



Damascus trail tourism on the wane after closings B1

Abingdon house destroyed by fire on Friday A3



Washington County News

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BUSINESS



Florist creates pickup, delivery service for customers

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STATE OF EMERGENCY

Storm damage, flooding leads to evacuations across region

BY TIM DODSON
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Washington County, Virginia, is now under a state of emergency after strong Sunday night storms caused flooding and damage across the region.

So far, local officials have confirmed four landslides, several damaged homes, a number of



ANDRE TEAGUE/WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS
An elderly driver who drove around the signs warning that the road was closed sits stalled in high water on Abingdon's East Main Street on Monday morning.

trees down and a number of impassable roads, according to

See **FLOODING**, Page A3

HIGHLANDS GLASS CO.



SHIELD SUPPLY

Local glass company supplying protective equipment for health care workers

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

ABOVE: Travis Watson, an employee at Highlands Glass Co. in Abingdon, uses polycarbonate to make intubation boxes for regional hospitals. The boxes are used by physicians and nurses on the front lines who put patients on ventilators suffering from the highly contagious virus.

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — An Abingdon glass company is supplying several hospitals in the region with an extra layer of protec-

tion from the coronavirus.

Leann Meadows, owner and operator of Highlands Glass Co., said when she opened her residential and commercial business more than 10 years ago, she never dreamed

she would be helping to save lives one day.

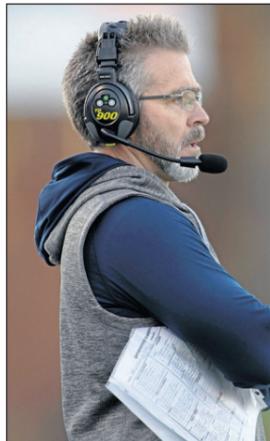
The business is supplying intubation boxes to physicians and nurses on the front

See **SHIELDS**, Page A5

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

LEFT: Highlands Glass Co. is offering these clear face shields for hospital caregivers to wear over face masks. The shields are premade from a company in Knoxville. The company is also making protective glass for reception areas at other area businesses.

SPORTS



Mark Palmer built Patrick Henry football into winning team

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COMMUNITY



Faith in Action sees decline in donations, operation hours

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Northam wants to shift May elections to Nov.

BY DAVID MCGEE
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Voters, candidates and election officials across Virginia are in a holding pattern after Gov. Ralph Northam announced last Wednesday he wants to move locality elections from May 5 to coincide with the Nov. 3 general election.

Northam announced his plans in response to the COVID-19 pandemic during his regular briefing and via a statement to the news media. Such a change must be approved by the General Assembly, which is scheduled to return to Richmond on April 22 — just 12 days before the election.

“We have wrestled with our options, and none of them are ideal or perfect,” Northam said. “No one should have to choose between protecting their health or casting a ballot. Holding in-person elections right now would put the health of voters and our election workers at risk. Therefore, I am recommending we move the May election to November.”

He is unilaterally moving the planned June 9 Republican primary vote two weeks later to June 23 for the same reason.

Northam said he spoke with lawmakers about the option.

Asked by a reporter if he might call a special session to get action sooner, Northam said he plans to wait for the reconvened session that’s now a week away.

“Postponing these elections is the best way to protect democracy without endangering public health or violating the stay-at-home order,” Northam said.

However, the governor is recommending that all absentee votes already cast be discarded, forcing people to vote again for November.

Secretary of Administration Keyanna Conner reinforced that point, saying absentee ballots that have already been cast will

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Rural King seeking tax rebate at former Lowe's

BY DAVID MCGEE
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

BRISTOL, Va. — Rural King is seeking a tax incentive from Washington County to help open a store in the former Lowe's building near Interstate 81's Exit 7, even as new sections of red roofing adorn the facade and workers are busy inside.

The Illinois-based retailer acquired the property about five years ago but couldn't proceed with a store because of non-competitor restrictions imposed by the former owner after Lowe's relocated about a mile away at The Falls in Bristol, Virginia.

That move sparked a series of meetings between the city and county, which produced an agreement for the city to pay the county \$350,000 annually for seven years to offset sales tax losses. Two years remains on that agreement.

Rural King, also known as RK Holdings LLP, has over 100 stores in 13 states. It bills itself as America's farm and home store, carrying essential goods, food, feed, seed and other farm and home products. Its nearest location is in Wytheville.

At last Tuesday's Board of Supervisors meeting, County Administrator Jason Berry presented a Rural King request for \$500,000 in sales tax rebates — \$100,000 over five years — that was met with some skepticism.

The request equals about 50% of the projected local sales taxes the store would generate, Berry said. The county provided sales tax rebates to at least two other retail projects — the Walmart development at Exit 19 and The Highlands Shopping Center on Lee Highway — but both were at a lower percentage.

The board ultimately directed Berry to develop models of what different levels of rebates might look like and present those at the board's May meeting.

"Bottom line, they [Rural King] would like to put \$3.1 million into this property, hire 60 full-time employees and over 20 part-time employees, and average wages would be \$11.30 per hour plus benefits," Berry told the board.

Berry said Rural King plans to open three new stores this year; they've already selected two, and this site is being considered as the third. If approved, it could open in the third quarter of 2020.

