeze everything out of win No. 1

The Panthers finally have something to celebrate. Now, they need to start stacking successful Sundays.

It's about time the sun shined on the Panthers.



HERBERT
L. WHITE

Whether they were just that good in a 30-0 dog walking of the Atlanta Falcons or the Falcons were just that pathetic, it's secondary. Carolina needed respite from a summer of misery – winless pre-season, followed by a pair of uninspired losses to open the regular season – so any port in a storm, right?

The glass-half-full crowd will point to Carolina's domi-

nance in every phase, to notch its first win of the season, starting with Bryce Young managing an efficient offense. The most impressive unit, though, was the defense, which shut out Atlanta and even had a hand in putting points on the Panthers' side of the scoreboard with Chau Smith-Wade's interception return for a touchdown.

Michael Penix, whom the Falcons swear is going to be a really good quarterback someday, wasn't. Carolina thoroughly confused and flummoxed him into a nightmare and turned in three takeaways.

"When you have a chance to score in

every phase, you give yourself a great chance to win," Panthers coach Dave Canales said. "I thought the defense played an unbelievable game. The run game plan, the execution, the communication, all that stuff that we've been really just harping on is where we have to continue to grow."

Smith-Wade isn't old enough to remember the good old days when Carolina was relevant as an NFL franchise – there are fewer of us in number than ever – but he knows there is something to be said for aspiration. Why not start with one game of total butt-whupping?

"It felt good," he said. "Panthers Na-

tion, we knew this was something they were looking forward to. For me to be able to prance into the end zone and look at the fans, I started saying, 'Thank y'all, thank y'all.' I just wanted to give them a nostalgic feeling, really."

Canales, a glass-half-full adherent if ever there was one, knows there's much to be done with this flawed group. But, hey, wins don't show up that often around here, so he's all in on feeling good and going forward.

"There was still a couple of things that we need to clean up from a defensive standpoint. But to take advantage

Please see FOR A WEEK | 6A

Experience pays off for Panthers guard Chandler Zavala

By Jeff Hawkins

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

On the Carolina Panthers' third play from scrimmage against the Atlanta Falcons, pulling right guard Chandler Zavala cut off a defensive lineman for a 6-yard Chuba Hubbard run.

The play itself wasn't overly special, but it established a tone that led the offense downfield for a touchdown on their opening possession. Considering

the slow starts that have hampered the rebuilding Panthers over the last several seasons, the start helped the offensive line carry the momentum throughout Sunday's 30-0 win.

Zavala started for the injured Robert Hunt and aided in limiting the Falcons' deep defensive line. He will be called upon for the foreseeable future with Hunt on injured reserve.

"He's a guy we're counting on," coach

Dave Canales said. "(Zavala was) really solid. It certainly felt like a normal game."

Normal?

The Panthers' defense pitched its first shutout since 2020, and Bryce Young played turnover-free as the Panthers (1-2) captured their home opener. Reserve offensive lineman Brady Christensen was impressed with the makeshift lineup.

"Not a lot of drop-offs," he said. It proved to be a big effort for Zavala and new center Cade Mays.

Their teammates backed them up, with Young and receiver Tetairoa McMillan calling their efforts "phenomenal."

"They started the offense," McMillan said. We can't get going without them." Hunt (torn biceps) and Corbett (knee)

Please see ZAVALA | 6A

After losing CIAA debut, JC Smith has some work to do

By Herbert L. White

herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

Homecoming is get-right time for Johnson C. Smith football.

The Golden Bulls, who lost 28-10 at Virginia Union Saturday, struggled against the more physical Panthers, who established control of both lines and as a result were able to dictate terms of engagement. Saturday's opponent, Bluefield State (1-2), isn't in No. 22 Virginia Union's league in terms of talent, which gives the No. 21 Golden Bulls (3-1, 0-1 CIAA) an opportunity to even their conference record.

The Big Blue, which lost 72-7 to Wingate last week in a nonconference game, average 9.8 points per game while allowing 41.8. Bluefield State generates an average of 223.4 yards an outing compared to 423.1 for opponents.

Please see GOLDEN | 6A



Johnson C. Smith quarterback Kelvin Durham completed 20-of-35 passes for 193 yards in the Golden Bulls' 28-10 loss at Virginia Union on Sept. 20, 2025.

