



WANDERING AROUND WASHINGTON

Editor's note: "Wandering Around Washington" is a regular, exclusive column from Joe Tennis highlighting the untold stories in the county, direct from the people who live and work here. Watch for him to wander into shops, restaurants and parks to bring you the gab and gossip — only in the Washington County News.

Facebook groups get boost from Pal's support

Just in time for the Fourth of July, the exploding popularity of a potential Pal's Sudden Service in Abingdon has blanketed Facebook with groups, polls, surveys and fan songs.

That's all been part of the community's response to five members of the Friends of Abingdon Inc., who have challenged the validity of the certificate of appropriateness awarded by the five-member Abingdon Planning Commission on May 20 to place a Pal's at The Meadows. The town council dismissed the appeal at its Monday meeting but not before hundreds of residents rushed to defend the fast-food chain.



Joe Tennis

Friends of Abingdon members said they have nothing against Pal's. In fact, they praised the award-winning company in a three-page appeal to Town Manager Jimmy Morani.

But their appeal implied that the signature teal-colored Pal's Sudden Service building — with a giant hot dog and hamburger — just does not conform to codes.

In the wake of all that, Washington County recently became the birthplace of the 2,700-member-strong Friends of Pal's of Abingdon, a Facebook group with a patriotic theme — "Life, liberty and Frenchie fries."

This "Friends" group owes its origin to 18-year-old Mary Walters and her father, Chris Walters, a 52-year-old financial adviser with an office in the old Washington County News building on Abingdon's Main Street, just across from the Martha Washington Inn.

This father-daughter duo lives in the Watauga section of Washington County on the outskirts of Abingdon.

And they both love Pal's.

"My dad and I were talking, and we thought it would get some of the members of the town and give them a platform," said Mary Walters, a 2018 graduate of Abingdon High School. "I didn't realize how many people it was important to and how many people it would reach."

Chris Walters, 52, said, "It's been interesting to see how a lot of the younger folks who have raised a voice on this issue [are] just ready to move forward on this project."

Mary Walters praises the group's members.

"I think this is an example of people in the community taking a real role in their community and the citizens of Abingdon taking charge and speaking up for something that they feel is important to them," said Mary Walters, who currently attends the College of Charleston, South Carolina.

"I'm really proud how people have talked across party lines," Mary Walters added. "They have spoken eloquently and civilly to each other, and I hope that attitude carries."



JOE TENNIS/WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

A view of the Pal's in Bristol closest to Abingdon.

TECH IN AGRICULTURE



CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Damascus farmer Adam Wilson operates a cow-and-calf operation and raises stocker calves, young steers and heifers. His farm-raised beef is highly regarded in the community, supplying meat to local restaurants Seven Trails Grill and Mojo's Trailside Cafe, both in Damascus.

The price of grain

Damascus farmer hopes high-tech rationing system will prove to be a game-changing, cost-cutting technique

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

DAMASCUS, Va. — Investing in new technology is helping a Damascus cattle farmer keep up with the times.

By the time cold weather rolls around, Adam Wilson plans to be feeding his thousand head of beef cattle with the help of a computer.

The second-generation farmer, who's well-known in Washington County for his innovative approach to farming, is stepping outside the box — or, perhaps, the field — and investing big money in a feed facility that will offer him substantial savings down the road.

Wilson's farm-raised beef is highly regarded in the community, supplying meat to local restaurants Seven Trails Grill and Mojo's Trailside Cafe, both in Damascus.

The farmer has laid out an automatic ration system that will allow him to customize the feed rations for his cattle while also having a greater influence on the quality of feed — all without even leaving the farm.

"I don't know of any other farms creating a feed system to this extreme, so I'm either crazy or innovative," he said with a laugh.

Commodity feeding from tractor-trailer load lots is often a practice primarily afforded by larger farms.

According to Phil Blevins, Washington County extension agent for Virginia Tech, the system is unique to the Washington County area.

"I'm not aware of another local farm making an investment like this. Usually you see these feeding systems on a company level rather than a farm level," said Blevins.

"I think it says that Adam is a farmer who's in it for the long haul. He wants to be an efficient producer so that he can survive in this industry.

"The farmer doesn't have a tremendous amount of control over prices because farmers are basically price takers. They can't hold their products to any extent to wait on prices to go up. They have to take what they can get. Their opportunity a lot of times rests on the cost-savings side for being more efficient to reduce their input costs.

"Adam is being innovative by maximizing his efficiency by managing his input costs and still getting the job done."

Saving time, money

The new feeding system will be a time-saving measure, allowing the



CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Adam Wilson stands in front of four 30-foot steel bins that will hold different grains or grain by-products delivered to the farm by tractor-trailer loads once his feeding facility is completed.

local farmer to distribute the feed in a quicker and more efficient way.

Instead of purchasing premixed cattle feed, Wilson will use an automatic ration system to blend choice grains that contain the preferred nutrients without the additives. "I'll also use grain by-products from food and ethanol production that would otherwise be thrown away. This is just one example of how the beef industry strives to be sustainable," he said.