"I think eventually they're coming. They want you to help them, and, if you help them, from what we heard, they'll come sooner than later," Berry told the board.

Supervisor Phillip McCall said he's noticed the improvements and has shopped at the company's Wytheville location.

"They have a lot of merchandise. They offer a lot, and I think they would be a great asset to this," McCall said. "I can see us giving them a percentage but not 50%."

Two fiscal years remain on the city-county agreement, and whatever sales tax revenues a business generates from the former Lowe's site would decrease the amount the city must pay the county.



Timothy Ray (left) and Travis Watson, employees at Highlands Glass Co., are working long hours to fill orders for intubation boxes for regional hospitals.

Shields

From Page A1

lines who must place patients on ventilators when they are suffering from the highly contagious virus.

The transparent, four-sided box is placed over a patient's head, acting as a barrier from virus particles that may become airborne when a tube is inserted in a patient's trachea to open the airway. The shields are designed to be used in addition to primary pieces of protective equipment, such as face masks worn by medical staff.

The boxes, made of clear polycarbonate manufactured by Lexan, measure 24 inches wide, 24 inches tall and 16 inches deep. The top and sides of the boxes are solid, with the front of the box open for the patient's head; the back panel has two openings for medical staff to access.

"The boxes are reusable and can be sanitized," said Meadows.

"We cut all of the polycarbonate with a Kett saw and then use a plastic welder to weld it all together.

"Boxes cost roughly \$150 each to make. We are donating our labor to fabricate the boxes. Hospitals only pay for the materials.

"I am honored that we are able to help the community in a time of need and have the workforce and capabilities to serve the community as well as other customers," said the business owner.

"We built a prototype for a local hospital, and the doctors really liked it. They made some adjustments to it and said more orders are coming.

"We will have 20 of the boxes out the door by tomorrow afternoon," said Meadows last week.

Four of her nine employees are working long hours to fill the box orders, she said. "We're having to put the hospitals in front of other customers right now."

The glass business is serving Johnston Memorial Hospital in Abingdon; Bristol Regional Medical Center; Russell County Medical Center in Lebanon, Virginia; Smyth County Community Hospital in Marion, Virginia; Sycamore Shoals Hospital in Elizabethton, Tennessee; Johnson County Hospital in Mountain City, Tennessee; and Greenville Community Hospital in Greenville, Tennessee.

"Buchanan General Hospital just placed an order as well," she said.

The company is helping other public areas stay safe in order to mitigate the spread of the virus.

Employees are making 1/4-inch, clear, tempered glass with speak-through covers for reception windows in local doctor's offices and for checkout lines in gas stations and grocery stores.

"We have a protective shield at the reception window at the office," said Esther Poff, receptionist at Boothe Chiropractic Clinic in Abingdon. "People can use their cards to make

payments, and I don't have to open the window very far to receive check payments.

"We're trying to keep everyone safe. I feel much better about it, too."

Dr. Robert Boothe, owner of the chiropractic business, said installing the protective shield is just one of many ways the clinic is taking proactive measures in protecting the public. "The clinic's main concern is the safety of our families, staff, community and our patients," said Boothe.

In addition, Meadows has received 100 clear face shields for hospital caregivers to wear over face masks. "The face shields are coming premade from Knoxville, Tennessee. The masks will provide an extra layer of protection for nurses and doctors."

Serving customers in a five-state area, Highlands Glass Co. provides glass for commercial storefronts, replacement windows, new construction windows, heavy equipment, screens, barnwood mirrors and frames, storm windows and camper replacements.

"As much as 40% of our work is local, with the remaining work done out of town," Meadows said.

"We also do residential work for new builds, custom shower enclosures, custom mirrors and tabletops," said Meadows. "I think while people are sheltering in place at home, they are realizing there's work to be done at home."

"The coronavirus hasn't slowed us down. If anything, it's picked up some."

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

COVID-19

Widespread community transmission in Mount Rogers district; 4 deaths

WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS
MARION, Va. — Three people died last week of COVID-19 in the Mount Rogers Health District, bringing that district's total to four.

"We are deeply saddened by these tragic losses and send our condolences to the families," district Director Dr. Karen Shelton said in a written statement.

No further information is being released out of respect for the privacy of the families.

The Mount Rogers Health District is experiencing widespread community transmission of the disease, specifically in Washington, Smyth and Wythe counties.

Fifty-one cases were reported Monday

across the district's two cities and four counties.

Residents should assume the risk of exposure is everywhere and behave accordingly, regardless of the details of specific numbers and locations of cases, according to the statement, which urges residents to be responsible and take personal precautions.

Scholle closes plant, lays off employees due to virus

WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS
Scholle IPN in Chilhowie is reducing its workforce this week by 128 employees due to a sharp decline in business due to COVID-19, according to a letter from the manufacturer to Mayor Gary Hening.

The April 1 letter from Fadil Bushati, director of human resources for Scholle IPN Packaging Inc., was included in the packet of information for Thursday's meeting of the Chilhowie Town Council.

"The unforeseeable and continually evolving events of the COVID-19 pandemic have created a climate of uncertainty for our company," Bushati writes in the letter. "The long-term impact upon our operations is unknowable, and our business circumstances have been constantly changing. Regrettably, these changes are affecting our dedicated employees."

