



The Panthers' rookie class stepped up with big plays against Miami. Can they build momentum going forward?



HERBERT L. WHITE | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Security officers stationed at the Lynx Blue Line Bland Street station on Oct. 6. City leaders announced last week new initiatives to improve safety on Charlotte Area Transit System bus and light rail vehicles and waiting areas in the aftermath of the Aug. 22 stabbing death of Iryna Zarutska on a Blue Line train.

Commuter safety gets boost

Security initiatives on city buses and light rail debut, and more are on the way

By Cameron Williams
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New measures to ensure commuter safety on Charlotte public transit are already in plain sight.

A week after city officials announced steps to address safety upgrades on Charlotte Area Transit System routes and vehicles, security officers and police were visible on Uptown train platforms. Their presence are in response to the Aug. 22 stabbing death of Iryna Zarutska, 23 on the Lynx Blue Line. Decarlos Brown Jr., 34, is charged with murder as well as committing an act causing death on a mass transportation system, a federal offense. He has pleaded not guilty.

"Many of you know that I have been in this situation before and having to have this loss of Iryna Zarutska, it's been a terrible time for all of us," Mayor Vi Lyles said at an Oct. 3 press conference. "We

Please see **CATS** | 2A



MATT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Charlotte City Manager Marcus Jones talks during an Oct. 3, 2025, press conference announcing new public safety initiatives on Charlotte Area Transit System routes and vehicles. The initiatives are in response to the stabbing death of Iryna Zarutska on a Lynx Blue Line train in Uptown.

New life for the death penalty

By Herbert L. White
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North Carolina has revived the death penalty.

Gov. Josh Stein on Oct. 3 signed House Bill 307 into law, committing the state to capital punishment as part of a criminal justice overhaul. The law, crafted in the wake of the Aug. 22 stabbing death of Iryna Zarutska on a Lynx Blue Line train. The legislation includes revives the death penalty by removing barriers that have prevented executions. It requires a review of death penalty appeals within two years of filing, and bar continuances unless a judge declares extenuating circumstances in a case.



Stein

"North Carolinians deserve to live in safe communities without fear of violent criminals being cycled in and out of the justice system," House Speaker Destin Hall (R-Caldwell) said last month in a statement. "This legislation eliminates dangerous cashless bail policies, holds magistrates accountable, sets a new standard requiring judicial officials to order



Hall

Please see **NEW** | 3A

Boosting NC nonprofit land trusts as housing fix

By Kylie Marsh
THE TRIANGLE TRIBUNE

RALEIGH - What if you could buy a home with guaranteed affordability without skyrocketing property taxes?

That's what community land trusts, or CLTs, do. By providing and maintaining affordable housing, CLTs help close the racial wealth gap.

Representatives of Community Home Trust, WeBuild Concord and Watauga Community Housing Trust presented an education session at last week's North Carolina Affordable Housing Conference in Raleigh.



Graham

North Carolina has 12 CLTs, and more are sprouting up nationwide. CLTs are nonprofit organizations comprised of members who live within the communities of the land that they own. Typically, CLTs also have real estate brokers on staff.

Through public and private investment, these nonprofits purchase land and build homes with the goal of selling them at affordable prices to low-income families. The homeowners enter a 99-year ground lease with the CLT, agreeing to sell their homes to other low-income families at an affordable price, thus maintaining a supply of affordable housing for community members in perpetuity.

Kimberly Sanchez, executive director of Community Home Trust based in Orange County, calls it "equity shifting," because the

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Trump immigration policies affect Black communities, too

By William J. Ford
MARYLAND MATTERS

For anyone who thinks the Trump administration's immigration policies are targeting Latino communities only, U.S. Rep. Maxwell Frost would like to set you straight.

Maxwell (D-Fla.) said that thousands of Black people, who like him are of Black and Latino descent, are afraid as U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and state and local law enforcement arrest people regardless of their legal immigration status.

"I see it very prevalent in my community here from Orlando, Florida, with our Haitian community that is being targeted, and also with Black Latinos that are being targeted," Frost said during a panel discussion at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's legislative conference in Washington, D.C.

The discussion came on the day Des Moines Public Schools superintendent Ian Roberts, who is Guyanese, was detained. School district officials said they had no information on why he was being held.

Frost questioned the need for ICE. "The fact of the matter is that we have other federal law enforcement to help ensure that we have an orderly and humane immigration process at the federal level," he said. "Creating a whole agency to literally

Please see **TRUMP'S** | 2A



TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

A collaborate between Smart Surfaces Coalition and the city of Charlotte aims to reduce extreme heat emanating from permeable sources like roads and rooftops.

Partnership goal: Drop temps by mitigating extreme heat sources

By Cameron Williams
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Charlotte is hotter than ever. But steps are being taken to change sources of extreme heat.

An analysis by the Smart Surfaces Coalition found areas in the city with an abundance of dark surfaces like roofs, roadways and parking lots are an average of 14 degrees hotter than areas with green space. The coalition is a non-profit whose goal is to help

cities lower average temperature, which in turn lowers energy bills and allows people to live more comfortably. The coalition is partnering with the city of Charlotte.

"What motivated us to create this is that cities are getting hotter and hotter," coalition CEO and founder Greg Kats said. "This is not just because of climate change, but because they're covering themselves in dark

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CATS commuter security measures make their debut

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know the violence was on our light rail, but we also know that our city is mourning this loss and will likely never forget it. No one in Charlotte should feel unsafe about getting to work, school or home to their family."

Lyles said the city has been working with the White House, other federal officers and assistants to ensure that CATS adds patrol units like bike teams and all-terrain vehicles.

"These are not things that were promised," she said. "These are the things that we are doing. These steps are in motion. Our city departments, CATS leadership and federal and state partners are sitting at the same table, sharing information and coordinating and collaborating each step of the way safety is taking care if all of us work together. And I want to be clear that I often hear from our neighbors, our residents, the people that live in this great city, who just want to feel safe."

City manager Marcus Jones outlined new measures taken to ensure transit safety as well as police pay.

"The City Council has spent the better part of the last year and a half having discussions around public safety," he said. "What's very clear is that while there are many things that we can do, there's more that has to be done."

"We have multiple city departments and multiple agencies that play a role in safety, but in terms of the city of Charlotte, about 40% of our general fund budget is solely for police. Forty percent of our general fund budget supports police. When you add fire [fighters] to it, it's about 60% of our general fund budget. Over the past several years, we have made tremendous investments in public safety."

Jones said recent changes in promotions and compensation have helped with first responder retention. Some job vacancies have been shifted to civilian positions, so patrol officers don't have to fill roles like the 911 center.

"What I do is I have opportunities with our Public Safety Pay Plan Committee... and we talk about what's important for attracting great people in public safety as well as retaining them," he said. "So, since 2019 we have increased the starting salary for police by 34% and the top out sal-

ary by 41%.

CATS interim CEO Brent Cagle said new equipment being deployed to help ensure the safety of rail and bus commuters like new bikes and all-terrain vehicles to move security officers.

"It really is a visual way to show our commitment to safety and security throughout transit. The partnership with [Professional Police Services] is growing and evolving as we work together to ensure the safety of our operators, our customers, and as we work to reduce or eliminate variation throughout the system. All of these are top priorities and CATS with PPS, and in partnership with [Charlotte Mecklenburg Police], we are ready to implement and execute on these plans."

Said Jones: "We work with community leaders; we work with the business community with a focus on a comprehensive plan as relates to public safety. More will come in the next week or two, but I want you to know that we focused on various areas in our city, starting with the Uptown, but not limited to Uptown. We have additional resources in our Central Division. We have targeted patrols, and targeted response for intervention and outreach. We're working more to make sure that we can keep our community safe."