Once the system is up and running, four steel feed bins that tower 30 feet into the air will each hold different grains or grain by-products delivered to the farm by tractor-trailers loads. Each bin can hold 35 tons of grain for a total of 140 tons of grains kept on the farm.

"It's cost-advantageous to buy the grain by the trailer loads instead of buying it already mixed," said

Wilson. While Wilson learned a lot about agriculture from his father, he also pays close attention to the business side of farming and earned a business management degree from Virginia Tech in 2007.

A "Roto-Mix" will blend his selection of grains — corn, corn gluten, soy hull and distiller's grains — into a mixture without damaging or tearing the fibers. A separate computer operates the mixer, allowing the farmer to control the machine from his phone and through the internet.

An automated auger will send the grain mixture to a mixer before going into another bin for storage.

"All I will have to do is turn the auger on and fill my truck up with the feed and leave," he said.

A feed box on his pickup truck

Farm

From Page B1

holds 1,500 pounds of grain, allowing Wilson to deliver the custom feed to his cattle that graze throughout the 1,200-acre boundary.

The young farmer, 33, said the investment has the potential for saving him \$20,000 to \$25,000 each year. "It's a sizeable investment. The mixer costs about what I will save in the first year.

"Feeding straight corn is not the most economical choice," he said. "You have to balance what's the most nutritious with what's the most cost-effective. You don't always want to buy the cheapest ingredients, but you can't always buy the most expensive."

Found his niche

Wilson treats his farm career as a business, finding niches that will help the business thrive.

"I want to help the farm to continue growing. If there is a third generation, I'd love for the farm to be even more viable when they take it over. That's why I'm willing to take risks and to invest in the farm. In any form of business, you've got to be willing to put your name on the bottom line and stick your neck out."

The farmer operates several money-making ventures. In addition to a cow-calf operation, he raises stockers, young steers and heifers kept until matured or fattened. "I keep steers and heifers, some of which will be added back to the herd to reproduce. Not many people are willing to keep heifers if a bull is nearby. Good fences always make good neighbors."

A few of his calves are sold to Abingdon Feeder Calf Association in the summer. Most of the stockers are sold off the farm in tractor-trailer load lots.

To increase his income, Wilson does custom farming by offering his services to other farmers. "Some farmers don't have the time or resources to raise calves after they've been weaned. It's easy for the calves to get sick once they're taken off their mothers. I give the weaned calves a better start before they are turned out to pasture to fatten up," he said. He generally accepts calves that range from 300 to 600 pounds each.

Whether his day begins helping a cow deliver a calf or harvesting hay for winter, the farmer never stops loving the work he was meant to do.

"I've never thought about farming as a job. It's a way of life," he said.

He began helping on the farm as a child as soon as he could slip on a pair of boots.

"I guess you could say I was the low man on the totem pole when I was a kid growing up on our farm. I did a little bit of everything from spraying weeds to digging thistles."

As soon as he was tall enough to reach the clutch, he began driving the farm truck and tractor.

"I've never considered doing anything else but farming. There is nothing else I've wanted to do.

"It's in my blood."

Carolyn R. Wilson is a freelance writer in Glade Spring, Virginia. Contact her at news@washconews.com.

Mixed response from locals on new minimum age to buy tobacco

BY TIM DODSON

WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

BRISTOL, VA. — You now need to be at least 21 years old to purchase tobacco and nicotine products in Virginia, and employees at local stores shared mixed responses Monday, when the new state law took effect.

Earlier this year, the General Assembly voted with bipartisan support to raise the minimum age from 18 to 21, and Gov. Ralph Northam signed it into law.

According to numbers from the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, Virginia joins 15 other states that have raised the minimum tobacco age. Supporters said passing the law would reduce the number of young people who start smoking, address electronic cigarette use and help adolescent well-being.

Health officials have also been raising red flags about e-cigarettes, with the Food and Drug Administration warning last year that the use of e-cigarettes by youths has reached "epidemic proportions."

Standing behind the counter of the Zoomerz gas station off Commonwealth Avenue in Bristol, Virginia, on Monday, cashier Debra Miller said she fully supports the new law because it will help keep tobacco out of the hands of young people.

"I drive a school bus for



As of Monday, 18-year-olds can no longer buy tobacco in the state of Virginia. The new minimum age is 21 with a few exceptions for those in the military.

Sullivan County [Tennessee] as well, and I do totally agree with the age limit being 21 because it makes it tougher for especially the high school kids to get a hold of the tobacco products," she said. "That is a big issue that all of us drivers have on our buses is the kids sitting in the back [of the] buses smoking, stuff like that."

Tennessee's minimum age is still 18, which led others who work in local stores to express skepticism about the effectiveness of the new law if people between 18 and 21 can drive across the border and purchase tobacco products in Ten-

nessee. Employees also said they're concerned about the law's impacts on the Virginia side of the border.

"I think it's going to hurt the sales," said Tina, a manager at a Quick Stop market on Commonwealth Avenue on the Virginia side of Bristol. Tina, who declined to share her last name, said a change in the minimum age could potentially be better if both Tennessee and Virginia did it at the same time.