The company that has been in Smyth County for over 20 years is reducing its workforce by about 128 employees beginning this week. Some of the reductions are anticipated to be permanent, although the entire facil-

ity is not being closed, Bushati said.

"From what I understand, they've shut the whole plant down," said Hening last Tuesday. "It's not permanent, I'm sure."

Hening said the pandemic has hurt everyone, but he remains optimistic about the future.

"One of these days, it's going to be gone, we'll wake up, and things will be back to normal," he said. "It's really hurting. It's hurt the meals tax for the town with everybody eating at home and not the restaurants. But we'll get through it."

Bushati said in the letter to Hening, "We were unable to provide this notice to you earlier because the extent of the public health impact of the COVID-19 natural disaster, as well as the circumstances resulting from the dramatic downturn in business, were sudden, unforeseeable, and outside of our control."

Just in the past year, Scholle IPN on Deer Valley Road in Chilhowie had expanded its production facility with a \$10.29 million investment and more than 42 additional jobs.

The plant expansion announced in March 2019 was expected to take about two years, with new equipment being added over the next two years.

Scholle IPN is one of the world's largest packaging manufacturers, providing sustainable packaging for the food and beverage, agriculture, automotive, cleaning, personal care and pharmaceutical sectors.

Scholle has been a pioneer and world leader in bag-in-box packaging for the food, beverage and industrial markets, manufacturing flexible packaging solutions such as bags for soft drink products in fountain dispensers at fast food restaurants and many other products.

Headquartered in Illinois, Scholle IPN operates in 14 countries with more than 2,000 employees worldwide. In 2018, Scholle IPN's Chilhowie operation employed slightly more than 100 people operating 15 pieces of equipment 24 hours a day. Employees numbered about 115 before the expansion.

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Abingdon cut 13 full-time, 64 part-time jobs A2

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BUSINESS



Dog trainer has hands full with influx of newly adopted pets

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ART



Drive-thru art exhibit on display at William King Museum of Art

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SPORTS



Patrick Henry running back nears end of grueling recovery

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Ballad to resume elective care this week

BY TIM DODSON
 WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

More than a month after Ballad Health suspended non-emergency surgeries as part of its response to the coronavirus pandemic, the regional health care provider is gradually starting to perform elective procedures again.

"The decision to resume procedures was made very carefully," Eric Deaton, Ballad's chief

operating officer, said during a news briefing last Wednesday with system leaders.

Governors in both Tennessee and Virginia issued orders in March directing hospitals to postpone elective surgeries to conserve personal protective equipment (PPE), free up capacity for COVID-19 patients and limit potential spread of the virus in facilities.

But now that more time has

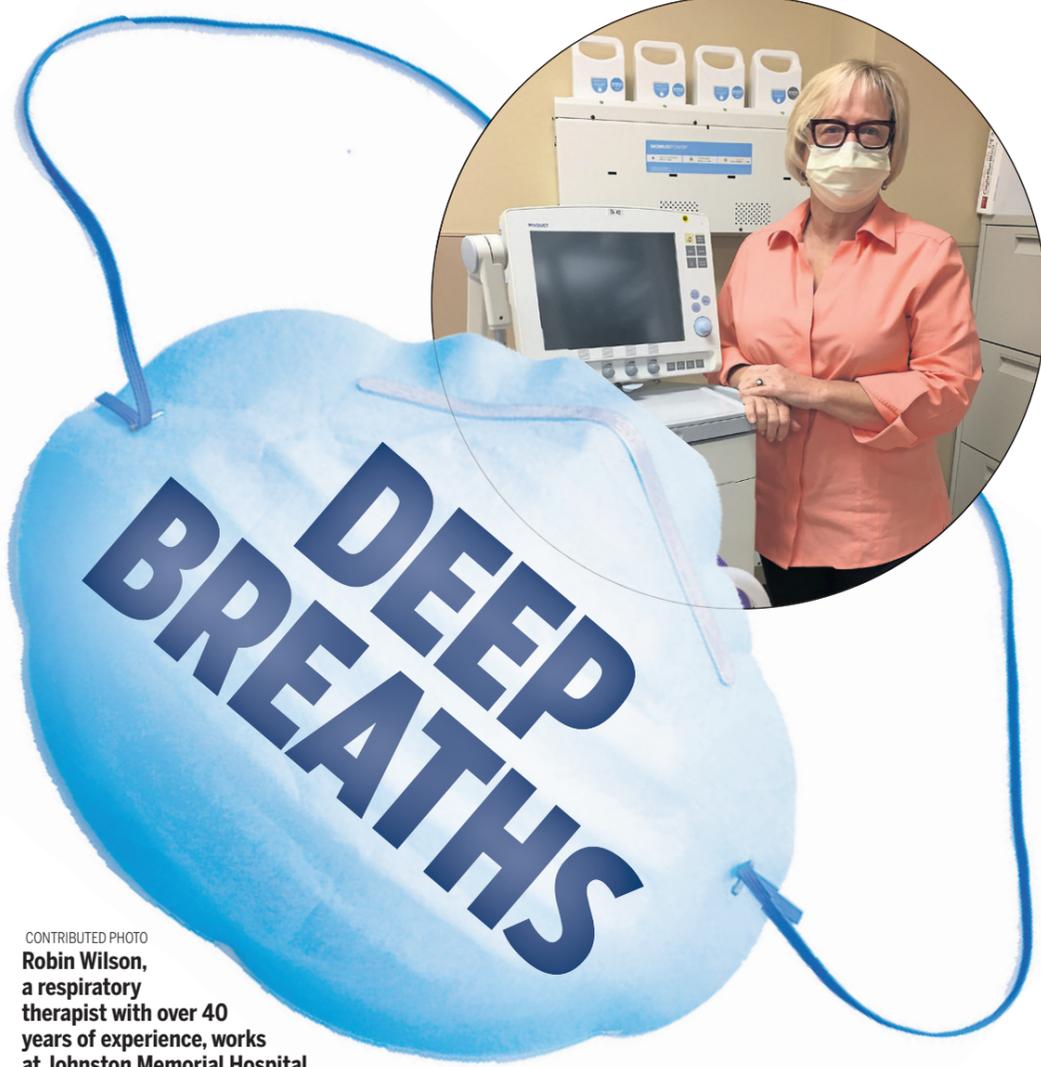
passed, health systems like Ballad that have not been overwhelmed with COVID-19 cases are hoping to safely resume procedures, which are a critical source of revenue.