Cagle added that he did not think it was feasible to have armed security at every CATS station.

"We also don't believe it creates a force that can stay mobile to respond throughout the system," he said, "if there are significant numbers of security on every vehicle. If those trains need to be stopped for some reason, that means those security officers are stationary with that train. And so again, it's not about there being personnel on every vehicle every day, all day long. It's are personnel visibly present throughout the entire system."

There will also be increased emphasis on preventing fare evasion as a measure to improve commuter safety.

"We have a lot to do," Lyles said, "and I hope that you understand that that's why we're standing here today, is to answer as many questions as possible, but also to think about what would be the best thing to help our city be who we can be."

Program aims to adjust extreme heat sources

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surfaces and more people. Also, as populations grow, you're paving over green areas, so there's more flooding, and that results in mold. You're seeing it in an uptick in asthma and allergies among kids, so it's got this huge range of bad outcomes in our cities to have tons of dark surfaces."

The coalition's survey of Charlotte found approximately 294,000 roads, 5,644 lane-miles of city roads and 1,200 acres of parking lots - impermeable surfaces that absorb up to 95% of the solar radiation and causes temperatures to increase. Heather Bolick, the city's chief resilience and sustainability officer, said Charlotte is integrating smart surfaces into new construction.

"In our sustainable facilities policy, it requires all of our new construction, all of our roof replacement projects, to have smart surfaces," she said. "So, all of our roof replacements have what we call smart roofs. The roofs are white reflective surfaces. ... We also have requirements around having native vegetation around our buildings. We have concrete, which is also a reflective material, so all of those different things are a part of the city's policies moving forward."

What this means for you

By getting rid of tarmac and other types of dark surfaces, it can reduce average temperatures by 3.1 to 6.6 degrees.

"Working with the Smart Surfaces Coalition has allowed us to further our progress toward meeting the city's sustainability goals, as outlined in the

Strategic Energy Action Plan Plus," Mayor Vi Lyles said in a statement. "This work is critical, especially for our most vulnerable communities, and it is energizing to collaborate with a group equally as passionate about preserving our environment."

The Strategic Energy Action Plan also focuses on preserving tree canopy, which is proven to help lower average temperature and energy bills. The presence of trees - and mitigation of extreme temperatures - are more prevalent in upper income neighborhoods.

"When you put in trees as part of this strategy, you're obviously getting a lot more rainfall that's captured and doesn't run off, that's going into the ground," Kats said. "It's keeping up the water table so that the trees can access water. Also, the shade from the trees - if you walk out of the shade in a tree and back in again on a sunny day, it'll feel 10 to 12 degrees different. It really matters in terms of comfort for pedestrians."

Bolick added that planting trees by roads also go a long way in mitigating heat.

"There are continued efforts to preserve and also require trees in the right of way," she said, "We've actually seen a few different heat maps, and they're all saying the same thing, which is obvious: that where you have transportation and roads is really where you have the heat. By keeping those street trees maintained and healthy, that's really where you're going to see the reduction in heat."



TAYLOR KNOPF | NC HEALTH NEWS

Founder and CEO of Promise Resource Network Cherene Caraco is flanked by peer support specialists and local law enforcement officials, including Mecklenburg Sheriff Gary McFadden, at the 2022 ribbon-cutting ceremony for the mental health agency's peer-run respite in Charlotte.

Light rail killing exposes gaps in the state's mental health system

By Rachel Crumpler and Taylor Knopf

NC HEALTH NEWS

In early September, video of a man stabbing 23-year-old Ukrainian refugee Iryna Zarutska to death on a light rail car in Charlotte shocked the country. People from across the political spectrum demanded answers: How does a horrific, unprovoked attack occur between two strangers? What needs to change so something like it doesn't happen again?

Law enforcement officers say the man was Decarlos Brown Jr., whose criminal and mental health record quickly came under scrutiny. The incident also fueled new legislation by North Carolina's Republican leaders, intended to be tougher on crime.

But the new bill - passed easily in both the state Senate and House of Representatives - doesn't add funding for North Carolina's mental health system.

Brown, 34, was diagnosed with schizophrenia and living on the streets. Over the past two decades, he's been arrested more than a dozen times, including several low-level misdemeanors. In 2015, Brown was convicted of armed robbery and served more than five years in prison. During his last encounter with law enforcement in January, when he repeatedly called 911, he reportedly told officers that "man-made" material was inside his body, controlling his actions.

Brown's mother says he tried to find him psychiatric help. His sister says if he'd received proper treatment, the killing could have been avoided. Many say Brown should have

been locked up - either in a jail or psychiatric facility. The reality is he spent time in both, and he didn't get the help he needed.

People with severe mental health disorders often cycle in and out of hospital rooms and jail cells, with little to no mental health treatment in between. Many also struggle with basic needs - housing, employment, access to care - that, if met, would help them be productive and stable in the community.

Mental health experts say they have long been familiar with the fractures and holes in the criminal justice and mental health systems that were exposed by the Charlotte killing. But the general public doesn't see them until such a tragedy throws the gaps into the spotlight.

"I believe this incident really highlights a systemic failure, not an individual or family failure," said Kate Weaver, executive director of NAMI Charlotte, an organization that supports people with mental illness and their family members. "When people with serious mental illness don't receive consistent care, there are risks."

If North Carolina is serious about finding solutions, advocates say, it will take resources and willpower to overhaul parts of the mental health system that aren't working and to establish an array of services in the community that actually support people.

Those resources have not been forthcoming.

Falling into chasms

People often first encounter the mental health system during a crisis - either through an arrest or an emergency room visit. In both scenarios, law en-

forcement officers are typically involved.

Across the U.S., jails have become de facto mental health facilities. The federal Substance Use and Mental Health Services Administration estimates that 44 percent of people in jails and 37 percent of those in prisons have a mental illness. Jails, in particular, are often ill-equipped to manage people with complex health needs; the costs for managing those mental health issues can be too much for smaller county budgets.

When someone is brought to an emergency room in a mental health crisis - whether it's a suicide attempt or a psychotic episode - they are often placed under an involuntary commitment and undergo forced psychiatric hospitalization. By state law, police officers serve involuntary commitment court orders and often transport patients between hospitals, frequently in handcuffs and shackles.

The experience can be jarring, and scarring. "Transitions in general for all human beings are tough," said Cherene Caraco, director of Promise Resource Network, a mental health agency based in Charlotte that is staffed entirely by people who've had mental health struggles. "And then you're talking about a transition into an institutional setting and then out of an institutional setting where you are forever changed when your rights are removed."

Caraco said most people exit psychiatric hospitals, jails and prisons without follow-up support. "You come out to nothing," she said.

Please see **LIGHT** | 3A

Trump's immigration policies impact Black communities, too

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go to our communities and now en masse and terrorize our people, I think is not needed."

President Donald Trump has authorized National Guard troops to take over law enforcement duties in Washington D.C., and dispatched them to cities led by Black Democratic mayors, including Los Angeles and Memphis, while weighing whether to send troops to Baltimore, Chicago and New Orleans.

Some Republican governors such as Patrick Morrisey of West Virginia and Mike DeWine of Ohio were quick to send their National Guard units to D.C., while Republican Gov. Bill Lee of Tennessee deployed troops to Memphis, his state's second largest city, in aid of Trump's orders.

Haddy Gassama, senior

policy counsel at the ACLU, said people need to know the laws in their states.

