

# In less than ideal conditions, Augusta County transportation staff keeps buses running

*By Patrick Hite*

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FISHERSVILLE — Augusta County celebrated National School Bus Driver Appreciation Day Wednesday, a well-deserved recognition for those who take students back and forth to school and other events.

But there's another group that helps keep those buses on the road and, currently, they are working in less the ideal circumstances. The bus garage is housed in a former laundry facility built in the 1940s in the Wilson complex on Hornet Road.

"The current facility is far outdated and stretched thin," said Tim Simmons, the Pastures District representative on the school board. "Something definitely needs to be done."

To start with, there are no lifts for bus maintenance. Mechanics go old school, using creepers to roll under the buses. The floor is also in bad shape, with cracks from aging.

"What will happen is our guys will get underneath with a creeper, be trying to maneuver a heavy piece and a wheel will get stuck in a crack," said Terry LaFon, the director of transportation for Augusta County.

Tyler Sprouse, the shop foreman, said that scenario happens often and there have been times that they just got lucky that no one got hurt.

"It's just tough," said Sprouse, who has been with Augusta County 11 years. "We make the best out of what we have. But if they're under there putting a clutch in a bus, you have a transmission that could weigh 300 or 400 pounds and you're trying to balance it on a jack and one of the wheels falls down into a hole. It's just a tough situation to deal with."

Clearance is a big issue. A former laundry wasn't built to fit a school bus. Joe Brucia, the parts manager, said in order to get those transmissions out it means jacking the bus up as high as it will go, touching the pipes on the ceiling.

"I can be kind of scary," Brucia said. "That things hanging off of a bumper jack, three or four feet. That's a lot of weight. Just work with what you've got. We try to do our best."

Mike Lawson, who represents the South River District, and Simmons are the two newest members of the Augusta County School Board. They recently took a tour of the bus garage. Simmons said he heard there were issues with the working conditions when he was campaigning for the seat.

The two board members saw that first hand on their tour.

"Over the years, Mr. LaFon and the team have done an excellent job of utilizing the current facility to its fullest potential," Lawson said. "However, the combination of the building's original design, age and limited space for renovation lead us in the direction of planning for a new facility."

That won't happen in the very near future, but Augusta County School Superintendent Eric Bond is hopeful it's not in the too distant future either.

"Our team in the transportation department does a remarkable job," Bond said. "As we work to develop our next 10-Year Capital Plan, improvements to our bus garage will definitely be an area of focus."

The current 10-year Capital Plan ends in 2025 so it won't be long before the board develops the next decade-long plan. If a new, or at least improved, bus garage is included in that plan, those working at the Fishersville location will be happy.

There are 16 people who work in the garage, and LaFon calls himself blessed to have so many knowledgeable, hardworking people in the shop. With buses on road by 6 a.m. there has to be someone in the garage by then. There's a rotating schedule with coverage from 6 a.m. until 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. There's also someone on call weeknights and weekends when buses are transporting students involved in extracurricular activities.

"We've all taken our turn going out late at night and getting one back," Sprouse said.

There are 212 buses in the fleet, LaFon said. Every day there are about 150 on the road picking up approximately 6,500 students. There are 67 cars in the fleet also.

Many of the mechanics arrive at the garage already having trained as technicians, but there is on-the-job training needed because of specific skills needed to work on a school bus.

"A guy who used to work in a truck shop, we have to train him on how the electric systems work," Sprouse said. "Long gone are days of being able to fix

stuff on the side of the road. Now we've got to bring a laptop scanner and all of these other things."

There are four bus bays. Usually there is one big job going every day, an engine or transmission. The other bays are doing basic maintenance. Buses are required to be checked over completely every 45 days, almost like the annual state inspection on cars in Virginia.

There's also a portion of the garage for cars, usually former law enforcement vehicles which arrive with a lot of miles on them. One in the shop on a recent day had more than 300,000 miles. Most of the cars have at least 200,000 miles. A transmission might cost more than the car is worth, but the county needs the car.

"They are worn out when we get them," Brucia said.

LaFon said the staff is working on repairs — some minor, others major — almost nonstop. One might think it's because of the age of the buses in the fleet. The state recommends buses get replaced every 15 years, but the Great Recession in 2008 put Augusta County behind in purchasing new buses. Currently the oldest bus on the road for Augusta County is from 1995.

The school division is slowly catching up with a budget that allows for 12 new buses a year. LaFon said by 2032 no buses should be older than 15 years. Yet, it's not those older buses causing problems. Sprouse said most of the issues are from newer diesel buses, many of which are back at the dealer for updated parts a month or two after first going on the road.

