

Sweet Briar president reflects on tenure,

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Madison Heights tract positioned for economic development,

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AMHERST NEW ERA-PROGRESS

Amherst County's only hometown newspaper | THURSDAY, JANUARY 26, 2023 | NewEraProgress.com | Amherst, Va.

County budget proposal includes new position to beautify U.S. 29 corridor

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Amherst County's fiscal year 2023-24 budget that takes effect July 1 is expected to have a 5% pay raise for county employees when it is formally presented to the board of supervisors in upcoming months, according to discussion during the board's Jan. 17 budget work session.

The board discussed potential supplemental spending line items that would add to what already is

funded in the current county budget, if approved, during the work session. The one-time spending projects total just more than \$422,000 and recurring costs are at \$723,640, for a combined tally of \$1.3 million, but no final decisions have been made as supervisors are in the preliminary stage of reviewing figures.

One potential addition that generated discussion during the work session: a new staff position in the maintenance department who

would enforce code on the U.S. 29 corridor and perform tasks to beautify the roadway.

Nate Young, acting co-director of community development, said the idea of the new position, which would have a recurring cost of \$43,200 and one-time expenses of \$35,000, is add more manpower for beautification efforts along U.S. 29. From picking up trash to trimming trees and cutting grass, Young said the goal is to make the corridor look better.

Interim County Administrator Jeremy Bryant said that position, if approved, would fall under the public works department and could serve other functions if needed in addition to the U.S. 29 beautification goal.

"I'm convinced now that it is a good idea," Supervisor Claudia Tucker said. "We've got to start somewhere. What we've been doing is not working. I absolutely support this."

Bryant said the county has relied

on the Virginia Department of Transportation to clean the corridor and noted staffing challenges with using inmates from the Blue Ridge Regional Jail Authority to help in those endeavors.

Please see **BUDGET**, Page A5

VIEW: For video of the US 29 corridor beautification efforts point your smartphone at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**



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

LANCERS LIGHT UP THE COURT

The Lancer basketball team unveiled its light show during player introductions on Jan. 19 as Martez Andrews, right, slaps five with a teammate. For more coverage, see **Sports**.

Man charged in shooting death at national forest

A Buckingham County man was charged with voluntary manslaughter after an Amherst County man was found dead in a remote area of the George Washington National Forest, the Amherst County Sheriff's Office said on Jan. 20.

Amherst County Public Safety dispatchers received a 911 call on Jan. 19 for a man suffering from a gunshot wound in the Alhambra Road area of Amherst County, according to a news release from the sheriff's office.

Sheriff's deputies were immediately dispatched and after an extensive search located Kevin D. Hartless, 49, of Amherst County. Hartless was dead when found by law enforcement, the release said.

Joseph F. Cunningham, 43, was detained at the scene and later charged. Cunningham is held at the Amherst County Adult Detention Center in Madison Heights without bond, according to the release.



Cunningham

The investigation is ongoing, the sheriff's office said. Cunningham is scheduled for a Jan. 26 hearing in Amherst General District Court.

Authorities ask anyone with information about this investigation to contact Capt. Clay Thompson at (434) 946-9373, ext. 6; call Crime Stoppers at 1-888-798-5900; visit the Central Virginia Crime Stoppers website at www.cvcrimestoppers.org; enter a tip number online at p3tips.com; or use the P3 app on a mobile device.

— Justin Faulconer

Amherst schools dinner serves up connections, community camaraderie

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Before the first piece of fried chicken was served at Amherst County Public Schools' Community Connections Dinner of Jan. 19, laughter and conversations filled the building like the busy hallway of a school before the start of class.

Roughly 200 people, including schoolchildren and families, schools staff and county residents, showed up for a banquet-style evening of fellowship that ACPS Superintendent William Wells said is much needed after nearly three years of enduring a pandemic and all the challenges it brought.

"It's important for us to re-engage and reconnect with the

community," Wells said as people trickled into the center. "This is one way to do that. During COVID it seems to be something we have lost as a community."

Wells and other educators greeted families and children as they walked in and encouraged them to sign a large poster to mark the occasion.