Further up the street, off Commonwealth Avenue Extension, Janice Deboard, a manager at G&G Country Store, said she

doesn't think young people should start smoking in the first place, and she acknowledges the health concerns that led to the new law. But she also said using tobacco products is a decision that the state should ultimately allow 18-year-olds to make for themselves.

"If you get in trouble at 18, you're a legal adult," Deboard said. "If you're going to be an adult and be responsible for everything else in your life, that should be the age."

The new law states that "No person less than 21 years of age shall attempt to purchase, purchase or possess any tobacco

product, nicotine vapor product, or alternative nicotine product."

Given the possibility of young people purchasing such products in Tennessee and taking them back to Virginia, Capt. Maynard Ratcliff with the Bristol Virginia Police Department said he anticipates the differences in state laws "will, at some point, pose a problem."

"We'll be enforcing the new law restrictions regarding underage possession just as we have any other similar laws in the past," he added.

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Debit cards used for lotto sales in Virginia but not in Tennessee

BY TIM DODSON

WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Betsy Carico works as a cashier at Andy's Market on Commonwealth Avenue in Bristol, Virginia.

Generally, she estimates that about 75% of lottery ticket sales are in cash and 25% are made with debit cards. People don't always carry cash, she says, so it's a convenient option for some customers.

Drive 10 minutes to Carl's Food & Beverage off Virginia Avenue on the Tennessee side of the border, and you can still buy lottery tickets — but you can't pay with a debit card.

The Virginia and Tennessee lotteries offer similar games, but under Tennessee law, sellers can only accept cash for lottery tickets. Stores can take cash and debit cards in Virginia.

It's a seemingly small difference, and legislators in Tennessee have proposed changes over the years to allow consumers to use debit cards, but the bills have had no success.

For Karen Tuck, who co-owns Carl's with her husband, the idea of accepting debit cards is a potential threat to her business. She says she would be concerned about merchant fees associated with the cards and how those could easily add up to hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"For a mom and pop, that's a lot of money we would have to absorb," she said.

She said she would be open to accepting debit

"only if there was a way that we can get back the money that it costs us to run the debit cards."

While it doesn't appear the rules in Tennessee are set to change anytime soon, data from the Virginia Lottery shows that debit purchases on its side of the border only account for a minor portion of purchases — at least from what the commonwealth is able to track.

Over a 12-month period from June 2018 to May 2019, the Virginia Lottery made about \$2.28 billion in sales. Of this figure, recorded debit sales on state lottery self-service machines accounted for over \$43 million, about 1.89% of total purchases. The actual percentage of people using debit cards for tickets is likely higher, but the lottery currently doesn't track clerk-assisted transactions made specifically with debit versus cash. It only has debit data for the self-service machines. Washington County customers made about 6% of their purchases with debit, \$163,258 out of about 2.71 million. In Bristol, debit accounted for about 6.6% of the self-service sales, \$45,749 out of about \$686,186 in sales.

But not all merchants in Virginia are taking debit cards.

Brian Self, co-owner of George & Sid's off Commonwealth Avenue in Bristol, Virginia, said it's a cash-only store when it comes to lotto tickets.

"It's always been that way since I've been here," Self said.

HOT

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GROW YOUR OWN GARDEN

Community garden hopes to jump-start season with kickoff

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — Steve Lindeman loves to grow vegetables — especially hot peppers. When the Hayter's Gap resident noticed the pepper plants were not getting enough sunlight in his home gardens last year, he rented garden space in Abingdon to grow nine different varieties of peppers, all of which he uses for cooking and making hot sauces and salsa.

Lindeman is among several gardeners who participate each year in the grow-your-own community garden at Fairview Historic Homestead on Hillman Highway in Abingdon.

The program was created four years ago by Sustain Abingdon, a committee comprised of town employees and citizens whose mission is to improve the quality of life for residents by offering environmentally sustainable solutions, principles and practices.

While the community garden has been beneficial to some local residents, organizers of the garden program are disappointed more people are not taking advantage of it.

It's fair to say the community garden program has not grown as fast as organizers had hoped.

"Once we get people to realize the program is there for them, we can provide a great thing," said Missy Kalb, organizer of this year's community garden.

To draw more attention to the program, Sustain Abingdon is partnering with Appalachian Sustainable Development to host a garden kickoff day from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturday, March 23. The event will be held at Fairview Historic Homestead, where visitors can learn about the garden program and receive tips on how to grow their own food.

The free event will feature informational handouts, activities, free raffles and giveaways. Food vendors will be on-site.

Sixteen organizations will be represented at the event, with five of them presenting informational talks on various garden topics.

"The informational talks will help people get started with their gardens," said Kalb. "That was us three years ago when my family and I moved here from Maryland. We had to get used to the climate in Southwest Virginia. We weren't sure what would grow best or when to start seeds."

Residents of Washington County and Bristol, Virginia, can lease from 20 available garden plots, each measuring 20 by 20 feet. Rent for each plot is \$25 for the spring and summer growing season. Participants can begin planting the gardens as early as April 1.