"That 1995 model bus, it comes in for routine maintenance," Sprouse said. "But other than brakes and oil changes and regular service, it's good to go."

Three years ago Augusta County went back to gasoline engines, which are easier and less expensive to maintain. Compared to the 22 quarts of oil and a \$25 filter in a diesel bus, the gas buses hold nine quarts with an \$8 filter.

Sprouse said technology has improved so much that the gasoline engines burn cleaner now than ever before. That leads to a longer life, with Sprouse estimating a bus can get between 200,000 and 300,000 miles out of a newer gasoline bus compared to the older ones that got maybe 100,000 miles.

This year the supply chain has caused a problem in getting gasoline buses so LaFon reluctantly returned to diesel engines. He's hoping to go back to gasoline buses next year. The school division also has four electric buses.

All of those need to stay on the road and the staff in Fishersville works tirelessly to do just that. They just wish it was in a more modern garage.

"There is a need for a new bus garage facility for the Augusta County School system," Lawson said.

When that will happen is not clear yet.

## **Parental rights: Challengers hope to bring change to Augusta County School Board**

*By Patrick Hite*

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MOUNT SIDNEY — Standing on the front porch of a house in a small, two-road subdivision just off Route 11, Sharon Griffin waits for someone to answer the door on which she has just knocked. The subdivision is tucked away between Route 11 and Interstate 81, barely visible to drivers on either highway.

Griffin was there though, no neighborhood too small for her to canvas as she attempted to reach as many voters as possible by Election Day.

It's her second attempt of the afternoon, the first door knock getting no response. When that happens she leaves a campaign flyer on the door and heads off to the next house.

But the second time is the charm for Griffin on this overcast, mid-September afternoon. An older man answers the door in a white t-shirt and a pair of black Adidas basketball shorts, and Griffin identifies herself as a candidate for school board.

The two talk for about 10 minutes. The man's wife joins them on the porch maybe halfway through the conversation. Turns out they have a grandson who goes to Augusta County Public Schools and a daughter who works in the school system, so they are concerned about what happens in education.

Despite that connection to schools, it's pretty clear the man who answered the door doesn't have a clue as to who Griffin is. It's probably a safe bet that he doesn't know who she is running against either, the current North River District representative, Nick Collins. Or, for that matter, anyone who was on the board.

He says the only thing he really knows about the board is the occasional sign he sees “here or there as you’re driving.”

## **From unchallenged to tensely contested, school board elections hinge on hard to define 'issues'**

That is most likely the case for many voters in Augusta County. Until recently it felt like the school board election was almost an afterthought. According to the Virginia Department of Elections, since 2003 there have been 39 school board elections over the seven districts in Augusta County through last year. Only six have been challenged — one of those was a race between two write-in candidates. Three districts have not had a contested race in that time.

This year, however, things are different. Three of the four open seats are contested. None of the incumbents in those challenged districts — Collins in the North River, Tim Swortzel in the Wayne and John Ward in the Riverheads — have ever had an opponent. Collins has been elected six times without a challenger.

“I really do believe I have some things to contribute,” Griffin tells the man and woman standing on their front porch. “I’m not saying anything bad about Mr. Collins, he’s a nice man, but he’s been in 24 years and he’s running for his seventh term. Some people just hear that and say, ‘Oh, time for a change.’”

Change being the key word as the challengers this year are hoping to bring lots of it.

This will be a critical election for the direction of the Augusta County School Board. Joining Griffin in challenging incumbents this year are Mykell Alleman, who is running against Swortzel in the Wayne, and Page Hearn, running against Ward in the Riverheads.

One of the big changes the challengers hope to initiate is giving parents more power in the direction of their children's education, something they believe isn't happening. They aren't alone in Virginia or the United States in framing the difference between themselves and their incumbent opponents as one of "parental rights."

Alleman, Griffin and Hearn have all campaigned, in part, on the issue of parental rights. Already on the board is Pastures District representative Tim Simmons, while South River representative Mike Lawson is running unopposed in the South River District. Both campaigned successfully on the parental rights issue.

A four-person majority of Simmons, Lawson, and two of the three challengers could shake things up on the board.

## School boards as battle grounds

In March 2022, on an episode of Steve Bannon's "War Room" podcast, co-founder of the conservative Moms for Liberty Tiffany Justice said "We're going to take over the school boards, but that's not enough. Once we replace the school boards, what we need to do is we need to have search firms, that are conservative search firms, that help us to find new educational leaders, because parents are going to get in there and they're going to want to fire everyone."

The results of school board elections across the country that November were mixed when it came to those sharing similar beliefs with Justice.

