



Hough High Huskies headed to the promised land for 8A title game

THE VOICE OF THE BLACK COMMUNITY SINCE 1906

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A federal court panel denied a stay of Republican-drawn redistricting in North Carolina, opening the door for the GOP to claim 11 of 14 congressional seats in the 2026 midterm elections. The remap reduces the chances of voters in the northeast electing a Black candidate after doing so since 1992.

What OK of congressional gerrymander means to NC

Federal court approves an 11th Republican-leaning district as a partisan initiative

By Herbert L. White

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A federal court has upheld North Carolina's new congressional map, which gives Republicans a chance at holding 11 of 14 seats.

The panel on Nov. 26 voted to allow the redrawn lines, which changes congressional districts 1 and 3 and improves the chances of adding another Republican seat. A lawsuit filed last month that sought to block the changes argued the redrawing disproportionately impacts Black voters.

In October, the General Assembly redrew the districts ahead of the 2026 mid-

term elections without new Census data or a court order to redistrict.

The opinion was signed by Judges Allison Rushing, Richard Myers II, and Thomas Schroeder, all of whom were appointed by Republican presidents.

"As Democrat-run states like California do everything in their power to undermine President Trump's administration and agenda, North Carolina Republicans went to work to protect the America First Agenda," Senate Leader Phil Berger (R-Rockingham) said in a statement. "North Carolinians voted to send President Trump to the White House in 2016, 2020, and 2024, and this new map re-

flects that support. President Trump deserves a Congress that will fight for American citizens and move his agenda forward."

Trump demanded Republican state lawmakers rewrite congressional maps to defend his agenda in Washington — starting with Texas and spreading to other states with GOP supermajorities. Democratic-leaning states responded with California voters passing a referendum that approved redistricting, followed by Illinois. North Carolina's single-district shift creates a majority Republican congressional district in the

Please see WHAT | 2A

NC post-conviction appeal limit could keep innocent people in prison

By Eric Tegethoff

NORTH CAROLINA NEWS SERVICE

A new law that went into effect Dec. 1 in North Carolina places a seven-year limit on appeals to convictions for incarcerated people, raising concerns innocent people could be denied justice.

The General Assembly passed the Public Safety Act earlier this year, which includes a provision to end, after seven years, the ability for a person to file post-conviction appeals known as motions for appropriate relief in noncapital cases.

Dawn Blagrove, executive director of the advocacy group Emancipate NC, said it will likely be an impossible deadline for many incarcerated people to meet.

"You would be very hard-pressed to find any cases in which that process that ultimately results in exonerations happen in less than seven years," Blagrove said. "It is just not the type of process that lends itself to expediency."

A motion for appropriate relief is one of the few ways people who are in prison can appeal convictions when new evidence is discovered, for instance. Before the law, there was no limit on such motions. Supporters of the law said it eliminates meritless claims and protects the rights of victims.

Blagrove countered there are many reasons why someone might need to appeal their conviction, and noted it is a well-established fact systemic and institutional racism are built into North Carolina's criminal justice system.

"What this law does is essentially said that once you are in the system, we are making it even harder for you to extricate yourself from that system," Bla-

Please see NC | 4A



Advocate Health CEO Gene Woods earned \$25.8 million in compensation in 2024, a 49% bump from the previous year, according to a corporate tax filing.

Advocate Health CEO compensation jumped 49% to \$25.8 million in 2024

By Michelle Crouch

CHARLOTTE LEDGER

Advocate Health CEO Gene Woods' compensation surged to \$25.8 million in 2024, a 49% jump from the \$17.3 million he earned the previous year, according to a recent tax filing.

Woods' total pay leading Atrium Health's parent company has more than quadrupled since 2017, his first full year as CEO of Atrium Health — before their merger — when he

earned \$5.4 million.

Woods' compensation places him above most other health care system leaders in the state. Novant Health CEO Carl Armato earned \$8.2 million in 2024, Duke Health CEO Craig Alabane earned \$2 million, WakeMed CEO Donald Gintzig earned \$1.9 million, while Cone Health CEO Mary Jo Cagle and ECU Health CEO Michael Waldrum both took home about \$1.7 million.

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Breathe uneasy: Air quality rules nixed

By Herbert L. White

herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

The air you breathe is about to get dirtier.

A federal court has agreed to a reversal of 2024 soot limits for power plants and factories, opening the door to a federal retreat from public health protections. The Environmental Protection Administration also announced its plan to delay by three years a deadline for coal plants to clean up waste by products. Soot has been linked to asthma and cardiovascular illness.

"We strongly oppose the EPA's decision to weaken America's protective health standards for soot — a dangerous pollutant linked to asthma attacks, heart disease, lung cancer, and premature death,"



Robbins

Jeffrey Robbins, executive director at Charlotte-based CleanAIRE NC said in a statement. "Dismantling these crucial safeguards will cost thousands of American lives and dramatically increase healthcare burdens on families nationwide."

The Charlotte region's air quality worsened according to the American Lung Association's 2025 "State of the Air" report, which is based on the area's worst county's average number of unhealthy days — 2.7 per year in Mecklenburg County's case — compared to one day the previous year. The region scored a "D" grade in ozone pollution after earning a "C" a year earlier.

Please see BREATHE | 2A

Board: Want to vote? Prove your citizenship

By Gavin Bacharier

NC NEWSLINE

The North Carolina State Board of Elections voted last week to begin verifying voters' citizenship status, as federal officials pursue a similar national plan.

The board voted to partner with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and share the state's voter rolls with the federal government's Systematic Alien Verification for Entitlements, or SAVE, database. According to DHS, the database was created to help states check for eligibility for benefit programs, but some states are using it to verify voter citizenship as well.

"This is one of the few tools available to us to check for noncitizens on our voter rolls," executive director Sam Hayes, a Republican, said in a Nov. 26 news release. "We are pleased to follow the letter of the law outlined in North Carolina's Constitution and to make clear that elections are reserved for U.S. citizens."

Under state law, the state board would send reports on residents' voter registration and citizenship status to county boards of elections. Counties would then be required to notify voters by mail within a month and, if they do not object, remove them from the voter rolls.

County boards will be required to flag any noncitizens removed from the voter rolls within the state database.

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What gerrymander means to NC voters

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state's so-called Black Belt.

The previous 1st District was 40% Black, 47% white and skewed slightly Republican.

Individual voters and pro-democracy advocacy groups challenged the redraw, arguing lawmakers intended to nullify Black voting power, especially in the northeast, where District 1 has sent Black Democrats to Congress since 1992. The court cited the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Alexander v. South Carolina NAACP*, which raised the standard to show racial bias in voting rights.

"We're disappointed in the court's decision," said Bob Phillips, executive director of Common Cause North Carolina. "This ruling gives blessing to what will be the most gerrymandered congressional map in state history, a map that intentionally retaliates against voters in eastern North Carolina for supporting a candidate not preferred by the majority party."

The plaintiffs argued that legislators' remarks about wanting to defeat a "sue-until-blue scheme" revealed retaliation for the earlier lawsuit challenging the 2023 districts, which had been brought by the NAACP North Carolina State Conference, Common Cause, and several affected voters. They contended the new redraw undermined their ability to get a final ruling on their challenge to District 1.

The court's decision followed a Nov. 20 opinion in which the court rejected challenges to the 2023 congressional and Senate plans as diluting Black

voters' strength in violation of Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act and the 14th and 15th Amendments. The panel found "it is undisputed that Black-preferred candidates are less successful under the 2023 [congressional] plan than under the 2022 [congressional] plan," but partisan gerrymandering - not race - explained the General Assembly's intent.