The Old Glade Antique Tractor Association prepares the garden spaces for planting, after which gardeners are responsible for tilling and weeding their own gardens. An elaborate rain water collection system on-site provides water access for the gardeners.

"We want more people to learn about the Abingdon garden and to take advantage of the opportunity to grow their own gardens," said Kalb. "It's a great resource to teach people how to grow their own food and to give them more control over their own health. It's especially important to get families involved because childhood obesity is prevalent."

The gardening boom is a growing trend throughout the nation, as well as in small rural communities. An increasing number of people are dedicating their free time to growing their own food, primarily because they want to have more control over where



PHOTOS BY CAROLYN R. WILSON/FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

The grow-your-own community garden located at Fairview Historic Homestead lets local residents maintain their own gardens on rented plots. Workshops for getting started will be held at the garden kickoff day on Saturday, March 23.



their food comes from.

Kalb said the garden program is also a good way for people to nurture relationships and to work together for a common goal.

"It's our goal to develop a community of gardeners who can help and support each other — swap seeds, borrow tillers and exchange advice."

Businesses and organizations featured at the event include Abingdon Farmers Market, Appalachian Sustainable Development, Barefoot Hippie Homestead, Fairview Historic Homestead, Highlands Beekeepers Association, Indoor Farms Greenhouses, Old Glade Antique Tractor Association, Permaculture Community Garden (Abingdon Gardens), Petals & Lace, Upper Tennessee River Roundtable, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, Virginia Highlands Community College Horticulture Program, Washington County Library Seed Savers, Washington County Master Gardeners and Wolf Farm Natural Elements.

During the kickoff event, gardeners can learn what they can do to deter wildlife, such as birds, raccoons and rabbits.

Kalb will partner with a local licensed trapper this year to help manage the control of primarily groundhogs, a common nuisance for gardeners who have

participated in the program.

For more information about the garden kickoff day or how to rent a garden space, call 276-628-3167.

In the event of inclement weather, call 276-492-2144 to confirm the rain date as March 30.

Carolyn R. Wilson is a freelance writer in Glade Spring, Virginia. Contact her at news@washconews.com.

Kickoff Workshops

- » **11:30-11:55 a.m.:** Anita Manuel, Permaculture Community Garden, will speak on different types of gardening and strategies for getting started.
- » **12-12:25 p.m.:** Chelsea Goulding, agriculture education program manager for Appalachian Sustainable Development, will talk about their Grow Your Own program.
- » **12:30-12:55 p.m.:** Heather Carlsen, a local homesteader, will discuss composting.
- » **1-1:25 p.m.:** Dr. David Kalb of Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries will talk about animal pest management.
- » **1:30-1:55 p.m.:** The Highlands Beekeepers Association will discuss beekeeping.

Herb dryer brings new opportunities for farmers



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Katie Commender could hardly contain her enthusiasm.

At lunchtime on Thursday, we chatted about a gift given to the Abingdon-based Appalachian Sustainable Development — a dryer that will be placed at the Appalachian



Joe Tennis

Harvest Herb Hub in Duffield, Virginia, and used by forest farmers to dry herbs like black cohosh, goldenseal and ginseng.

"It significantly increases drying capacity so that farmers can not only dry more herbs, but they can dry different types of herbs," Commender said.

"It helps us expand not only the number of farmers we impact, but it helps us expand into different types of crops that we can work with farmers on."

Is this a big deal? You better believe it.

This new-to-you dryer spans 40 by 10 feet: a huge increase from the 3-by-3-foot dryer now in operation at Duffield — about an hour's drive from Abingdon in nearby Scott County.

An hour, to some, may sound like a long way to go to dry herbs.

But for farmers, Commender says, that's an easy commute.

Why, some come three hours — or more — from Grayson County, Virginia, or Lewisburg, West Virginia, she said.

Reason: Getting your own dryer to complete these root-drying tasks would cost about \$15,000!

"We are really hoping to spread the



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Katie Commender, who works for Appalachian Sustainable Development, talked about the benefits of a dryer located in Duffield, Virginia, that will allow local farmers to dry their own herbs.

word to farmers about the opportunities available to them, and this new dryer certainly increases our capacity to help," said Commender.

"Our demand for forest botanicals and field-grown herbs now outweighs our available supply."

As Commender sees it, the Appalachian Harvest Herb Hub in Duffield reduces barriers to forest farming, an

agroforestry practice uniquely suited to the Appalachian Mountains.

Hooking up this new dryer and finding solutions for farmers is all in a day's work for Commender, who came to work for ASD in 2012 as a Sustainable Forestry AmeriCorps VISTA; she was recently promoted to agroforestry program director in September 2018.

Along this journey, Commender moved from her home state of Pennsylvania to live in Abingdon for three years before relocating to Blacksburg, Virginia, to pursue a graduate degree.

Returning to the Tri-Cities, she came back to work in Washington County at Abingdon for ASD but now lives in nearby Sullivan County, Tennessee.