Politico reported that in Oswego, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, four school board candidates backed by the conservative 1776 Project all lost. In Charleston County, South Carolina, however, Moms for Liberty backed five of the eight winning candidates.

The Brookings Institute reported that 372 candidates backed by Moms for Liberty in 88 counties have won election since 2022.

In Virginia, Gov. Glenn Youngkin won two years ago with a campaign strongly focused on parental rights in education. The issue is based on the belief of some on the far right that parents have been removed from the decisions schools are making for their children.

Many of the hot-button issues in education — transgender polices, Critical Race Theory, school vouchers, banned and challenged books — are often framed as violations of parental rights.

Youngkin's administration released model policies for the treatment of transgender students in June. In a press release, the Virginia Department of Education mentions the issue, saying the policies restores parental rights in decision making about their child's identity. The policies require school personnel to use only a student's name that appears in official records or a nickname commonly associated with that name unless the school has parental permission in writing.

Critical Race Theory is an academic and legal framework that "recognizes that racism is more than the result of individual bias and prejudice. It is embedded in laws, policies and institutions that uphold and reproduce racial

inequalities," according to the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund (LDF) website.

The LDF says the term has been unjustifiably used to include all diversity and inclusion efforts, race-conscious policies, and education about racism, but in his first executive order, Youngkin banned what he termed "inherently divisive concepts, like Critical Race Theory" that he said "presumes that some students are consciously or unconsciously racist, sexist or oppressive, and that other students are victims."

Melissa Moschella, an associate professor of philosophy at The Catholic University of America, wrote that the teaching of CRT in K-12 shows that public schools aren't ideologically neutral, using that argument to advocate for a voucher system.

"Public schools' monopoly on public educational funding violates parental rights," Moschella wrote.

Right there on Griffin's red, white and blue flyer, it reads, "Voice for Children's Protection and Parent's Rights."

When asked how she defines parental rights, Griffin said parents have the primary responsibility for their children and too often across the country schools have usurped those rights.

"My job is not to represent the school system to the public, and I feel like when they sit in board meetings, the current school board is representing the school system to the public," Griffin said at recent candidate forum. "My job is to represent the constituents to the school system, represent their values and their concerns. Somehow we got that turned upside down in the country and in places in Virginia."

In Youngkin's model policies — which are supported by Griffin, Alleman, Hearn and Lawson — the governor says that "parents have the right to instill and nurture values and beliefs for their own children and make decisions concerning their children's education and upbringing in accordance with their customs, faith, and family culture."

Critics of the parental rights movement don't disagree that parents have this right. In fact, maybe they have this duty, but at some point they have to trust that they've taught their children well and see if they can live in the real world within that value system.

"We do not want to raise snowflakes who are not able to take the realities of the real world," Texas state Rep. James Talaricoit said in a hearing about a book banning bill in his state. "We want to prepare our kids, especially our teens in high school, for what they're going to face when they're outside our school laws."

Nick Collins, who is challenging Griffin, doesn't deny that parents have the right to be involved in their children's education, only that he doesn't think it is the issue that the challengers are making it out to be. According to the 24-year veteran of the board, no one has ever given him an example of a parent being denied access to information concerning their child's education. All he hears are anecdotal tales.

"It's kind of like we're waving a flag," he said. "I'd really like to hear some specific examples, because I think our doors are open at the schools, in the school board office, in the instructional department."

He said any concern by parents will be heard.

"Some of these things that have been discussed, I take exception to," Collins said. "Because I feel like there is an avenue for every parent to express their concern."

When asked in the forum about parental rights, Hearn said the term is a self-explanatory phrase.

"Parental rights is just that you have the right to make the decisions as to what is best for your child," she said. "That goes for their education. That goes for their extracurricular. That goes for their religion. That goes for everything. That is your right as a parent, and your right only. We should not be co-parenting with the government in any aspect. And that includes the school board."

Does the parental rights debate conflate "rights with "responsibility?" Does it ask too much from the schools and not enough from the parents in raising children?

"Parents have a right to raise and train their children," Hearn's opponent, John Ward, told The News Leader this summer. "In a democratic society we have that freedom. Parents are responsible for the proper care and training of lives entrusted to them."

Unlike the other challengers, Alleman has said she believes in parental rights, but she also believes in parental responsibility.

"If your child is the one who is disruptive in class and that teacher calls you, you should be walking side-by-side with that teacher," Alleman said. "You and the teacher are the best allies together. This is not parents versus teachers. It should never have turned into that. It's always about unity."



## What's wrong with the incumbents?

In a very conservative county, it's not that the current board members are considered liberal by any stretch of the imagination. Collins, Ward and Swortzel all were part of a board that unanimously voted against former Gov. Ralph Northam's model policies aimed at protecting transgender students in 2021.

