



Dating season never ends, but it's evolving in a digital era

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CLEANAIRE NC

CleanAIRE NC director of programs and impact Daisha Wall (center) leads a discussion on deploying air quality sensors in Ghana as part of an exchange program sponsored by the U.S. State Department and IREX. CleanAIRE NC development director Madison Fragnito is third from left.

Clear the air: Charlotteans share initiative in Ghana collaboration

CleanAIRE NC leaders deploy pollution monitors as part of exchange program

By Herbert L. White
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Daisha Wall's expertise is helping Africans breathe easier.

Wall, director of programs and impact at Charlotte-based CleanAIRE NC, spent two weeks in Ghana recently as part of the Mandela Washington Reciprocal Exchange Program sponsored by the U.S. State Department and IREX, a global development and education initiative. She consulted with the Ghana Environmental Protection Agency and local stakeholders in CleanAIRE For All, an international collaboration on environmental capacity.

Wall and CleanAIRE NC development director Madison Fragnito deployed air quality monitors in Techiman, a city in Ghana's Bono East Region 65 miles northeast of Kumasi. They trained Ghana EPA staff on their maintenance, data analysis and communication strategies.

Wall and Fragnito also promoted air quality awareness among students and stimulate interest in the environment and climate change.

"From a personal standpoint, just taking work out of it, obviously, I'm a Black woman, African American," Wall said. "I have always wanted to make it to any country in Africa, but Ghana in particular

was just such an exciting opportunity for me, just to be able to connect with the homeland, essentially. I have a lot of ancestry from Ghana, and so that was just a really cool experience for me.

"I recognize it's a once in a lifetime opportunity - some people don't even make it out of the country - so from a personal standpoint, super exciting. But also, I will say it made me recognize my privilege a lot more. It was just interesting, navigating through cultural differences."

Environmental awareness has become more global in scope in recent years as

Please see **CHARLOTTEANS** | 2A

Leandro delay draws criticism

By Ahmed Jallow

NC NEWSLINE

The North Carolina Supreme Court issued a new round of opinions last week, but once again left unresolved the Leandro school funding case, a decades-old legal fight over the state's obligation to provide a "sound, basic education" to its public school students.

The Leandro case dates back to 1994, when five low-wealth, rural counties sued the state over insufficient school funding. In 1997, the North Carolina Supreme Court ruled that the state was violating students' constitutional right to a sound, basic education, a decision that has been upheld multiple times since.

Democrats controlled the legislature until 2011, but did not provide the funding needed to solve the problem. In recent years, Republicans have similarly declined to appropriate the full amount called for by a remedial plan.

The most recent substantive ruling came in November 2022, when the court ordered the General Assembly to fund the first two years of the Comprehensive Remedial Plan. After the court shifted to a 5-2 Republican majority in 2023, the justices granted Republican lawmakers' request to reconsider that decision.

The court heard oral arguments in February 2024 but has yet to

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HB 307 charts new path for NC justice

By Emma Unger

UNC MEDIA HUB

North Carolina's 122 death row inmates have spent up to 40 years waiting for execution.

Wayne Laws received a death sentence in August 1985, while Joel Valdez was sentenced last August. Despite the growing number of inmates on the row, North Carolina has not executed anyone since 2006. But the state's recent update to criminal justice law seeks to change that.

In response to the August murder of 23-year-old Iryna Zarutskaya in Charlotte, House Bill 307, later titled "Iryna's Law," was proposed in the state legislature and became law less than two weeks later. The law, parts of which went into effect Dec. 1, seeks to toughen North Carolina's criminal justice proceedings.

Representatives who spoke in support of the bill during the floor debate focused on the circumstances of Zarutskaya's death and her alleged killer. The case received national media attention and outrage, as the suspect had a history of mental illness and nearly 20 interactions with the police, including an arrest in January.

"He should have never been allowed out of the jail," Rep. Tricia Cotham, R-Mecklenburg, said during the debate.

Representatives highlighted aspects of HB 307 that are designed to reduce the use of unsecured bonds, implement conduct reviews of judges and magistrates, and improve the involuntary commitment process.

Please see **HB307** | 3A

Field is set for NC 2026 elections as filing closes

By Sarah Michels

CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS

The 2026 election field is set in North Carolina.

Over the past three weeks, thousands of North Carolinians have filed to run for office, including in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, state legislature, state courts and many local offices.

Many of those contests will conduct a primary election in March to determine each party's general election nominees. Nearly half of state legislative races and all but two congressional races involve at least one primary contest.

In some of these cases, the primary will decide the winner. In six state legislative races, only Democrats filed to run, and in 11, only Republicans did.

In others, the primary is little more than a formality before the main event — the general election cycle.

US Senate

One of those cases is the U.S. Senate race, where former Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper and former Republican National Committee and North Carolina Republican Party Chairman Michael Whatley both face multiple filed primary challengers, but are likely to sail through.



Cooper

Political experts expect the election to break spending records — some estimates put it at a billion dollars. According to the most recent campaign finance filings, Cooper's campaign and associated committees have raised \$14.5 million, while Whatley has raised \$5.8 million.

Thanks to a 2010 Supreme Court decision, Citizens United, outside groups and corporations can spend unlimited amounts on elections, as long as they don't directly coordinate with candidates. That will likely make up the lion's share of money spent during the election.

Instead of going at their filed primary opponents,

Please see **FIELD** | 2A



SERVICE EMPLOYEES INTERNATIONAL UNION

A service worker at Charlotte Douglas International Airport holds a sign during a rally on Dec. 18, 2025. Workers with American Airlines contractors want the city of Charlotte to push for better pay and benefits in their airport lease negotiations with the carrier, which accounts for 90% or passenger traffic.

Airport service workers take on American Airlines' 'piggy bank'

By Herbert L. White

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Service workers at Charlotte Douglas International Airport want a better deal from American Airlines.

Workers allied with the Service Employees International Union are pushing city leaders to push American, which serves 90% of Charlotte Douglas' passenger traffic, for better subcontractor pay and benefits in their lease negotiations with the carrier. The union contends American's dominance means depressed salaries, which are as low as \$12.50 an

hour.

"Too many of us are still struggling just to survive. I know what that struggle looks like. I've lived it. I've gone from staying in a storage unit, to an extended-stay hotel, to sleeping in my car," said Timothy Lowe II, a high lift driver who services American planes. "There are workers who keep this airport moving every single day and can't afford a place to live—let alone a ticket to take a vacation."

Contract workers have long insisted on better pay, staffing up-

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Recycle



Charlotteans partner on Ghana air quality

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climate change has been linked to an increasing number of major weather events from wildfires to tsunamis. Although western nations have taken the lead in creating strategies for limiting pollution from greenhouse gases and other human-driven impacts – with varying results – the Ghana initiative continues the process.

“The CleanAIRE for All project offers a practical and scalable approach to improving air quality and public awareness in Ghana,” said Huda Ibrahim, assistant program officer at Ghana’s EPA who invited the Americans to share their knowledge in her country after spending six months at CleanAIRE NC. “It also provides a strategic avenue to strengthen the Ghana Environmental Protection Authority’s leadership in sub-national air quality monitoring.”

Said Wall: “Leading up to the process, we wanted to make sure that the project would be as sustainable, applicable, culturally responsive as possible, and that we were making the most impact. We didn’t want to just focus on air quality monitoring. We actually extended a lot of branches in this two-week project into health and education, but from the monitoring standpoint, and why they wanted us to go over there is because in Ghana, there are not many reference stations like we have here in the United States.”

Ghana’s air quality reference stations are operated by the operated by the federal government. An obstacle for Wall and Fragnito was a lack of internet access, especially in rural communities. They had to figure how to install monitors to make data collections for air quality strategies.

“It was a huge challenge, especially deploying those sensors that required Wi-Fi, but we were very quick on our feet,” Wall said. “We ended up employing ... a local electrician who because some places the internet wouldn’t reach as far ... connected it to an existing wire system in (a) home so it could be placed in certain areas where it could reach Wi-Fi.

“We immediately recognized that our first deployment that being in this rural setting with not as much access to the things that we have access here to is extremely difficult. I think just in terms of the prowess or the ability to kind of take those things to the next steps in those issues that we came up

across in deployments, the EPA was really fast on their feet to come up with solutions.”

The need for sensors and data collection is especially critical in Ghana, where pollution standards are less strict than in the United States. The major causes of air pollution in that country, Wall said, are uncontrolled burning and dust exposure.