"These mid-decade redistricting battles are tearing our democracy apart; we need the courts more than ever to enforce the protections of the Constitution to protect voters and the right to dissent," said Hilary Harris Klein, lead counsel for plaintiffs and senior counsel for Voting Rights with Southern Coalition for Social Justice. "If politicians want to keep their majority in any legislative body, our Constitution should require them to do it by earning votes, not by silencing the voices of communities they disagree with after every election."

The reshaped 1st District draws in new Republican voters that theoretically would push U.S. Rep. Don Davis, a Black Democrat, out of office. Democratic lawmakers, voting rights advocates and two of Davis' predecessors criticized the redrawn map.

"I believe the lawmakers responsible for the map and for this misguided ruling know they are wrong and will be judged accordingly," Phillips said. "Meanwhile, our fight for fair maps continues, and our fight for voters living in these distorted districts will carry on, with more energy than ever. Ultimately, we the people will prevail."



TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Charlotte's air quality, which scored a "D" grade in ozone pollution in the American Lung Association's 2025 "State of the Air" report, is likely to get worse after a federal court agreed to a federal rollback of pollution standards.

Breathe uneasy: Air quality rules nixed after federal court decision

Continued from page 1A

lier and remained 79th worst in the U.S., 38 places better than in 2023 when Mecklenburg had 3.7 unhealthy days to earn a failing grade.

Nationally, the report found that nearly half of people in the U.S. live in counties with unhealthy levels of ozone or particle pollution.

Mecklenburg earned a failing grade for year-round particle pollution levels above the federal standard after a passing grade in 2024.

Soot - also known as fine particulate matter, or PM2.5 - is the United States' deadliest air pollutant. The Biden-era rule, based on extensive scientific evidence, would have lowered the legal limit to 9 micrograms per cubic meter, preventing an estimated 4,500 premature deaths and 290,000 lost workdays by 2032.

Ozone and particle pollution can cause premature death as well as asthma, heart attacks and strokes, preterm births and impaired cognitive function. Particle pollution can also cause lung cancer.

EPA, which will seek comments on the extension until Jan. 7, 2026, said in a statement that the 2024 rule costs "hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars to American citizens if allowed to be implemented" and was not based on a complete scientific review.

EPA sided with 24 states led by Kentucky and coal industry groups that sued to reverse the 2024 standard. Nearly 90% of U.S. coal plants already meet the higher standard. EPA also proposed an extension to October 2031 the deadline for some large coal plants to end operation of coal-

fired boilers and close unlined coal ash pits "to promote electric grid reliability."

In 2024 during the Biden administration, EPA said the more restrictive annual limit of 9 micrograms per cubic meter would avoid more than 800,000 cases of asthma symptoms, 2,000 hospital visits and 4,500 premature deaths. The rollback is seen as a concession by President Donald Trump to support the coal industry.

Children, seniors, pregnant women, people with underlying medical conditions such as asthma, COPD, heart disease and outdoor workers are disproportionately impacted by daily exposure. The rollback has potentially outsized effects on Black and brown communities near busy roadways that where disproportionate amounts of soot and greenhouse gas emissions are generated by gas-powered vehicle exhaust.

"According to the American Lung Association, 63 million Americans experience the short-term effects of soot daily," Robbins said. "That's 17% of the national population. And these health burdens are not shared equally. Black, Indigenous, and people of color, in addition to low-income communities, routinely face the highest levels of soot pollution."

Robbins is calling on state lawmakers and environmental agencies to enact stronger soot standards instead of subscribing to federal standards.

"Simply put, reducing soot pollution will save lives," he said. "North Carolina now faces a critical choice: accept lower standards that endanger our communities or step up as a leader in public health."

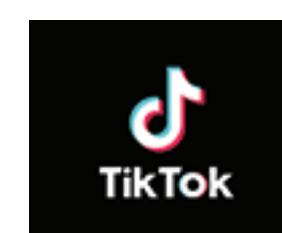
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Advocate Health CEO's compensation jumped 49%

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million - but those organizations are significantly smaller than Advocate. UNC Health did not provide its executive pay figures by the deadline.

Woods also out-earned Sam Hazen, CEO of for-profit HCA Healthcare, the largest hospital system in the country and operator of Mission Health in western North Carolina. Hazen received \$23.8 million in 2024.

This year's increase makes Woods one of Charlotte's highest paid executives in 2024. He earned more than all but one of the Charlotte region's Fortune 500 companies, behind only Bank of America CEO Brian Moynihan, who earned \$35 million last year, according to securities filings.

Woods serves as the CEO of Advocate Health, Atrium Health's new parent company. Advocate was formed under Woods' leadership when Atrium combined with Midwest-based Advocate Aurora in 2022. It is now the country's third-largest public health system, with \$35 billion in annual revenue and hospitals in the Carolinas, Georgia, Illinois and Wisconsin. It has roughly 162,000 employees.

Woods' pay consists of \$4.6 million in base compensation, \$14.4 million in bonus compensation, \$3.8M in other reportable compensation and \$2.9 million in retirement and other deferred pay, according to Advocate's federal tax filing.

It lists 20 other senior leaders who earned more than \$1 million in 2024, but that includes retirement and severance packages for some departing executives.

In a statement, Advocate said the system's executive compensation "reflects

the scale and complexity of guiding one of the nation's largest health systems." It emphasized that "the majority of compensation is performance-based," tied to patient safety, quality and community impact metrics.

The statement also noted that Advocate has "the most U.S. News & World Report 'Best Hospitals' in North Carolina, Illinois and Wisconsin," which it cited as evidence of its quality. Executive compensation, the system said, represents "just 0.17% of total system compensation."

Atrium Health released the state-required compensation totals for its other executives in May but did not include Woods' pay. At the time, an Atrium spokesman said Woods' compensation would appear in Advocate Health's 990 tax filing, which was due Nov. 17 this year.

The Ledger/NC Health News has been requesting the filing since Nov. 15. Federal law requires nonprofits to provide a copy of their 990 immediately if someone asks for it in person, but the hospital was unable to produce the document when a reporter went to Advocate's headquarters. Advocate emailed the filing the next day.

Woods' compensation leap reflects a broader trend of nonprofit healthcare systems paying their top executives handsomely. Critics say the compensation is hard to justify for nonprofit systems that receive millions in state and federal tax exemptions, and they argue that the growing gap between CEO pay and frontline worker pay undermines their public-service mission.

State elections board: Want to vote? Prove your citizenship

Continued from page 1A

Critics of the SAVE database have warned of possible mismatches and incorrect information in it, as well as other hiccups that could lead to people being improperly removed from voter rolls.

The decision from North Carolina's board comes as the Trump administration seeks to construct its own verification program. The U.S. Department of Home-

land Security is seeking access to an obscure computer database used by law enforcement officials, while also demanding that states share copies of their voter files with personal data, Stateline has reported.

But the national plan has garnered fierce opposition among civil rights advocates who argue that it would effectively create a national source of personal

information on American voters.

North Carolina's voter rolls already undergo cross-checking as officials remove voters who move out of the state or die. But Republicans, who recently took a majority on the state board, have pushed for further scrutiny and regulation, specifically on citizenship status.