And all three recently voted to make bathrooms at the county's two new middle schools gender-specific following public outcry when it was discovered that the board had reached a consensus to make them gender neutral during the design phase.

Even at the recent candidate forum, Collins, when addressing a question about transgender students playing sports, stated, "Boys are boys and girls are girls."

While it's not easy to pinpoint all the reasons some don't like the incumbents, it seems that some of their more vocal detractors simply don't like that they are positive about the school system.

During the September school board meeting, Swoope resident Nick Astarb went to the podium during the public comment period.

"When the school board members go around the room this evening, as you do, you take turns, I'm not really interested, we're not interested in who you had cookies with, who you substituted for, what football game you went to or that you bought a goat," Astarb said. "What we're interested in is what you're going to do about an administration that's running roughshod over this school board."

At the school board forum Oct. 16, Collins started his closing remarks countering what some of the other candidates had just said by saying, "OK, I'm going to get feisty. We are not upside down and we are not backwards. Augusta County has one of the best school systems in this Valley."

That drew some boos from the audience and one loud, "Wrong," from someone watching.

Collins then went on to highlight some positives, including a student with disabilities who recently gave the pledge of allegiance at a school board meeting. That drew even louder negative response and got a sheriff's deputy involved in calming down a man and woman shouting at Collins.

Collins then shouted back at the couple, telling the unidentified woman, "How about shutting up, lady." Simmons has asked Collins to step down as chair following that statement, but it did seem like he and other longtime board

members — Swortzel and Ward did not participate in the forum — were under attack from the start of the night.

“The past several years you have watched as the school board has started to implement policy that is contrary to the beliefs and the values of the parents,” Alleman said during the forum. “Never before in our history have so many parents come out and risen up against the people they voted into office because they don't represent their values.”

After the forum, a teacher in Augusta County who didn't wish to be identified, messaged The News Leader and asked if we thought the job of Superintendent Eric Bond was in trouble if the challengers win. The teacher said that, if so, he might start looking for a job in another district.

In January, 2022 a newly elected conservative Spotsylvania School Board fired its superintendent. The Virginia Code does provide a division's school board the ability to fine, suspend or remove from office a superintendent, so the question is a valid one, especially based on how some candidates feel about the current relationship between the board and Bond.

“Personally the way I feel things go right now with the school board is that Dr. Bond makes the decisions and tells the school board what to do and the school board tells the parents what's going to happen,” Hearn said. “That is literally the exact opposite of the way things should go.”

That drew applause from some in the audience.

## **It's the home stretch, but who's coming out to vote?**

As the campaign enters its final week, there's still no real indication of how the vote will go in the three contested races. The forum on Oct. 16 drew around 100 people in person and within a week the livestream had been watched 4,700 times.

So people are paying attention. How many will actually vote, though?

According to the Virginia Department of Elections, the North River District has 7,529 active registered voters. In 2019, when Collins last ran and was unopposed, he received 3,280 votes. That's only 43% of those registered. Ward got 42% of the registered voters in the Riverheads District and Swortzel received 40% in the Wayne District that same year. Both were also unopposed.

If the message challengers like Griffin, Alleman and Hearn are communicating resonates with the public enough to drive voters to the polls, upsetting the incumbents is certainly within reason.

That's Griffin's hope as she continued to knock on doors that September afternoon. As she and the reporter from The News Leader parted ways that day, Griffin, a red drawstring bag across her back, headed up a gravel driveway toward another house with another door on which to knock.

Augusta County will soon find out if was enough houses and doors to get her a win Nov. 7.

## **'It's very, very special': Educators recognized for dedication to students with Dawbarn Awards**

*By Patrick Hite*

*April 6, 2023*

Walking down the hall, Barry Nelson took one look into the office where he was headed. He saw a woman holding balloons, a man with a camera on his shoulder, the principal of his school and the superintendent of his school division. There were another dozen other people gathered also.

What Nelson did next is, honestly, what many would have probably done in his situation — the Wilson Memorial High School custodian started slowly backing away from the door. Luckily assistant principal Craig Flesher gently nudged him back in the right direction.

As he listened to Miriam Burrows of the Community Foundation tell him he was a recipient of a Dawbarn Award and \$10,000, Nelson, dressed in the same thing he wears almost every day — an Augusta County issued t-shirt and cutoff blue jeans, just stood there, too shocked to say much more than "Thank you all".

Just to his right, on the door to the counseling office, was a poster that read, "If you are overwhelmed come tell us." It appeared from the look on his face, Nelson was in the correct location for his current state of mind.