"Showing up" is perhaps the most-used phrase in the Amherst schools division this school year.

Please see **DINNER**, Page A3

VIEW: NewsVu QR code. For video of the Community Connections Dinner point your smartphone at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**



PHOTO BY JUSTIN FAULCONER, THE NEW ERA-PROGRESS

Amherst County Public Schools Superintendent William Wells holds the microphone as elementary students lead the crowd in the Pledge of Allegiance during the Jan. 19 dinner.

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New high school football coach announced B2

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Former senior center lawsuit heads to court B5

Sports

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AMHERST SHOOTING DEATH INVESTIGATION

Official: Handling of case an 'injustice'

Supervisor, ex-sheriff pens post about 2019 homicide, wounding; prosecutor responds

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An Amherst County supervisor who formerly served as the county's sheriff recently took to social media to criticize what he called a "serious injustice" in how a 2019 homicide and wounding

case was handled. In a Jan. 30 post on his personal Facebook page, Supervisor Jimmy Ayers shared his thoughts at length regarding the June 2019 slaying of Doris Puleio and wounding of her daughter. In a subsequent interview, Ayers said he made his comments as a citizen, not as a county



Ayers

wounding and two counts of using a firearm in commission of a felony in connection with the

supervisor. Justin Jay Sales, who at the time of the homicide lived in Amherst, was arrested in July 2019 and accused of first-degree murder, aggravated malicious

shooting death of Puleio, 92, and wounding of Trudy Ann Goetz, 74. Puleio was found dead in her home on Bobwhite Road in Amherst with gunshot wounds to her torso and left arm, while Goetz suffered two piercing gunshot wounds to the torso and one that grazed her chest, prosecutors have said.

At a Dec. 8, 2021, hearing in Amherst Circuit Court, Commonwealth's Attorney Lyle Carver

moved to drop the charges, citing multiple evidentiary issues, among them a chain-of-custody matter, a cyberattack that affected

Please see **AYERS**, Page A3

WATCH: To see video of an interview with Jimmy Ayers on this matter, point your smartphone at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**



PAIGE DINGLER, NEW ERA-PROGRESS

Liberty middle schooler Colton Croft, top, wrestles David Wall of Amherst Wrestling at Amherst County High School on Jan. 28.

Wrestling Club builds talent

Amherst group trains K-5 youth to compete in middle, high school

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In late January, under the shadows of several district, con-

ference and regional wrestling championship banners at Amherst County High School, the future of the sport in Amherst got the opportunity to put its

skills on display. Craig Maddox, the K-5 coach for the Amherst Wrestling Club,

Please see **WRESTLING**, Page A6

WATCH: For video of the Amherst Wrestling Club in action point your smartphone at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**

Scleroderma fundraiser walk planned March 4 at Sweet Briar College

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After a two-year hiatus because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the "Stepping Out to Cure Scleroderma" is returning to Sweet Briar College's Fitness Athletic Center on March 4.

The Amherst Woman's Club, Sweet Briar and the Greater Washington, D.C. chapter of the Scleroderma Foundation sponsored the first walk March 2, 2019 at the college's indoor track, the site of this year's event.

Suzanne Raine, a club member and event organizer, said the March 2019 walk marked the Washington, D.C. chapter's first walk in Virginia. A second walk was held a year later a week prior to the shutdown from COVID-19.

Scleroderma is an often life-threatening inflammatory and vascular disease in which the body's immune system attacks its own tissue. The mission of the walk is to provide support for patients with the disease, to

Please see **FUNDRAISER**, Page A2

Happy (future) trails: Amherst bike club eyes expansion of land, locations for use

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Nearly three years after receiving Amherst Town Council's approval to establish a trail network

within the L. Barnes Brockman, Sr. Business and Industrial Park on U.S. 60 East, the Amherst Mountain Biking Club has its sights set on expansion efforts. The club held a Jan. 27 meet-

ing at the Amherst Fire Department's fellowship hall that drew just more than 40 people for an evening of food, socializing and conversation. Alex Motley, the club's president,

said the goal of the gathering was to invite the community for input on the potential new trails in the town of Amherst and Amherst County.