“It’s going to be a long road, mostly because standards are so different,” she said. “In the United States, there’s some debate now, because the Trump administration is trying to strike down this rule, but there was a rule made last year to decrease our exposure for particle pollution, or particulate matter, which is what we measure, from 12 micrograms per cubic meter to 9. ... Essentially, they estimated that it would save thousands of lives a year, because air quality is one of the leading causes of death globally as well as in the United States.

“In Ghana, it’s 35 [micrograms] – that’s their annual standard, so it’s a lot higher. There’s going to be challenges in terms of seeing the reduced health risk, because even if these sensors are showing that they’re staying under attainment of that 35 micrograms per cubic meter, that is still an insanely high number that should be lowered to protect health.”

For Wall, working with Ghanaians was a revealing experience. The U.S. environmental movement includes a growing presence of Black Americans, but for two weeks, she shared goals and heritage with people who look like her.

“It felt really cool, being surrounded by people that look like me,” Wall said, “and I’m usually, especially as a Black woman in the environmental space, the only person [of color] in a room” in the U.S. “So being around all of these people, it was really incredible. In terms of just the perspective of how different it was between the U.S. and Ghana, I think that there’s just a lot of opportunity.

“There’s things that we know that they don’t, but there’s also things that they know that we don’t, and so being able to collaborate effectively in that way, and using their knowledge on the ground actually put some things in my mind that we need to have available here when we’re out in the field doing deployments. ... They helped me in my process as well.”

Field is set for NC 2026 elections as filing closes

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Cooper and Whatley are already trading jabs at each other.

Whatley supporters have criticized commutations Cooper made during his time as governor, as well as spending on a “high-end chauffeur service” and a campaign vehicle. However, FEC reports also show Whatley spent thousands on a luxury car service and private aircraft, according to Politico.

On the other hand, Cooper supporters say Whatley failed at his Trump-appointed job as “recovery czar” after Tropical Storm Helene. Whatley was supposed to help the Federal Emergency Management Agency address the damage, but some Western North Carolinians feel he hasn’t shown up.

Cooper will face Democrats Robert Colon, Justin Dues, Daryl Farrow, Orrick Quick and Marcus Williams in March.

Whatley will face Elizabeth Temple, Margot Dupre, Thomas Johnson and Michelle Morrow. Morrow narrowly lost her bid for superintendent of public instruction to Democrat Mo Green last year in a controversial campaign. Trump endorsed Whatley early, and hosted a campaign event with him Dec. 19 in Rocky Mount.

US House of Representatives

North Carolina’s 14 congressional representatives are all running for reelection next year. Eight have primary challengers.

There are several crowded primaries. One is in the First Congressional District, where Republicans are vying to challenge incumbent Democratic Rep. Don Davis in the general election. In North Carolina’s recent mid-decade redistricting, the First Congressional District became more Republican.

That gives Republicans a much better shot at victory in a district that was already becoming redder.

State Sen. Bobby Hanig, R-Currituck, said he decided to run before the redraw. He’s an America First Republican in line with President Donald Trump. He said his “proven leadership” and dedication to showing up and listening to constituents sets him apart from the crowd.

“Already I serve 10 counties,” he said. “It takes about three-and-a-half hours to get from end to end. What’s another 20 miles in any direction?”

On the final day of filing, Republican Laurie Buckhout threw her hat in the ring. Buckhout narrowly lost to Davis in 2024 by less than two percentage points. While she prefers to look forward, she told Carolina Public Press when she filed that she thought she would have won that race under the current, redrawn map.

Buckhout is a combat veteran and former business owner, and said she has the most experience of the primary candidates. Earlier this year, she served as acting assistant secretary of defense for cyber policy under the Trump administration, which she called “inspiring.”

If elected, her priorities include building jobs, getting fentanyl off the streets and bringing back economic prosperity, she said.

Republicans Asa Buck, Ashley Nicole Russell and Eric Rouse have also filed to run for the Republican nomination.

The Third Congressional District was also impacted by the redraw, in the opposite direction. It became less Republican, although it still boasts about a 55% Republican vote share.

Democrats Allison Jaslow and Raymond Smith will compete in March to take on incumbent Republican Greg Murphy in November.

While the other House seats are relatively safe for their respective parties, some Democrats are optimistic about taking the 11th District from Republican . Chuck Edwards if there’s a blue wave. Edwards will face one filed primary opponent, Adam Smith, while five Democrats are fighting for the Democratic nomination — Jamie Ager, Paul Maddox, Richard Hudspeth, Lee Whipple and Zelda Briarwood.

In the 14th Congressional District, Republican Tim Moore faces a surprising primary candidate from none other than Kate Barr, who knowingly ran a losing campaign for state senate in 2024 to make a point. Barr is a Democrat, although her registration may state differently while the election progresses.

She’s using the race to speak out against political redistricting, which makes races like hers extremely uncompetitive. Since a Democrat stands no chance at winning in the solidly Republican district, she decided to run as a Republican.

“I’m running in the only way that makes sense within the jacked up system that power-hungry politicians have built,” she said in a statement. “If they want to get

mad about it — they should start by yelling at the men in the mirror.”

State House of Representatives

Democrats are looking to not only maintain their ground in the state House, where they have just enough seats to block a Republican supermajority, but to gain momentum.

Part of that mission involves challenging Democrats who don’t always toe the party line, and vote with Republicans on occasion to override the governor’s vetoes. That includes Reps. Carla Cunningham, D-Mecklenburg, Nasif Majeed, D-Mecklenburg, and Shelly Willingham, D-Edgecombe. Each has at least one primary opponent in 2026.

A previously ousted swing Democrat is back for a rematch. Former Rep. Michael Wray will face Rep. Rodney Pierce, D-Halifax, to try and get his seat back. Wray has encouraged Republicans to change their registrations to support him in his bid, while Pierce secured Stein’s endorsement

Another part of Democrats’ goal is flipping Republican seats. Five races could be considered toss ups, according to data from the Civitas Partisan Index and Dave’s Redistricting. Those are held by Reps. Allen Chesser, R-Nash, Mike Schietzelt, R-Wake, Erin Paré, R-Wake, Jonathan Almond, R-Cabarrus, and Tricia Cotham, R-Mecklenburg.

Democrats currently hold 49 of 120 seats. To earn a majority, they would have to maintain their current seats, win the five toss-ups, and find seven additional seats. If there’s a blue wave, it’s possible for Democrats to win four additional Republican leaning districts, held by Reps. Timothy Reeder, R-Pitt, Donna White, R-Johnston, Alan Branson, R-Guilford, and Mike Clampitt, R-Swain.

Beyond that, there are three likely Republican seats that are less likely to flip, but could be targets for optimistic Democrats. They are held by Joseph Pike, R-Harnett, Jennifer Balkcom, R-Henderson, and Mark Pless, R-Haywood.

There are nine open seats in the state House, where incumbents aren’t running. They include District 90, where incumbent Rep. Sarah Stevens, R-Surry, is leaving the legislature to run for state Supreme Court.

State Senate contests

On the other side of the legislative building, everyone wants to stay. All but one incumbent has filed for reelection. Four Republicans filed for Hanig’s open seat, making for a competitive primary.

District 26 may be the most high-profile legislative race. Senate President Pro Tempore Phil Berger, one of the most powerful politicians in the state, will face Rockingham Sheriff Sam Page in March. Berger secured Trump’s endorsement, but Page is well-known in the district. Berger hasn’t had a primary challenger since 2012.

Republicans have a 30-20 supermajority in the Senate, which allows them to override the governor’s vetoes without Democratic support. Democrats may be looking to break that supermajority this cycle.

To do so, they have a fairly narrow runway. There are a pair of “toss-up” races in districts held by Republicans — District 7, held by State Sen. Michael Lee, R-New Hanover, and District 11, held by State Sen. Lisa Barnes, R-Nash. Democrats would need to win those hold onto a third toss-up in District 18, held by Wake County Democrat Terence Everitt.

Other races

There are hundreds of other races, including statewide contests for the courts, and local races for sheriffs and boards of commissioners, plus some school boards, mayors and city councils.

One of the most significant is the race for a seat on the state Supreme Court, which is currently a 5-2 Republican split. Democratic Judge and incumbent Anita Earls is up for reelection.

Democrats have stressed that reelecting Earls is critical to flipping the state’s highest court before the next redistricting cycle. State Rep. Sarah Stevens, R-Surry who drives much of the legislature’s election policy, has filed to run against her.

