

Southside Sentinel

SSentinel.com

Serving Middlesex County and adjacent areas of the Middle Peninsula and Northern Neck since 1896

VOL. 127, No. 46

URBANNA, VIRGINIA 23175 • MARCH 2, 2023

TWO SECTIONS • \$1

Greg Chambers selected as Pride of Middlesex honoree

Greg Chambers has been selected as the Middlesex County Rotary Club's 2023 Pride of Middlesex award honoree. Chambers was to be the honoree in 2020, 2021 and 2022, when the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated repeated cancellations of this event. Chambers will be honored for his service to the community at the Pride of Middlesex Award and Hors d'Oeuvres Banquet at the Deltaville Maritime Museum on Saturday, April 1. Proceeds from the event will go to Habitat for Humanity of Middlesex County

and the in-county charitable projects of the Middlesex Rotary Charitable Foundation Inc.

Chambers' many community service accomplishments include leadership of Habitat for Humanity and the establishment of the Middlesex Water Authority and the Middlesex Water Project. He was actively involved with Habitat in Schenectady, N.Y., before his retirement, and he continued volunteering with Habitat after he



Chambers

and his wife Gayle moved to Middlesex. He served as president of Habitat for Humanity of Middlesex County for the past eight years and currently serves as its vice president. He has also served in multiple leadership positions at both the Cryer Center and Hands Across Middlesex over the last 10 years.

Chambers has also been actively involved in the Middlesex Water Authority since it was started in 2014 and currently serves as board vice

chairman. He said, "I expect that bringing infrastructure like water, sewer and broadband to Middlesex will bring jobs and economic prosperity to the people of Middlesex. I hope I'm right. It's easier to help someone find a job than it is to build them a house!"

This award and hors d'oeuvres banquet for Greg Chambers is set for Saturday, April 1, beginning with a social hour at 5 p.m. and food service and program beginning at 6:15 p.m.

(See Chambers, Page A6)



Middlesex County's own Deborah Pratt was honored at the Virginia General Assembly last week as representatives from the Virginia seafood industry went with her to the Capitol in Richmond where she was honored with a unanimous vote for House Resolution 320 that honors her years of dedication as a national and international oyster shucker. Pratt, leaning on a post at the Capitol, is flanked by, from left, Virginia Watermen's Association President J.C. Hudgins, Virginia Seafood Council's Kim Huskey, Shellfish Growers of Virginia Executive Director Mike Oesterling, Virginia Marine Products Board Executive Director Mike Huff and Oysters For Life Owner Tolar Nolley. (Contributed)

Virginia House recognizes Pratt as world-class shucker

by Larry Chowning

The Virginia House of Delegates unanimously approved House Resolution 320 last week honoring Middlesex County's own Deborah Pratt for a lifetime of shucking oysters and representing the Virginia seafood industry as a world-class oyster shucker.

Virginia State Del. Keith Hodges, R-Urbanna, presented the resolution for approval on the house floor as he introduced Pratt, who was standing in the balcony. He introduced her as a "Super Star of Oyster Shuckers" and an icon in the oyster shucking world.

Pratt grew up in Middlesex County on the

(See Shucker, Page A6)

Middlesex school official seek \$1.16 million hike in FY 23-24 local funds

No members of public attend hearing on proposed budget

by Larry Chowning

The Middlesex County School Board (MCSB) had no one from the public to attend the fiscal year 2023-2024 (FY 23-24) budget public hearing at St. Clare Walker Middle School on Monday and only two school board members, Claudia Soucek and Garland Harrow, attended.

The proposed FY 23-24 school operation budget calls for a 10.50% increase in local funding of schools, a \$1,168,751 increase over last year. The FY 22-23 budget used \$11,100,000 in local funds to run the schools. The anticipated amount coming from the county for school operations out of the FY 23-24 proposed budget is \$12,272,334. The upcoming fiscal year runs from July 1, 2023 through June 30, 2024.

Expenses

Compensation is always the highest expense in the school operational budget. The proposed Middlesex County Public School System's (MCPS) FY 23-24 budget reflects a 5.7% plus step increase for all school employees. A step equates to a 1.3% increase, which equates to a 7% total salary increase. This is the amount recommended by the state's legislature and is tied to additional salary compensation coming from the state.