"At 28 years old, I feel incredibly blessed to have the opportunity to serve as ASD's agroforestry program director," Commender said. "I wake up every day with one of the most rewarding opportunities before me — helping farmers achieve their dreams, whether it's diversifying their crops to mitigate risk, implementing new agroforestry practices to increase yield and conserve natural resources, or accessing new premium-priced markets to improve livelihoods."

Flying high

Courses prepare students to use drones to maximum effect

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — While drones may be fun gadgets to fly for hobbyists, a local college is offering classes to better prepare students to operate the unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) legally and safely while setting them up to use drones in professional settings.

Virginia Highlands Community College is offering a three-day Remote Airman Training course starting March 20 for anyone who wants to receive a license to fly a drone.

The test prep course is not a “how to fly a drone” opportunity but instead a course that teaches drone users how to pass the test to receive a license.

“The course teaches everything you need to know to pass the Part 107 FAA Drone Pilot Exam,” said Kevin Hamed, biology professor at the college and an instructor of the drone classes.

According to Hamed, even hobbyists can benefit from receiving their licenses.

“As a hobbyist, you are very limited on the airspace you can fly within. Recreational drones can’t fly within 5 miles of an airport. So the benefit of having a license is being able to fly in more areas.”

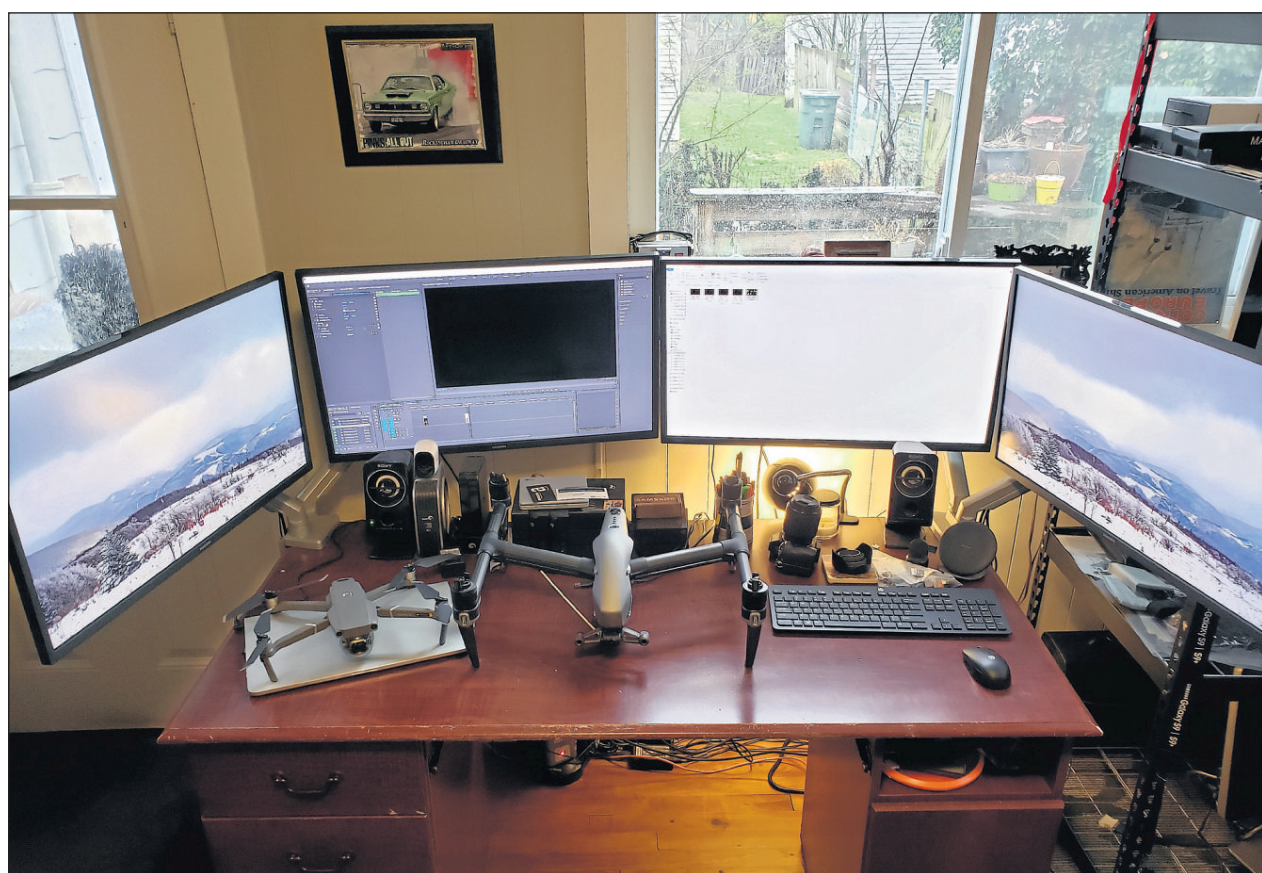
The drone revolution is soaring throughout the world and right here in Southwest Virginia, said Hamed.