Three Democratic Court of Appeals judges are also up for reelection. They make up a superminority on the 15-person court.



Cunningham



Majeed



Cotham



Davis

Court’s delay in Leandro school funding case draws criticism

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issue a final ruling. The case has now been pending at the state Supreme Court for more than 600 days.

Republican lawmakers have argued that the state constitution gives the legislature alone the power to decide how taxpayer money is spent, and that courts lack the authority to tell them how to spend it.

The delay is not just a legal limbo, advocates say: it has worsened the financial and staffing crisis across the state’s public schools. North Carolina ranks near the bottom nationally when it comes to teacher pay and per-pupil funding.

In a virtual press conference Monday, advocates and parents said the court’s prolonged inaction is depriving 1.5 million students of critical resources.

“There is one word that defines what is happening right now, and I want everyone to remember this word: neglect,” said Tamika Walker Kelly, president of the North Carolina Association of Educators. “They neglected their needs for books and classrooms. They neglected their need for school counselors and nurses in our buildings. They neglected the need for us to have safe buildings, smaller class sizes and educators who are supported, not exhausted and burnt out.”

Sharita Jones, a teacher from Vance County, one of the original communities that filed the suit, said that fully funding the plan would directly address these shortfalls.

“The heart of Leandro is simple: every child in North Carolina deserves access to a sound basic education no matter their

ZIP code. Fully funding Leandro would mean smaller class sizes, more support staff such as counselors, social workers and nurses, and competitive pay that allows us to recruit and retain strong educators,” she said.

Melissa Price Kromm, executive director of N.C. For The People Action and a long-time voting rights advocate, recounted the impact of underfunding on her 10-year-old daughter’s education. “My daughter didn’t have a teacher for nearly half of this past school year, and before that, she went through most of kindergarten without a teacher. We are still working to close the gaps in her education because of it,” she said.

“The remedy is not a mystery,” Kromm added. “North Carolina has a court-ordered comprehensive remedial plan that lays out exactly what is needed. The courts have said they must fund it, but year after year, the General Assembly has refused to comply fully.”

Rep. Julie von Haefen (D-Wake) has spent the past six years introducing bills to fully fund the plan, but the Republican-controlled House has blocked them.

Organizers closed the virtual press conference by calling for broader civic engagement and pressure on state lawmakers.

“Speaking up and speaking out is going to take more than just educators,” Jones said. “People in support have to be telling lawmakers know their concerns and informing others who may not know what’s going on.”

Neither state House Speaker Destin Hall (R-Caldwell) nor state Senate Leader Phil Berger (R-Rockingham) responded to a request for comment.



Kelly

By Kylie Marsh

THE TRIANGLE TRIBUNE

Middle housing is what’s missing from the nationwide affordable housing conversation.

Casita Coalition is a California-based housing nonprofit dedicated to middle housing solutions, a creative variety of dwellings like duplexes, triplexes, townhomes and Accessory Dwelling Units, which can all fit on smaller tracts of land.

The virtual panel discussion featured Rhett Fussell, founder of Raleigh Area Land Trust; Taryn Bell, founder and CEO

of Bell Liberty Group; and Eli Spevak, founder and CEO of Orange Spot LLC.

Bell presented on The Cottages of Carey Park, a middle housing subdivision in Atlanta. It consists of 10 units with multiple floorplans development with prices ranging from \$215,000 to \$405,000. “Middle housing provides a replicable model for urban infill in neighborhoods nationwide,” Bell said. “Hopefully, this won’t be as unique as the years progress.”

Some of the designs Bell showed featured shared driveways and closer distances between dwellings, but

community members welcome and love it, Bell said. The Cottages at Carey Park were designed within the existing fabric of the community, which minimizes disruptions.

“You always hear about developers coming and making decisions for communities; we’re making decisions with communities,” Bell said.

Fussell discussed the Cottages of Idlewild in Raleigh, an 18-unit development of affordable units, up to 80% of area median income.

All designs presented are fee-simple,

meaning homeowners purchase only the structure and not the land with it. This is an increasingly popular form of property development and acquisition which protects homeowners from skyrocketing property tax costs. “Zoning is critical when it comes to housing and addressing the lack of middle housing that our nation is facing,” Bell said.

Zoning can be tricky for these types of developments, though. They can take a long time. For example, Fussell said the Raleigh Unified Development Ordinance allowed for cottage courts.

HB 307 charts a new path for NC justice

Continued from page 1A

The implications most widely discussed since the law's passing surround the use of capital punishment in North Carolina. HB 307 removes restrictions on permissible methods of death and aims to resume executions.

While some consider the law to be the first step of North Carolina's movement back toward a tough-on-crime political stance, it is just the latest of many changes in the state's history of criminal justice and capital punishment.

NC's history with death penalty
The use of capital punishment predates the establishment of the United States, and it has been a feature of North Carolina throughout the state's history. Despite federal death penalty reforms in 1972, complicating factors have led to a decline in the use of capital punishment over the past several decades. North Carolina has not executed anyone for nearly 20 years, with the last implementation of the death penalty taking place in August 2006.

"People are still committing capital crimes. Some people are still being prosecuted as capital offenders," Matthew Robinson, Appalachian State University professor of criminal justice, said. "Some people have been convicted and sentenced to death, and then they go to death row and just sit there."

The North Carolina Medical Board's 2007 adoption of a policy to prohibit state physicians from participating in an execution was a driving factor of the decline. The board said a physician would lose their license for administering lethal injection. Although the policy was later overturned by the North Carolina Supreme Court for being in conflict with state law, the decision laid the first speed bump for the death penalty.

Changes in North Carolina law in the early 2000s also gave prosecutors more discretion on sentencing, allowing them to seek outcomes like life imprisonment without the possibility of parole in capital cases. In response, the number of death penalty sentences decreased statewide.

Perhaps the biggest blow to capital punishment came as research exposed racial biases throughout the North Carolina justice system. Robinson said internal and external reviews of the state consistently supported discrimination in trial and sentencing, which began to gradually turn public opinion against the practice.

"People of color make up less than 30% of North Carolina's population but over 60% of those on death row," Rep. Pricey Harrison, D-Guilford, said during the debate on HB 307. Harrison also cited evidence of discrimination in jury selection and that defendants are more likely to receive the death penalty if they are accused of killing a white person.

The Racial Justice Act, ratified in 2009, attempted to address the disproportionate treatment at a state level. It said that if one could prove a statistical pattern of members of a certain race being sentenced to death more often or members of a certain race being excluded from the jury pool more often, the death sentence could be overturned.

"Two hundred-plus people filed appeals under the Racial Justice Act, and this really brought the system to a grinding halt," Robinson said.

Since the Racial Justice Act's initial passage, seven challenges have been brought to court. Five resulted in a commuted sentence, and the remaining two were remanded to trial court.

The first four successful claims under the Racial Justice Act were brought to court in 2012. A judge found discrimination in

the four sentencing trials and commuted each defendant's death sentence to life without parole.

A year later, the Racial Justice Act was repealed, but a 2020 North Carolina Supreme Court ruling mandated that appeals filed under the act before the 2013 repeal would still be heard. This February, a superior court judge ruled on the first Racial Justice Act case to move forward since the 2020 mandate. Judge Wayland J. Sermons Jr. found that Black jurors were struck at three times the rate of white jurors in the case of Hasson Baccote, who was sentenced to death by a predominantly white jury in 2009.

Frank Baumgartner, UNC-Chapel Hill professor of political science, said the racial discrimination identified in the five successful trials points to a larger trend. In a study of prosecutorial peremptory strikes in Congressional District 11, two professors at the Michigan State University College of Law found that eligible Black potential jurors were twice as likely to be struck by state prosecutors than white potential jurors. Similar studies support the finding.

"Under the Racial Justice Act, that should be enough to overturn almost every death sentence in the state because virtually every single one of them had that practice," Baumgartner said.

The large volume of appeals and the long duration of an appeals process put executions on an indefinite hold.

Despite the pause in executions, about one or two people have received a death sentence every year in North Carolina, and the state still has the fifth largest death row in the country with 122 people.

Iryna's Law: Why now?

On Aug. 22, while Zarutskas was on a Charlotte light-rail train, suspect Decarlos Brown Jr. allegedly fatally stabbed Zarutskas in the neck. The incident was captured on camera and circulated across national media, receiving public comment from politicians, even including President Donald Trump.

Though Zarutskas's death prompted the most recent change in legislation, HB 307 is not the first attempt by North Carolina lawmakers to redirect the state's path and restart executions.