The budget also calls for three new positions. The school board wants to hire a dean of students at Middlesex Elementary School (MES), a special education teacher at Middlesex High School (MHS) and a "full-time" athletic trainer to work with athletes at MHS and St. Clare Walker Middle School (SCW).

School superintendent Dr. Tracy Seitz brought some good news/bad news on health insurance. The good news was that the increase in health insurance for school employees is going to be 9.9% rather than the 14.2% bad news increase that had been anticipated.

There is a proposed 18.9% increase in transportation costs in the proposed budget. Dr. Seitz said that the reason for the increase was that a mechanic was promoted to "fleet manager," which resulted in an increase in salary. The 18.9% increase also covers anticipated rises in fuel costs, she said.

Revenues

The budget calls for more state aid to the school system as the Average Daily

Membership (ADM) is anticipated to be higher this fiscal year. State aid to localities for kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) is partially figured by the number of students enrolled in the school system.

Dr. Seitz said that the FY 23-24 budget was figured on a 1,100 school population but it actually came in at 1,169, which brought more state funding into the schools in the FY 22-23 coffers. This year, Dr. Seitz said the FY 23-24 proposed budget is figured on a 1,150 ADM.

Middlesex County's composite index (CI), which is the formula used to determine the county's ability to pay for its school system, is at .6324, one of the higher in the state. The .6324 means the locality has to pay 63 cents on every dollar that the state spends on MCPS Standards of Quality (SOQ) requirements. SOQ establish minimum staffing standards that all Virginia schools must provide and drives 85% of state funding for local school divisions.

The CI formula is partially derived from real estate values within the locality. Middlesex is a peninsula with valuable waterfront properties along its shores on Chesapeake Bay and Rappahannock and Piankatank rivers. The high real estate values reflect that the county is one of the richest localities in the state. Yet, more than 50% of the MCPS population is eligible for free and reduced lunches and there is a high poverty rate throughout the county. County politicians have generationally argued that the CI formula is inaccurate and unfair, with little to no success in getting the Virginia General Assembly to change it.

The FY 23-24 budget, however, does reflect a 11.91%, or a \$590,882, increase in state aid, from \$4,961,992 in FY 22-23 to a proposed \$5,552,874 in the FY 23-24 budget. Sales tax funds used for schools are anticipated to drop 5.70% next year. Federal aid to schools is anticipated to rise by 14.29%.

The FY 23-24 budget also lists three capital improvement projects:

- MES roof restoration, \$800,000.
- MES LED lighting upgrades, \$250,000.
- MHS building restoration, \$45 million.

The MCSB has to vote on the proposed FY 23-24 budget before it goes to the Middlesex County Board of Supervisors (MCBS) for their consideration. Supervisors are scheduled to present a public hearing on the overall county budget (which includes the school budget) on April 6 and vote on the county budget on April 13.

Town council coughs up hairball of an issue: Handling feral cats

by Tom Chillemi

The feral cats are back.

More than six years ago, a debate raged on how to handle Urbanna's feral cats. Some said they posed no harm and some even fed them daily. Others say there are too many of them and they cause problems.

The issue died down but surfaced again on Feb. 23 when Andy Anderson, co-owner of Urbanna Boatyard and Marina ("Urby"), addressed the Urbanna Town Council. "I have a real cat problem

at the marina," said Anderson. "I'm very passionate about animals, but the hard facts are I've lost at least two clients due to damage on their boats" and a third boat owner is considering leaving. "They (the cats) are damaging boats and entering boats. I've had well in excess of \$5,000 in damages to boats."

Anderson added that one of his tenants is feeding upwards of 15 cats, and added that when cats are fed and named they are no longer feral, but are pets.

Anderson asked to get the message

out to, "Please stop feeding cats on our property."

"I know people are passionate about the cats and I know it's a very touchy subject historically, but it is impacting our business and I'm right in the epicenter of it."

Anderson said he would like to have a forum to discuss solutions.

Bird sanctuary

Councilor Alana Courtney commented that Urbanna is a bird sanctuary and she has noticed a decrease in the number of birds in

the last 15 years. "They (cats) are the number one killer of birds," said Courtney. "I love the cats too and I love what everybody does for the cats, that's wonderful, but it is really a problem and now that I hear this from you, this is more than just a normal problem."