Please see **TRAILS**, Page A2

WATCH: For video of the Amherst Mountain Biking Club's efforts point your smartphone at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**

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County budget plans vehicle tax rebate

Also includes \$2.5M boost to school funding

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Amherst County's projected fiscal year 2023-24 budget has no tax increases, gives \$2.5 million more to the county's public school system and is poised to

give county employees a 7% pay increase.

Interim County Administrator Jeremy Bryant presented the figures to the Amherst County Board of Supervisors on Feb. 21. Revenue is projected at \$56.1 million and expenses are forecasted at \$55.9 million, which would result in a surplus of \$165,539, according to Bryant's presentation.

"We've had minimal growth in

real estate tax revenues," Bryant said. "We've been down some in real estate taxes."

Real estate tax brings in 29% of county revenue, figures show. Bryant attributes the slight drop to two factors: the county reassesses real estate every six years, with the most recent reassessment coming in 2020, so unlike some localities the county has missed the bubble for inflated real estate values. Plus,

permanently disabled veterans and their spouses now receive a 100% homestead exemption and pay no real estate tax on their primary home.

Bryant said development-related permits are leveling off some compared to recent years, which affects revenue; the county is receiving increased federal and state assistance for Department of Social Services operations; and most

other revenue sources have seen incremental growth.

The budget plan, which begins July 1, also proposes a 20%

Please see **BUDGET**, Page A5

WATCH: For video of the county budget breakdown, point your smartphone at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**



PHOTO BY LEE LUTHER JR., FOR THE NEW ERA-PROGRESS

Former Lancer baseball coach and three-time state champion Jim Procopio, right, shares a laugh and embrace with former Lancer player DeWayne Kitts during a Feb. 23 celebration event at Amherst County High School.

LANCER LEGEND

Baseball program pays homage to Coach Jim Procopio

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For more than an hour Feb. 23 during "Jim Procopio Recogni-

tion Night," memories filled the old Amherst County High School gym with the same thrill of a home run off the bat or a pivotal play in the field.

The Procopio era that defined Lancer baseball was back in full force for a night of fellowship and family.

The legendary former Amherst baseball coach who led the

Lancers to three state championships and numerous district titles in baseball and football was the focus of stories, heartfelt speeches and laughter that shined a spotlight on his memorable career.

Procopio coached the baseball team from 1968 to 1985 and over the years was an extremely positive influence on the

student-athletes, some of whom went on to play and coach in the

Please see **PROCOPIO**, Page A3

WATCH: For video of the Jim Procopio Recognition Night event point your smartphone at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**

School budget proposes 7% raise, more pay for bus drivers

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A 7% pay raise for Amherst County Public Schools employees is proposed in the division's 2023-24 fiscal year budget that Superintendent William Wells unveiled Feb. 23.

Priorities in the \$63.9 million proposal, a 1% increase from the current budget, include maintaining a competitive pay scale for staff, keeping class sizes at a level to ensure students' success and continuing to build programs that provide opportunities for children, Wells said in his first budget presentation to the Amherst County School Board since taking the division's chief role in July.

"We have to be competitive with our surrounding divisions," Wells said of the planned pay raise.

In order to ensure all the division's 700-plus employees receive it, since the state gives funding to a portion of those workers, more local dollars are needed, which Wells said is

Please see **SCHOOLS**, Page A5

WATCH: For video of the Amherst schools' budget presentation, point your smartphone at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**

Amherst, Nelson supervisors discuss joint ag center project

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In a joint meeting of Amherst and Nelson counties' board of

supervisors described as a historic occasion, officials discussed potentially collaborating on a new shared agricultural complex to serve both jurisdictions and

agreed a working group of stakeholders is needed to further explore the idea.

During the Feb. 21 joint meeting in the Amherst County board's

meeting room, neither board was ready to commit to purchasing a property in northern Amherst

Please see **AG CENTER**, Page A5

WATCH: For video of the Amherst and Nelson board's joint discussion on the potential shared agricultural center point your smartphone at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**

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