

THE SMITHFIELD TIMES

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SECOND FRONT

Isle of Wight County Schools culinary arts students made sure 100 needy families got a full meal on Thanksgiving.

— See page 9



QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“It’s just gross. We’re really tired of it; I’m sure it’s the same person year after year.”

— South Church Street resident Jim Groves
On deer carcasses being dumped on a cul-de-sac near his home

Surry ‘energy policy’ draws mixed reaction

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

A proposed “energy policy” amendment to Surry County’s 2040 Comprehensive Plan drew mixed reactions from residents at a Nov. 21 Planning Commission public hearing.

While aimed primarily at

limiting the number and location of new solar farms, the policy is intended to be inclusive of all energy sources, including Dominion Energy’s existing nuclear plant.

The amendment proposes limiting utility-scale energy project sites to 10% of the county’s land, subtracting water and wetlands, for a maximum of 15,278 acres. Of

this, 9,263 acres are already taken up by existing and approved utility-scale solar farms and the nuclear plant. Another 22.8-acre parcel at the Surry-Sussex county line is slated for Align RNG’s “biogas” processing facility, leaving just under 6,000 acres available for future energy projects.

Energy projects looking to site

within the available 6,000 acres would need to be located within a mile of high-voltage transmission lines, and would be restricted to siting at least half a mile from any historic site, per the proposed policy’s current wording. Energy projects would further be restricted to at least 750 feet from any place of worship or cemetery,

and at least half a mile from any other existing community-scale or utility-scale energy facility.

The hearing drew four speakers, three from Surry and one from outside the county.

Sam Edwards of the county’s Surry District said in his opinion, the proposed energy policy

• See ENERGY, p. 4



BURNED BODY LEFT IN FIELD

A new state law requires Virginia State Police to maintain a publicly accessible online database of unsolved homicides, unidentified bodies and missing-person cases. Three of the database’s 60 cases are from Isle of Wight County. This is the second in a multi-part series.

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Dee Dee Darden remembers the grisly sight that greeted her the morning of Wednesday, June 5, 1991, like it was yesterday.

Her late husband, Tommy, had gone out early that morning to one of the couple’s wheat fields on Bowling Green Road, only to return a few minutes later in a panic.

“He came flying back down the road, saying, ‘Get in the truck; get in the truck! You gotta see it; you gotta see it!’” Dee Dee recalled in a recent interview at

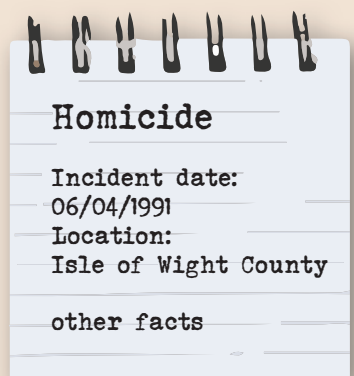
her longtime business, Darden’s Country Store.

In the field, lying face down, was the badly burned body of a Black man police later identified as 33-year-old Thomas Daryle Williams of New York City.

The murder remains unsolved, as one of three decades-old Isle of Wight County crimes listed in an online Virginia State Police database of cold cases that made its debut in June.

The Smithfield Times could find only one article in its archives, dated June 12, 1991, and none in any other Virginia

• See COLD CASE, p. 3



U.S. Rep. A. Donald McEachin dies at 61

Staff report

U.S. Rep. A. Donald McEachin, D-Va., who represented Surry County in Congress, died Nov. 28 at age 61.

McEachin’s chief of staff, Tara Rountree, confirmed McEachin’s passing in a Nov. 28 press release, stating, “We are all devastated at the passing of our boss and friend, Congressman Donald McEachin.”

“Valiantly, for years now, we have watched him fight and triumph over the secondary effects of his colorectal cancer from 2013,” the press release states. “Tonight, he lost that battle, and the people of Virginia’s Fourth Congressional District lost a hero who always, always fought for them and put them first.”

The 4th Congressional District spans south from Richmond to the North Carolina border. McEachin was first elected as the district’s representative in 2016.

He was reelected on Nov. 8 to what would have been his fourth consecutive two-year term, defeating Republican challenger Leon Benjamin with just under 65% of the districtwide vote to Benjamin’s just under 35%.

“Until a new representative is elected, our office will remain open and continue to serve our constitu-

• See MCEACHIN, p. 7

Planners OK Zuni solar farm

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Isle of Wight County’s Planning Commission is recommending approval of a proposed 71-megawatt solar farm and substation in the Zuni area.

The proposed Carver Solar facility would span 20 parcels totaling 637 acres.

The included land straddles both sides of Route 460, with the solar farm’s proposed borders stretching from just over one mile east of the village of Zuni to just under a mile west of the town of Windsor.

Texas-based Open Road Renewables subsidiary Carver Solar I LLC has applied for a

conditional use permit on behalf of the 13 families who own the land.