Gassama said local and state agencies can participate in 287g agreements with ICE, allowing the federal agency to delegate certain tasks to state and local law enforcement officials such as executing warrants in their jails and identifying and beginning removal proceedings against individuals arrested by local law enforcement.

"The Trump administration has said that their goal is to, just this year alone, detain and potentially deport up to 100,000 immigrants. They're well on their way to that goal," Gassama said. "Currently, there are over 60,000 immigrants in detention. It's almost flipped on its head where it is using immigration policies to expand the

mass incarceration system."

Panelists also urged conference participants to vote.

"If you don't vote, you're dishonoring the legacy of people who sacrificed, paid their lives so that we would have opportunities to participate in [a] democracy that they did not," former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder said during a discussion Friday morning with Rep. Terri Sewell (D-Ala.)

"This is not a non-contact sport," said Holder, who is chair of the National Democratic Redistricting Committee. "We just can't watch television and yell at Fox News or something, or agree with MSNBC, [or] whatever. You got to be doing more than that. Got to be engaged."

Pushing nonprofit land trusts as a tool to address housing crisis

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saved costs to the homeowner can go toward other things, rather than exhausting all income trying to keep a house. "We're not landlords, and we're not interested in being landlords," Sanchez said.

North Carolina faces a significant housing shortage. A National Low Income Housing Coalition report earlier this year showed that there are 41 affordable rental homes available for every 100 of the 332,199 households that make 30% or less of the area median income. The report also said Charlotte has 31 affordable homes for every 100 of 77,395 low-income households, and Raleigh has 38 for every 100 of 41,060 households.

While property values appreciate, leases for homeowners on land owned by CLTs average around \$100, according to Investopedia. At the time of sale, homeowners collect a capped percentage of the value appreciated on the home, called equity. The CLT still owns the land.

A challenge for CLTs, the panelists said, is the model isn't that widely known - yet. Banks don't know how to provide financing that is tailored to this type of model, and many community members don't know it exists, either. That's part of Grounded Solutions Network's mission: to expand knowledge and education on a national scale. The North Carolina Land

Trust Coalition works statewide to do the same.

"It's explaining that investment, and how that is a slow growth investment, but it evens out in the end, is just one of our biggest challenges," Sanchez said.

"A lot of banks aren't familiar with or haven't done this before, so it just took some education to do that," said Ben Loomis, Watauga Community Housing Trust board chair.

CLTs differ. Durham Community Land Trustees, established in 1987 by residents in Durham's historically Black West End neighborhood, provides housing to applicants who earn 30%, 60% and 80% of the area's median income.

WeBuild Concord CEO Patrick Graham said there are benefits to investing into a CLT - donations of land or homes from developers can be written off as charitable contributions against capital gains.

"Most developers, and what I've told them to do is look across your whole portfolio, because you may be able to use these types of deductions for things you're not even thinking about, not just specific projects," Graham said. "It's a way to encourage them, and, at the same time, it allows us to get developments at cheaper costs, so that when we're developing, we can do so without giving away the story."

Light rail killing exposes gaps in mental health care

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Ted Zarzar, a psychiatrist who divides his time between UNC Health and Central Prison in Raleigh, said the period where people reenter their communities is high-risk for folks with a mental illness. Their symptoms can spiral downward without continued care.

Many times these people are released from carceral settings without a job or a place to live. Some people may have a single outpatient mental health appointment scheduled and a 30-day supply of their medications.

Others might just get handed a list of resources and phone numbers.

"I think it is the exception, rather than the rule, that somebody goes to a follow-up appointment," Zarzar said. "At best, they end up in an emergency room or inpatient hospital and get connected that way. But at worst, they end up either back in jail or prison, or something horrific happens, like what happened in Charlotte."

Without a direct handoff to true support and services, it is nearly impossible to stay stable in the community, Zarzar said. People often land right back in a hospital or prison cell in a frustrating — and costly — cycle of recidivism for which taxpayers pick up the tab. Incarceration in a North Carolina prison runs more than \$54,000 a year. The average cost of a hospital stay in North Carolina is \$2,881 per day, according to 2023 data collected by KFF, a nonpartisan health policy and research organization.

"We don't have cracks in the system, we have chasms," Caraco said. "And once you fall into that chasm, it's not easy to come out of that without a lot of support."

'Not a casserole illness'

Lately, lawmakers from New York to California have proposed to involuntarily hospitalize people who are homeless, to force them into mental health treatment. The bill passed by North Carolina lawmakers this week also seeks to push more people into involuntary commitments.

But many in the mental health and substance use treatment community argue that forced psychiatric hospitalization does not address severe and complex mental illness, and it doesn't often yield positive results. These commitments are temporary, and people are often discharged without the community support they need. Coerced treatment can also lead patients to distrust the system and leave them reluctant to seek help the next time.

Bob Ward is a retired attorney who spent a decade representing people in involuntary commitment hearings in Mecklenburg County. Ward said he saw firsthand the lack of treatment and timely care. He said civil commitments of any kind — adult, minor, inpatient or outpatient — are "useless" if the right treatment and supportive services are lacking once the person comes home.

The continuous rise in involuntary commitments — which are intended to be a last resort for someone who is a danger to themselves or others — is a "sure sign of a failed system," Ward said. A NC Health News investigation found that the number of involuntary commitment petitions filed in county clerk of court offices rose at least 97% between 2011 to 2021.

Only a fraction of those people end up making it through the whole commitment process to a psychiatric inpatient bed, according to a May report by Disability Rights NC. Many who work with people experiencing the process say it's riddled with problems and needs significant reform.

Weaver, the NAMI Charlotte leader, said when it comes to involuntary commitment, it's "difficult to balance people's rights with public safety, and it is not against the law to have a mental illness."

Friends and family also treat mental illness differently than they do other medical issues, Weaver said.

"If you had a loved one with a cancer diagnosis, your friends would rally around you, the casseroles would come, the lawn would get cut and you would have continuing care with a team," she explained. "When someone in the family has a mental illness, it is not a casserole illness. People don't come rally around that family, and there is no continuum of care."

"There is no mental health team that follows that person from the beginning, from illness to wellness."

Weaver said families struggle to find lasting help for their loved ones — a situation that played out in the case of Decarlos Brown, the man accused in the Charlotte stabbing.

Brown's mother said his mental health had declined significantly after his five-year prison stay. By this summer, he only had bits and pieces of mental health support, and he was homeless.

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle agree that the system failed Brown.

"He was failed because his mother wanted somebody to pick him up, and there was not the willingness on the part of the system to do that," Republican Senate leader Phil Berger told reporters on Sept. 22. "[Iryna Zarutska] was failed because there was a system that would allow someone like that to exhibit the sorts of problematic behaviors without there being any intervention."

Berger questioned whether inadequate funding for mental health resources was at fault, instead suggesting that people

were unwilling to step in with already available resources.

Solutions include support

In response to the killing, mental health experts who spoke to NC Health News highlighted the need for transitional support for people leaving jails, prisons and psychiatric facilities. They also emphasized the need for money for an array of community mental health services that could prevent stays in jails and psychiatric facilities, which are expensive and often the least effective option.

The mental health system is designed to take a faulty approach with limited options, said Caraco, director of Charlotte's Promise Resource Network.

"You do this, and then you do this, and then you do this. You need a referral. You need an assessment. It is time-limited. You need a diagnosis. You have to comply with medications," she said. "All of the things that lead people to not being able to engage in anything that feels meaningful."

There's a predetermined set of services and options. Either it works for people, or they walk away, she said.