Anderson added, "There is no question that cats have an impact on bird populations."

Cat project

Several years ago The Urbanna Cat Project had volunteers that would

trap, spay or neuter and release the cats back from where they came.

Billy Mayo, of Rappahannock Avenue, said that program caught seven cats on his property.

The volunteers have dwindled and there are very few people to catch and process feral cats, said Councilor Merri Hanson, who added that she has at least 10 feral cats on her property. "And it's not spring yet, so they will be having more. They are not vaccinated, and many of them are

(See Feral Cats, Page A6)

Inside 	Business directory ... B2	Menu (school).....A2		Relay for Life coming to Bethpage PAGE A2		Paige Melton to open 2023 Groovin' PAGE A3		MHS in state basketball quarter-final PAGE B1
	Church.....B6	Obituaries.....B5						
	Classifieds.....B2	Sports.....B1						
	Letters.....A4	Weather.....A5						

Southside Sentinel

SSentinel.com

Serving Middlesex County and adjacent areas of the Middle Peninsula and Northern Neck since 1896

VOL. 128, No. 25

URBANNA, VIRGINIA 23175 • SEPTEMBER 28, 2023

TWO SECTIONS • \$1



Driven by powerful gusts, fire rages at Rappahannock Oyster Company in Topping on Saturday morning, destroying a dock. See related video at <https://bit.ly/ROCFire>. (Photos courtesy of Hartfield Volunteer Fire Department and Mark Walker)

Fire claims dock; restaurant open

by Tom Chillemi

A wind-driven fire consumed part of the oyster processing section of Rappahannock Oyster Company in Topping on Saturday. However, Merroir, the company's seafood restaurant, remains open.

The emergency call went out at 7:20 a.m. as the remnants of Tropical Storm Ophelia dumped rain and blew a strong north wind across the Rappahannock River and up Locklies Creek.

Fire was visible when the first firefighter arrived on scene on Locklies Creek Road. "The wind was really driving the fire" said Kevin McNamee, chief of the Hartfield Volunteer Fire Department (HVFD). "The rain was so heavy you could not see across



the river."

Fortunately, the wind pushed flames away from the restaurant and other buildings at the complex that raises and markets oysters,

Chief McNamee explained. The damaged dock is across a parking area from the restaurant.

(See Fire, Page A8)

A DAM MESS

Easy solution continues to elude officials responding to Healy's Millpond Dam crisis

by Larry Chowning

There was a sigh of relief from boards of supervisors all over the state of Virginia, when in 1932 the Virginia General Assembly passed the Byrd Road Act that took away responsibility of maintaining secondary roads from counties and gave it to the state.

Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT), assigned with maintenance of roads in Middlesex County, looked after all those secondary roads in the county until 2006 when the state agency decided it would no longer maintain a portion of Stormont Road (Route 629) over the dam of Healy's Millpond.

VDOT said that the dam was privately owned, it was the responsibility of the owner of the dam to repair the earthen dam to secondary road standards and then, and only then, a new road bed would be installed by VDOT.

The late Gene Ruark who owned the dam in 2006 refused to fix the dam, stating VDOT had maintained the road and the dam since 1932 and he did not feel it was his responsibility. The Middlesex County Board of Supervisors (MCBS) was told by a judge

(See Dam Mess, Page A8)



Since 2006 a portion of Stormont Road (Route 629) at Healy's Millpond has been closed to through traffic because during a VDOT six-month inspection it was determined that the spillway-box culvert on the dam failed. From then and until now the dam issue has been a political fiasco as Middlesex County officials, the owners of the dam and VDOT officials all want the other to fix it and have not taken on the responsibility. This has left waterfront landowners living on the pond with a failing dam and shrinking water levels. Landowners want to fix the spillway at their own cost but as long as the county and VDOT consider putting a road back across it, the cost is unaffordable. Landowners want the road condemned for "perpetuity," which would bring the dam down to a class rating that homeowners could afford to fix. (Photo by Larry Chowning)

Hearing on allowing manufactured homes in waterfront dist. set

by Larry Chowning

The Middlesex County Planning Commission denied an application on Sept. 13 that would have allowed manufactured homes in Waterfront Commercial districts as a special exception.