Reed in stride for second season

By Cameron Williams

cameron.williams@thecharlottepost.com

Tomekia Reed was burned out when she got to Charlotte.

For years at Jackson State, she poured everything into lifting the Tigers and SWAC women's basketball to prominence. She was successful, but it was tiring mentally and physically.

"I am just going to be really honest with you, I was burnt out when I got this job," Reed said. "I was in a position where I was bringing the SWAC to prominence. I was trying to make sure that people understood the importance and that there was a lot of value in those schools because everybody had looked down on HBCUs."

"I had put so much energy into the social media piece, in my team and encouraging them to just fight and be great. We were able to do so and we won big. It afforded me the job here, but when I got to Charlotte I was burnt out."

In Reed's first season with the 49ers, they went 11-21 and 4-14 in American Conference games. Reed, who was accustomed to transition basketball for easy layups at Jackson State, found a different style of



Reed

Independence High in position to make noise in Meck Power 6

By Herbert L. White

herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

Independence High has been through its share of adversity five weeks into the season.

Last week, the Patriots rallied from a 20-12 hole in the third quarter to beat previous No. 3 Palisades 27-20 on the road. Independence, which moves up to third in this week's rankings, got off to a 12-0 advantage before Palisades, rallied for the 20 unanswered points. The Patriots, though, had the final say with the final 15 points, capped by Jared Street's 3-yard run with 3 minutes, 11 seconds left.

"Our kids are resilient," Patriots coach D.J. McFadden said. "We've played good teams all nonconference, five weeks of it. We've been down in some of these games, so we just felt like, late in this game, when it got tight, that our experience in these games would come and take over. Credit to our kids, they kept

playing. They've been down before. They've been on the road and down before. And we just stuck with it."

Independence's defense sparked the rally by shutting Palisades out in the fourth quarter. The Pumas had one final chance to force overtime, but the Patriots forced a turnover on downs to seal the win.

"We would love to be balanced where we have a good offense and a good defense," McFadden said. "Our defense has some players over there. We got some dudes over there, a lot of good seniors, and I would like to think we're a little more mature on defense than on offense."

"When we get in games like this, we do lean on our defense and our captains. ... Making that big fourth down stop and holding them down at the end is not a surprise to us."

With the nonconference portion of the

schedule behind them, Independence has a week to prepare for the Meck Power Six 7A/8A opener against second-ranked West Charlotte. With Mallard Creek, Chambers and Butler also on the docket, every game will pose a top-level test.

"We've got to mature a little bit," McFadden said. "I think that's going to be our focus during this bye week. And then, just like anything else, anything else we talk about every day, just showing up every day, going 1-0 and getting better. We're going to keep chopping away at it and we'll rest up."

Hough on top of the Magnificent Seven

Hough and West Charlotte are still 1-2 in the Magnificent Seven rankings, while Independence moves up to the third spot this week.

The Huskies, the lone unbeaten team, have been first since the season's first week while

Please see LIONS | 6A

Please see REED | 6A

For a week, Panthers can celebrate success

Continued from page 5A

of some of those opportunities with Chau Smith-Wade with the touchdown, Mike [Jackson] with the interception, and then that punch-out at the end, it's just a form of habits. It's what we're trying to get done in practice is the more attempts we get on the ball, eventually you can get one out there.

"How about (kicker) Ryan Fitzgerald? Not just the field goals and PATs, but I really thought he impacted the game with how he kicked the ball on kickoff, gave us some amazing field position, some different kicks that gave them some issues getting the ball on the ground in the landing zone. Then offensively, I felt like we had some good rhythm going, and if you look at the stats, our penalties really put us in some unfavorable third downs, and we weren't able to convert some of the

longer ones."

Young, Carolina's own quarterback enigma, understands the power of positivity. Now there's the hard part - finding a way to replicate last week's success for the long term, starting Sunday at New England.

"Blessed," said Young, who completed 16-of-24 passes for 121 yards and ran for a score. "Feel great. I'm super proud of this team. Just complete team performance, all three phases. Defense, special teams, they played phenomenal all night, so this is great. ... It's one week, so for now it's great, and then we'll come back ... we'll watch the film, see what we can replicate, see what we can learn from it and turn the page, but it feels good right now."