Caraco said her organization ends up serving many of those who've walked away from traditional mental health care that they found ineffective or harmful.

"Our system should be set up like a buffet. There are times where you want nothing but crab legs, and there are times you're going to eat dessert first, but you have an array of options available in front of you to choose from. Because at different times, different things feel right," she said. "That array has got to be accessible to you."

Caraco believes that connecting people with certified peer support specialists at hospitals or jails would help bridge some of the gaps. Peers draw on their own experiences with mental illness, substance use, homelessness and/or incarceration, making them more relatable to people navigating the same challenges.

Hospital emergency departments already employ people who are often referred to as "sitters," whose role is to sit with patients at risk for suicide to make sure they are safe. Caraco suggested that hospitals replace sitters with community-based peer support specialists.

"They're sitting in the emergency department. They're interacting, they're developing plans, they're getting deeper into the relationship and what's going on," Caraco said. "And trying to establish that rapport and that relationship right off the bat."

If these people were peer support specialists from a community-based organization, instead of hospital employees, that relationship could continue after the patient is discharged. Some psychiatric hospitals use "peer bridgers" who build relationships with people while they're still inpatients, with the goal of staying connected once the patient is released and navigating the community mental health system.

That same concept can also be applied to jails and prisons, Caraco said.

Peer support specialists and social workers are being incorporated into mental health crisis responses more often. Initiatives like the HEART team in Durham use a mental health crisis response unit to respond to 911 calls related to mental illness, homelessness and substance use. These specialized teams can help steer people to community support instead of emergency rooms or jails.

"We need folks who have lived experience — not only of mental health disabilities, but of criminal justice involvement and incarceration, because no one wants to talk to people who can't relate to them," said Corye Dunn, policy director with Disability Rights NC.

Bring care to where people are

Dunn said there's also an opportunity to bolster Assertive Community Treatment teams, which are designed to be community-based, wrap-around services for people with severe mental illnesses. She suggested there should be more forensic ACT teams that include peer support specialists who were previously incarcerated.

Zarzar said ACT teams break down barriers to accessing care by bringing it to people where they are — even if it's under a bridge.

"It takes the inpatient treatment team and puts it on the outside," he said. Teams include psychiatrists, nurses, peer support specialists and more. They have frequent contacts with clients to help get their basic needs met and reach their personal goals.

Zarzar said he's seen positive outcomes, but it hinges on a person's voluntary participation.

Clinical social worker and longtime mental health advocate Bebe Smith said it can be difficult for people to qualify for ACT team services, as they have to fit narrow criteria of a diagnosis of severe and persistent mental illness plus a high utilization of services.

They must also have Medicaid and be enrolled in one of North Carolina's "tailored" plans.

According to the N.C. Department of Human Services, North Carolina operates 87 ACT teams — a number that has remained relatively stable over the past decade. Between 6,400 and 6,800 individuals received ACT services at any given time last year. In fiscal year 2024, the state spent \$8 million in non-Medicaid funds to cover treatment for uninsured individuals, supporting 915 people.

New life for the death penalty in North Carolina

Continued from page 1A

mental health evaluations and, when necessary, involuntary commitment. We will simply not tolerate policies that allow violent offenders back onto our streets to commit more crimes and jeopardize public safety."

Stein slammed the last-minute capital punishment amendment authored by Senate Leader Phil Berger (R-Rockingham), as "barbaric" because it provides execution alternatives to lethal injection like firing squad and the electric chair.

"There will be no firing squads in North Carolina during my time as governor," Stein said in a video explaining why he signed the bill.

North Carolina has 122 inmates on death row — the nation's fifth largest — but hasn't carried out an execution since Samuel Flippen was put to death by lethal injection on Aug. 18, 2006. Since then, litigation over execution procedures and the Racial Justice Act stalled executions although there is no official moratorium.

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. Nearly half of North Carolina's death row inmates were sentenced by all-white juries.

Under the new law, any death penalty 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.

Death penalty critics slammed the law because it opens the possibility to new execution methods while failing to address violence prevention. The death penalty has historically been

applied to Black people accused of murder regardless of the victim's race.

"HB 307 moves our state in the wrong direction," Noel Nickle, executive director of the North Carolina Coalition for Alternatives to the Death Penalty said in a statement. "The way to build true safety is through mental health care, re-entry support, violence prevention, and strong resources for survivors and families. This bill ignores proven solutions and doubles down on a system that will never deliver justice or security."

The law:

- Resolves that a judge or magistrate must consider a defendant's criminal history before setting pretrial release.
- Requires written explanation why a judicial official determined the conditions of release.
- Allows the removal of judges or magistrates who failure to make findings for release.
- Allows the state Supreme Court chief justice or 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.

Stein lamented a "lack of ambition or vision" by Republican lawmakers to include a "red flag" law, background checks to prohibit the sale of firearms to violent criminals and dangerous people and allow law enforcement to "remove a gun from someone who is a danger to others or themselves." He did, however, praise changes to the pre-trial release process.

"Iryna's Law alerts the judiciary to take a special look at people who may pose unusual risks of violence before determining their bail," he said. "That's a good thing, and why I have signed it into law."

NC property tax justice coalition notes progress, work still to do

By Greg Childress

NC NEWSLINE

Orange County residents attending a meeting Monday night about property tax disparities nodded knowingly at Hudson Vaughan's words.

"Across the country, Black-owned property is under appraised when folks are trying to get bank loans or equity out of their homes but is actually overassessed for property taxes," said Vaughn, director of the Community Justice Collaborative at the North Carolina Housing Coalition.

The audience of mostly elderly, Black residents had heard Vaughn use the words before. Many of them have experienced what he described.

"I was sitting here thinking earlier ... I remember back in the day when they [banks and businesses] were charging us Black people a lot more for interest rates on our homes, on our cars and this feels like the same thing," said Regina Merritt, who lives in rural Councilville. "We're getting taxed out."

Vaughan called residents together to provide an update on the Orange County Property Tax Justice Coalition's effort to bring tax fairness to about a dozen historically Black communities across Orange County. More than 160 residents and supporters attended the meeting held at the Whitted Human Service Building in Hillsborough.

The coalition is made up of community organizers from historically Black neighborhoods across Orange County including Councilville, Mars Hill, Fairview, Rogers Road, Piney Grove, Efland-Cheeks, Cedar Grove, Northside, Pine Knolls, Tin Top, and Glosson/Davie Road.

Vaughan opened with good news. He said that of more than 220 residents the group helped file property valuation appeals, about 50 received "good reductions" in assessed property values of more than 10%. Four neighborhoods received land value reductions that will collectively save them \$500,000 a year, he said.

Lower property valuation means lower property taxes for property owners. Low-income residents and those on fixed incomes said they are finding it difficult to pay the higher tax bills they received after the county's recent property revaluation.

According to the coalition, Orange County data shows that historically Black neighborhoods were overvalued, which led to more than \$2 million in unfair property tax increases.

"This is about the haves and the have nots," said Horace Johnson, the son and namesake of Hillsborough's first and only Black mayor who recently died. "Right now, it's coming down to money. What's a senior supposed to do? Decide whether to take their insulin, get their shots? Pay their water bill or light bill? Get the roof fixed or pay their taxes an end up in the street?"

Vaughan said residents provided the

county with evidence-based appeals that included corrections about the condition of homes, challenges to lot assessments and neighborhood sales data residents used to justify lower value of homes and lots.

The residents' advocacy also led the county to review all the neighborhoods the coalition deemed "problematic," and prompted the establishment of a tax assessment work group to review and evaluate the policies, processes, and procedures used by the county tax office to assess property values. The work group will also examine how the tax office communicates with the public about assessments.