The application was initiated by Leonard H. Powell from Pinetop District. The final decision, however, will be considered by the Middlesex County Board of Supervisors at a public hearing on Tuesday, Oct. 3, at 7 p.m. in the Middlesex County Historic Courthouse in Saluda.

The planning commission denied the application on a 4-2 vote. Planning Commission members Bev Butler, R.D. Johnson, Teresa Anderson and Marilyn South voted to reject the application, while Bill Powell and Denita Hammond voted to approve.

Manufactured housing is not permitted by right or with special exception approval, in Village Community, Residential, Cluster Development, Waterfront Commercial, General Business and Light Industrial zoning districts. Manufactured homes are allowed in Low Density Rural and Resource Husbandry zoning, which is 83% of the land in the county.



Leonard Powell



Countless hours of work are reflected in Mike Oien's 1968 Pontiac Firebird, above, painted "Hot Rod Red." A snapshot, left, shows the forgotten Firebird before Oien's restoration. It is just one of many vintage cars, planes and boats on display Saturday at Hummel Field in Topping during the annual Wings, Wheels & Keels festival. See related story and schedule, pages A4 and 5. (Photo by Tom Chillemi and contributed)

Once forgotten Firebird set to shine at WW&K on Sept. 30 at Hummel

by Tom Chillemi

Anyone who appreciates vintage cars and trucks dreams of discovering a "barn find," a classic car that sat forgotten in a garage for decades.

A restored 1968 Pontiac Firebird barn find is the car featured by Memory Lane Car Club for Wings, Wheels, & Keels, set for this Saturday, Sept. 30, at Hummel Field airport in Topping. (See related items, pages A4 and 5.)

Michael W. Oien of Lancaster found his forgotten Firebird Coupe deluxe model that had been sitting in a garage for about 20 years. It was in rough shape. But, after a seven-year restoration it was transformed into an icon of the muscle car era.

Oien, a Minnesota native, was living in Minneapolis and the car was in southeast South Dakota. On weekends he would drive four hours each way to work on the car.

The car has the original 350 cubic inch engine, air conditioning, tilt steering and power windows. The sheet metal of the car is all original except the trunk pan and the roof skin.

Crash

Oien, who says he was not a mechanic, said the biggest issue he had was when he

(See Firebird, Page A8)

Inside 	Arts & Leisure.....A2	Letters.....A6	Candidates speak at SCW forum PAGE A6	Tropical storm sinks 'portapotty' PAGE A7	Brand new CC course christened PAGE B1
	Business directory ... B2	Obituaries.....B7			
	Church.....B6	Sports.....B1			
	Classifieds.....B2	Weather.....A7			

Southside Sentinel

SSentinel.com

Serving Middlesex County and adjacent areas of the Middle Peninsula and Northern Neck since 1896

VOL. 128, No. 35

URBANA, VIRGINIA 23175 • DECEMBER 7, 2023

TWO SECTIONS • \$1

New supervisor sworn in

'Bill' Harris will serve Hartfield District

by Larry Chowning

William A. (Bill) Harris was appointed by the Middlesex County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday to the Hartfield District supervisor seat recently vacated by John Koontz, who moved out of the district.

Harris will be the Hartfield District representative until a special election can be held on November 5, 2024.

Harris has lived in the county for more than 50 years and is a Middlesex High School graduate. "Middlesex County has been my home for over

five decades and I believe I am in a position to be supportive of the Board of Supervisors, the county's administrative staff, as well as all Middlesex County citizens through this transition stage," he wrote in his application for the position.

"We had a large number of applicants," said board chairman and Pinetop District Supervisor Lud Kimbrough. "They all (applicants) had great knowledge of Middlesex County, male and female, but we found him (Harris) uniquely qualified for the job with his experience and knowledge of

the county."

Jamaica District Supervisor Wayne Jessie thanked all those who applied for the position. "It was a tough decision but one candidate was a bit above the rest," he said.

Saluda District supervisor Don Harris — who is no relation to William Harris — said that it was nice to see so many applicants but he agreed with Jessie that one applicant stood out above the rest.

Harmony Village Supervisor Reggie Williams said that he liked his first impression of Harris and he hoped that the other applicants will find other ways to volunteer to help Middlesex County.