In 2015, then-Gov. Pat McCrory signed into law HB 774, which said doctors were no longer required to oversee executions. Under the law, nurses, physician's assistants or emergency medical personnel can carry out an execution. "It can be done by a prison employee who has EMT training," Baumgartner said. "That would be sufficient, according to the law."

HB 270, filed and discussed this spring, aimed to add firing squad and electrocution to the list of acceptable execution methods, but it never made it out of the House.

Zarutskas's death didn't necessarily change statewide opinion, but Baumgartner said the case has been politicized in an important way for legislative changes.

The video of the murder and widespread media coverage stirred a response in people across the nation. The victim, a young daughter and girlfriend on her way home from work, also garnered widespread empathy. In the debate, Cotham urged legislators to bring justice to Zarutskas and her family.

Lynda Simmons, an advocate of restorative justice, denounced this way of thinking. In 2004, her son, Brian Eddie Colletti, was killed by a random act of violence.

"My grief is my job, and my healing is my job," Simmons said. "And what [the justice system is] doing has nothing to do with that."

The suspect's circum-

stances of release from jail, under consideration of his criminal record and history of mental illness like schizophrenia, also sparked outrage. Brown had most recently been arrested eight months before Zarutskas's death. The defendant was released without posting bail on a promise to reappear in court.

Rep. Marcia Morey, D-Durham, said during the House debate that Brown's arrest was for a mental health crisis, not a violent crime, and the magistrate followed the suggested bail guidelines. She also said Brown appeared for his following court date. However, Cotham described the state's legal system as a "revolving door" for dangerous criminals.

Noel Nickle, executive director of the North Carolina Coalition for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, said the bill's legislative timeline likely also contributed to its passing. "It was fast-tracked," she said. "It was railroaded through, and the general population, the constituents, did not have an opportunity to reach out to their lawmakers."

Lawmakers debated and passed the bill within two days, and it was signed into law by Gov. Josh Stein 10 days later Oct. 3.

"Iryna's Law": What does it do?

The amendments that have earned the most attention since HB 307's passage would effectively resume executions in North Carolina. Two amendments added in the state Senate aim to remove current roadblocks for the practice of carrying out capital punishment. President Pro Tem Phil Berger, R-Rockingham, spoke in support of both provisions.

"For nearly two decades, judicial and administrative roadblocks have stopped true justice for victims, and it's time for that to end," Berger said in a press release after the Senate passed the legislation.

The bill legalized lethal gas and electrocution as methods of execution by removing language that restricted their use. Some scholars find this concerning, as electrocution is ruled unconstitutional in two states, and North Carolina's history with lethal gas indicates flaws in the method - several execution records describe defendants as writhing in pain and deaths taking up to 32 minutes.

It also goes further to open North Carolina to other methods.

"The law allows the state to use any methods of death that's being carried out by other states," Robinson said. "And states are really experimenting with methods of death now."

Alabama completed the first known execution using nitrogen gas in 2024. The method was most recently used on Anthony Boyd despite his request for the firing squad. Witnesses said Boyd, who unwaveringly claimed innocence, thrashed, gasped and breathed "agonized breaths" for 38 minutes until he died.

South Carolina, one of five states that allows firing squad executions, carried out its third execution by firing squad Nov. 14. "Who knows what might be applicable in the next couple years?" Baumgartner said.

In order to restart executions, HB 307 also requires outstanding appeals, including the 200 appeals under the Racial Justice Act, to be resolved by December 2027. Though Robinson supports the effort to resolve appeals, he agreed with other critics that it's unlikely all appeals will be resolved in that time frame. Nickle argued the timeline would put a harmful strain on the judicial system.

"Seventy percent of all death sentences in North Carolina, but also nationally, get overturned on appeal, and often it takes many decades for those



UNC MEDIA HUB

North Carolina representatives discuss the proposal for HB 307, also known as Iryna's Law. Parts of the law, which aims to restart executions in the state, went into effect on Dec. 1.

appeals to get their ways through the court," Baumgartner said, later adding, "You could say it's dysfunctional, but still, it takes a long time for those appeals to go through the system."

Given the typical success of death penalty appeals, many believe the time limit will threaten innocent or harshly sentenced people on death row. "We know that to the degree we limit appeals, to that same degree we increase the likelihood of wrongful convictions and potentially wrongful executions," Robinson said.

Robinson also said research shows that the death penalty is generally unsuccessful as a system. Executions are costly - a study by the Death Penalty Information Center in 2009 found that North Carolina spent at least \$36 million extra over seven years by pursuing the death penalty over life imprisonment - and is not a proven deterrent of crime.

"The 23 states that do not have the death penalty are no less safe. They do not have a higher homicide rate," Nickle said. "In fact, some studies show that states that do have the death penalty have a higher homicide rate."

Data taken from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports show that states with the death penalty have higher murder rates on average than states without the death penalty every year since 1990.

However, the law goes beyond updates to capital punishment. It also seeks to strengthen bail requirements and hold magistrates accountable for release decisions.

"Defendants with three or more offenses of our Class 1 misdemeanors within the last 10 years, they will now have to have a secured bond or house arrest," Cotham said.

Under the law, judges are required to include a written statement in the case record to describe why they handled the case in that manner; the Administrative Office of the Courts must create rules of conduct to address conflicts of interest for magistrates; and the chief justice is permitted to initiate suspension of a magistrate.

Robinson said the law institutes mandatory mental health evaluation, and it supports involuntary commitment of defendants with mental illness. However, Morey said the bill does not do enough to address mental illness before a crime takes place.

"Tough on crime doesn't only mean let's pay attention to punishment after the fact," Morey said during the House debate. "It also means, what can we do to prevent the crime? Which this bill completely fails to do."

In response to the nature of the crime resulting in Iryna's death, HB 307 also permits committing murder on public transportation to be used as an aggravating factor in a case. And Mecklenburg County, where the crime took place, received funding to add 10 assistant dis-

trict attorneys and five legal assistants to aid in improved crime response.

Moving forward: What to watch for
North Carolina has yet to see how HB 307's reforms will play out. Robinson expects to see immediate legal challenges of any new methods of execution instituted in the state, as previously seen in North Carolina and across the country.

Legislators may also attempt to pass accompanying laws in the coming months. "We'll look to see what else the state does in terms of laws that might be needed to speed up the process of executions, to reduce appeals and things like that," Robinson said.

Baumgartner said he will watch around the country to see how death penalty law changes in red states compared to blue states. He expressed concern that capital punishment could become a divisive political stance between parties. "It shouldn't be the partisan color of the governor or the General Assembly that determines who lives and dies," Baumgartner said. "And that's potentially what we're looking at here."

The North Carolina Coalition for Alternatives to the Death Penalty and other advocacy groups will continue to explore methods to reduce the size of the

state's death row. "If we are to get any closer to the abolition finish line, we have to shrink the size of our death row," Nickle said. In December of 2024, the coalition successfully encouraged then-Gov. Roy Cooper to commute 15 death sentences.

They will also continue to educate North Carolinians on the racial bias of the death penalty system, the cost of execution and experiences of those impacted by the death penalty. "The death penalty is a long process. It victimizes people because of the appeals and being brought back into court," Simmons said. "That's horrible to keep going through, and it's horrible for the offender's family."

In the coming months, all eyes will be on the state courts to see how many appeals will actually be handled in a timely manner, as mandated by the law, as well as what the courts find from appeals.

"It's possible that their appeals are successful, and they successfully challenge their death sentence under the Racial Justice Act. Then we'll see more people removed from death row," Robinson said. "That might lead to more negative press coverage of the death penalty, and that might weaken public support further."

Airport service workers take on American Airlines

Continued from page 1A

grades, improved work conditions and benefits at Charlotte Douglas. City Council blocked a proposal earlier this year that would have required airline contractors to do that.

American contract workers from cabin cleaners to baggage handlers contend their wages don't cover basic necessities. Nearly 40% report having housing insecurity that necessitate living with friends and family or short-term rentals.

As workers gathered Dec. 18 at the airport to demand changes, they cited a report by Amsterdam-based New Soil Analytics that shows Charlotte Douglas passengers pay some of the highest nonstop domestic fares in the United States.

"American Airlines can no longer use Charlotte as their piggy bank," said Niecy Brown, district director of SEIU Workers United North Carolina. "CLT should be an economic engine for everyone—not a near monopoly where both travelers and workers are fleeced. As the city negotiates a new lease with American, Charlotte residents deserve transparency, a public process, and a deal that truly benefits the community."