Any port in a storm.
Herbert L. White is editor-in-chief.

Zavala gets his opportunity

Continued from page 5A

were hurt the previous week at Arizona. Both are expected to miss several weeks but could return during the season's second half.

In the meantime, Zavala and Mays will be called upon to replicate Sunday's results.

The Panthers' offense netted only 224 yards, but with the defense creating three turnovers and not allowing the Falcons to venture past Carolina's 30, Young took advantage of quality field possession. Cornerback Chau Smith-Wade also contributed a third-quarter pick-six that handed the Panthers a 17-0 advantage.

For Zavala, his consistent play against Atlanta was a stark contrast to outings over the past two seasons. The 2023 fourth-round draft pick from North Carolina State was thrust into the starting lineup in past seasons but wasn't ready for NFL challenges.

After Christensen suffered a season-ending torn bicep during the 2023 season opener, Zavala struggled with the Panthers limped to a 2-15 campaign. Young was sacked 62 times in 16 starts.

In his opening 25 snaps of 2024, Zavala posted a 28.1 pass-blocking grade from Pro Football Focus - No. 78 of 86 qualifying guards.

During a Week 3 game at Las Vegas last season, Zavala logged 22 snaps and posted a 48.2 grade.

Zavala likely is in line to receive a better report card this time around.

"We had enough time in our pass protection ... the run game looked solid," Canales said.

The Panthers' five starting offensive linemen, Taylor Moton, Damien Lewis, Mays, Zavala, and Ikem Ekwonu, helped push the Panthers to a 44-38 overtime win in Week 18 last season. In that game, Young passed for 251 yards three touchdowns and rushed for two more. He wasn't sacked.

Young's 4-yard touchdown scramble in the first quarter handed the Panthers their first lead of the season. The problems the offense encountered getting off plays, at times, last season and through their two games in '25 were virtually eliminated.

"They definitely stepped up," said Hubbard, who finished with 73 yards on 17 carries.

For Zavala, who did not appear at his locker following Sunday's win, experience appears to be paying dividends.

"(Zavala's) strong as an ox and experience helps a ton," Christensen said Wednesday. "If you're able to go into a game confidently and are able to ride through the highs and lows and get to the next play, it's huge."

Said right tackle Moton: "I love playing next to (Zavala), I'm excited about the following games with him."

Like Sunday against the Falcons' defensive front, which rotated as many as nine tackles and ends and generated six sacks against Minnesota during a Week 2 win. The Panthers yielded just one.

Xavier Legette needs a spark

By Jeff Hawkins

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Ja'Tavion Sanders tried to pull in a low Bryce Young pass over the middle 67 seconds before halftime in the Carolina Panthers 27-22 loss to the Arizona Cardinals. Officials ruled a catch for a first down.

Did Sanders trap the ball? As instant replay officials debated, Young directed his teammates to line up quickly, while wide receiver Xavier Legette casually strolled to the line of scrimmage.

By the time Legette was in position, officials overturned the spot, forcing the Panthers to punt. The Cardinals scored a touchdown with 4 seconds left for a 20-3 lead.

The Panthers fell to 0-2 for the fourth consecutive season. Legette absorbed instant social media heat.

A fan favorite despite producing pedestrian first-year statistics, Legette caught one pass for minus-2 yards against the Cardinals, making him the second player in NFL history to amass negative yardage on at least eight passing targets. In two games, Legette has four catches for 8 yards. He also has one rushing attempt for 0 yards.

Although the leisurely walk to the line of scrimmage may not have been a good look, Legette retained the confidence of coach Dave Canales and most of his teammates.

Legette needs to shake slow start

As rookie Tetairoa McMillan continues to emerge as a potential WR1, Canales confirmed Legette likely will remain WR2.

"I believe in Xavier," Canales said. "This is a guy that I truly believe in because of the way he's wired, the way that he works at it, the way that he continues to train. He had a great week of practice. He had some opportunities on the field where the ball didn't go his way."

"I tried to get him a few early touches. They didn't amount to much. But as the game kinda went on, (he had) a few of the other targets. He didn't make them. But I think it's a matter of just finding opportunities."