Still, Vaughn said, there is much work left to do.

Of the 220 appeals the coalition helped residents file, 60 were outright rejected or received tiny reductions, Vaughn said. He cited an example of one Black homeowner who found that her tax record included a bathroom she did not have. The homeowner filed an appeal and her property value was reduced by only \$1,000, Vaughn said.

"Can you believe that?" Vaughn asked. "Now, [Orange County officials] claim that was an appeal that was granted but what I want to point out is how pathetic that response is. It is unjustifiable and unacceptable."

In the Perry Hill community west of Mebane, Vaughn said every appeal for tax relief was rejected.

"All of those had comparable sales" of nearby homes to show the county, Vaughn said. "They showed the differences between the interiors of the homes and every one was outright rejected."

Vaughan is doing similar work in Wake County, which he said is the best in the state in ensuring equity in property taxes.

"All but one of all of the appeals we submitted [in Wake County] got accepted, and the average was three times as much as we've seen here in Orange County," he said.

In an interview, Vaughn said recent revaluations have placed intense pressure on Black neighborhoods and long-term residents, many of who have lived in those communities their entire lives.

"We've had a lot of folks say that if they didn't get reductions, they were going to have to sell their homes," Vaughn said. "We've had people threatened with foreclosure as a result of the tax rises. We've had people paying as much as 80% of their income to property taxes."

He noted that renters and homeowners who spend more than 30% of income on house are considered cost-burdened.

"We've had some folks who are paying more than half of their income to just property taxes alone," Vaughn said. "So those pieces make it very difficult to both stay in your home and to have money to do other things."

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High concerns in higher education

Folks in higher education must feel General Custer at Little Big Horn, fired at from almost every angle. Higher education hasn't faced this many pressures in our lifetimes.

Nowhere is that stress greater than from the federal government. Colleges and universities have bullseyes pasted on them by the Trump administration, which hates Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs, condemns affirmative action admission preferences, deplores antisemitism protests, claims ideological student indoctrination and their refusal to hear conservative voices.

Trump has taken aim at areas he can control - the flow of federal funding. Harvard had \$2.6 billion in research grants frozen. Cornell had \$1 billion, Columbia \$400 million and the list spreads like a spider web.

North Carolina schools are also affected. Duke reportedly had \$108 million frozen. According to The Center for American Progress college cuts ranged from a low of \$37,500 at NC Wesleyan to \$40.2 million at UNC Chapel Hill, including \$9.5 million at North Carolina State, \$5.9 million at High Point University, \$4,373 million at UNC Charlotte, and \$1.128 million at East Carolina. Jobs have been lost, research abandoned, innovations unrealized and foreign research students stripped of visas.

It's not just the federal government cuts keeping administrators awake. The new fiscal year for the state started July 1 without a new state budget, meaning state supported schools saw no enrollment growth funds, performance growth, salary increases, building reserve increases and no new capital budgets. If the projections by the Office of Management and Budget and the Fiscal Research Division of the legislature are accurate, the state is facing a budget deficit of \$100 million or more this year. When a new budget is finally passed it is highly likely to include budget cuts...and higher ed will be a target.

Chancellors at UNC Chapel Hill and East Carolina are good at reading trends. ECU Chancellor Philip Rogers recently said, "We are not in a budget crisis right now," but added there is the possibility for budget tightening down the road. UNC System universities froze tuition rates in 2016 and that freeze is adding to financial pressures on schools. ECU announced budget cuts of \$25 million, and Chapel Hill has made cuts of \$70 million in anticipation. We applaud their prudent visionary leadership and financial accountability. Other schools are likely to follow.

At the same moment, administrators are preparing for another "cliff," a demographic cliff. The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that enrollments in colleges and universities peaked at around 18 million in 2010, but declined to 15.4 million in 2022, a 15 percent reduction. America's birthrate has reached an all-time low of 1.6 children per woman and next year we will see the full impact of this cliff; for the first time the number of college age people will decline. Enrollment declines will follow.

Further, the average graduate has \$38,700 in debt, according to the Education Data Initiative, causing more students to weigh the cost/benefit proposition. If you include tuition, fees, housing, food, books and minimal personal expenses, the average cost for attending our state-supported universities ranges from \$27,000 to \$32,000 per year; for private schools the average is reportedly \$58,000.

A growing number believe a diploma isn't essential. In 2010, 75% said a degree was important. By 2019 that number had shrunk to 53%. A Gallup poll released in September reported only 35% say a college education is very important; 30% said it wasn't worth it.

In 2024, two dozen colleges closed their doors in the U.S. They were mostly private schools and located predominantly in the Northeast where populations are declining. Black Mountain College, Flora MacDonald, St. Andrews and St. Augustine's are a few that have closed recently in North Carolina and the announced "merger" between Queens University of Charlotte and Elon University was due to Queen's declining enrollment (1,100) and large debt.

Government cuts, enrollment declines, frozen tuitions, fewer prospects and the lessening of public value are highly problematic, but there are greater worries yet to come. According to Carolina Demography, 18% of our state's population is now over 65, having risen from 13% over 15 years. It is projected to be more than 20% by 2035.

This aging population will require more expensive healthcare and benefits like Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security and demand increased amenities. These boomers have changed every era since their birth and that is likely to continue.

Where is the money going to come from to fund these increased demands? There are only three choices: budget reallocations, increased taxes or reduced benefits. Higher education will be affected.

Tom Campbell is a Hall of Fame North Carolina broadcaster and columnist who has covered North Carolina public policy issues since 1965.

We've lost respect for the rule of law

Thirty years ago, when the verdict in the O.J. Simpson trial was announced, half the nation exhaled in relief and the other half gasped in disbelief.

I was there, a member of the defense team many dubbed the "Dream Team."

I remember vividly the polarized emotions that followed. But I also remember something we have since lost: a respect for the rule of law.

Back then, as contentious and polarizing as the Simpson case was, our nation's leadership set a tone of restraint and respect. President Bill Clinton, who almost certainly disagreed with the jury's decision, did not attack the jurors, question their intelligence, or undermine their legitimacy.

That is what troubles me most about where we are today. The polarization of 1995 pales in comparison to the division we see now. Social media has turned every courtroom into a national battleground, and political leaders too often seize upon moments of controversy to inflame, not

to calm. Were the Simpson trial happen in 2025, I fear the outcome would be far darker. Today, we live in a climate where even former FBI directors are prosecuted in apparent acts of political vindictiveness. Our leaders denigrate jurors, prosecutors, and judges when verdicts or rulings don't go their way. The rule of law—the bedrock of our democracy—has been dragged into partisan warfare. That should alarm us far more than a single high-profile verdict ever could.

The Simpson case was, in many ways, the perfect storm: race, celebrity, sex, and mystery, all wrapped up in a televised spectacle. America couldn't look away. We love to see our heroes rise, and perhaps we love even more to watch them fall. That's why the trial captivated the world. Even so, when the dust

settled, Americans accepted the jury's decision, however grudgingly. Our country was stronger for it. Thirty years later, I can't say the same about our democracy. The Simpson verdict tested America's nerves. But America passed that test. Today, I'm not sure we would. That, I hope, is what we remember on this anniversary: not just the case itself, but how we as a country responded to it—with respect, with restraint, and with an understanding that our system of justice, imperfect as it is, only works if we all agree to uphold it. Because if we lose that, we lose far more than any one trial.

Carl Douglas is an award-winning civil rights attorney and founding partner of Douglas/Hicks Law who served on O.J. Simpson's "Dream Team," helping secure his acquittal in 1995.