According to New Soil Analytics, Charlotte Douglas travelers spent \$3.26 billion more on nonstop domestic flights from 2015-24. The report found average fares to and from Charlotte were 33.4% higher than the average for comparable travel in U.S. airports over the 10-year span. Passengers paid as much as 42.3% more in 2018 and 20.4% more last year.

Flying to and from Charlotte Douglas cost passengers an average of \$119 more per round-trip ticket over the decade than at comparable airports with an accumulated \$5.62 billion more than they would have if Charlotte fares matched national averages. Of that total, \$3.26 billion was paid by travelers who live in the region.

Charlotte Douglas, the world's sixth-busiest airport, is the cheapest major U.S. airport for airlines to operate out of, the study found. In 2024 aircraft traffic increased 11%, which benefited American's bottom line of a record \$13.7 billion in fourth-quarter revenue and \$54.2 billion in 2024.

Airport workers propose a new long-term lease with American with revenue sharing for gate access, operating fees, and future airport development projects. The city allows airlines to keep 40% of the net remaining revenues generated by passenger spending on concessions, parking, and airport kiosks.

They also want the city to greater transparency in the lease negotiations and allow a 90-day public review period.

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The Voice of the Black Community

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Managing the impact of inflation, AI in investments as a North Carolina business

As the boom in artificial intelligence and ongoing inflation continue to shape our global economy, communities, businesses and investors across the U.S. should be open to new opportunities generating from AI while hedging against risk in their investment plans for 2026.

According to J.P. Morgan Private Bank's 2026 Global Investment Outlook, like most global trends throughout history, AI and inflation will likely have ripple effects that hit close to home.

"In 2025, uncertainty defined the market narrative," said Christopher Nolan, Head of Investments and Advice for the Carolinas at J.P. Morgan Private Bank. "Today, we have major themes setting the agenda, reflecting a fundamental shift in how economies operate. Those looking to reconfigure their investment portfolio in 2026 should consider a refreshed investment playbook that blends discipline with flexibility."

The age of AI: Promise and paradox

Artificial intelligence is transforming industries, driving productivity and reshaping labor markets, fueling a surge in investment and speculation about a potential AI bubble. This current AI boom is anchored by solid fundamentals, and that the greatest risk is a lack of understanding how to integrate this technology, which could impact your business.

AI is a tech sector rapidly becoming more competitive, and investors should find the balance between capturing the potential of the AI revolution while managing the risk of overexuberance. Although AI investments currently account for less than 1% of U.S. GDP, large U.S. tech companies have tripled their annual capital expenditures from \$150 billion in 2023 to a projected \$500 billion or more in 2026. This surge in AI-related investments has already contributed more to U.S. GDP growth than consumer spending this year. Over half (58%) of small businesses say they use generative AI—up from 40% in 2024 and more than double the adoption rate in 2023, according to U.S. Chamber of Commerce's latest Empowering Small Business Report.

If you're running a small business, you know your organization inside and out. That deep understanding will become your strongest asset in navigating the world of AI – how to use it safely and effectively and knowing how to include it in your investment portfolio.

Beyond bonds: Navigating inflation's structural shift

The sharp rise in inflation since 2022, coupled with increased government deficits, has redefined the investment landscape, replacing stability with ongoing price pressures and heightened uncertainty. Today, inflation's gradual yet significant impact is a central consideration for long-term portfolio performance.

In your own business, inflation has likely driven up costs, affected your supply chain and added pressure on labor expenses. You've likely had to integrate the effects of inflation into your bottom line – inflation doesn't appear to be going away any time soon.

Factoring inflation into your investment portfolio is vital in 2026. Investors will need to look beyond traditional fixed income investments to address persistent inflation and build portfolios for strength and stability. Other investment options that can hedge against persistent inflation and provide portfolio diversification include commodities, real assets and hedge funds.

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When Big Tech's thirst threatens our health

In Morrow County, Oregon, families are living through a crisis.

According to a Rolling Stone investigation, mothers have suffered miscarriages. Neighbors are battling rare cancers.

Local officials have raised concerns about dangerously elevated nitrate levels in the community's drinking water following the siting of a nearby Amazon data center.

BEN JEALOUS

The investigation reports that the facility's massive water consumption – up to 5 million gallons per day – may have accelerated nitrogen migration into the aquifer faster than natural filtration can occur. Amazon strongly denies any connection between its operations and these health problems.

Whatever the ultimate cause of the health crisis in Oregon, the broader concern is undeniable: when data centers consume enormous amounts of water, communities can face real risks. And now, similar pressures are emerging in Ohio.

Central Ohio already hosts about 130 data centers, representing more than half the state's total. In Marysville, just two facilities consume roughly ten percent of the city's entire daily water supply. Amazon operates dozens of data center facilities and campuses across the New Albany, Hilliard, and Dublin region. Residents are watching water demand

surge as new facilities are proposed.

Here is what should concern every Ohioan. The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency has issued a draft General National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permit governing wastewater discharges from data center facilities into state waters, including non-contact cooling water, cooling tower blowdown, and associated stormwater. The publicly released draft does not specify nitrate limits among the listed regulated pollutants.

The draft permit also relies on existing antidegradation standards that allow a lowering of water quality when deemed necessary to accommodate important social or economic development. In plain terms, regulators are signaling that some degradation of water quality may be acceptable to support data center growth.

This is not just about water. Modeling by researchers affiliated with the California Institute of Technology suggests that air pollution associated with data center growth could contribute to approximately 1,300 premature deaths annually nationwide by 2030, with an estimated public health burden approaching \$20 billion.

But it does not have to be this way.

We can build data centers today that eliminate operational water consumption entirely – and with the right policy reforms, they can be built at lower total cost than conventional designs.

The solution is zero-

water cooling through immersion systems with dry heat rejection. Instead of water, servers are cooled using specialized dielectric fluids. Instead of evaporative cooling towers, heat is rejected through air-cooled radiators or geothermal systems. In these configurations, operational water use is eliminated.

Some raise concerns about the safety of dielectric cooling fluids. Modern formulations are engineered to be non-toxic, biodegradable, and safe for humans and wildlife. The answer is not avoiding zero-water systems but requiring the safest available fluids rather than the cheapest.

Industry representatives argue that zero-water cooling is too expensive. That claim does not withstand scrutiny.

Multiple industry analyses, pilot deployments, and academic studies indicate that zero-water data center systems increase upfront capital costs by roughly 35 to 45 percent. However, analyses synthesizing findings across these studies suggest that targeted policy and procurement reforms can more than offset those added costs.

These reforms include streamlined permitting for zero-water systems, public sharing of facility designs tied to development incentives, competitive bidding requirements, bulk purchasing cooperatives, standardized modular systems, antitrust enforcement in cooling equipment markets, and shared geothermal infrastructure where appropriate.

Taken together, these

measures could reduce total project costs by more than ten percent while eliminating operational water consumption altogether. In other words, we can build cheaper data centers without draining aquifers or compromising drinking water.

Strong safeguards must accompany any expansion. Communities deserve meaningful input on whether data centers locate nearby. Facilities should be confined to industrial zones, with enforceable buffers for noise, heat, and air quality. Homes and schools should be off limits.

Jerome Township has already enacted a moratorium on new data centers, citing utility and safety concerns. Other communities across Ohio are paying close attention.

The technology exists. The economics can work. What remains is political will.

Big Tech will complain. Some companies may threaten to locate elsewhere. But no community should accept development that requires sacrificing clean water or public health.

Whatever ultimately caused the health crisis in Oregon, Ohio communities are already feeling the strain of unchecked data center growth. We know how to prevent similar harm. We know it can save money.

The only remaining question is whether our leaders will act in time – or wait until the damage is done.

Ben Jealous is a professor of the practice at the University of Pennsylvania and former national president

Memories from a female sports junkie

My love of football started when I was in middle school.

Daddy was the play-by-play announcer for the

Ayden High School Tornadoes. My brother, who was skinny, played tight end. More often than not, he warmed the bench.

I was a cheerleader in high school. In those days, our pleated skirts touched the tops of our bobby socks. I learned the "push them back," "hold that line," "hey, hey, hey, hey, let's go," cheers and actually started learning the game. The football players were friends. Some of the cheerleaders were. A couple weren't.