Black Friday of resistance as Black Americans push back

By Stacy M. Brown

BLACK PRESS USA

Black Friday arrived this year in a country wrestling with the weight of policies that have stripped stability from millions of Americans and placed Black communities at the edge of economic ruin.

Storefront lights shine as the nation were whole, yet in living rooms across the country, families count the losses of a political agenda that has torn apart the federal workforce and shattered the financial security of those who once depended on it. Hundreds of thousands of Black federal workers have been removed from their positions

since Trump returned to office, and the effect on neighborhoods, schools, and generational wealth has been immediate. The crisis facing Black women is even deeper. The National Partnership for Women and Families reports that 265,000 Black women have been pushed out of the labor market since January, and the unemployment rate for Black women has climbed to 7.5 percent, which is the highest in years.

"According to the American Lung Association, 63 million Americans experience the short-term effects of soot daily," Robbins said. "That's 17% of the national population. And these health burdens are not shared equally. Black, Indigenous, and people of color, in addition to low-income communities, routinely face the highest levels of soot pollution."

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"Simply put, reducing soot pollution will save lives," he said. "North Carolina now faces a critical choice: accept lower standards that endanger our communities or step up as a leader in public health."

coalition stepped forward to reclaim the weekend that once symbolized celebration.

Their message calls for shoppers to keep their money, their labor, and their attention away from the companies they believe profit from silence while Black households are battered by economic loss.

"No surrender." No surrender," the Mass Blackout coalition announced in its call to action, which accuses the nation's corporate power structure of thriving while ordinary people struggle to survive.

The second coalition focuses its attention on retailers like Amazon and Home Depot. Activists accuse these companies of cooperating with or benefiting from Trump's political agenda. LaTosha Brown, cofounder of Black Voters Matter and a member of the We Ain't Buying It coalition, delivered her remarks in the coalition's public statement.

"We ain't buying this foolishness," she said. "We're not buying this racism. We're not buying the abandonment of DEI. We're not buying that the wealthiest country in the world cannot take care of its own citizens. If they want to call it Black Friday, let's show them what a Black Friday really looks like."

Home Depot issued its response after activists accused the retailer of working with immigration authorities during enforcement actions. The company stated that it is not notified before such actions occur and that it is not involved in them.

Organizers remain unconvinced and continue to include the retailer in holi-

day boycott plans.

Amazon has faced scrutiny for working conditions and for the \$1 million it contributed to Trump's inauguration, which boycott leaders cite as evidence of political alignment. The coalition argues that Amazon has benefited from federal policy while workers across the country face tightening hours and declining wages, and its owner, Jeff Bezos, has fully capitulated to Trump.

Behind all these confrontations sits a larger truth. Black Americans are living through an economic emergency that has been shaped by federal policy decisions targeting the jobs, protections, and historical pathways that built the Black middle class.

Analysts at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities report that Trump's agenda has attacked food assistance, health care, and family income supports at the very moment when unemployment among Black women is rising, and Black communities are losing stable federal careers that once offered a route out of poverty.

Organizers say this Black Friday is not about discounts. It is a line drawn by people who are tired of being told to spend in a country that is stripping away their ability to live. It is a refusal to pretend that holiday lights can hide the harm done to families who have been pushed to the margins of the economy.

The final word from organizers cut through the noise of the season.

"We're not buying from companies that won't stand with us," LaTosha Brown said. "Our dollars will go elsewhere."

The Charlotte Post

Trump chastised for talk of possible Nigeria invasion

By April Ryan

BLACK PRESS USA

"A complex reality" is being overlooked by President Donald Trump, with his proposal to send the U.S. military into Nigeria over alleged anti-Christian behaviors, said U.S. Rep. Greg Meeks (D-N.Y.), a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Trump said last week in a post to social media that if Nigeria does not halt the persecution of Christians, he may send U.S. troops "guns-a-blazing" to "completely wipe out the Islamic Terrorists who are committing these horrible atrocities." Trump has directed the Department of War "to prepare for possible action," he wrote. "If we attack, it will be fast, vicious, and sweet, just like the terrorist thugs attack our CHERISHED Christians!"

Meeks responded in a written statement with, "I know President Tinubu recognizes the importance of inter-faith harmony and is working to address this challenge."

While chastising Trump's plans, Meeks said, "Providing security support is one thing; Trump's threatening military intervention to 'defend Christians' is a reckless distortion of the facts."

And Trump's aid cuts have blocked much-needed emergency nutrition and livelihoods programs—the very tools essential to preventing the spread of insurgency.



The Trump Administration's designation of Nigeria as a Country of Particular Concern ignores the complex reality of violence there. Clashes between Christian farmers and Muslim herders are driven by resource scarcity and competition for land, not religion alone. Terrorist groups have devastated communities, especially in the predominantly Muslim north, and all Nigerians deserve protection." According to a 2019 Pew Research study, Nigeria ranked fifth among the world's Christian populations and third among the world's largest Muslim populations.

Meeks also makes the distinction that Nigeria's President Tinubu is Muslim while his wife is Christian. The last time Trump met with a Nigerian president was in April 2018, when he hosted then-President Muhammadu Buhari at the White House. The bilateral meeting focused on enhancing partnerships between the two countries, promoting economic growth, and fighting terrorism, including Boko Haram and ISIS in West Africa.

There was no chance of ironing out this issue at the end of November at the G-20 Summit in South Africa, as Trump has declined to attend the world leaders' event on the African continent. Although not a formal member of the G20, Nigerian officials planned to participate in the summit and make presentations.

Durham students protest ICE presence

By Kylie Marsh

THE TRIANGLE TRIBUNE

DURHAM — Durham Public Schools students organized a walkout in rapid response to U.S. Customs and Border Patrol's descent upon the city.

CBP agents moved to the Triangle last week following their blitz on Charlotte. About 29% of DPS students were absent, Durham Public Schools Superintendent Anthony Lewis said.

Magaly, who didn't want

to give her last name due to fear of being targeted by authorities, is a junior at Hillside High School. She spoke with her teachers about wanting to call a protest and was motivated to organize one by their responses.

"I don't think it's right how people's families are being broken apart," she said. The next day, Magaly

said "almost the whole school" walked out in support, chanting and holding

banners and signs. For almost an hour, students marched a lap around the school during the third period. Afterwards, they returned to class in high spirits.

"Everyone was in a good mood," Magaly said. As to why the crackdown is happening, she thinks there are misconceptions.

"Maybe they think colored people might have criminal records or be violent," she said.

Clock ticks on \$1.2B in unspent COVID funds

By Lucas Thomae

CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS

State Auditor Dave Bolek has a New Year's resolution for state agencies: spend the remaining \$1.2 billion in federal COVID funds before they expire at the end of 2026.

In spring 2021, amid the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress passed a massive stimulus package that sent \$5.4 billion to North Carolina's state government. That money sits in an account called the State Fiscal Recovery Fund and has been allocated to individual agencies by the state legislature.

The Office of the State Auditor released a report on Nov. 17 showing that by the end of the 2024 fiscal year, less than half of those COVID funds had been dispersed.

Most of the remaining money was tied to agencies tasked with large-scale water, sewer and broadband infrastructure projects. The Department of Environmental Quality, for example, had yet to draw down \$1.7 billion (89%) of the \$1.9 billion allocated to it within the audit's timeframe.

"State agencies were allocated billions of dollars for COVID, but a lot of that money sat parked," Bolek said in announcing the report.