Don't outsource VA services. Fix them

By Suzanne Gordon and Steve Early

SPECIAL TO THE POST

James Jones is a 54-year-old disabled Army veteran. After four years of active duty and four in the reserves, Jones says he has a "multitude" of health care problems.

"There's PTSD, a right arm injury, my right shoulder, chronic rhinitis from toxic exposure during the Gulf War, dental," he says. That's why he depends on the Department of Veterans Affairs health system, the nation's largest.

Jones, a federal employee from Watauga County, North Carolina, is also one of the 25 percent of vets who live in rural areas. And care for these rural veterans is now at serious risk as Republicans push to cut rural health care and privatize the VA. North Carolina, which has one of the highest veteran populations overall in the country, could be especially impacted.

The VA MISSION Act of 2018, passed under President Trump's first term, established a parallel private network, the Veterans Community Care Program (VCCP). The VCCP now sees 60 percent of VA patients and eats up over \$30 billion a year that could go to hiring more staff and improving the VA's aging infrastructure.

This year, VA Secretary Doug Collins asked Congress for a 50 percent increase in VCCP funding and — in an unprecedented move — a reduction in VA funding. The private sector, backers insist, can provide rural veterans with high quality, convenient care without the delays they may face at the VA. But Jones and other rural veterans say this is a lie.

"I prefer to go to the VA, even if I have to drive longer to get there," Jones says. But even if he wanted to take advantage of non-VA providers, there are simply not enough near his home — or anywhere else in rural America — to accommodate the needs of the 4.7 million rural veterans like himself.

That's precisely what the Veterans Healthcare Policy Institute found. In a study, which one of us (Suzanne) authored, VHPI discovered that rural veterans seeking care in the private sector face even greater barriers than those in the VA.

While these providers may be well-intentioned, few have enough expertise to recognize veterans' complex health care problems, much less treat them. This was also the conclusion of not one but two RAND Corporation studies of private sector providers. Bob Anderson, an 81-year-old Vietnam veteran in Albuquerque, has been very frustrated by these providers: "When I went to the private sector cancer doctor, my appointment was late in the afternoon on a Friday, and they prescribed pain meds that I had to pick up at the VA, which was all the way across town," he said. "It was very difficult to get the pain medicine I needed."

Anderson says there was no effort to coordinate or follow up his care. In the VA system, by contrast, "You'd always get a call from a nurse or nurse practitioner the next day to see how you were doing."

But for many rural veterans, the problem isn't just finding a provider who understands their needs — it's finding any provider at all. Of the less than 1,800 rural hospitals remaining, 432 are considered "vulnerable to closure."

In fact, the majority of rural Americans already live in so-called health deserts. In states with large rural populations like Georgia, North Carolina,

and Texas, nearly every rural county — and many urban ones — falls under this designation.

Worse still, President Trump's new budget will decimate rural hospitals and discourage even more medical and mental health professionals from practicing in rural areas.

If millions of veterans are steered out of the VA and into crumbling rural health care institutions, they'll be forced to compete with their loved ones, friends, and community members for increasingly scarce rural health care resources. That's bad for all concerned.

Fortunately, opposition is forming to the administration's VA priorities and other efforts to dismantle the federal government. James Jones is part of that opposition. What he and his fellow veterans want is not more costly and unnecessary outsourcing but improvements in the VA itself.

Suzanne Gordon is a journalist, editor, and author of *Our Veterans: Winners, Losers, Friends, and Enemies on the New Terrain of Veterans Affairs*. Steve Early writes about politics and labor.

Transit tax is regressive and inequitable

I was a member of the Charlotte MOVES Task Force, led by former mayor Harvey Gantt, which included 25 leaders from various spheres of influence in Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

We were all deeply committed to developing a transportation plan that would create a safe, equitable, and effective transportation system, enhancing all modes of commuting across this county for all its people, particularly low-income and working-class individuals who were and are seeking to improve their quality of life. During the plan formation, some proposed a 1-cent sales tax increase, which I opposed then and still do now, due to its negative impact on the very individuals who require a 21st-century public transportation system.

Charlotte is one of the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the nation and is admittedly in dire need of a modern transportation system. However, using a regressive sales tax to fund significant infrastructure projects, such as the proposed "one cent for mobility" sales tax increase in Mecklenburg County, raises several critical concerns.

I understand that the intent behind this strategy is to produce considerable revenue for improving transportation options; however, the consequences of a regressive tax system need closer examination. Frankly, a sales tax disproportionately affects low and moderate-income individuals.

Since everyone pays the same rate regardless of their income, those with lower incomes end up spending a greater part of their income on essential goods and services that are subject to sales tax. This tax worsens already existing inequalities, thus making it more challenging for marginalized communities to obtain the goods and services they need, while increasing their overall tax burden to support infrastructure improvements.

Additionally, funding essential public services through sales tax revenues raises concerns about the sustainability and predictability of this funding source. Sales tax revenues can fluctuate significantly due to changes in economic conditions, consumer spending habits, and other external factors such as recessions. This volatility may hinder long-term planning and jeopardize the stability of the transportation projects that rely on these funds, potentially leading to delays or scaling back of much-needed improvements. There is also the risk of public pushback.

Residents may perceive a sales tax increase as an inadequate or unfair method of funding ambitious transportation initiatives, especially if they believe an unequal distribution of benefits will occur. If the funding mechanism does not align with the community's needs, it could alienate voters and complicate efforts to garner support for the projects.

Furthermore, the task force's reliance on a one-time capital investment plan mobility bond, backed by property taxes, raises concerns about the long-term effects on local property taxpayers. While some

may view property taxes as more equitable—since they are based on an individual's ability to pay—this approach also creates an additional financial obligation for property owners.

Finally, while the proposed sales tax increase might seem like a straightforward funding solution for the mobility program, its regressive nature can lead to inequitable burdens on lower-income residents and create uncertainty in financing the overall project.

A more equitable and sustainable funding model could involve exploring alternatives, such as progressive taxes or fees that align more closely with individuals' financial capacities, ensuring that all community members share in the benefits of improved transportation infrastructure without facing disproportionate financial strain.

Pedro Perez has lived in Charlotte since 2018. He was executive director of Charlotte Family Housing and now consult with the Mecklenburg Criminal Justice Advisory Group as a member of its Community Engagement Task Group.

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MATT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

After opening the season 1-2, West Charlotte High, paced by quarterback Jamouri Nichols (4) have reeled off four straight wins, including a 31-7 romp against Meck Power Six 7A/8A rival Independence.

Lions on cruise after bumpy start

Dominant win against Independence is West Charlotte High's fourth following 1-2 opening stretch

By Cameron Williams
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West Charlotte High football is roaring past midseason.

After beating Meck Power Six rival Independence 31-7, the Lions, No. 2 in the Magnificent Seven rankings, improved to 5-2 after starting the year 1-2. Lions coach Sam Greiner feels his team is on the right track to win another state title.

"I keep telling everybody I'd rather be 13-2 and win a state championship than 14-1, losing one at the end where it hurts," he said. "I would love to be undefeated, yes, but I don't know if this

team can grow being undefeated as much as they can by having those two overtime losses."

Greiner admits the Lions, who lost to Greensboro Grimsley and Rock Hill South Pointe, make mistakes that are addressed in practice. He also squashed the notion of a lack of discipline.