“We know that Amazon already has test markets where they are doing delivery service nationwide. They’re already delivering in the United Kingdom,” said Hamed.

“UPS is doing some amazing trials, too, where they have drone and drivers working together — basically doubling the number of packages they can deliver in a day.

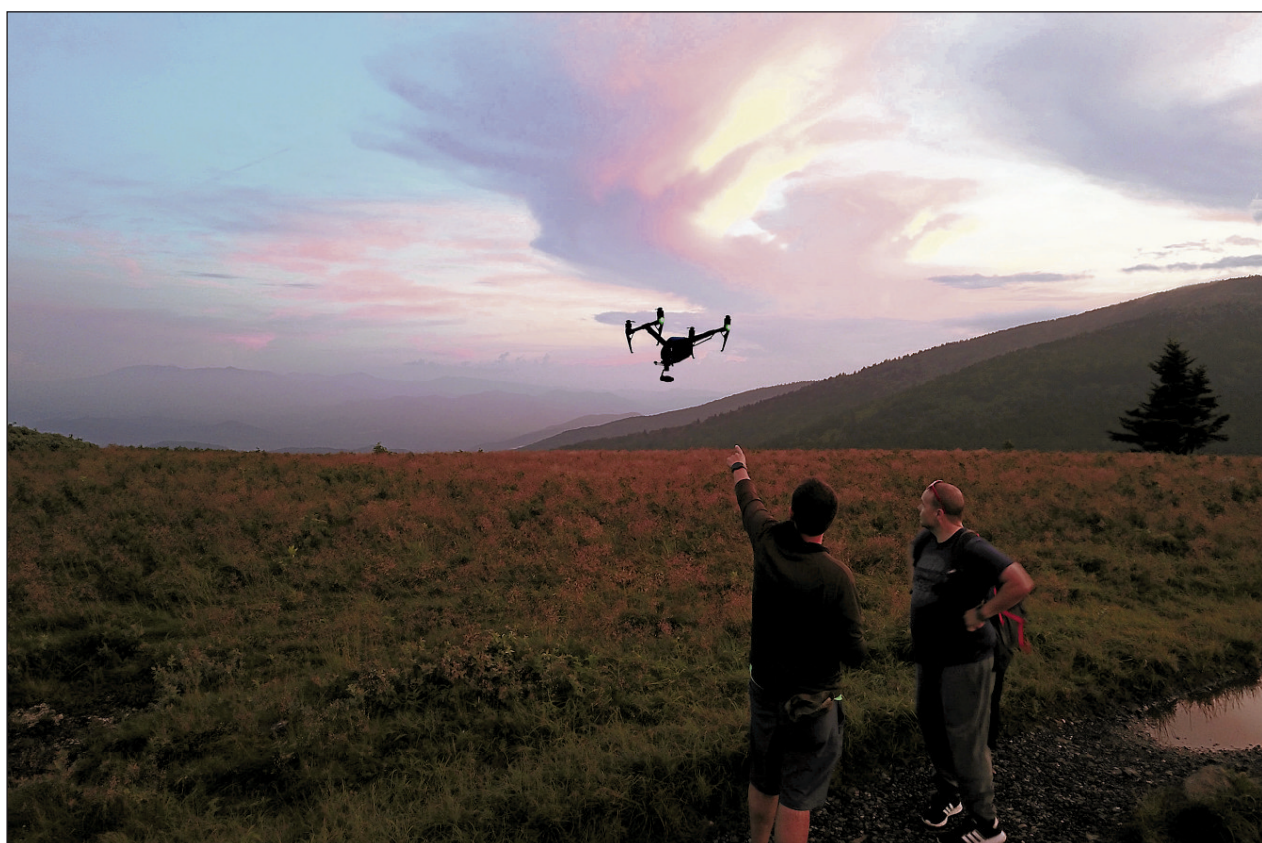
“So we’re going to see drones used in many applications.

“Anyone thinking about a career in natural resources, engineering, city planning and the



Mark Poe's base of operations for his drone business allows him enough hardware to handle massive photo files that his clients can use for advertising or 3D modeling.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO



Matt Poe (left), owner of Poe Media & Solutions in Bristol, Virginia, and Josh Kestner fly a drone against a sunset sky in Roan Mountain, Tennessee.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

military needs experience with drones because in the next five to 10 years, drones are going to be absolutely everywhere,” he said. “For a young person, getting these skills is only going to make them more competitive in a

very competitive work environment.”

The test prep classes started in 2017 at the community college with help from Virginia Tech to get started. “Virginia Tech has been essential in the success of our pro-

gram,” said Hamed, who, along with co-instructor Tamara Lasley, received training from the school.

He estimated as many as 80 local students have enrolled in the courses at Virginia Highlands Community College.

Hamed said the classes will cover FAA regulations all drone users should know.

The professor said a license is required for any activity that could be construed as a commercial, moneymaking activity.

“For example, a friend may ask you to take photos with your drone at their family reunion in the backyard. If they invite you to have dinner with them in exchange for the photos, the FAA considers that you’ve been compensated for flying,” explained Hamed.