"With funds not expended by the end of 2026 going to the U.S. Treasury, state agencies should be proactive in making sure taxpayers realize a return on the investment of these funds."

The audit was not factually incorrect, but it likely overstated how much ARPA funding was actually sitting unused, Carolina Public Press has found.

The NC Pandemic Recovery Office, housed within the Department of Commerce, maintains a dashboard tracking State Fiscal Recovery Fund spending. It shows that North Carolina's ARPA spending accelerated in 2025 and that 78% of the fund has now been dispersed — far higher than the audit's 46% figure, which only covered spending through June 30, 2024.

State auditor spokesperson Randy Brechbier told CPP the report ended at that date because it reflected the scope set under the previous auditor's administration.

"The purpose of this audit was not to determine why certain funds have yet to be disbursed," the report's introduction stated, "but to determine whether the North Carolina Office of State Budget and Management accounted for, allocated and disbursed amounts appropriated to the State Fiscal Recovery Fund in accordance with State Fiscal Recovery Fund legisla-

tion. To that end, all matters were done in accordance with law."

Still, the audit and Bolek's comments raised doubts about whether the state could complete its ARPA projects by the end of next year — and risk forfeiting millions of federal dollars in those COVID funds.

Agencies holding large amounts of unspent ARPA money don't seem alarmed, however. They told CPP they expect to use their full allocations by the December 2026 deadline, with few exceptions.

One reason spending appears behind schedule is that ARPA money is typically reimbursed after expenses occur, meaning agencies draw the COVID funds only once they have already spent money on approved projects.

"Many of the remaining activities are infrastructure-related, including broadband and water and sewer projects, which have higher costs later in the projects than in the early stages," a spokesperson for the NC Pandemic Recovery Office said.

"Because of these two factors, disbursements are higher in the final years of those projects than in the early stages."

That's why agencies like the Department of Environmental Quality and the Department of Information Technology hold the bulk of remaining ARPA funds. They are responsible for seeing major construction and technology projects through from contracting to completion.

DIT spokesperson Cristalle Dickerson said most of the department's remaining \$565 million has already been contracted but not yet expended.

The department plans to funnel the rest into three new grant programs by the end of next year: the Broadband Recovery Program to repair broadband infrastructure destroyed by Tropical Storm Helene, a utility-pole replacement program and a new broadband line-extension program.

The Department of Environmental Quality, meanwhile, still has \$359 million in unexpended funds, although most of it has been obligated to local governments for water and sewer projects. Those grants primarily serve towns and counties with distressed water systems. DEQ awarded the last of its ARPA-funded grants in spring 2024, and reimbursement is expected through next year.

The Department of Health and Human Services' lead and asbestos remediation program is also one of the state's major ongoing ARPA projects. The agency received \$150 million to inspect and remove asbestos and lead-based paint in public schools and child care facilities, of which \$55 million has been spent so far, according to the dashboard.



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The real fix for high drug prices

By Saul Anuzis

SPECIAL TO THE POST

Far too many seniors face an impossible choice: pay for prescription drugs or purchase other necessities.

Roughly one in every five seniors has recently declined or delayed filling a prescription, skipped a dose, or split pills because of the cost.

President Trump recently floated two proposals to tackle this affordability crisis. Both are well-intentioned. But one could easily backfire and deprive seniors of lifesaving medicines – while the other would help solve the problem with virtually no downsides.

Patients are counting on the president to choose wisely.

That first plan, which the White House has dubbed its "Most-Favored-Nation" proposal, could cap U.S. drug prices at the levels that prevail in European countries with socialized healthcare systems. In those countries, drug price controls result in patients having fewer treatment options and facing years-long delays to access medicines that Americans take for granted, all while forcing biotech companies to curb investment in potential new treatments and cures.

If we adopt those same price controls, it's inevitable that sooner or later, Americans would suffer the same rationing and decline in research and development that Europeans experience. Socialism doesn't work in Europe, and it wouldn't work here, no matter how noble the White House's intentions are.

Fortunately, the other option is far more promising. For months, President Trump has repeatedly spoken of the need to "totally cut out the middleman" from the drug supply chain.

He's referring to the pharmacy benefit managers, insurers, and other intermediaries that stand between the companies that develop and manufacture drugs on the one side, and patients on the other. Today, about half of all money spent on brand-name medicines goes to these middlemen.

PBMs are some of the worst offenders. These enormous, yet obscure, companies decide which medicines are, and aren't, covered by insurance. And they use their leverage to negotiate huge discounts and rebates off the price of drugs – but generally don't pass these savings on to patients who need to fill prescriptions. In fact, PBMs have a perverse incentive to steer patients towards more expensive medicines, which come with bigger secret kickbacks to the PBM.

By extracting billions from the healthcare system, PBMs make medicines less affordable while offering little value to patients.

That's why the White House is increasingly pushing drug companies to start selling their medicines directly to patients at transparent, discounted cash prices – cutting out the middlemen entirely. In fact, the president announced the government will create a website, "TrumpRx," to help patients find and buy drugs directly from manufacturers.

Innovative companies like Mark Cuban's Cost Plus Drugs, which offers transparent cash prices for dozens of medicines, have already proven time and again that bypassing PBMs can deliver real savings at the pharmacy counter.

Unsurprisingly, this solution is popular. Surveys show that 86% of Americans in battleground congressional districts support allowing manufacturers to sell medicines directly to patients and local pharmacies.

Among seniors, support is even stronger: 90% favor direct sales, and just under 80% say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who backed the idea.

President Trump doesn't need to import socialist price controls – along with all the negative consequences they bring – to make medicines more affordable. He merely needs to pursue his excellent idea of making it easier for patients to purchase discounted medicines directly from manufacturers, so that middlemen don't siphon off savings that could otherwise go to patients.

Saul Anuzis is president of 60 Plus, the American Association of Senior Citizens. This piece originally ran in the Detroit News.

NC post-conviction appeal limit could impact innocent

Continued from page 1A

grove contended. "Even in the event that you have done nothing wrong. That is deeply problematic."

Blagrove argued the General Assembly needs to increase its support of public defenders.

"So that people can have access to the most robust defense on the front end," Blagrove said. "Also so that there is unlimited resources available for them to prove their innocence if they have to do it within a seven-year period."

The canonization of Dick Cheney

My 91-year-old grandmother has a litany of wise sayings, but one in particular always stayed with me.



JARED
BELL

A few times after we attended a funeral, she would comment on the eulogies with a matter-of-fact clarity, saying, "People get up there with the lying and the carrying on, acting like the person was a saint when in life they weren't."

In other words, death does not magically transform the flawed into the flawless.

Last month, as the nation mourned former Vice President Dick Cheney, her words echoed loudly. The narrative that emerged felt strangely predetermined. Tributes poured in describing him as a patriot, a strategic mind, a man of unshakable conviction.

Even former President George W. Bush framed him in soft focus, calling him a "good man who loved his country." His coffin was greeted by a host of leaders across the political aisle, each offering solemn nods and polished praise as though bipartisan ceremony could smooth over the jagged edges of his legacy.

Others followed the same script. Republican leaders hailed his "steadfast leadership." Cable news tributes emphasized his "unwavering commitment to American security," and commentators portrayed him as a statesman whose judgment shaped a generation. But that carefully curated remembrance, respectful as it may be, was incomplete.

It was sanitized. It skipped the chapters that defined millions of other

people's lives far more than his virtues ever did.