"We definitely aren't a clean football team yet," Greiner said. "I mean just silly things and silly mistakes. Everyone keeps on saying, 'Well, they are undisciplined.' If we are so undisciplined, why are we as good as we are?... That is the stupidest thing I've ever

heard. We play with such passion, sometimes that can hurt us. We do need to clean up the kicking game. I love my kicker and love what we are doing ... but we've got to tighten some things up."

Receiver Donte Nicholson, a Charlotte 49ers commit, filled the stat sheet against Independence with 10 catches for 118 yards and two touchdowns. The receptions weren't run of the mill, either. He utilized athleticism on a handful of contested passes.

"I tell everybody that we've got a lot of good athletes," Greiner said, "but he is the best athlete I've ever coached,

with just his pure raw athletic ability. I've never seen him drop a football until tonight. That one was the first one we had seen and we gave him a little crap for it on the sidelines, but he owns it. ... Donte is phenomenal. We are going to feed him if [an opponent] gives him room."

Lions quarterback Jamouri Nichols said it's an advantage to have a deep receiving crew, and a wideout like Nicholson makes his job easier.

"I know that when we need a big play, I can trust [Nicholson]," Nichols said. "Especially with [opposing] defenses, it

Please see **WEST CHARLOTTE** | 6A

Hough High No. 1 in rankings, Olympic debuts at No. 7

By Herbert L. White
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There's bound to be some separation for Magnificent Seven squads this week.

Hough is No. 1 for the seventh straight week and show no signs of slowing against Mecklenburg County competition. The Huskies, who were idle last week, play at Garinger Friday and barring a massive disaster have the

leisure of working on playoff seeding with five weeks in the regular season.

West Charlotte is a solid second in the rankings and tied for first in the Meck Power Six with wins against conference foes Mallard Creek and Independence. Palisades, Mallard Creek and Myers Park each move up a spot with Independence's loss at West Charlotte while the Patriots fall from third to sixth.

New to the rankings is Olympic,

which is 3-0 in the Greater Metro 6A/7A and 4-2 overall. The Trojans replace Ardrey Kell, which fell to 3-3 after a 14-11 loss to Palisades.

This week's Magnificent Seven, with overall record, conference record and previous week's ranking:

1. Hough (6-0, 1-0 Greater Charlotte 7A/8A, first). The Huskies took last week off, which mean no opponent was embarrassed. Garinger won't have

that luxury Friday.

2. West Charlotte (5-2, 2-0 Meck Power Six 7A/8A, second). The Lions are No. 2 by a proverbial country mile after dismantling previously No. 3 Independence 31-7. Next up is a field trip to Butler.

3. Palisades (4-2, 1-0 Southwestern 7A/8A, fourth). The Pumas picked up a big conference win with a 14-11 decision.

Please see **HOUGH** | 6A

In a rough debut season, accountability

The Charlotte 49ers' goal at this point of the season is to get to the end as healthy as possible.

Charlotte (1-4, 0-2 American) went to South Florida and got run out of the stadium 54-26 in a game that was never really in question. Charlotte has several key players out with injuries and a few out for the year.

With quarterback Conner Harrell and running back Henry Rutledge out for the season, Charlotte turned to Grayson Loftis and C.J. Stokes to fill those voids against the Bulls. Stokes performed well with 13 carries for 54 yards and

Please see **ACCOUNTABILITY** | 6A



CAMERON WILLIAMS
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST



MATT LACZKO | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Charlotte football coach Tim Albin is the voice of accountability in a debut season of lopsided losses and injuries that have decimated the 49ers' roster.

DeSean Jackson in a whole new world

Ask DeSean Jackson how he's doing, and, well, he'll tell you.

Not the "I'm fine, how are you?" that's the common theme from coaches on the MEAC teleconference. If Jackson is hurting, he's man enough to say it.

"I ain't doing well today. That last one was tough. Imma be honest with you," he said during a recent teleconference. Jackson was referring to the collapse that saw Delaware State blow a 31-17 first-half lead against Sacred Heart to lose 35-31.

As the saying goes, it wasn't the loss as much as HOW the Hornets lost. Both teams were flagged for unsportsmanlike conduct before the game got going. That meant a second such penalty would be an ejection.

Starting quarterback Kaiden Bennett scored the Hornets' second touchdown in the first quarter. Afterwards, he ran and shook hands with a couple of Delaware State fans in the stands. Then turned and handed the ball to the referee who rewarded him with an ejection for unsportsmanlike conduct.

Please see **DESEAN** | 6A



BONITTA BEST
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Panthers' rookie class spark rally and some hope

By Jeff Hawkins
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Down 17-0 with 6:57 remaining in the first half, the Carolina Panthers faced fourth-and-5 situation at the Miami Dolphins' 48.

Bryce Young dropped back and averted a sack to keep the play alive. Downfield, rookie Tetairoa McMillan followed the "scramble rules" and worked his way open. Young discovered enough space to throw a pass that the diving McMillan hauled in for a 21-yard gain. Five plays later, Young connected with Xavier Legette on a 7-yard touchdown pass, sparking a rally the Panthers finished off after converting on their second fourth-and-five play late in the fourth quarter. The follow-up effort was executed by first-year wide receiver Jimmy Horn Jr., who made a tough, acrobatic play in his NFL debut.

Two plays later, Young hit rookie tight end Mitchell Evans on a 4-yard touchdown pass with 2:03 remaining to lift the Panthers to a 27-24 win Sunday at Bank of America Stadium. It was the third time in franchise history that Carolina (2-3) rallied from a 17-point deficit to earn a victory.

Panthers coach Dave Canales credited the rookies for the spark.

"We're counting on them," he said. "I've seen them make strides every week. I'm proud of this group after a sloppy first half. I felt the maturity of this group. You are going to face adversity. We can make it harder on ourselves by the decisions (we make.)"

Or easier.

Big plays create big comeback

Through the first four games, the Panthers lacked explosive plays - completions of at

least 16 yards and rushes of 12 yards. They entered Sunday ranked No. 28 with just 18 explosive plays.

Against the Dolphins, the Panthers' big-play ability showed up with Rico Dowdle, starting for an injured Chub Hubbard, compiling 206 rushing yards and a touchdown. Fueled by runs of 53 and 43 yards, Dowdle secured a tie for the second-most rushing yards in team history, matching Jonathan Stewart.

"I saw us take a step in staying together," Canales said.

McMillan, who finished with six catches on eight targets for 73 yards Sunday, needed to make a big play. While entering Sunday as the Panthers' leading receiver, the No. 8 overall draft pick last April endured some early growing pains. On one play during last week's loss

Please see **PANTHERS** | 6A

West Charlotte Lions on cruise after bumpy start

Continued from page 5A
helps get other guys open. They are obviously always on Donte, so he helps get other players open and that is big for us.”
Nichols thinks the early season losses helped the Lions develop character. “We took a couple losses,” he said. “Everyone knows that, but each time we went back in the locker room or waiting on the field, we are trying to find our true identity.”
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools sold just 1,000 tickets to Friday’s game due to safety concerns, and the teams didn’t play last year, which caused an uproar on both sides. Nichols took a lighthearted approach, Greiner, not so much.

“I was just happy to have everyone here,” Nichols said. “I thank God that we even played, because the last few games have been rough with a lot of things going on in the stands. But, I was happy we played and got through the game.”
Said Greiner: “That is a very frustrating thing that people made decisions about above my pay grade. What do we have to do to not penalize what we’ve built for so long? People on the outside probably think coach [D.J.] McFadden and I are enemies or something, but we aren’t. We built this thing up like a [Floyd] Mayweather versus [Manny] Pacquiao fight and we were limited to less than 1,100 people. That was a joke.”