Ballad had 12 confirmed COVID-19 patients being cared for in its facilities last week and another eight who are "patients under investigation," or suspected cases, Deaton said. In total, he said the health system

had more than 300 beds available specifically for coronavirus patients, adequate PPE and more than 200 ventilators that could be used.

Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam said that his previous order to prohibit elective surgeries and dental procedures, which expired Friday, was to preserve the state's PPEs for front-line

See **BALLAD**, Page A6



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
Robin Wilson, a respiratory therapist with over 40 years of experience, works at Johnston Memorial Hospital. Respiratory therapist is critical to caring for intensive care patients with COVID-19 symptoms.

Respiratory therapists on the front lines of pandemic

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
 FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

ABINGDON, Va. — Robin Wilson has been a respiratory therapist longer than some of her team members at Johnston Memorial Hospital have been alive.

The director of cardiopulmonary at the hospital has spent more than 40 years in the region treating patients with a variety of chronic breathing problems from black lung to emphysema.

But COVID-19 has changed all of that.

Now, the respiratory therapist and a team of 20 spend time on the front line caring for intensive care patients who struggle from lung complications caused by the coronavirus.

Wilson confessed some days she feels like a warrior, fighting a virus that's still so new to the medical field.

"I feel like, as a respiratory therapist, we've been preparing for this pandemic for years," said Wilson.

"But how can you be ready for something like this?" she asked. "I don't know that you really can be."

While the volume of infections at the Abingdon hospital is nothing like what is being seen in New York and other major cities throughout the country, Wilson said the emotional toll is the same.

"We have team members who have elderly parents at home and children whose health is compromised. They don't want to take this virus home to their families, and they are doing everything they can to protect themselves," she said.

The pandemic is causing anxiety and stress for people around the world, including caregivers, who work long

hours, often putting their own lives on hold.

"We've had some really, really long hours," said Wilson.

"You've seen the pictures of health care workers with mask marks on their faces. We have some pretty good ones here, too. But I am committed to being here and being with my team and making sure we have the resources for our patients."

She hasn't seen her own children or grandchildren in weeks. "I'm from D.C. — Dickenson County," said Wilson with a chuckle. She has managed to keep her sense of humor even during the toughest days.

"In some ways, this reminds me of my mother growing up during the Depression. I can imagine they suffered from

See **THERAPIST**, Page A6

Civil rights lawsuit filed in 2018 Glade Spring police shooting

BY ROBERT SORRELL
 WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

The mother of a man who was shot and killed by Washington County deputies in 2018 in Glade Spring, Virginia, has filed a multi-million-dollar federal civil rights lawsuit against law enforcement officials, including the former sheriff.

Last Wednesday, Roanoke-based attorney John Fishwick filed the suit in U.S. District Court in Abingdon on behalf of Teresa Suzanne Skeen, the mother of Phillip Cameron Gibson, the 37-year-old man who died on May 8, 2018.

The suit lists the Washington County Sheriff's Office, Sheriff Blake Andis, deputies Seth Sparks, Chad

Long and John Asbury, as well as several John Does, as defendants. The John Does refer to unknown officers.

Former Sheriff Fred Newman, who retired at the end of 2019, also faces several counts in the suit. The family seeks \$5 million per count per defendant, states the suit, which requests a jury trial.

In 2018, on West Main Street in Abingdon, Sgt. Lance Campbell stopped and pulled over a vehicle being driven by Gibson. The driver spoke with Campbell, and for unknown reasons, Campbell shattered the window of Gibson's vehicle, the suit claims.

Gibson then fled the scene, which resulted in a pursuit involving multiple jurisdictions.

A Virginia State Police trooper conducted a pursuit intervention technique at the intersection of state Route 91 and U.S. Highway 11 in Glade Spring, where Gibson's vehicle crashed into a pole.