Because the truth is this: Dick Cheney was not merely a controversial figure. He was the chief architect of a catastrophic war in Iraq, a war built on manipulated intelligence, packaged in false certainty, and sold to the American public with a confidence that has since unraveled into one of the greatest foreign policy failures of the modern era.

And while we can say no historical figure is pure, that line too often becomes a shield, a way to downplay, dilute, or deflect from the scale of the harms done.

The human toll of that decision is staggering. Estimates vary, but none of them are small. More than 200,000 Iraqi civilians were killed by documented violence, according to the Iraq Body Count Project. When factoring in broader war-related deaths, the Brown University Costs of War Project places the number between 280,000 and 315,000.

Higher mortality studies, including The Lancet's 2006 analysis and the ORB International mortality survey, place the toll closer to one million. Even the lowest numbers are devastating. The highest are almost unfathomable. That war destabilized an entire region, and it maimed and killed thousands of United States service members, leaving countless others with invisible wounds.

The Costs of War Project, also estimates that more than 30,177 post-9/11 service members and veterans have died by suicide, far exceeding the number killed in combat. Many were driven to despair by the trauma of a war justified by distortions.

Beyond Iraq, Cheney was among the most vocal and

unapologetic defenders of the interrogation practices that emerged in the post 9/11 era. He repeatedly defended techniques such as waterboarding in interviews, including with The Guardian.

He endorsed the CIA's "enhanced interrogation" program, as documented by Human Rights Watch. The ACLU noted that Cheney never expressed remorse, and a detailed review by FactCheck.org highlighted how many of his claims contradicted official findings.

Waterboarding, black sites, and extraordinary rendition were all justified in the name of counterterrorism. They were carried out under a framework of legal gymnastics designed to sidestep international law and basic human morality.

These were not accidents. These were choices, deliberate and calculated decisions that reshaped the nation's posture toward human rights and left a stain on America's global reputation that has never fully washed out.

So, while I understand that funerals highlight the noblest parts of a life, journalism should not behave like a eulogy. History should not operate as public relations. When mainstream coverage reduces Cheney's legacy to "complicated," it trivializes the human cost of his decisions.

There was nothing complicated about violating international law. There was nothing complicated about allowing torture. There was nothing complicated about sending young men and women to fight and die in a war justified by distortions.

There are costs when we distort someone's legacy. The chief cost is that the blight of their decisions

gets ignored. Their actions become recast as mundane misjudgments when, in reality, they reshaped the world in violent and irreversible ways.

When we call Cheney a good man who loved his country, we are also failing to mention how he championed warrantless NSA surveillance programs that violated Americans' privacy rights, pushed expansive theories of executive power that weakened constitutional oversight, and presided over an era when Halliburton and its subsidiary KBR, companies he once led, secured billions in no-bid contracts, and profited from the very war he helped engineer.

While I may oppose much of what he stood for, I do not believe we should stop memorializing Cheney. Memorials are not always about celebrating the good, and ignoring history does not help. We cannot learn from what we refuse to confront. But we can condemn what his actions stood for and the damage they inflicted.

Without doing so, we risk ignoring the horrors of what happened after 9/11 and the victims whose lives were shattered by decisions made in the name of patriotism but carried out through violence, secrecy, and impunity.

A country that canonizes its war makers without confronting their wreckage is a country that chooses amnesia over accountability, and history has never been kind to nations that forget what they survived.

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

Passport ruling a distraction from real issue

By Thomas L. Knapp

SPECIAL TO THE POST

"Displaying passport holders' sex at birth," the U.S. Supreme Court held in a short, unsigned ruling on Nov. 6, "no more offends equal protection principles than displaying their country of birth."

The case, *Trump v. Orr*, concerns a Trump administration policy of requiring that "sex at birth," rather than "gender identity," be displayed on U.S. passports.

The ruling allows that policy to stand – reversing a lower court's stay on its enforcement – while the matter continues to work its way through the lower courts.

Here's what the plaintiffs in the case say they're after: "[T]he same thing millions of Americans take for granted: passports that allow them to travel without fear of misidentification, harassment, or violence."

It wasn't until 1947 that the U.S. government strayed so far beyond the Constitution's limits on its powers that it started requiring passports to enter

or leave the U.S. – and that requirement didn't apply at the Canadian and Mexican borders until after 9/11.

Passports don't ALLOW people to travel, they RESTRICT the ability of people to travel. They're a relatively recent tool of government control. They're also wholly unconstitutional.

There's a term for the government holding you in a place you'd rather not be and forbidding you to leave without permission. That word is "imprisonment."

Under the Constitution, imprisonment requires due process of law, including but not limited to conviction, by a jury, of a crime.

It wasn't until 1947 that the U.S. government strayed so far beyond the Constitution's limits on its powers that it started requiring passports to enter

mission Slips to Travel in the first place.

If SCOTUS was willing to do its job – voiding unconstitutional laws – it would overturn the entire federal travel control regime instead of creatively interpreting "equal protection."

The continuing existence of the U.S. passport scheme is just another evocative exhibit in the airtight case that Lysander Spooner put forth in 1870: "[W]hether the Constitution really be one thing, or another, this much is certain – that it has either authorized such a government as we have had, or has been powerless to prevent it. In either case, it is unfit to exist."

Thomas L. Knapp is director and senior news analyst at the William Lloyd Garrison Center for Libertarian Advocacy Journalism (thegarrisoncenter.org). He lives and works in Florida.

What's a North Carolina teacher to do?

First, they asked nicely and with respect, and got no response.

Then the teachers went to



TOM
CAMPBELL

the chalkboard and wrote succinctly and plainly why they deserved to get a pay raise. North Carolina teachers are the lowest paid in the South. And since 2011, the General Assembly has systematically cut teacher benefits and given them lower than inflation pay raises. The average teacher pay of \$58,292 ranks 43rd in the U.S. – \$13,738 less than the national average.

The legislature hemmed and hawed. The Senate passed a budget with a token teacher pay raise. The House budget was

more generous, but the two chambers couldn't reach agreement. Nothing was done. The legislature, unable to reach a budget agreement, adjourned.

And it's not just teachers that aren't getting pay increases. All state employees' pay is stalled.

We're told that nothing is likely to be done until early next year when the legislature convenes.

Frustrated at the prospect that their pay won't even be considered until next year, some teachers decided to stage a walkout, calling in sick. Not many participated, it was not disruptive and had no impact.

This is a good place to say that we generally don't like actions like employee walkouts, believing that better communications can help in resolving issues. But resolutions re-

quire the input and willingness of both sides to find solutions. The recent track record of our legislature indicates they aren't interested in public school teachers. They prefer spending large sums of money to give private school scholarships, while literally ignoring our traditional public schools.

What's a teacher to do?

Let's consider what is really the big bottleneck with increasing teacher pay. It seems to be the state Senate. That means the issue ultimately resides with Senate President Pro Tem Phil Berger. If Berger wanted to pay teachers more, it would happen.

Someone suggested that instead of conducting a statewide walkout now, when the legislature isn't even in session, maybe a better approach might be for teachers to unite in

Senator Berger's Senate district. He has a very serious primary challenge for the March 3 election next year. Berger might be much more receptive to listening to teachers if he believed they might impact the outcome of that election.

Our teachers deserve better. Our legislature, along with the rest of the state, expects teachers to work each day doing their jobs. Shouldn't we also expect the legislature to do their jobs? When they can pass a mini budget but can't consider their employees, our lawmakers aren't doing their jobs.

