



Volleyball

Lady Lancers volleyball tops Heritage **B2**



Football

Lancers varsity team wraps up regular season **B1**

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LEE LUTHER JR. PHOTOS, FOR THE NEW ERA-PROGRESS

Caroline Cockerham and Colson Davis act out a scene in Amherst County High School's production of "The Aliens Have Stolen Our Wives."

'Just what we needed'

Amherst theater stays active during pandemic, records competition piece

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An out-of-this-world experience has come to Amherst County High School's drama program for a spring production of "The Aliens Have Stolen Our Wives," an original play written by ACHS instructor Patricia Emmert and her husband.

The challenges of COVID-19 have led Emmert and the drama students to put on their competition play in a pre-recorded performance sent to the Virginia High School League. The school's theater program participants normally travel in the fall to perform for the VHSL competition and observe other schools' productions, but this year Emmert and crew had to improvise by recording the performance in an empty auditorium at the high school.

Emmert described the original piece as a "ridiculous, silly, funny" story of a fictional town called Bigelow where men play poker, women go shopping and enter the aliens as they study human behavior and mating rituals referred to as the SOLs (standard of love).

"I thought it was a lot of fun and the kids have really enjoyed

it," Emmert said. "It's just what we needed."

Since the pandemic the drama program has been in a constant state of adapting. The spring musical last year was scrapped and a late fall production, "Spoon River Anthology," was held outdoors with characters staying socially distanced in a graveyard setting. Drama students also did a recent improvisational show via Google meet and plans to hold a live performance April 17 outdoors at the high school.

"When you're performing, the beautiful thing is the audience is part of the show," Emmert said. "The kids told me they're so happy to just hear an audience's reaction — on time. They're excited about that."

The drama club also plans to perform "The Lion King Jr." in the school's parking lot the first week of June.

The pre-recorded production of "The Aliens Have Stolen Our Wives" will be posted on Amherst Theatre's website at emmertstheatre.com.

"It's all new to us," Emmert said of putting on a show without a live audience. "This is the first time we've ever recorded a show."

The recording includes a full

performance in real time without any editing and the camera doesn't pick up all the nuances of each character, she said. "They don't get any feedback from an empty theater room," Emmert said.

Despite the challenges, the students made the most of it.

"We have had a lot of fun with this show," Emmert said. "This play just kind of started as a joke but we ended up really liking it."

Colson Davis, a senior, said he didn't think he was going to have the chance to be on the stage this year and is thankful to have the chance to perform.

"Just to be able to do even a recording is a blessing in my book and I'm really grateful for the opportunities Mrs. Emmert gave us this year," Davis said.

Student Eleanor McPhatter said the performance felt much the same but different in a lot of ways as well. "We did it like a normal show, basically," McPhatter said.

Nico Thomas said he enjoyed playing a character he described as an egotist, which contradicts Thomas's personality. The performance without live laughter or applause is different and he

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Vee Dalton-Mayhew, left, and Kayden Fifer, portraying aliens, fly in their space ships.

AMHERST COUNTY

Proposed budget increased

Public hearing on fiscal plan set for April 20 board of supervisors meeting

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Amherst County's proposed \$46.4 million budget for fiscal year 2022 represents an increase of \$1.9 million, or 4.3% over the current year, and contains no real estate tax or personal property tax increases.

The budget, which takes effect July 1, is set for a public hearing during the Amherst County Board of Supervisors' meeting at 7 p.m. April 20.

County employees are anticipated to receive a 4% pay raise, while some workers in constitutional offices and the county's department of social services are slated to receive a 5% increase because of state funding tied with those positions.

The proposed general fund is \$45.8 million, up \$1.9 million because of increased investment in the capital improvement plan for county projects, which was cut significantly in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Revenues for the general fund have increased \$2.7 million, or 6.2%, as a result of drawing from savings for the CIP, a new cigarette tax of 27 cents per pack taking effect in July and the 2020 real estate reassessments, according to County Administrator Dean Rodgers.

"Nevertheless, revenues no

longer meet the expenses of the county and this will need evaluation during the FY '23 budget," Rodgers said in a March 30 letter to supervisors, staff and residents posted on the county's website. "On average, expenses have risen over time at a rate of 2% while revenues have only averaged a 1% rise."

Amherst County had seen a decline in the unemployment rate from 6.7% in 2012 to 2.9% in December 2019, but the pandemic drove it back up to a high of 9.2% last April, according to Rodgers. In September, unemployment in the county was back down to 5.5% while the current fiscal year saw a steady flow of business activity with 29 startup businesses documented by the Virginia Employment Commission, he wrote.

The board of supervisors has moved broadband expansion and increased residential housing to the highest spot in its strategic goals, Rodgers said. The Madison Heights master plan, which is funded within the CIP program, will include significant increases in residential property inventory of all types, he added.

"The biggest push for the coming years is to improve the economic development environment by expanding broadband availability," Rodgers said.

The county already has contracted for projects using \$1.8 million in Coronavirus, Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding to expand the network of fiber-optic cable to homes without any service

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County jury trials to resume April 14

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After a year of emergency suspension during the coronavirus pandemic, jury trials are on the brink of restarting in Amherst Circuit Court.

The first jury trial in more than a year, an aggravated malicious wounding case, is set to bring jurors into the courtroom the morning of April 14.

Jury trials were suspended at the beginning of the pandemic by the Virginia Supreme Court, which in the summer required all jurisdictions to develop and submit a plan for conducting those trials safely in the future. Once the plans were approved, the courts could restart trials at their discretion.

Most circuit courts in the

Lynchburg area delayed jury trials despite getting the green light from the state in December and January. Judges in Lynchburg and the counties of Amherst, Bedford and Campbell — which all are in the 24th Judicial Circuit — signed orders that cited climbing COVID-19 infection rates in postponing jury trials.

The pandemic reached its zenith locally in January — the Central Virginia Health District, made up of Lynchburg and surrounding counties, saw a record high of 25.5% of COVID-19 tests returning positive Jan. 1, and Lynchburg General Hospital experienced its peak stress Jan. 13 with 133 COVID-19 patients requiring about 38% of its beds.

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