From there, Gibson fled on foot, leading officers

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Therapist

From Page A1

some of the same feelings of disconnection and financial struggles.

“There are a lot of folks struggling economically now from the effects of COVID-19.

“Even if you don’t have COVID, there’s nobody who’s not being touched by this virus. It separates us but connects us, as well.”

Many times Wilson and her staff have to fill in for families who can’t be with their loved ones in the hospital because visitations have been restricted to ensure a safe environment for patients.

“It’s not an option,” she said. “It’s what we do.”

Although the coronavirus outbreaks have caused a disruption in her job, it’s also given the therapist the opportunity to get creative and pull from every available resource from her 46-year career.

Wilson’s department created a ventilator lab at the hospital at the end of March to help doctors and nurses revisit the technology commonly used in respiratory therapy.

“With elective or [non-emergency] cases on hold during the pandemic, we are tapping into a lot of medical staff not currently working,” she said.

“Unlike some areas of the country, we have been fortunate to have more



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Wilson’s department has created a ventilator lab at the hospital to help doctors and nurses revisit technology used in respiratory therapy.

time to prepare and to learn from other medical facilities throughout the country.

“We’re using the knowledge we have available, but as we move forward, we may choose other methods of treatments. That’s yet to be seen. I think this is why it’s such a challenge right now.

She believes the job of a respiratory therapist has become more valuable than ever.

“I consider us to be a supportive team, caring for patients who are challenged with diseases and critical care. We complement what the doctors and nurses do. I’m proud

to see the profession evolve to that point. Like nursing, the respiratory therapy field has the ability to be quite versatile.

“I hope more young people will be drawn to this profession,” she said.

Challenged is the best way to describe how she feels at the end of the day.

“And I feel a sense of accomplishment. My team, myself, my hospital and my health system [all] address the challenges of COVID-19 every day.

“But we’re not over it yet.”

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

Ballad

From Page A1

workers and hospitals.

“We worried that our hospitals would be overwhelmed by a surge of cases,” Northam said during a news conference last Wednesday.

The governor said hospitals have not been overwhelmed by COVID-19 cases.

Beginning last Friday, Northam said medical procedures can continue in Virginia.

A committee of physicians and other leaders from across Ballad’s system worked to develop recommendations for a plan for elective cases.

“COVID testing is going to be a critical part of this,” said Beth Jackson, a physician who served on the committee.

Patients must test negative for the virus before a surgery, and procedures will be delayed for those who test positive.

Ballad faces a backlog of about 5,000 cases, CEO Alan Levine said.

Over several weeks, the system will start treating

lower acuity outpatient cases and then start to resume cases that may require inpatient care and eventually those that require hospital stays, Levine said.

Restarting elective cases will allow Ballad to begin bringing back employees who were recently furloughed due to lower patient volumes.

The furloughs affected about 9% of Ballad’s 15,000-member workforce, but Levine did not have specific numbers about how many may expect to return in the coming weeks.

One big unknown is whether there may be patients who want to continue to delay procedures instead of moving forward in the near future, he said.

Still, Levine stressed that Ballad has a “culture of safety” and that precautions like visitation restrictions, the use of protective gear for employees and required testing and screening procedures are being taken to limit potential exposure to the virus.

In addition to the details

on elective care, Ballad leaders also shared plans to expand COVID-19 testing.

“If you feel you need the test, we’ll provide the test for you,” Levine said.

People who want to get tested can call Ballad’s Nurse Connect hotline at 1-833-822-5523 to determine which location to go to. Levine said results should be available within about 24 hours, but the volume of tests going to labs will be a factor in how quickly they are turned around.

These tests will be available for a cash price of \$52, but Ballad can also bill insurance, and a patient who qualifies for Ballad’s charity care policy would not be charged, he said.

While Ballad does have rapid testing capabilities — results are available in a matter of hours — the system is prioritizing those resources for people with serious symptoms, emergency cases and its employees, Levine said.

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Shooting

From Page A1

running toward a nearby restaurant and then across U.S. Highway 11, the family and law enforcement have confirmed.

As Gibson ran up an embankment, he tripped and fell. At that point, deputies opened fire, resulting in a total of 12 gunshot wounds to Gibson, three of which entered his back, the suit states.

The suit claims no officers attempted to assist Gibson after he was shot. The man died at the scene.

After the shooting, law enforcement officials, including Newman, “falsely accused Gibson of having turned towards the law enforcement officers and pointed a firearm at them as he reached the top of the embankment,” the suit claims.

The family says in the suit that Gibson was not holding a firearm or any device resembling a firearm.

Following the shooting, Newman also “falsely accused” Gibson of having a criminal conviction of aggravated assault in an attempt to paint a picture of Gibson as a violent felon, the suit states. Gibson has never been convicted of aggravated assault.

An investigation was conducted, and the officers involved in the shooting were cleared of any wrongdoing by Washington County Commonwealth’s Attorney Josh Cumbow. The suit states that the defendants violated Gibson’s constitutional rights to be free from reasonable seizure and excessive force and accuses them of wrongfully causing Gibson’s death.

After the shooting, the family sought answers from law enforcement and filed multiple requests under the Freedom of Information Act. Family members said they wanted to obtain body cam and patrol car camera footage of the shooting. Newman and the VSP denied each request, as well as requests made by the Bristol Herald Courier.