Tom Campbell is a Hall of Fame North Carolina broadcaster and columnist who has covered public policy issues since 1965. Contact him at tomcamp@ncspin.com

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DONALD WATKINS | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Carolina Panthers cornerback Mike Jackson steps in front of Los Angeles Rams receiver Puka Nacua for an interception in the Panthers' 31-28 win Nov. 30 at Bank of America Stadium.

Backline's just fine for Carolina

Between injuries and suspension, remade secondary help 7-6 Panthers stay in thick of playoff chase

By Jeff Hawkins
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

With cornerstone cornerback Jaycee Horn sidelined, Mike Jackson stepped up for the Carolina Panthers.

Jackson cut in front of Los Angeles Rams wide receiver Puka Nacua for an interception and dashed down the sideline for his first NFL pick-six in the Panthers' 31-28 upset win Sunday at Bank of America Stadium.

"That was unbelievable," Carolina coach Dave Canales said. "It was such a payoff."

Along with Horn (concussion), the Panthers also played without starting safety Tre'von Moehrig, who was suspended for unsportsmanlike conduct

against San Francisco, and Corey Thornton, who was lost for the season with an injury in the same game.

Enacting the "next man up" philosophy, the Panthers turned to their young reinforcements, second-year cornerback Chau Smith-Wade and rookie safety Lathan Ransom, to face quarterback Matthew Stafford, an MVP contender. With his 4-yard touchdown pass 2 minutes, 50 seconds into the first quarter, Stafford established an NFL record for 28 consecutive touchdown passes without an interception.

Then, the Panthers' secondary picked off Stafford twice over his next three passes, highlighted by Jackson's scoring sprint down the near sideline.

Jackson joked that the new-look secondary attempted to make Stafford into "Superman with no cape."

"When he's having his Hall of Fame speech," Jackson said, "I'm going to be thinking about this pick."

Stafford entered the week leading the NFL with 30 touchdown passes and a 113.7 rating. The Rams (9-3) had their six-game winning streak snapped.

"I'm so proud of this group, going blow-for-blow with an amazing team," Canales said.

With injuries in the secondary creating issues on a short work week, the Panthers brought back familiar faces in cornerbacks Robert Rochell and David Long Jr., and elevated Kalen King from

the practice squad to his NFL debut.

"It's just the next man up," Jackson said. "There's guys that you guys might not know. They got a chance to go out there and play."

Panthers pick off Stafford

King tried to stay patient. A 2024 seventh-round draft pick by Green Bay, King was on the practice squad for all but one game last season and never played. He finally got on the field last week, covering kicks.

"Two years I waited and it felt amazing," King said. "I went out there and competed. Hopefully we can build on this going into the bye week and create some momentum and win a division."

Please see **A RECONFIGURED** | 6A

LB Krys Barnes must 'prove to myself I do belong' in NFL

By Jeff Hawkins
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

In his first NFL start since the 2023 season, Carolina Panthers linebacker Krys Barnes stepped into the injury-plagued lineup in a 20-9 loss to the San Francisco 49ers.

As soon as Jauan Jennings initiated a post-game altercation with Tre'von Moehrig for what video showed was a punch to the 49ers wide receiver's groin area, Barnes leapt into action, bear-hugging Jennings and walking him away from the Panthers safety.

With first-teamers Christian Roze-

boom (hip/hamstring) and Trevin Wallace (shoulder) sidelined, Barnes, who spent most of the season on the practice squad, could be called upon to play a leading role down the stretch.

"I just want to prove to myself I do belong," Barnes said last week. "I try to show it every day at practice and every opportunity."

Barnes stepping up

Barnes was patient.

After signing with the Panthers on Aug. 3, Barnes entered a linebacking room in flux. Out was expected starter Josey Jewell, who was released in July

because of concussion concerns. In were Rozeboom and Wallace.

Barnes, who entered the NFL with Green Bay in 2020 as an undrafted free agent, continued prepping with the second and third units, biding his time as an inactive asset for eight of the opening nine weeks. Barnes started 23 of his first 29 appearances with the Packers.

"As a competitor, it's hard, you want to be out there and play ball, especially on game day," Barnes said. "I handle every week the same. You have to prepare as if you're a starter. It's the nature

of the business. For me, the standard has been set. I'll come in and try to uphold that standard and go from there."

Barnes finished with a game-high 10 tackles, including three solo stops. Among his highlights, Barnes stopped Christian McCaffrey for no gain on third-and-1 early in the second quarter, but, along with two teammates, failed to tackle Jennings on his 12-yard touchdown catch and run on the game-opening drive.

"I loved the way Krys played," coach Dave Canales said. "He played physical

Please see **BARNES** | 6A

Top dogs: Hough perfect on road to 8A title game

By Cameron Williams
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CORNELIUS — The Hough Huskies have finally made it to the promised land.

After years of coming up short in the West region, the 2025 Huskies got over the hump with a 24-0 win against West Charlotte Friday in the 8A West Region final. Hough (13-0) coach DeShawn Baker — who has been on the job since 2023 — said the win was extra special.

"We are a part of history," he said. "I told the kids we are the kings of the Queen City and that [West Charlotte] couldn't mess with us. Everybody talks about what they do, but they haven't seen a defense like ours, and I meant what I said. We came out and played our style of ball and so it is special and means we are a part of history."

Amidst the postgame celebration, Baker said: "North Charlotte, South Charlotte, East Charlotte, West Charlotte, Hough by 30." He had reason for confidence in his team, which is unbeaten against Mecklenburg County schools since his arrival. This year's team erased the narrative of playoff failures. Now,

Please see **BEST** | 8A



CAMERON WILLIAMS | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Hough High football coach DeShawn Baker holds the North Carolina 8A West Region trophy after the Huskies' 24-0 win against West Charlotte Nov. 28. The Huskies will play Raleigh Millbrook for the state title Dec. 11.

Ascent called to national team duty

By Steve Goldberg
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Two Carolina Ascent players have been called up for U-20 national team duty.

Goalkeeper Charlotte Burge is with the U.S. squad while B Hylton represents England when they played Nov. 29 in San Pedro del Pinatar, Spain, in a tuneup for the 2026 FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup, which will take place in Poland Sept. 5-27.



Hylton

Now in her second year with the Ascent, Burge, 19, is still the youngest professional goalkeeper in the country. With Meagan McClelland and Samantha Leshnak-Murphy in front of her last season, and McClelland and Sydney Martinez this year, Burge has spent more time in the nets with the US Soccer teams. She had a previous call-up with the U19 team.

"Since I'm a younger player in this (professional) environment, going to the national team gives me an opportunity to play with girls my age," she said. "In a playing aspect, it's

Please see **ASCENT** | 6A

Charlotte FC's season is over, but soccer business continues

By Steve Goldberg
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

The season may be over, but soccer never stops.

Charlotte FC announced a variety of recent moves, including a contract extension for general manager Zoran Krneta and end-of-season roster decisions. The club's first major signing, Christian Fuchs, has left his assistant coach position to take the reins as top man for a team in the English fourth division.

Who stays, who goes

Charlotte FC exercised options on Drake Callender, Djibril Diani, and Tyger Smalls. The midseason signing of Callender, the former number one goalkeeper for Inter Miami, signaled the end for Kristijan Kahlina's backup

David Bingham, who is eligible for free agency.

Eryk Williamson is out of contract and a free agent. The eight-year MLS veteran came to Charlotte after seven seasons in Portland, making 24 appearances with four starts.