“Technically, you’re in violation of the law because you flew a commercial mission without a license.”

During the training, participants will review the five main testing areas, including Regulations, National Airspace System, Weather, Loading/Performance and Operations, as well as other information that pertains to commercial operations of Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) under FAA Part 107. Class members will have the opportunity to take practice tests, as well as participate in planning a UAS mission and conducting hands-on indoor test flights.

Teacher sharing knowledge

Drones already are being used for military operations, monitoring livestock on farms with vast acreage, tracking and mapping fires to help with emergency response, weather forecasting, humanitarian and disaster relief and more.

“The No. 1 application for drones is agriculture, and the No. 1 employer for Washington County is agriculture,” said Hamed. “Our leading industry is agriculture, and drones can do so much for agriculture, and we’re excited about that.”

Mindy McCroskey, an agriculture teacher at Abingdon High School, recently received her license to fly a drone after completing the classes at the community college, followed by passing a written test.

Locations for test centers for the Federal Aviation Administration Part 107 UAS examinations

See **DRONES**, Page B2

At Abingdon High, the show must go on



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ABINGDON, Va. — Hopefully, by the time you read this, Miss Lynch won’t be on crutches for the second weekend’s worth of “Grease” performances at Abingdon High School.

Or maybe she will. And, hey — maybe that’s OK, at least onstage.

Miss Lynch, the teacher role in the musical “Grease,” is not required to stand on crutches.

But accidents happen.



Joe Tennis

And just two days before this high school show premiered with a dress rehearsal on Feb. 28, the actress portraying Miss Lynch took a fall.

That actress, I now reveal, is my 17-year-old daughter.

She did not break her leg; she sprained her ankle. But, ever since, I have heard a lot of “break a leg” comments about actors going on stages.

Undaunted, my daughter got on stage, on crutches, like a tried-and-true trooper. And I was ever so proud to see her, as Miss Lynch, command the greaseball ‘50s kids with a forceful tone.

You know what? It all worked.

In fact, those crutches even seemed natural.

Maybe, I thought, Miss Lynch should have been cast in a cast and as an accident-prone instructor in charge of those hipsters of the hand jive.

“That’s always the big fear: There’s always the chance that a principal is going to get sick or have a sprained ankle,” said 17-year-old Brice Crum, who plays Danny in the show.

“We kind of didn’t know what to think,” Crum added. “We didn’t know if she could walk.”

Turns out, she could — with crutches.

Turns out, too, for Crum, being cast as the lead in this high school musical was a longtime dream.



The cast of “Grease” poses at Abingdon High School. For more photos from Abingdon’s production, see page B3.

JOE TENNIS/WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

“There’s a lot of pressure to make sure you’re on top of your lines,” Crum said. “You’ve got to set an example, but it’s definitely a lot of fun.”

You just have to work together, even if accidents do happen.

Just ask the chorus teacher, Alissa King, who’s in charge of the remaining “Grease”

productions at Abingdon High School on March 8 (7 p.m.) and March 9 (2 and 7 p.m.).

“Their teamwork has built them as students and as individuals,” said King, 26. “And this is something that’s bigger than they are. And it’s going to apply to anything they do in life, as far as working as a team.”

Drones

From Page B1

include Sevier County Choppers in Sevierville, Tennessee, and LC's Flying Service in Blacksburg, Virginia.

"I wanted to learn more about it so I can teach it to my students," said McCroskey.

"With an increase in technology in agriculture, I figured it would be good to pass this information on drones to my students so they can seek job opportunities within the industry."

A drone used at the school operates with software that allows the students to analyze fields and determine where fertilization needs to take place.

"During the course, I learned how to operate a drone properly and about the safety precautions, and more importantly, I learned about the FAA regulations when flying a drone," said McCroskey.

"I also got helpful tips on teaching my students the proper techniques."

A moneymaking business

Hamed said the potential for drones in society is soaring very day.

"People are using drones not just because they're cool and fun to fly, but businesses are using them because they realize it saves them money."

"That's what is going to drive this trend. A business is more likely to use technology to make their business more efficient."

Matt Poe of Abingdon has turned his fascination with drones into a lucrative business.

Poe experimented with different beginner drones just as a hobby before he saw the gadget as a big moneymaker.

In 2018, he began his own business, Poe Media & Solutions, after enrolling in the drone classes at the community college and later receiving his license.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

"People are using drones not just because they're cool and fun to fly," said Kevin Hamed, a drone class instructor at Virginia Highlands Community College. "Businesses are using them because they realize it saves them money."



Burning season underway in region

BY NICK SHEPHERD
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Spring is quickly approaching, and many residents will soon take to the outdoors to burn unwanted trash, yard debris, brush and leaves.

This time of year is also the height of spring wildfire season in Virginia, according to the Virginia Department of Forestry. The season began on Feb. 15 and will run until April 30.

During this time, Virginia residents can only have controlled fires between 4 p.m. and midnight. The law prohibits any burning before 4 p.m. It also prohibits burning if a fire is in or within 300 feet of fields containing dry grass, wooded areas, brush land or other flammable materials.