Hough High leads rankings

Continued from page 5A
sion against previous No. 7 Ardrey Kell. Struggling Ballantyne Ridge is this week’s foe.
4. Mallard Creek (5-2, 1-1 Meck Power Six 7A/8A, fifth). The Mavericks recovered from their mauling at West Charlotte by beating up on North Mecklenburg. Independence, which is coming off a beatdown by West Charlotte, is next.
5. Myers Park (5-1, 1-0, Greater Charlotte 7A/8A, sixth). The Mustangs, who demolished Garinger 58-0, might be the most surprising crew in the rankings. They’re consistent and handling business, which is all anyone could ask.

Hopewell is next.
6. Independence (4-2, 0-1 Meck Power Six 7A/8A, third). The Patriots had no answers for West Charlotte in a 31-7 loss, a recurring theme among Mecklenburg County clubs. Good news, though: Chambers is coming to Mint Hill, which should be a less daunting challenge.
7. Olympic (4-2, 3-0 Greater Metro 6A/7A, unranked). Speaking of surprises, the Trojans crash this week’s party. They’ve quietly become a player in the Greater Metro race after beating A.L. Brown 24-21 last week and take on West Cabarrus Friday.

Panthers rookies add a spark and hope

Continued from page 5A
at New England, McMillan switched spots along the formation three times before Young directed the rookie to the correct spot. On his initial 35 targets, McMillan hauled in just 18 passes. He offered no excuses.
“I’m my biggest fan and my biggest critic,” McMillan said Wednesday. “It’s my first season, whatever, but that’s not an excuse. I try not to use that excuse and it shouldn’t be an excuse.”
“I’m definitely not happy about a few missed opportunities that I’ve had in the past couple of games. And I feel like that’s just me, just trying to do too much, just overthinking. I think the biggest thing for me is after those missed opportunities is just trying to go make the next play, the opportunity that comes after that it’s my job to go make it.”
Play with maturity
Along with McMillan, other first-year players took center stage during the rally. McMillan called Horn’s 17-yard contested reception on fourth down “arguably the biggest play of the game. When his name got called, he showed up.”
Inactive for the first four games, Horn, a sixth-round draft pick, caught two passes on three targets for 21 yards. He also rushed the ball twice for 10 yards.
“Jimmy Horn coming through in a big,

big way,” Canales said. “It was one of our bread-and-butter concepts. There was a defender there. He tried to make a play and Jimmy got up there and snatched it away from him.”
When Dowdle limped to the sideline late in the fourth quarter, Trevor Etienne gained 17 yards on two carries, including a 12-yarder that set the Panthers up at the 4. Young hit Evans for the game-winning TD on the next play.
“They rely on us (rookies) to make plays,” McMillan said. “They didn’t draft us for no reason. When our turn comes, it’s time to make plays. Shout out to all the rookies. They were a bit part of our success today.”
Will that continue in the future?
If McMillan continues to average nearly 70 yards per game, he could finish among the top 10 rookie receivers in league history. If he can cut down on the mistakes, that is.
“Just staying confident is the biggest thing for me,” McMillan said. “People make mistakes. We’re not perfect.”
Maybe not, but McMillan, Horn, Etienne and Evans made the plays they needed to lift the Panthers.
“We talk to our guys, especially the young guys,” Canales said. “We talk to them out of respect that we’re counting on you to do your job.”

DeSean Jackson coaches in a whole new world

Continued from page 5A
“I have never seen anything like that in all my years of football,” Jackson said. “That was not unsportsmanlike conduct. And he handed the referee the ball, and he threw the hat. ...If we had our guy, it would have been a different game.”
After getting over the shock of losing Bennett, DSU still built a 31-17 lead with two minutes left in the first half. Then, with Sacred Heart facing fourth-and-long, a Hornet player committed a “bonehead penalty” that gave SHU a first down and resulted in a field goal to end the half 31-20.
Ask any coach how fast momentum can swing after a score right before halftime. The Hornets never got the momentum back, and the officials made sure of it. The hype and/or disdain surrounding Jackson’s and

Norfolk State coach Michael Vick’s hiring isn’t just centered within the HBCU community. Predominately white schools don’t want to lose to them either.
Jackson saw it coming. “The odds are stacked against us. We knew at the beginning of the season it was going to be that way,” he said. “We’re not going to get the extra calls; we’re not going to get the extra love; it’s really us against the world mentality.”
In-camp turmoil
Jackson also is learning, as a first-year college head coach, that the job entails more than recruiting and X’s and O’s.
When you’re rebuilding a program that hasn’t had a winning season since 2012, and alumni and fans are waiting for you to work miracles, the transfer portal can be both a benefit and a curse.
Understandably, Jackson

hit the portal hard after his hire. But in this age of Name, Image and Likeness, players are all about their brand. Winning is not necessarily at the top of their agenda.
“It’s so many things that go into wins and losses that people don’t understand,” Jackson said. “Who goes to the meetings, who’s on time, who is not on time, who is missing in study hall. ...What you put in during the week affects what happens in the game. The morning of the [Sacred Heart] game, it was disciplinary things I had to worry about instead of worrying about the game. In all reality, it cost us that game.”
“...A lot of guys are here for a reason. I gave a lot of guys opportunities, but they have to be appreciative of those opportunities.”
Bonitta Best is sports editor at The Triangle Tribune in Durham.

Accountability amidst losing

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a touchdown.
Loftis, however, was pulled after going 2-for-11 and an interception and replaced by third-stringer Zach Wilcke. Wilcke performed well given the circumstances, going 14-of-18 for 150 yards, two touchdowns and an interception.
So, while it appears to be doom and gloom for 49er fans, given an injury list as long as CVS Pharmacy receipts, maybe it is time to pump the brakes and manage expectations a little. Of course, every fan for any school wants to win every game, and that is understandable. But there comes a point where realism has to set in.
Charlotte played one of the toughest schedules a first-year coach could have asked for and even after managing just one win in five games, coach Tim Albin is staying positive when it would be easy to blame everything on injuries. He accepts responsibility.
“They got after us in all three phases,” he said after the USF game. “They did a really good job. That quarterback [Byrum Brown], we didn’t get a lot of pressure on him. He escaped and he is tough to bring down. He breaks through a lot of arm tackles and really makes them go.”
One thing about Albin that is different from prior Charlotte coaches is that he can self-reflect and internalizes a lot better. He doesn’t mince words about his team’s play.
“On our performance, it was a really rough first half,” Albin said. “We had big

eyes. A deer in the headlights type thing. The nine penalties in the first quarter and early into the second crushed me. Our defense was out there too much. We could not help our defense, offensively. We made a change and put Zach in there and there was a little spark. ... I don’t have the stats in front of me but 13-14 penalties, you’re just not going to win football games that way, it doesn’t matter who is coaching them.”
Charlotte needs a coach like this, and it is imperative that the people making decisions in the athletic department give him time to get 49ers football going in the right direction.
According to ESPN analytics, the 49ers’ best chance of winning another game among their last seven is Oct. 18 against Temple and even so, the numbers suggest the Owls are 77.9% favorites. To quote the movie “Dumb and Dumber,” “So, you’re telling me there’s a chance?” Well, there is always a chance, but without your starting quarterback, a key running back and overall banged up across the roster, it is not going to be easy moving forward.
But give Albin a fair shake. He is a proven coach who has won a lot of games. It is not time to give up on him yet. He knows how to take accountability, and to me, having covered all but one of Charlotte’s coaches since the program’s inception, that speaks volumes in and of itself.
Cameron Williams covers Charlotte athletics for The Post.

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