PHOTO COURTESY RICHARD GILSON

The car driven by Phillip Cameron Gibson II came to rest beside a utility pole in Glade Spring just off Exit 29 before a short foot pursuit, where he was shot and killed by WCSO deputies in 2018.



ANDRE TEAGUE/WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS

Michelle Castle (left) and her sister, Paige Fultz, talk on Sept. 8, 2019, about the questions they have regarding the death of their brother, Phillip Cameron Gibson II, following a police chase and shooting by WCSO officers in 2018. Gibson’s mother has now filed a civil rights lawsuit against law enforcement officers for Gibson’s death.



PHOTO COURTESY WCSO

A gun police claim Phillip Cameron Gibson II brandished before the officer-involved shooting that ended his life. A new lawsuit against law enforcement officials contends that Gibson did not have a firearm in his hand during the confrontation.

The suit claims the WCSO and VSP “deliberately engaged in a cover-up of the fatal and unlawful shooting” by withholding records.

After Andis became sheriff, the family’s attorneys told the Herald Courier that they were finally able to view the video footage. However, they have not

said what they saw.

The suit accuses Newman of failing to properly train and supervise his officers and notes that they had been involved in at least two other fatal shootings in 2014.

In addition, the suit states, “Newman maintained a practice or custom of deputies employing excessive, deadly force without sufficient provocation, reason or justification.”

Newman, who was not aware of the suit Thursday, declined comment.

Andis said he did not know a suit had been filed. Gibson’s family also declined to comment Thursday.

“His family wishes to move forward and to seek justice in this matter,” Fishwick said in a statement.

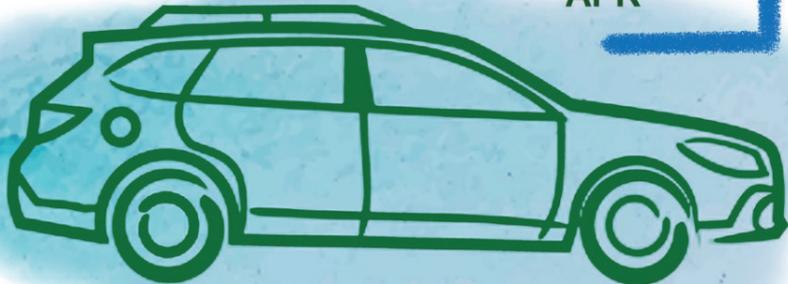
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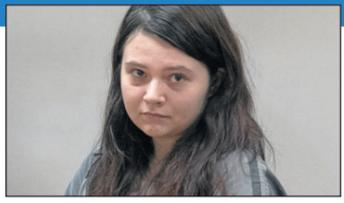
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2020 Plumb Alley Day canceled due to coronavirus A2

Megan Boswell indicted on multiple counts of false reports A3



Washington County News

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SPORTS



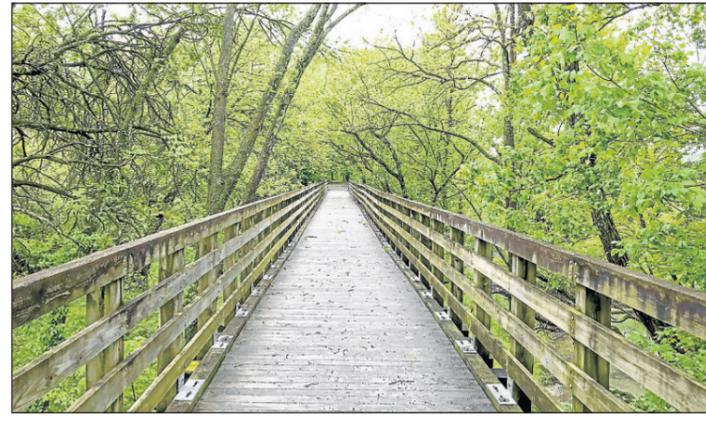
Jordan Keith named winner of Gene 'Pappy' Thompson Award

» B2

Creeper Trail reopens with restrictions

BY JOE TENNIS
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS
ABINGDON, Va. — Gary Greer watched last week's relentless rain with some lament, saying few if any bicyclists were headed to Damascus to take a ride on the Virginia Creeper Trail. But at least there was hope. A break in the clouds. The green light. All of the above should now be found simply because the famous Virginia Creeper Trail is open again, following five weeks of being gated due to concerns over the coronavirus. Make that five important weeks: the start of the bike-shuttling spring tourism season, said Greer,

the owner of Creeper Trail Bike Rental & Shuttle in Damascus. "The rug was pulled out from under us, and it was really scary for all of us," Greer said. "Most of the bike shops make their money in summertime. Then, in the spring, that business slowly comes back, and you work your way back into a full season." Greer, 59, operates two of about a dozen shuttles on the Virginia Creeper Trail, plus a bike shop in Damascus next to the Pizza Plus facing Food City. But he's kept that bike shop shuttered for the spring simply



The Virginia Creeper Trail in Abingdon, Virginia, reopened on May 12 after being closed for five weeks, giving the trail towns of Abingdon and Damascus a chance to recoup some tourism losses.