"During the day, winds tend to rise and humidity decreases, and those are conditions that make controlling fires more difficult," said Bill Miller, senior area forester for VDF in the Clinch Work Area, which serves Lee, Scott, Washington and Wise counties. "After 4 p.m., the humidity starts to recover, and the temperatures have peaked and come back down, and the winds have usually subsided."

Anyone burning before 4 p.m. in Virginia could face legal trouble. Burning outside of the designated time is a Class 3 misdemeanor that could result in a \$500 fine as well as being financially responsible for any damage caused by the fire and the cost to put it out.

Miller said March and April are the windiest months and the busiest time for the forestry division. He said people have been inside all winter and want to get things done like cleaning up brush and debris.

No permit is required to start a controlled burn in Virginia.

Across the state line in Tennessee, a permit is required between Oct. 15 and May 15, according to the Tennessee Department of Forestry.

"We require permits to burn," said Danny Osborne, area forester for Carter, Johnson and Sullivan counties. "It's based on weather, and it is either given or not given. We can give permits a couple of days in advance."

Permits are needed when starting an open air fire within 500 feet of a forest, grassland or woodland. They are free of charge and can be obtained by calling the Division of Forestry in the county where the burning will take place or by filling out an online application, according to its website.

Osborne said the permits are issued daily and must be renewed each day someone wants to have an open air fire. Each permit has a new number each day and must be kept with the person starting the fire at all times.

Different cities and counties in both Virginia and Tennessee could have different burning ordinances in place. People are encouraged to check the ordinances where they live.

It has been a wet year so far, but that does not mean forest fires cannot start.

"We've had record rainfall and wet weather, and we're really concerned people may not realize how quickly small fuels [like brush] dry," Miller said. "It cannot only spread but escape folks' control."

A news release by VDF said 95 percent of all wildfires in the commonwealth are caused by people, and more than half of those are caused by people burning trash and yard debris.

Miller urges people to wait until May 1 before open air burning. Fires are much less likely to escape after that time, he said.

"There's green grass and the leaves have returned to the trees," he said. "Once the shade gets on the forest floor, it takes a lot longer for fine fuels to dry out."

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Abingdon animal shelter will hold free adoptions through March

WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS
ABINGDON, Va. — Abingdon's C.C. Porter Animal Shelter, 27252 Porter Lane, is offering free adoptions for all animals during March.

"This is a great opportunity to come to our shelter, adopt a pet and save some money," said Washington County Sheriff Fred Newman. "Our shelter is offering this event in coordination with the Washington County Public Schools and the PAWS [Providing Animals With Support] Project in hopes of generating an increase in adoptions."

Although the adoption fee will be waived, a refundable \$50 spay/neuter fee will be required at the time of the adoption, Newman said. The fee will be refunded within 45 days upon receipt of a completed sterilization certificate signed by a licensed veterinarian.

Adoptions are open only to residents of Washington County, Virginia, the city of Bristol, Virginia, or one of the surrounding Virginia counties, Russell, Smyth, Grayson and Scott.

For more information, call 276-676-6210.

Spring book sale starts on St. Patrick's Day

WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS
The Friends of the Washington County Public Library will hold their annual spring book sale from Sunday, March 17, through Sunday, March 24.

Thousands of books from all genres and for all ages will be available for bargain prices during the weeklong event, and customers can browse titles in the conference room at the main library in Abingdon. Most books are available from 50 cents to \$2, and the selection will be refreshed daily.

The sale also includes vintage and out-of-print books, which will be individually priced, as well as DVDs, audiobooks and CDs.

A preview sale will take place on St. Patrick's Day from 2 to 5 p.m. Sale hours the rest of the week will be 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Monday through Thursday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Friday and Saturday, and 1 to 5 p.m. on Sunday, March 24. Credit cards are accepted, and all proceeds will support library programs.



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The commercial drone operator averages about four jobs each month, using his professional drones to produce advertising, photography, videography, commercials and photogrammetry, the art and science of making measurements from photographs.

He's made commercials for Park Place Drive-In in Marion, topographic example maps for land development companies and 3D models of structures for various types of measurements.

"I've created virtual reality content, filmed racing events, sporting events, weddings, corporate training videos and educational videos. I've also filmed, directed and edited many advertisements across different industries," he said.

The entrepreneur quickly learned the cost of a successful drone business came at a higher price than he expected.

In addition to purchasing three drones, Poe also had to invest in hard drive equipment and two computers that are equipped to handle the large resolution files, all of which amounted to \$45,000. He's currently setting up a studio in Bristol, Virginia, for his media business.

Word of mouth has been his best form of advertising so far. He's completed jobs throughout Southwest Virginia, but one of his next jobs will take him to South Carolina for a televised dog event.

Remote Airman Training will be held 6 to 9 p.m. on March 20 and 21, and from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. on March 23 at the Instruction and Student Center at Virginia Highlands Community College. Additional classes will be held April 1-4.

Cost is \$122 for Virginia residents.

For more information or to register for the classes, call 276-739-2430.

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