Stuart Tripp, legendary coach of the Ayden Tornadoes, coached several state Single A championships in football and basketball. When he retired, Tommy Lewis became head coach and continued the winning tradition. Pep rallies and rented buses for out-of-town games were regular fare. We rode, like in "Hoosiers," to faraway places like Farmville, Greene Central, Pactolus, and Grifton. Ikey Baldree was coach in Grifton. He was an Ayden boy who grew up to coach.

At East Carolina College the stands were full, even on the grass. The crowd was loud. Clarence Stasavich was head coach. "Stas" introduced the single wing offense, which had been his tradition at Lenoir Rhyne. Very few schools knew how to defend against it, including Wake Forest, who lost in the inaugural game in 1963 at Ficklen Stadium, 20-10.

Tailgating had not caught on. Some of us ate pregame or post-game meals at the Bohemian restaurant. Their veal parmigiana was sublime. On game days, the guys would bring their dates huge yellow chrysanthemum corsages with a purple ribbon, East Carolina's colors. Sometimes, after the game, there would be a dance in the student union under Wright Auditorium.

For a short while in college, I lived in the Kappa Delta house with my "sisters." I did not have a closet at the sorority house, so I hung clothes at the end of my bunk bed.

Tom would round the corner of Fifth Street in his tan Volkswagen. I thought it was a magical time. We would often dine – using the term loosely – at Sumrell's Tastee-Freez, on 10th Street. A hamburger steak, fries, salad and drink were \$1.50. I remember thinking that if Tom would feed me, I would marry him.

In October 1964, I represented the home economics department in the ECC homecoming parade. I rode on the back of my brother's brand new 1964 cherry red Mustang convertible.

An early prelude to the Super Bowl, the NFL championship game, was played shortly after our honeymoon in 1966. Vince Lombardi's Green Bay Packers defeated the Cleveland Browns. There were years, when our children were in high school, that we played Fantasy Football as a family. I would buy the ESPN football guidebook for the season. There was always a list of up-and-coming players to watch as the season progressed. That's how I drafted Rob Gronkowski. Ron and Joe Flacco were key on my teams for years.

In my experience, few women like football. I'm often the only woman present when sports are discussed.

In January, the Kansas City Chiefs will not be playing in the playoffs. Patrick Mahomes hobbled to the blue tent for first aid and has some serious healing to do. Neither of the Kelce brothers will be playing. That means Taylor will not be in the club box. What are we to do?

Bad Bunny will bring the halftime show. It will be energetic and entertaining.

There will be no costume malfunctions. He will reach a very broad audience of younger viewers. That's a good thing.

It is often said that baseball is America's sport. I take issue with that. Baseball is best enjoyed in the stadium or on the radio. It's slow. Radio is a good medium for baseball because you can do something else while you're listening.

I am trying to learn the rules of hockey, since the Canes and the NBA have the longest seasons of anybody. I know what hooking and icing are. That's a start.

The NBA reminds me of CIAA basketball. It's run and gun, very little finesse.

When Dean Smith made the Four Corners offense popular, he could milk more out of the last five minutes of a basketball game than anybody.

As the weather cools into winter, unless you are a news junkie or a Hallmark Channel regular, sports is it.

Watch 'til you learn enough to enjoy the game. Football is not brain surgery; it's just two halves of fun. Go Ravens. I have always cheered for you.

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

On cannabis, don't just reschedule, deschedule

On Dec. 18, President Donald Trump signed an executive order – titled "Increasing Medical Marijuana and Cannabis Research" – which directs US attorney general Pam Bondi to "take all necessary steps to complete the rulemaking process related to rescheduling marijuana to Schedule III" from Schedule I.

THOMAS KNAPP

To be clear up front, I'm not complaining: ANY relaxation of the federal government's IDIOT standards for, and ANY retreat in its evil war on, marijuana is a win.

It's a win for patients whose ailments the drug addresses. It's a win for

taxpayers who fork over tens of billions of dollars a year to the DEA to maintain those standards and continue losing that war. And it's a win for freedom in general.

So, yay Trump.

That said, it's long past time to "deschedule," rather than "reschedule," marijuana.

What's the difference?

According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, a Schedule I drug is one with "no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse."

Marijuana clearly falls outside that first clause (according to patients, according to doctors, and according to the laws of 41 states).

A Schedule III drug has "currently accepted medical uses" and "a moderate to low potential for physi-

cal and psychological dependence."

That leaves the "abuse" and "dependence" considerations ... which always have been, are, and will forever remain far outside any legitimate purview of government.

"Abuse" is in the eye of the beholder, and humans find ways to be dependent on all kinds of things. Here are four: Caffeine. Nicotine. Alcohol. Sugar.

None of which, by the way, are "scheduled" drugs, and none of which have been used by humans in their modern, refined forms for as long as cannabis, aka marijuana.

There's a reason people call marijuana "weed" – it is one. It grows wild on every continent except Antarctica.

It's been used both medically and recreationally for

thousands of years. Queen Victoria, whose name defined strait-laced moral views of the 19th century, used it for menstrual cramps.

It didn't become illegal in the US until the 20th century, and the real reasons had far more to do with keeping alcohol prohibition cops employed after booze became legal again, and suppressing hemp as a competitor to the wood-pulp paper industry, than with "abuse" or "dependence."

The war on drugs has always been stupid and evil; its application to marijuana particularly so.

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



TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Carolina Panthers defensive end LaBryan Ray tackles Tampa Bay running back Bucky Irving during the Panthers' 23-20 win Dec. 21, 2025 at Bank of America Stadium. Carolina improved to 8-7 and took sole possession of the NFC South lead by a game over Tampa Bay with two weeks left in the regular season.

Carolina's alone at the top

Bryce Young and the Panthers embrace moment against Tampa Bay, seize NFC South lead in process

By Jeff Hawkins
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Arms spread wide, Bryce Young ran off the Bank of America Stadium field and targeted a group of fans sitting in the lower deck waving black towels. After evading the diving grasp of Yaya Diaby, Young, playing on an injured right ankle, scrambled left to keep the play alive long enough for tight end Ja'Tavion Sanders to work his way open for a go-ahead touchdown pass. Young, who has endured multiple ups and downs during his three seasons in Carolina, embraced the moment.

"That was an amazing environment," Young said after leading the Panthers

to a 23-20 against Tampa Bay on Sunday. "It affects the game."

The win, the Panthers' first against Baker Mayfield since they unceremoniously released him in the middle of the 2022 campaign, pushed Carolina into first place in the NFC South with two regular-season games remaining.

If the Panthers (8-7) beat Seattle on Dec. 28 and Tampa Bay (7-8) loses to Miami, Carolina clinches the division. If next week ends up a wash, the Panthers will travel to Tampa Bay on Jan. 4 for a deciding matchup. The Panthers have not qualified for the playoffs since 2017.

Panthers control NFC South fate
The inconsistent Panthers have alternated wins and losses since Week 8, including relevant wins against Green Bay and the Los Angeles Rams. The trend continued Sunday. After a disappointing loss to last-place New Orleans a week earlier, the Panthers rebounded against Tampa Bay.

The Buccaneers, who have claimed four consecutive divisional titles, opened the season 6-2, appearing to be Super Bowl contenders. But since Week 9, they have won once.

In a game featuring two quarterbacks who traveled a similar career path, Young topped Mayfield for the first time in five meetings.

Mayfield identified with Young's early struggles. When Carolina coach

Dave Canales benched the 2023 No. 1 overall draft pick following two starts last season, Mayfield, the top pick in 2018, spoke up in support of Young.

"Quarterback is hard, especially for young guys when you're not surrounded with the pieces (and) not given the opportunity to have success," Mayfield said. "A lot of times guys have the talent, they might have the brains, but they don't have the right opportunity, the right fit."

"For Bryce, I can relate to this, finding that belief within yourself again. He'll get it. His story is far, far from finished."

But will it continue beyond 2026 with Please see **CAROLINA** | 6A

Inconsistent Panthers finally bestow the gift of relevance

This is the most wonderful time of the year if you're playing relevant football.

It's been a minute since the Carolina Panthers have been in such a position, and Sunday's 23-20 win against Tampa Bay put them on top of the NFC South, an unexpected Christmas gift from a franchise that's left misery under the tree over the last decade. They dumped popular and effective players



HERBERT L. WHITE

(Cam Newton, Christian McCaffrey) and coaches (Ron Rivera, Steve Wilks) over the last eight seasons and replaced them with the likes of lesser lights Teddy Bridgewater, Matt Rhule and Frank Reich. Ow.

Irrelevance set in, quickly and surely.