See **CREEPER**, Page A5

HEALTH



Teachers, writers encourage residents to start journaling to alleviate anxiety

» B1

VACCINATIONS



Doctors and medical staff in the region are reminding parents that young children need to stay updated on their vaccines, even in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. Local doctor's offices prevent large groups of people to gather by allowing patients to wait in cars and are confident that doctor's offices are safe for families to visit.

'Not as dangerous as parents think'

Pediatricians reminding families to keep kids' vaccines up-to-date and that doctor's offices are safe to visit

BY CAROLYN R. WILSON
FOR THE WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS
ABINGDON, Va. — Southwest Virginia pediatricians are seeing a worrisome trend develop among parents with young children — a shift that's affecting much of the country. Pediatricians in the region are reporting a drastic decline in vaccination rates since the COVID-19 crisis began. It's a trend, they fear, will lead to outbreaks of children's diseases that normally would be prevented with vaccines, said a group of pediatricians from Rich-

lands to Wytheville who convened during a Zoom interview last week. "People seem to be afraid to come into the office," said Dr. Sarah Seeley-Dick of Highlands Pediatrics in Abingdon. "They are rescheduling visits and missing vaccines for their children. It's really important not to miss vaccinations. Well-checks are super important to help prevent illness every day — not just during the coronavirus outbreaks." Studies done by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) indicate vaccination rates are dipping

to dangerously low levels for this year. Last week, the AAP launched a campaign urging parents to call their pediatricians to schedule checkups and vaccines for children of all ages. Vaccinations are not just for today. According to the website for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, vaccines "protect our children's children and their children by keeping diseases that we have almost defeated from making a comeback." Lowered immunization rates in a commu-

See **VACCINES**, Page A6

2 newcomers elected to Abingdon Town Council

BY JOE TENNIS and DAVID MCGEE
WASHINGTON COUNTY NEWS
ABINGDON, Va. — Two new members are headed to the Abingdon Town Council following last week's election as voters ousted both incumbents. James R. "Scabbo" Anderson, 67, and Amanda Pillion, 45, garnered the most votes out of the five candidates.



Anderson



Pillion

The election means defeat for current Mayor Wayne Craig, 79, and Vice Mayor Cindy Patterson, 54, both of whom were elected to four-year terms in 2016. A fifth contestant, Roman Blevins, 22, received 7.74% of the vote. Pillion was the top vote-getter with 31.17% of the vote. "It's surprising, but I worked hard," said Pillion, who is the wife of State Sen. Todd Pillion, R-Abingdon. "I worked hard for people to vote absentee and to vote curbside. I feel like it was really a confusing time. But I wanted to make sure people know how and when to vote." Anderson, who won nearly 25.97% of the vote, said he was surprised by the outcome and noted that he had previously lost by 13 votes when running for Town Council in 2018. "It's been a hard row to hoe," Anderson said. "But it paid off, and I'm ready to get the ball rolling. Work is cut out for us, but I'm really ready to get going, hopefully, in the right direction." Both Pillion and Anderson said building the Abingdon Sports Complex is a top priority, now that the campaign is over. "I have a hunger to see the sport complex finished," Pillion said. "We've wasted time. We've wasted money. We've wasted energy. We need to finish it in the way that it was meant to be done and the way it was promised."

See **ELECTION**, Page A6

BUSINESS



Kingsport designer selling handmade school-themed masks

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Vaccines

From Page A1

nity could open up new problems for a health care system that's already burdened from the COVID crisis, said the local doctors.

Fewer vaccinations means more children will not be protected, which could cause local outbreaks or even epidemics. When fewer people get immunized, outbreaks of diseases like pertussis, known as whooping cough, could become more prevalent.

The doctors advise parents to become more aware of their children's immunization schedules and to make sure their children receive the vaccines at the appropriate times.

"We're concerned that people are so focused on COVID-19 that they may let down their guards, and other diseases, such as measles, that are ordinarily suppressed by vaccines will begin to resurface," said Dr. Anita Henley of Royal Oak Pediatrics in Abingdon and Marion.

"Nationwide, this is a big problem," agreed Dr. John Davis at Clinch Valley Pediatrics in Richlands, Virginia. "People are scared to come to the doctor. We even have people who won't bring their sick children to the office because they're afraid they may catch something while here."

"Word needs to get out that it's not as dangerous as parents think," Davis said.

"We believe most children experience very mild symptoms

from COVID-19 and that most of our area has not seen a significant number of cases," said Dr. James Scott of Wythe-Bland Pediatrics. "I think the serious disease cases will be extremely unusual in children and in our area."

Seeley-Dick said all the local pediatric offices are "taking precautions that are extraordinary for our offices."