"I believe in him, I believe that he's approached this the right way and just continues to work. I'm gonna continue to encourage him and be in his corner and push him to keep striving for that and keep working on his chemistry with Bryce."

So far, the connection is sparkless.

Pro Football Focus tagged Legette with the offense's lowest Week 2 grade (47.9). In Week 1, he drew a 53.9 grade, the fifth lowest on offense.

David Moore offered some veteran advice, telling Legette to "keep his head up, keep going."

"If you're a competitor, you're going to be hard on yourself at times," Moore said. "I think that's the nature of the game, being a competitor, always expecting the best of yourself, keeping yourself to a higher standard."

Young understands. The 2023 No. 1 overall draft pick was benched after Week 2 last season but rebounded with a strong second half.

"I have all the confidence in the world in him," Young said. "He's going to be great for us. He's a huge part of this offense. It's not any sort of wavering, any sort of ... there's nothing like that. I'm excited for this week. I'm excited for the weeks following for him."

Tetairoa McMillan making good on draft status

On the flip side, McMillan became the first Panthers rookie to compile 100 yards receiving in a game since Christian McCaffrey in 2017. Following April's draft, some league insiders questioned the defense-needy Panthers' decision to draft McMillan eighth overall, bypassing prospects like edge Jalon Walker and defensive lineman Mykel Williams.

By taking receivers in the first round the last two drafts, GM Dan Morgan envisioned two lengthy, athletic wideouts who could help stretch the field and grow with Young. Legette, who dropped potential game-winning passes against Kansas City and Philadelphia last season, has yet to live up to expectations.

"I'm not worried about him at all," McMillan said. "The main thing for me, and what I see in him, is his confidence. He's a confident dude, and he's staying confident regardless of the outcome, regardless of whatever's going on."

A career receivers coach, Canales indicated he is taking Legette's early season struggles personally. As Carolina's primary play caller, Canales did not relinquish his responsibility of "putting him in positions to do the things that he's shown us he can do well in the past."

"It's not all on X," Canales said. "This is me, too, so I take it personally as well."



MATT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

West Charlotte High rose to second in this week's Magnificent Seven football rankings, trailing only Hough. The Lions (3-2) play at Mallard Creek Friday in a clash of Meck Power Six rivals.

Lions, Patriots rise in the Magnificent Seven ranks

Continued from page 5A

presseason No. 1 West Charlotte holds the runner-up spot for another week ahead of a Meck Power Six showdown against Mallard Creek.

New to the rankings for the second time this season is Ardrey Kell, which upset previous No. 6 Chambers.

This week's rankings, with overall record and previous week's ranking:

1. Hough (5-0, first). The Huskies destroyed New Bern 63-15 to solidify them as not only the best team in Mecklenburg, but perhaps one of the best in North Carolina. Only question left is can they prove it in the postseason. Next game is West Mecklenburg at home.

2. West Charlotte (3-2, second). The Lions routed West Mecklenburg 55-0 to once again earn the unofficial by literal Best in the West title. What did the Hawks do to deserve such mistreatment? Next up for West Charlotte is a tougher test at Mallard Creek.

3. Independence (4-1, fourth). The Patriots rallied from a 20-12 hole to beat Pal-

isades 27-20 in Mecklenburg's best game of the week. They get the week off to prepare for West Charlotte on Oct. 3.

4. Mallard Creek (4-1, fifth). The Mavericks took down Cardinal Gibbons 20-16 to keep their good thing going. Now things are about to get serious with a home date against West Charlotte in what's this week's game of the week.

5. Palisades (3-2, third). The Pumas had Independence right where they wanted them before falling short 27-20. They'll try to recover against Ardrey Kell, which won't be an easy task.

6. Myers Park (4-1, seventh). The Ponies were impressive against Charlotte Christian in a 24-6 win. They host Garinger Friday with a chance to add another pelt to an already impressive haul.

7. Ardrey Kell (3-2, unranked). The Knights' 16-13 road win against Chambers was enough to push them into this week's rankings and knock the Cougars out. AK is off this week to contemplate their Oct. 3 tangle against Palisades.

Reed ready for second season

Continued from page 5A

play.