At last, the franchise is showing signs of reversing the slide. Carolina is by no means a juggernaut in 2025. They're flawed in some critical areas - how else can you explain being swept by New Orleans? The roster lacks critical big moment experience and head coach Dave Canales is still figuring out the

riddle to success.

They've alternated wins and losses for the better part of the season, but it's an improvement over the prolonged stretch of bad Carolina's exposed us to since David Tepper bought the franchise in 2018. The irony about this climb out the proverbial mud is this: the Panthers have a better record than the perennially mighty Kansas City Chiefs, who'll be sitting at home for sure when



Canales

the playoffs start next month.

Sure, Carolina is mediocre at 8-7, but so's the division they're leading, at least for now. That's more than anyone should've expected four months ago.

Who among us would've imagined the Panthers sitting in a relevant space as you read this, stacking just enough wins to make people pay attention, if not actually believe? Strange thing, the ability to show some collective improvement behind an energetic and smart coach like Canales, the seventh man in that role (including interim Please see **FINALLY** | 6A

JCSU's next act: Improve on the best roster ever

By Herbert L. White
herb.l.white@thecharlottepost.com

The best team in Johnson C. Smith football history made its mark in 2025. What the 2026 squad will look like is a mystery.

The transfer portal gives players freedom of movement and with it roster uncertainty that leaves coaches recruiting their best players in addition to weighing position upgrades. With the Golden Bulls coming off their first CIAA title since 1969 and inaugural berth in the Division II playoffs, JCSU has momentum to do both.

What will the roster look like by the time spring drills open in March? It's uncertain today, but based on the group that end the season, conclusions can be drawn in terms of where the Golden Bulls have holes to fill - either by promoting underclassmen already on the squad or bringing in new talent.

Offense
Quarterback
This is bound to be a position of major off-season emphasis because of its importance in Maurice Flowers' offense, which set a pro-

Please see **GOLDEN BULLS** | 8A



TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Bobby Smith, a redshirt freshman running back who earned All-CIAA after rushing for 1,098 yards and nine touchdowns, was the first Johnson C. Smith player to break the 1,000-yard barrier since Emanuel Wilson in 2019. Wilson was a freshman as well.

SC State's Berry gets the very last word

See, you all thought I was exaggerating about those weekly MEAC conference calls.

It was sickening the way those journalists fawned over DeSean Jackson and Michael Vick like they walked on water or something.

Coaches have massive egos. They might say all the politically correct things in public, like how all the attention is good for the conference - blah, blah, blah - but inside is a different story.

It is interesting, though, that Chennis Berry took offense since he's just two years into the job at South Carolina State. North Carolina Central coach Trei Oliver or former Howard coach Larry Scott should have been more irate as the longest tenured coaches at the time.

But South Carolina State was the defending conference champion, and Berry was treated like an afterthought on Monday mornings.

Think the media have learned their lesson? Probably not.

Please see **CHENNIS** | 6A



BONITTA BEST



Berry

Charlotte FC emphasizes defensive help in MLS SuperDraft



CHARLOTTE ATHLETICS

Charlotte FC drafted former South Florida goalkeeper Jahiem Wickham with the 82nd pick in last week's MLS SuperDraft.

By Steve Goldberg
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

For the first time since 2022, Charlotte FC stood pat in the MLS SuperDraft by selecting defenders Will Cleary and Luke Adams, as well as goalkeeper Jahiem Wickham.

In that first draft prior to the club's inaugural season, Charlotte had the first pick in each of the three rounds. Before the 2023 draft, Charlotte traded up to the first pick with expansion side St. Louis City to take Hamady Diop who was later snatched away in the 2025 expansion draft by San Diego FC. They also acquired the 12th pick from the Colorado Rapids to select Patrick Agyemang, who was sold this past season to Derby County in the

Please see **CHARLOTTE FC** | 6A



TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Carolina Panthers receiver Tetairoa McMillan extends past Tampa Bay defender Jamel Dean to catch a 22-yard touchdown pass from Bryce Young in the Panthers' 23-20 win at Bank of America Stadium.

Finally, Panthers bestow gift of relevant season

Continued from page 5A
stand-ins) since Pepper bought the franchise. The best thing for Canales is he's going to be really good once he gets the hang of it. And perhaps best of all, Tepper finally decided a hair trigger is no way to build a good football product. Taking the hands-off approach and leaving people to succeed or fail on their own works best for all concerned. Give general manager Dan Morgan some props, too. He put together a roster that improved the defense after a

historically bad 2024 and invested in offensive balance that doesn't leave Bryce Young on the hook to win solely with his arm. And although Young isn't the most dynamic quarterback around, he's graduated to competent, which is good enough right now. Is he deserving of a contract extension? I'm not going that far. Let him make the playoffs first – he may never have a better chance than right now. That will be relevant. *Herbert L. White is editor in chief at The Post.*

Carolina seizes the moment to grab first in NFC South

Continued from page 5A
the Panthers?
The Panthers must decide on picking up the fifth year on Young's rookie contract. The Cleveland Browns, who drafted Mayfield, parted ways with Mayfield after his first four seasons in favor of Deshaun Watson. While Canales ignored the question three times during Sunday's post-game press conference, Young attempted to direct his answer back to the team. "I'm 1-0," he said, a common response indicating he doesn't like to look too far ahead. "I'm trying to figure out how to win next week."
Has Young earned a fifth season? If the Panthers pick it up, he would make approximately \$26.5 million in 2027. The five highest-paid NFL QBs make at least \$53.1 million. "That's out of my hands," Young said.
Mayfield moved on from Panthers
Mayfield apparently holds little sentiment when it comes to his time in Carolina. He declined a mid-week interview request from media covering the Panthers. When he ran on the field for pre-game warmups Sunday, the crowd heckled Mayfield.
After being granted his release by the Panthers following a 2022 season in which he won just one of six starts, Mayfield signed with the Rams and began rehabilitating his career. That summer, he entered free agency and signed a one-year, prove-it deal with Tampa Bay.
Under Canales, who was the Bucs' offensive coordinator, Mayfield established career highs in passing yards

(4,500) and touchdowns (41) and guided Tampa Bay to the 2023 NFC South title and a playoff win. Mayfield earned his payday, signing a 3-year, \$100 million contract and earned Pro Bowl nods during his first two seasons with his fourth team. "The challenge is he's one of the great competitors in this league for certain," Panthers defensive coordinator Ejiro Evero said Thursday. "He's going to fight."
Mayfield, who threw a first-quarter touchdown pass to Mike Evans, finished 18-of-26 for 145 yards. His lone interception came on his final pass, a missfire that rookie safety Lathan Ransom dove to catch. "I have a ton of respect for him," Young said. "We're in the same division so I've been watching his tape ... how he carries himself ... the heart he plays with."
Young completed 21-of-32 passes for 191 yards two touchdowns, earning his sixth fourth-quarter comeback win this season and 12th of his career. Ryan Fitzgerald connected on the game-winning 48-yard field goal with 2:20 remaining.
Following one of his biggest NFL wins, Young was asked how it felt to enter Week 17 in first place and in control of their postseason destiny. "It feels great," he said. "There's still a lot more football to be played."
The Panthers' Week 17 game will have a similar "remember me" theme as former quarterback Sam Darnold, who has evolved into an MVP candidate this season, returns to Charlotte with the NFC-leading Seahawks.

NC State continues ACC soccer power

By Steve Goldberg
FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST
Long an also-ran in the soccer-rich ACC, North Carolina State outlasted their rivals to make the final four of college soccer. But the Wolfpack couldn't survive overtime in the NCAA Men's College Cup final, losing 3-2 to Washington, a Big Ten school. The 48-team tournament consisted of 22 automatic qualifiers and 26 at-large teams. It was the NCSU's first final ever and their second berth in the semifinals, the first since 1990. That was also the only time the Wolfpack won the ACC postseason tournament.
After a first-round bye, NCSU beat Marshall (1-0), UNC Greensboro (2-0), Georgetown (3-2), and St. Louis (2-1) to make the final. Washington took out Oregon State (3-2), SMU (1-0), Stanford (1-0), Maryland (3-1), and Furman (3-1).
Essentially a home game for the Wolfpack with the NCSU campus just 5 miles away from WakeMed Park in Cary, 10,316 fans set a new attendance record for the College Cup since 2004.
Down 2-0 with 28 minutes to play, the Wolfpack came back to draw even with just three and a half minutes left on a curving

right-footer by Taig Healy. Donovan Phillip became the top scorer in Division I with his 19th goal, which put State back in the match in the 66th minute.
He was assisted by All-American center-back Nikola Markovic, the top pick in last week's MLS SuperDraft.
At that point it felt like either side was arguably the team of destiny as they went to the first of two potential golden-goal overtime periods before a penalty kick tiebreaker. The tension lasted 114 seconds before the Huskies Harrison Bertos scored from close range to crush the home crowd.
ACC dominance
While the top prize eluded the conference, the tournament underscored the dominance of the ACC, which now includes Pacific Coast programs as well. Nine of the 15 conference schools – 60% – that field men's teams earned berths in the College Cup.
Although Florida State is the 2025 women's champion and a longtime powerhouse in the sport, the Seminoles don't have a men's team. Nor does Miami, despite its multicultural advantages, or Georgia Tech, which is also the only ACC school without a women's team.