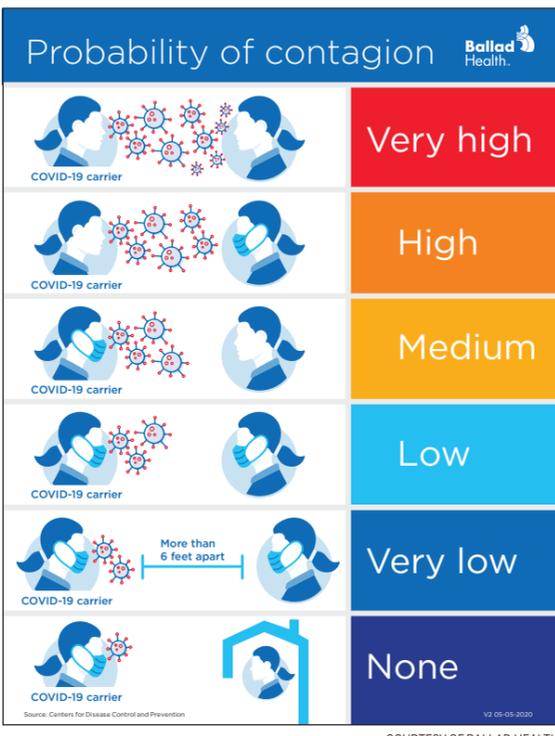
"We are taking extra precautions in all of our offices to make sure we keep people safe, and we encourage them to come in for their well-checks," she said. "We want to start getting people back into the office so we do not delay vaccinations. But we also want to remind people that as we get back out into the world that we really want to make sure we're doing our own best to prevent other people from getting sick, as in wearing our masks when we're out in public and trying to keep safe distances between people."

"We know everyone wants to get out of the house. We know people have cabin fever, but we also don't want to see all of this suddenly explode again."

The doctors hope the safety measures they are taking will convince parents that it is safe to bring their children for visits.

People cannot mingle in waiting rooms; they must wear masks and practice good hand-washing, they said.

"We make sure people come straight from their cars to examination rooms," said Dr. Amy Harden of Mountain



This graphic from Ballad Health demonstrates the probability of becoming infected with COVID-19 with various social distancing measures.

View Pediatrics in Marion. "Nobody is in a waiting room, so you're not going to be sitting beside someone who is sick. When patients come in for well-checks, they are coming into well spaces that have not had sick people prior to them. All of that goes together to help prevent the spread of disease as much as humanly possible."

Examination rooms are thoroughly cleaned between patients, and staff members at all of the offices wear masks.

Dr. Pamela Myers said Highlands Pediatrics is making sure the safety and health of their families is their highest priority.

The doctor referred to a Probability of Contagion simulation graphic created by Ballad Health that demonstrates

the benefits of social distancing and wearing masks to help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

"We are strongly encouraging people to wear face masks, practice social distancing and regularly wash their hands. I think if people see us taking these precautions, they will be more likely to come in for visits," said Myers.

"We want people in the community to know that we're still here, and the recommendations made for children still exist," said Seeley-Dick.

"It's very important to stay up-to-date with visits. We're doing our part to make it a safe and enjoyable visit."

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

Election

From Page A1

Patterson, who received 18.48% of the vote said, "It's been an honor and a privilege to serve the citizens of Abingdon."

Craig received 16.28% of the vote and expressed an interest Tuesday night in continuing his public service. He said he would be "willing to serve in any way that I can."

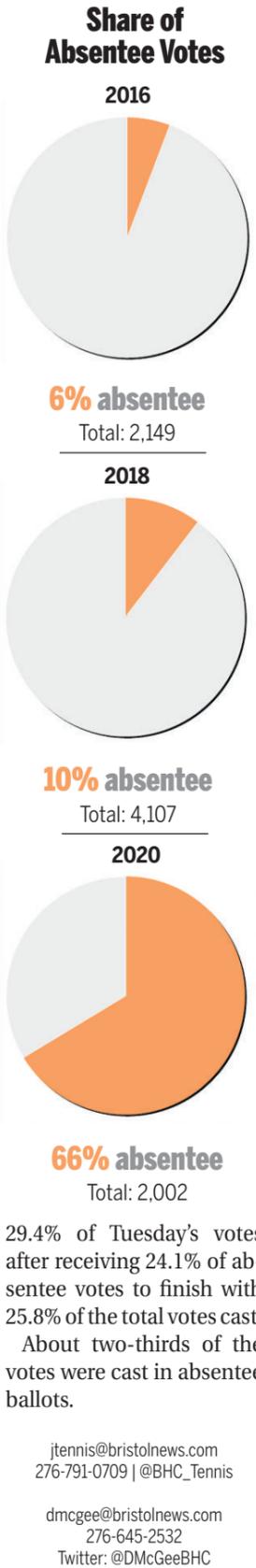
This month's avalanche of absentee ballots mirrored — usually within a couple of percentage points — the final outcomes of local races both here and across Virginia.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak began in March, state and local officials urged voters to use absentee ballots and "vote from home," rather than congregating at polling places on Election Day in May's series of more than 100 city and town elections across the state. A COVID-19 exemption was even added to expedite the process — since current law requires voters to give a reason why they cannot appear on Election Day to cast their ballot.

The result was a high percentage of absentee votes locally and in towns and cities across the region and state. And those votes — which were typically reported first — foretold winners and margins of victory.

Among towns, the Abingdon Town Council voting percentages varied by less than two percentage points between absentee and final totals.

Top vote-getter Amanda Pillion received 30.5% of absentee votes and 31.1% of the final total in a five-way race for two seats. She received 32.2% of votes cast on Tuesday. Anderson got



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