The options of Bill Tuiloma, Nick Scardina, and Jahlana Forbes were declined.

In three seasons with the Crown, Tuiloma, who joined from the Timbers in 2023, appeared in 29 MLS games with 23 starts and 37 appearances across all competitions. The New Zealand international, who played centerback and right back, scored three goals across all competitions in 2025.

The 24-year-old Scardina, acquired in the 2023 MLS SuperDraft with the 40th overall

pick, is more of a surprise as he deputized reasonably well during Charlotte's epidemic of outside back injuries that kept Nathan Byrne and Souleyman Doumbia off the pitch. In his third season, he started eight matches in 15 MLS appearances. Across all competitions, he made 19 appearances for the first team. His cost was just \$104,000 this season.

Forbes was a 2024 MLS SuperDraft pick (38th overall) out of Wake Forest and accumulated 12 first-team minutes, coming off the bench against Monterrey in the Leagues Cup. The defender was on the bench for two MLS matches. Over two seasons, he started 25 of 26 games for the Crown Legacy, with four goals and four assists.

Please see **OFFSEASON** | 6A



CAROLINA PANTHERS

Linebacker Krys Barnes turned his first start as a Carolina Panther into a time-high 10 tackles (3 solo) in their 20-9 loss to San Francisco Nov. 24. As a result, he was elevated to the 53-player roster.

Barnes eager to solidify Panthers opportunity

Continued from page 5A

and was playing good assignment football."

With that start serving as Barnes' third and final practice-squad elevation, the Panthers added him to the 53-man roster.

Familiar with McCaffrey

Barnes knew what to expect facing McCaffrey. He experienced enough as a member of the Arizona Cardinals.

"I have a long history with him," Barnes said. "He makes people look bad all the time. He's a hell of a back, much respect for him."

During his first full season with the 49ers in 2023, McCaffrey paced the NFL in rushing (1,459 yards). After missing 13 games last season with calf and knee injuries he looks rejuvenated in 2025, leading the league with 1,581 scrimmage yards going into Week 12.

Carolina defensive coordinator Ejiro Evero predicted what would happen if McCaffrey discovered rhythm, like he did when he touched the ball on the 49ers' opening five plays.

"You're not going to have a good day

if you're asking guys to make a lot of one-on-one tackles against these runners," Evero said.

Barnes put it another way. "It comes down to being where you're supposed to be," he said.

McCaffrey finished with 89 yards rushing on 24 attempts and one touchdown. He also added 53 yards on seven receptions. His 298 touches lead the NFL.

Canales called the Panthers' performance "a game of missed opportunities."

Carolina intercepted 49ers quarterback Brock Purdy three times in the first half, leading to just three points.

Canales' run-first play-calling philosophy led to just nine carries and 54 yards combined by Rico Dowdle and Chuba Hubbard.

"I've got to a better job," Canales said.

With special teams ace Claudio Cherelus sustaining against San Francisco, the Panthers signed Isaiah Simmons to the practice squad. The 2020 eighth overall draft pick could play a hybrid role, adding depth at linebacker and safety.

A reconfigured secondary keeps Carolina in contention

Continued from page 5A

Carolina quarterback Bryce Young completed 15-of-20 passes for 206 yards and three touchdowns, including two on fourth down. He was credited with his 11th fourth-quarter game-winning drive, the most of any QB since 2023.

"I just trust my guys," Young said. "There's no big conversation, no big hoohah."

The Panthers improved to 7-6 - their first seven-win season since 2022 - and will return to action Dec. 14 at New Orleans. They trail NFC South-leading Tampa Bay (7-5) by a half game.

Stafford started Sunday by completing four of his first five passes, leading the Rams to a quick 7-0 advantage. After Young capped his first drive with a 35-yard touchdown pass to Chuba Hubbard, to tie the score at 7-7, Stafford's turnover troubles started to mount.

Sparked by Stafford's 32-yard pass to Davante Adams, who beat Smith-Wade in coverage, the Rams drove to the Panthers' 8. Stafford's third-down pass deflected off defensive lineman Derrick Brown's helmet and into the arms of safety Nick Scott, ending his interception-free streak of 317.

"Man, it was great," Rochell said of beating his former team. "I know I'm just getting here this week, meeting the guys. We came out and listened to our coaches this week. It was an amazing day to part of."

I know my guys'

Long knows Stafford.

As a teammate with the Rams, he learned about Stafford's variety of throwing angles from firsthand experience during practices.

"Stafford is one of the great throwers in the league," Long said last week after his first Panthers practice. "I feel like you have to give him his respect."

Long compared Stafford's big-play abilities to NBA star Stephen Curry. Like Stafford completing passes via unorthodox throws, the former Davidson College sharpshooter will find a way to make long-range shots.

"It's like Steph Curry. (He) might be perfectly covered and he'll hit a jump shot in your face," Long said. "You have to line up and play defense on the next play."

"That's the biggest thing - play your technique."

Despite the Panthers forcing Stafford into three turnovers, including a Derrick Brown-induced sack-fumble with 2:34 remaining to clinch the win, Canales said Carolina will enter the off week confidently, but understands there are "things to clean up."

Canales cited the secondary play as "up and down."

Ransom led Carolina with 11 tackles, including a sack, but the first-year player will be challenged to "remain connected with the back end," Canales said. "Lathan was working through some things."

"He played physical and showed up making hits in the run game and had a nice sack. He's a dynamic player. I thought Chau Smith-Wade did a solid job today."

Horn missed a game for the 32nd time in his career. Through 12 games this season, he's grabbed a career-high five interceptions, including two in the San Francisco loss.

With a week off, the Panthers anticipate Horn returning to health and Moehrle will remain disciplined for the remainder of the season.

"There's going to be ups and downs, but I know my guys," Young said. "I know how they work. I know who they are. I know the competitors they are. No matter what, I'll always have confidence in them, so I'll never change."

Mixed results for JC Smith basketball

By Herbert L. White

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Acclimation is a challenge for Johnson C. Smith basketball.

With a remade roster in his second season, the Golden Bulls are still figuring each other out during a 3-2 start. Inconsistency has been evident on both ends of the floor, but they crossed a hurdle Nov. 29 when they beat Elizabeth City State 82-72 for their first road win.

"Half new guys, half old guys, just to process, as far as how we do things, what we're looking for," coach Antwain Banks said. "The new guys are trying to figure it out. I'm trying to be patient with them try-

ing to figure it out, so I just think more practice, more games we'll get better with it. I think we just hit maybe the 30-day mark as far as practice, as far as together, so they're still trying to figure it out and build some chemistry amongst themselves."

JCSU, which has four players averaging double figures paced by Jamauri Bryant and Trey Pettigrew at 17.8 points per game, could use more consistency. The Golden Bulls split results last week with a loss to Lenoir-Rhyne and the win against ECSU. The week prior, they swept Virginia University of Lynchburg 119-75 and Morris College 97-80 on campus.

« HIGH SCHOOLS »

Best in the West, Hough aims for first state title

Continued from page 5A

they get a chance to play for a state title.

"We got the monkey off our back," Baker said. "Everyone is talking about what we can't do. I heard someone say, 'Man, what if you play West Charlotte and they beat you?' Kanya West said it best: 'I guess we'll never know.'"