The parcels are located off Yellow Hammer Road, Windsor Boulevard (Route 460), Winston Drive, Cut Thru Road, Ecelia Road, Barrett Town Road, Mill Creek Drive and Antioch Road.

According to Ryan Gilchrist, Open Road Renewables’ vice president of development, only 503 of the 637 acres would be fenced off with panels or related infrastructure. The rest of the land would be used for access easements or landscape buffering.

The 20 parcels, in their current agricultural state, generate just over \$6,500 in real es-

tate taxes per year. Open Road Renewables has forecast that the addition of solar panels and related infrastructure would bring just under \$76,000 in real estate taxes per year, plus an average of \$76,236 in machinery and tools tax revenue, for a cumulative \$6.1 million over the project’s estimated 40-year lifespan.

In 2021, Virginia’s General Assembly passed a state law allowing localities to assess an additional payment of up to \$1,400 per megawatt per year, which would increase 10% every five years beginning in 2026.

• See SOLAR, p. 6

School Board’s Dial revises campaign finance reports

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Former School Board member Renee Dial has revised her campaign finance disclosures after receiving letters from the Isle of Wight County Registrar’s Office alleging omissions.

Dial, who lost her District 2 seat on the School Board to challenger John “Mark” Wooster in the Nov. 8 election, had initially reported only \$100 in contributions and no expenses for Jan. 1 through Oct. 27, compared to Wooster’s just over \$2,260 in

donations and just over \$1,950 in expenses for the same period.

Chief Deputy Registrar Susan Saunders sent Dial a letter on Nov. 4 stating that a “concerned citizen” had taken issue with Dial’s reports. Registrar Lisa Betterton then sent Dial a follow-up letter on Nov. 21 stating her office had “been advised” that Dial’s campaign had “produced a number of campaign yard signs and other related campaign materials” despite reporting no expenses.

“Cash and/or in-kind contri-

• See FINANCE, p. 6



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TOWN NEWSLETTER

Town of Smithfield residents can get the scoop on fall happenings with the semiannual town newsletter inserted in today's edition, which was mailed to every home in the town limits. Non-subscribers who enjoy this complimentary copy of the Times are encouraged to subscribe by calling us at 757-357-3288 or emailing info@smithfieldtimes.com.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“The world has changed – gun violence, active shooters, mass shootings – it's relevant now.”

— Isle of Wight County Sheriff James Clarke Jr.
Addressing county supervisors on the need for resource officers in every school

Smithfield commits \$1 million for Luter Sports Complex expansion

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Smithfield's Town Council has authorized up to \$1 million to expand and upgrade the Joseph W.

Luter Jr. Sports Complex on West Main Street.

The vote followed a closed session to discuss “contract negotiations” on Oct. 5.

According to Mayor Carter

Williams, the work will entail adding three to four new baseball or softball fields and additional bathrooms and concession stands.

The \$4 million athletic park

opened in 2018. It already has a concession stand and bathrooms located central to an existing baseball field and three softball fields, but the building is 750 feet away from the park's football

field. The new concession stands and bathrooms would be located closer to the football field and would serve the new baseball

• See COMPLEX, p. 8



Homecoming

Reggie Jetton and Marisabel Condit were crowned homecoming king and queen, respectively, during halftime at Smithfield High School's Oct. 21 game against York High School. York ultimately defeated Smithfield 36-14. In front are Hardy Elementary first-grader Luke Wilson and Chloe Williams. See more Homecoming photos from all the local high schools on page 11.

Elementary resource officers to return

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

School resource officers will be returning to Isle of Wight County's elementary schools for the first time in a decade.

The Isle of Wight County Sheriff's Office has received a 45-month, \$267,743 grant from the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, which will

pay nine months of salaries and fringe benefits for four new sheriff's deputies for five years. Isle of Wight supervisors plan to combine the grant funds with roughly \$220,000 in unspent money Isle of Wight County Schools returned to the county at the end of the 2021-22 school year to fund the officers' uniforms, vehicles

• See OFFICERS, p. 7

'The model's broken:' County leaders say state school funding isn't enough

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Isle of Wight and Surry county officials say Virginia funds an insufficient number of public school teachers – leaving locali-

ties with little choice but to make up the difference with local tax dollars.

According to data Deputy Superintendent Susan Goetz

• See FUNDING, p. 6

Supervisors add \$1 million to Isle of Wight schools budget

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Two weeks after meeting with the county's School Board, Isle of Wight supervisors voted unanimously on Oct. 5 to add

just over \$1 million in local funding to Isle of Wight County Schools' 2022-23 budget.

The funding includes the remaining \$812,507 the supervi-

• See BUDGET, p. 8

Death certificate: Prime suspect in Ragged Island murders hanged himself

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Samuel “Sammy” Rieder, who'd been retired Isle of Wight County Sheriff Charlie Phelps' prime suspect in a September 1987 double murder, was himself discovered dead roughly three

years later.