« JOHNSON C. SMITH »

Golden Bulls' next act: Upgrade best roster ever

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gram record with 403 points.
Senior Kelvin Durham, who set school single season records for total offense (3,178) total touchdowns (36), passing yards (2,937) passing touchdowns (26) and completion percentage (64.94) in 2025, is out after a wildly successful campaign. Replacing that dual threat productivity won't necessarily be easy, which begs the question: will Durham's successor come from the transfer portal or is he already on the roster?
In four seasons at JCSU, Flowers' Week 1 quarterback starters have all been transfers. That track record – and Flowers' philosophy – suggests he'll look for experience behind center unless someone currently on the roster – Andrew Attmore or Marion Littlejohn – takes a giant leap in the spring.
Running back
Bobby Smith literally came out of nowhere to emerge as an All-CIAA tailback. Smith, a redshirt freshman, rushed for 1,030 yards, becoming the first Golden Bulls back to crack the 1,000-yard barrier since Emanuel Wilson in 2019.
It's a good thing Smith was durable enough to survive 236 carries because injuries decimated JCSU's depth. Kamarro Edmonds, Avante George and Antonio Crim all missed significant time, but the good news is they all have eligibility remaining.
Receiver
JCSU again had the CIAA's best corps of pass catchers, but the pecking order flipped in 2025. Biggie Proctor earned All-CIAA after snagging 71 passes for 932 yards and 10 scores in a breakout senior campaign. Brevin Caldwell, a two-time All-CIAA, missed all but one game due to injury, which opened the door for the Golden Bulls' depth to flourish. The Golden Bulls are going to need reinforcements with Procter and Brian Lane moving on after exhausting their eligibility and Caldwell and Isaiah Perry, an all-conference kick returner who caught nine passes for 174 and two touchdowns, in the portal.
Reggie Brigman (11 catches, 165 yards, 2 TDs) and Jordan Black, a punt returner who caught seven passes in spot duty, have an opportunity to move into expanded roles.
Offensive line
JCSU's record-breaking offensive outburst wouldn't have been possible without the front wall anchored by All-CIAA right guard Jamari Mason. The redshirt junior is

the anchor should he return, and the Golden Bulls also have youngsters in Robert Early (left tackle), Brendan Arrington (left guard) and Daniel Caldwell (right tackle). Graduate Marcus Andrews is moving on, but overall JCSU has a young group that excelled in clutch situations.
Defense
The biggest addition might be retaining defensive coordinator Barry Tripp, who was a candidate for the Winston-Salem State head coach job. JCSU has been one of Division II's top defenses the last three seasons and keeping him on Beatties Ford Road is key to maintaining continuity.
Defensive line
Going into the season, Flowers emphasized improving the pass rush, and JCSU responded with a school-best 31 sacks. Defensive tackle Cadricus Stanley (32 tackles) and end Quentin Williams (18 tackles) led the way with four sacks each. Jalen Alexander, who was part of Flowers' first recruiting class, paced all Golden Bulls with eight tackles for loss among his career-high 35 tackles as a senior.
Stanley still has eligibility, but Williams is a senior and tackle Steny Joseph (30 tackles, 5.5 tackles for loss) is in the portal.
Linebacker
This group might be in the best shape moving forward. Vincent Hill anchored the corps in at middle linebacker and earned All-CIAA as a junior while Kristian Eanes stepped in at weakside when Quavaris Crouch was hobbled by injuries. Hill and Eanes are both juniors.
Secondary
This group will take a hit. Starting cornerbacks Tyquerion Hines and Rontay Dunbar are graduating. Same for free safety Daryl Taybron, who was in Flowers' first class of recruits. Strong safety Tynan Tucker is the only starter eligible to return for another season.
Special teams
It's going to be an offseason of transition with All-CIAA kicker Lukasz Smolen (8-of-9 field goals, 47-of-49 extra points) opting for the portal after one season. The hole gets bigger since the sophomore also averaged 37.6 yards per punt.
Andrew Hirst, a sophomore who averaged 35 yards per punt on 15 kicks, is on the roster.
The return team will take a hit with Perry opting out after becoming the first Golden Bull to return two kicks for scores in a single season. He added a pair of receiving touchdowns, too.

Chennis Berry gets last word

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How many is that now?
Seven HBCUs are seeking football coaches. It's going to be interesting to see how many go the NFL route.
• Morehouse's hiring of former NFL player Terance Mathis was a bust. The Maroon Tigers won just four games in his two seasons.
• Savannah State coach Aaron Kelton resigned right after the season ended. Kelton compiled a 16-24 overall and 11-20 SIAC record in four seasons. That he lasted that long is amazing considering the swift hook athletics directors are pulling on coaches today.
• Albany State (and Benedict under second-year coach Ron Dickerson Jr.) are the main reasons Morehouse and Savannah State have openings. Dickerson guided the Tigers to the playoffs in his second year,

and Quinn Gray led the Golden Rams to the regional quarterfinals. Gray is heading to his alma mater, Florida A&M.
• No one was probably more surprised at a pink slip than Langston coach Quinton Morgan after 10 seasons. Morgan posted a 68-33 overall record and 59-23 mark in conference play. He is the second winningest coach in program history. Granted, the Lions finished 3-7 this season, but it was their first losing season since the shortened 2020 pandemic year.
• Former Bowie State coach Kyle Jackson had a hard act to follow after Damon Wilson. The Bulldogs never won a division title in his four seasons or earned a playoff berth. That was in stark contrast to the legacy Wilson left before heading to Morgan State.
• Since coach Larry Scott led Howard to its only Celebration Bowl appearance in 2023, the Bison have gone 9-15. The grumblings were getting louder. New Auburn coach Alex Golesh was the head coach at South Florida, Scott's alma mater. Golesh needed a tight ends coach, Scott's specialty before taking the Howard job. Bye.
• ESPN's 30 for 30 should do a show on Florida A&M since the departure of Willie Simmons in 2023. There have been three presidents and five athletics directors since then. Not to mention the "donation" of \$237 million that wasn't. James Colzie III was 12-12 in two seasons, including the Rat-tlers' first losing season (5-7) since 2017. Bye.
Bonitta Best is sports editor at The Triangle Tribune in Durham.

Charlotte FC goes for defense in draft

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English Championship. Andrew Privett was their third pick in that draft, 69th overall in the third round.
They traded up to get the 14th pick in 2024 draft and took Tyger Smalls, whose playing time has grown since Dean Smith became head coach. They also bought the 38th pick to select Jahlane Forbes, whose contract option was declined at the conclusion of the 2025 season.
With the 22nd pick, the Crown chose Cleary, who played at Stanford. Though listed as a midfielder/defender, Cleary was an anchor of the Cardinal back line that tallied seven clean sheets and a 0.85 goals against average. In 2025, he scored four goals and three assists in a balanced attack that featured six players with at least four goals. Stanford went 14-4-2 in the regular season before losing 1-0 to NCAA College Cup champion Washington in the third round. A team captain, Cleary was also

named first team CSC Academic All-American.
The 52nd overall pick was used on Adams, a 6-4 redshirt sophomore from Tulsa who fits the tall centerback profile that coach Dean Smith likes. He started all 13 games he appeared in this year as well as all 15 matches in 2024. Adams, a McKinney, Texas, native, led the Golden Hurricane backline to five clean sheets and earned American Conference Defender of the Year.
With the 82nd pick, Charlotte chose Wickham, who played at South Florida. A redshirt sophomore, the 6-4 Wickham hails from Brampton, Ontario, and previously played at Syracuse and Toronto FC Academy. He appeared in 17 matches (9-3-5) with three shutouts, 61 saves and a 1.47 goals-against average.
Wickham shared American Conference Goalkeeper of the Year honors.