"This league is so much different than the SWAC," she said. "The SWAC is a driving league. Most of the teams there drive the ball to the basket. The American is a shooting league. A lot of the teams have great shooters, so this is something that myself and my staff had to adjust to. I have a much bigger staff here as well, so adjustments were the big thing."

The 49ers return three players from last year's roster: guards Imani Smith and Caroline Thiel along with center Daphane White. Reed recognized all three could have taken the easy route and left, but appreciates they stuck it out.

"I absolutely love Caroline," Reed said. "When I interviewed for the job, everyone kept saying, 'You have to keep CT.' ... From the day I met her 'til now she is one of the hardest workers... and her energy is through the roof. Smitty is such a smart player. We had her playing [multiple positions] and she got the job done because she is a determined player. Daphane has been through so much. She has battled injuries. After the season last year, I told her she should probably go pro. She said, 'Coach, I don't

want to end my [college] career like this,' so she decided to come back. When we get a healthy Daphane on the floor, it is going to be hard to guard her."

The rest of the roster is composed of new players that Reed felt embodied character traits she has within herself.

"This team is going to be exciting," she said. "When I went out and recruited, I was looking for players who resembled who I was as a person. That is someone with a lot of energy, resilient, tough, and that is what these players bring to the table. They are fun to work with and fun to coach. They make mistakes just like anyone else, but they work through it. They love each other and I think that is really important when you bring in several new players, making sure they have that chemistry and have one another's back. But what I love probably the most about this group is that they are coachable, and they want to be great."

Golden Bulls have work to do

Continued from page 5A

ponents. JCSU averages 31.3 points per game.

Virginia Union, coming off a 41-38 overtime loss to Edward Waters the previous week, leaned into its personality against Smith: defense and a bruising ground attack. The results were evident as the Panthers controlled both sides of the line while JCSU struggled to match their physicality.

JCSU couldn't keep pace in completing drives, which cost them on the scoreboard. The Golden Bulls were 2-of-4 in red zone efficiency, but only one possession ended with a touchdown. Virginia Union, on the other hand, turned all four opportunities into Curtis Allen touchdown runs.

The most glaring issue for Smith was their run defense, which Virginia Union gashed for 200 yards on 38 carries - the fourth-most against a Maurice Flowers-coached team. Chowan (251 yards), Bluefield State (203 yards) and Livingstone (204) each broke the 200-yard barrier in 2022. Flowers' debut season. The Panthers managed only 40 yards last year in a 20-16 loss in Charlotte.

Allen did most of the damage with 108 yards and four touchdowns on 23 carries while quarterback R.J. Rosales added 63 on nine attempts. At an average of 5.3 yards per carry, VUU controlled momentum although JCSU maintained possession for 31 minutes, 48 seconds.

Virginia Union led 14-10 at intermission and outscored the Golden Bulls 14-0 in the second half to salt away their most impressive win of the season.

Not very clean

VUU got the better of Smith's special

teams. Zyaire Tart ripped off a 61-yard kick return to open the game and added a 40-yard punt to set up a third-quarter touchdown.

Excessive penalties again plagued JCSU with the Golden Bulls flagged 11 times for 101 yards compared to 10 for 66 yards for Virginia Union. Four games in, it's indicative of a larger issue for JCSU, who went over 100 yards in penalties for the second time this season.

Defensively, Virginia Union turned Golden Bulls quarterback Kelvin Durham pedestrian and as a result, so was the offense. Durham completed 20-of-35 passes for 193 yards but didn't look very comfortable in the second half as VUU turned up the pressure. He scored on a 2-yard run in the second quarter to force a 7-7 tie but spent most of the game trying to avoid VUU's pass rush, which sacked him four times. He also tossed a second-quarter interception in Panthers' territory to kill a drive.

Worth the wait

The best news for JCSU was the return of receiver Brevin Caldwell, who missed the first three games for an undisclosed reason. The two-time All-CIAA pick caught eight passes for 94 yards with a long of 24 yards. Biggie Proctor added 75 yards on seven catches.

The linebacker duo of Vincent Hill and Quavaris Crouch, had their most productive outing of the season with 16 tackles combined. Crouch added a pair of sacks to go with his seven tackles while Hill chipped in nine stops. Defensive end Jalen Alexander continued his strong start with a forced fumble to go with four tackles.