The Smithfield Times has obtained a copy of Rieder's death certificate, which states the 31-year-old was found in his Chesapeake mobile home the morning of Aug. 8, 1990, hanging from a

• See DEATH, p. 8



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SECOND FRONT

Rushmere woodworker's shop draws the attention of a national magazine.

— See page 9



QUOTE OF THE WEEK

“Public education is the great equalizer. This is especially true for economically disadvantaged students. It is troubling to me that some individuals have decided that we can only teach students one perspective.”

— Isle of Wight Schools Superintendent Jim Thornton
In statement about his decision to retire early

Thornton to retire early

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Dr. Jim Thornton will leave his role as superintendent of Isle

of Wight County Schools on June 30 – one year earlier than specified in his contract.

In 2021, the School Board had renewed Thornton's contract

through the end of the 2022-23 school year. Following a closed session at the start of its March 10 meeting, the board voted to amend Thornton's contract to

specify the earlier date.

The board had initially voted to approve a “proposed amendment” to Thornton's contract “as discussed in closed session.”

School Board Attorney Pakapon “Pak” Phinyowattanachip then advised that to comply with Vir-

• See SUPERINTENDENT, p. 7



DECA team wins big

Pictured from left, back row, are Javier Taylor, Isabel Johnson, Riley Gallahorn, Fiona Stewart, Grace Chatham, Emma Chatham, Jake Fales, Mya Lukkes and Grace Ericksen. In front, from left, are Kaitlyn Worrell, Allison Fales, Ashlynn Halsey, Jocelyn Rogers and Taylor Price. Smithfield High School's DECA club brought home a bunch of awards from a state conference and now turns its attention to an international competition. See story on Page 4. (Submitted photo)

Hospital decision set for March 21

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

A change in leadership at the Virginia Department of Health isn't expected to impact the agency's timeline for reaching a decision on Riverside Health Systems' requested certificate of public need for its proposed 50-bed Isle of Wight County hospital.

Interim State Health Commissioner Dr. Colin Greene is set to make his decision on the matter March 21 – the same date VDH had assigned when Greene's predecessor, Dr. Norman Oliver, held the position.

Oliver left his post – reportedly at Gov. Glenn Youngkin's urging – on Jan. 14, one day before Youngkin took office. Since then, Greene, formerly the director of the Lord Fairfax Health District, has been leading the VDH in an acting capacity.

Now Greene, not Oliver, will have the final say as to whether Riverside receives the required state

• See HOSPITAL, p. 8

No vote on mixed-use zoning yet

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Smithfield's Planning Commission still hasn't made its recommendation on whether to allow mixed-use developments in town.

On March 8, they again tabled a proposed change to the town's zoning ordinance that would replace the currently unused “planned corporate office and research” zoning designation with planned mixed-use development, or PMUD.

The commissioners have been debating the proposed change since December. The new zoning option would allow single-family and multi-family homes, bed-and-breakfast lodging, retail stores and other uses to coexist on a single parcel.

The idea originated when a consultant assisting the town with redoing its comprehensive plan suggested gradually transforming the South Church Street

corridor into a denser, more walkable area.

It became controversial after a group of residents – and a member of the Planning Commission – acknowledged the change would also allow former Smithfield Foods Chairman Joseph W. Luter III to file a rezoning application for his proposed “Grange at 10Main” mixed-use development at the western border of the town's historic district.

Luter acquired the 50-plus acres for his proposed development by purchasing and razing the former Little's Supermarket and 1730s-era Pierceville homestead at the corner of Route 10 and Main Street in 2020. While he has yet to apply for rezoning or permits, his preliminary plans call for a 13,300-square-foot permanent farmers market, a hotel, three- and four-story apartment complexes with a total of 225 units,

• See ZONING, p. 8

IW planners OK short-term rentals, solar restrictions

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Isle of Wight's Planning Commission, on Feb. 22, gave its assent to a series of proposed zoning ordinance changes that would permit short-term rentals in the county and impose restrictions on solar farms.

Per the most recent draft, the changes would allow short-term rentals like AirBnB as a by-

right use in areas of the county zoned rural residential (RR) or rural agricultural conservation (RAC). As a by-right use, a developer who successfully applied for either zoning, or purchased land already zoned RR or RAC, would be able to set up a short-term rental without needing to obtain special permission from the Planning Commission or Board of Supervisors.

According to Amy Ring,

the county's community development director, short-term rentals would still require something akin to a home occupancy permit. As a condition for obtaining such a permit, the county plans to require the property owner to designate a local contact to resolve complaints from renters during the duration of their stay. Failure to do so

• See PLANNERS, p. 6

Smithfield planners table comprehensive plan

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Smithfield's Planning Commission discussed a final draft of the town's updated compre-

hensive plan on March 3 but took no vote on the matter.

The town has been working with Summit Design and Engineering since last year to create the document, which

will guide land use decisions for years to come. Smithfield's existing plan hasn't seen major changes since 2009.

• See PLAN, p. 6



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