The Community Foundation's Chris Lassiter calls this his favorite week of the year. He and Burrows, along with a team from Deep Structure Productions, visited 10 schools in Staunton, Waynesboro and Augusta County to award Dawbarn Education Awards. Along with the award comes \$10,000. This year I was fortunate that Burrows and Lassiter invited me to accompany them on their prize patrol.

Here's the background: The Dawbarn Education Awards were created in 1992 when the late H. Dunlop "Buz" Dawbarn established a \$100,000 fund at the Community Foundation. He later added substantially to the awards program through his estate. The Foundation presented the first awards on Oct. 10, 1994. Since that time, \$2 million and 287 awards have been distributed to Dawbarn Education Award recipients.

"I just love the joy of being able to share good news with people," Lassiter said. "I like being present when they experience the good news. We do lots of great things at the Community Foundation but I don't know if we do any specific thing that's of this magnitude, that's this big of a surprise to people and the result is that much joy."

It has a special place in Lassiter's heart also because his dad, Ron Lassiter, was part of the first group of recipients of the award when it was created in 1994.

"It's kind of like our family legacy," he said.

Ten people received the award this year:

- **Mathew Snyder**, Kate Collins Middle School, 6th-grade math teacher
- **Dawn Pryor**, Waynesboro High School, assistant manager cafeteria
- **Diane Lundstrom**, Berekeley Glenn Elementary School, 5th-grade teacher
- **Brad DeWitt**, Stuarts Draft High School, business teacher and coach
- **Barry Nelson**, Wilson Memorial High School, custodian
- **Chesne Baska**, Wilson Middle School, media specialist/librarian
- **Angela Small**, Valley Career and Technical Center, instructor veterinary technician program
- **Fonda Morris**, Clymore Elementary School, principal
- **Charlie Nesmith**, Shelburne Middle School, band director
- **Lori Peltonen**, Staunton High School, media specialist/librarian

"The single most important thing we've got to do as a society is educate people," Buz Dawbarn once said. "Democracy isn't going to work in the long run if we don't produce educated citizens."

He was right, although in today's society it sometimes seems those who help produce those citizens are vilified more than praised.

"I think we're at a point right now, as a country, where education is being attacked by politicians," said Charlie Nesmith, one of this year's recipients of the Dawbarn Award and one of two band directors at Staunton's Shelburne Middle School. "It's very nice to be part of a community that very openly

values the arts and values education and values teachers. I feel very thankful for that."

Those in education — from classroom teachers to instructional aides to bus drivers to administrators to custodians to kitchen staff, and I'm forgetting a lot of people — are both overworked and underpaid. When they turn on cable news or listen to talk radio or hear speakers at a school board meetings, educators are told that they aren't doing their jobs or that they're indoctrinating kids or teaching divisive concepts.

One of this year's recipients said a fellow teacher once said that, if they had the power to indoctrinate students, they would indoctrinate them to bring pencils and paper to class. Teachers barely have time to do what is required of them, much less all the extra things some believe them to be doing.

Teachers' work days do not end at 3 when students go home. Many stay until 6 or 7 p.m., then come home, eat dinner, and work another couple of hours. They work weekends, too. Many attend their students' sporting events or band concerts or stage plays. They volunteer at the concession stands or they take ticket money for the softball game. It is not a job that you forget about when you leave the building for the day.

Jennifer Morris is an instructional supervisor with Staunton City Schools. She's also a past recipient of a Dawbarn Award. She said what the Community Foundation does is incredibly important for the education profession.

"It causes one to feel valued," she said. "It makes a person feel like what they're doing matters"

Augusta County Schools Superintendent Eric Bond said those who work in education do it for the students and not much fanfare comes along with the job.

"To be able to recognize them in a special way with a Dawbarn Award and the meaning behind the Dawbarn Award, " Bond said, "It's just very, very special."

Bond, along with his counterparts in Waynesboro, Jeffrey Cassell; and Staunton, Garrett Smith; found time in their busy schedules to attend the presentations. School board members came along. Fellow teachers and students were present. That's because this is a big deal.

I watched Chesne Baska break down in tears when she received the award this week. Brad DeWitt stood in stunned silence as person after person entered his classroom for the presentation. Angela Small let out a "Whoop" after the shock of what was happening wore off.

They all expressed their emotions differently, but every one of them of them talked about how much the recognition meant to them. None of them do it for that recognition, but to receive it is special. And well-deserved.

"It's very rewarding, and I think that just to see how hard everybody, not just in this building, but in every building, how hard they work and the blood sweat and tears they put into this job," said Clymore Principal Fonda Morris. "To have some people recognized, I think, is just good for our profession.