Hough's defense, which has been stout all season long, showed why they just might be the best in the state by shutting out West Charlotte (10-3). Defensive coordinator Chachi Sullivan said he knew the Lions weren't going to beat them based on athleticism alone. What made game planning difficult was wondering what the Lions had up their sleeves.

"We never thought that they were as good as everyone said they were," Sullivan said. "We looked at the film. I'll be honest with you; I was nervous because I couldn't see what everybody else was saying. Honestly, I'm not trying to be disrespectful. I think they have some tremendous athletes, but I think that comes a time where being fast is not how you become a receiver, being fast is not how you become a running back. I think they're just allowed to be athletes. The small details that you can see, there's tendencies that were dead giveaways to what they wanted to do, and they're just [winning with athleticism]."

Hough, which opened in 2010, has a long list of highly successful coaches.

Bobby Collins, the school's first coach (2010-13), led the Huskies to a 19-5 record his final two seasons before taking over at Rock Hill South Pointe.

Miles Aldridge coached Hough to a pair of 10-plus win seasons before a final sea-

son of 7-5. He is now an assistant coach at Atlantic Collegiate Academy in Conway, S.C.

Matt Jenkins took over in 2017 and had four 11-plus win seasons in five years. He got the Huskies to the regional final in 2021 before losing to Julius Chambers. Jenkins is now the head coach at West Cabarrus.

It was Baker who did what none of the others couldn't - get to the championship game. He was quick to divert the credit, though.

"This just means that my coaches have done a hell of a job all year," Baker said. "I have some great coaches, and I've got some great kids. I can't take all the credit, man. I have to have good players to be a good coach. I might be the head coach here but my coaches and players, they stayed the course and believed what I was teaching them and coaching them to do. It just worked out."

The Huskies have a gap week until the state championship game against Raleigh Millbrook on Dec. 11. It's a first for both teams as neither have won a title.

On paper, Hough as the third ranked team in the state by MaxPreps and Millbrook 11th, the Huskies should be the favorite, but Baker isn't letting his squad get complacent. He knows the Wildcats are unbeaten for a reason and will present challenges.

"We will not look over anybody," Baker said. "We aren't over here saying the East is no good. We are going to go out there and do what we do to prepare for every week. Millbrook is a really good team. They have some good players over there."

Ascent on international call-ups

Continued from page 5A

more of an immature level, but that doesn't necessarily mean the level is dropped. It's just it's more similar to what I was used to before I came here. The speed of play (with the Ascent) is definitely faster. Being in this environment helps me go to the national team."

Burge's decision to go pro rather than spend time in the college ranks was solidified from the three months she spent in Germany with 1.FFC Kaiserslautern in 2023. Burge said there was a different kind of intensity in what she experienced.

"I think they just maximize what they have," she said. "The girls made soccer their entire life, like they were planning to play pro. If they didn't play pro, they had to go to work, and that's just not what you want to do over there. I think everyone over there is more passionate about it than we are here, especially at the youth level. Soccer is really all they have to look forward to during the day, because they don't enjoy going to school."

Only two goalkeepers were listed on the roster announced by US Soccer. The other is Kealey Titmuss, who plays at Penn State. "Charlotte is a high-poten-

tial young player who is going to have a long career ahead of her," Ascent coach Philip Poole said. "We have been deliberate in identifying elite young players who we see have the potential to achieve great things."

Hylton also went straight into the professional ranks as the first Ascent academy signing to sign a contract.

She became the youngest goal scorer in the team's brief history last April with a strike against Brooklyn FC. She's played in six matches so far this season.

For Hylton, 18, it's her second time with the England youth squad after previously joining the U-19s in November 2024.

Though born and raised in Charlotte, Hylton is eligible for the English team through her father Andy, who is from Essex, England, and played for the Charlotte Eagles.

Hylton went straight into the starting lineup in her first game, which was a qualifying match against Turkey for the 2025 UEFA Women's U19 tournament.

She was the only non-England-based athlete on the 20-player squad.

"I've definitely made quite a few friends on that team," Hylton said. "Princess (Ademiluyi) is playing down at

Fort Lauderdale, so I got to see her a week or so ago, and that was fun. Looking forward to reconnecting with everybody. Each camp is always going to be different, new people, new opponents, but then, we still have the same values, and we're still chasing the same goals."

Is there more pressure being with a national team?

"Yes," Hylton said. "There's always a step up. You're representing an entire country at that point. But I mean, also no in a sense, because really, my job is to do everything in my power to help the team win."

"B has made massive strides this fall," said Poole. "We are extremely proud of her and recognize how much work she puts in every day. Young players develop at different rates and don't always follow a linear path toward becoming a finished product."

"B is clearly in a period of rapid progress. Any time a young player has the opportunity to represent their national team, we are in full support. Playing for England again will be another important step in her development."

Offseason moves for Charlotte FC

Continued from page 5A

Tuuloma, 30, and Williamson could be salary cap casualties as they were on the books for \$525,000 and \$775,000 guaranteed compensation, respectively. Callender over Bingham is a soccer decision as the former made \$456,000 this year, compared to \$104,000 for Bingham.

Two of the Crown's top offensive threats, both on loan, will return. One is booked into next summer, while the other is becoming permanent.

Prime time players Wilfried Zaha and Pep Biel both triggered performance-based options. Closing out his second loan from Greek side Olympiacos, Biel will join Charlotte FC on a permanent transfer. He had 10 goals and 11 assists in 26 games this season but missed key stretches, including the playoffs, due to injury.

Zaha's loan has been extended to June 30, 2026, which falls in the middle of the season and will have to be addressed.

Two loaned players, Adilson Malanda and Jahkeele Marshall-Rutty, will return to their clubs. While that's accurate for Marshall-Rutty, Malanda was a loan who never left. His transfer to Middlesbrough FC in the summer window included a loan back that would keep him in the Queen City through the MLS playoffs. Marshall-Rutty's loan did not include an option, and he will return to CF Montreal.

Brandon Cambridge and the Crown are in ongoing discussions about his future. Charlotte FC retains an option on the forward for the 2026 season.

The following players are under contract for 2026:

Goalkeepers (4): Drake Callender, Nick

Holliday, Kristjan Kahlina, Chituru Odunze

Defenders (6): Nathan Byrne, Jack Neeley, Andrew Privett, Tim Ream, Mikah Thomas, Harry Toffolo

Midfielders (7): Pep Biel, Brandt Bronico, Baye Coulibaly, Djibril Diani, Nikola Petkovic, Brian Romero, Ashley Westwood

Forwards (7): Nifasha Berchimas, Liel Abada, Archie Goodwin, Tyger Smalls, Idan Toklomati, Kerwin Vargas, Wilfried Zaha

Kmeta keeps the reins

The club announced that general manager and chief soccer officer Zoran Krneta, the man responsible for roster and coaching staff build decisions, has been signed to a new multi-year contract.

Krneta, who has been with the club since its inception, oversees the Crown's sporting department which has registered three consecutive Audi MLS Cup Playoff appearances.

"We are on an exciting, upward trajectory, and now our aim is to win trophies. That is where our focus is going into the 2026 season and beyond."

This past season continued an upward climb in league standings, which set multiple single-season records for the club, including points (59), wins (19), home wins (13), and goals scored (55).

After nine matches, CLTFC were top of the table in the MLS East, but a loss of form, exacerbated by 10 of 12 games on the road over May and June, fostered a bad run that dropped them to 10th. The team rebounded with a record-tying nine-game winning streak, from July into September, which vaulted them to fourth place at season's end.