William A. (Bill) Harris, left, is sworn in Tuesday by the clerk of the Middlesex County Circuit Court Rachel Hartenbach as the Hartfield District board of supervisors member. County official Shanae Hammond holds a Bible. (Photo by Larry Chowning)



Urbanna celebrates Christmas



Middlesex High School (MHS) Choir members (above) sing Christmas carols during the Festival of Trees Saturday night on the Urbanna Town Green. They include, in foreground, from left, Bridey Dubey, Kylie Willis, Kylina Morning, Madison Johnson and Kenny Vincent. Judged as the top Christmas tree on display was the entry by Bethpage Camp-Resort and the Bay Aging entry was the runner-up. Later the 28th Urbanna Hometown Parade rolled through town. Among its entries was the MHS Charger Marching Band (left), with Chole Pratt in the foreground, which was judged best band. More parade photos and story, pages B6 and 7. (Photo by Don Richeson)

Town names administrator

Ted Costin takes reins in part-time Urbanna position

by Tom Chillemi

On Friday, Dec. 1, the Urbanna Town Council hired Ted Costin as town administrator and zoning administrator on a part-time basis.

Costin brings 32 years experience in government work — 17 in local government and 15 at the state level with the Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM).

Costin began work on Monday getting oriented with the help of Mayor Bill Goldsmith. "I had a great first day showing him projects in the works," said Goldsmith. "He is going to be a great addition and is committed to a seamless transition."

Costin was hired on a part-time basis to be town administrator and zoning administrator and will be paid \$63.50 per hour, which equals \$105,666 annually. His contract dictates that he work no more than 32 hours per week. He will not receive benefits such as insurance and retirement contributions. He is to be given a \$700 a month car allowance (\$8,400 annually).



Costin

The town previously had a town administrator and a zoning administrator. The salary for these two employees totaled \$108,000.

The contract dictates that if Costin is dismissed by a vote of council after June 1, 2024, then he is to be paid \$26,212.80, which equals to three months salary.

Experience

Most recently Costin was county administrator for Nottoway County for two years until August 2023.

In June 2022 Costin was appointed by Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin to serve as a local government representative to the Secure and Resilient Commonwealth Panel.

Costin was Western Division director for the Virginia Department of Emergency Management

(See Town, Page A7)

Broad Creek has 'extreme shoaling,' dredging expected soon

by Larry Chowning

The Middlesex County Board of Supervisors (MCBS) voted unanimously last month to approve an agreement with Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission (MPPDC) to move forward with a "Broad Creek Emergency, targeted dredging design and implementation" project.

At the meeting, MPPDC Deputy Director

Curt Smith gave an update on the dredging projects for Whiting and Broad creeks and discussed the service agreement related to Broad Creek.

Smith stated that the work going on now for Whiting Creek is "design only" with anticipated design completion in 2024. He also said that Broad Creek will be a full dredging project due to the extreme shoaling at the entrance to the creek and channel.

"It has become a public safety hazard and needs immediate attention," said Smith. He presented a virtual view of the issue showing where the shoals are, pinpointing where the smaller amount of sediment could be removed from those areas to prevent further shoaling.

Supervisors have \$1 million in the county's dredge fund to use towards immediate dredging work to free up some of the smaller shoaling sites before permitting and federal funding is

approved for major dredge work on the creek.

"At this time, the larger project will be placed on hold until the channel is cleaned up with 'hot spot' dredging that will free up boat traffic now," said Smith.

He also said that MPPDC and others will be attempting to find long term solutions to Broad, Whiting and Jackson creeks. Even though

(See Dredging, Page A8)

Urbanna Town Council dives into pool funding

by Tom Chillemi

Funding for the Urbanna community swimming pool appears to be on track, it was reported at the Nov. 16 meeting of the Urbanna Town Council.

Councilor Sandy Sturgill reported that donations, pledges, grants, town money total \$184,500.

Sturgill said Urbanna Beautification Inc. has donated \$99,000.

(See Pool, Page A8)



Christmas Friends seeking donations, more volunteers

The 2023 activities of Christmas Friends Inc. are now in full swing. More monetary donations and a few more gift wrappers and delivery volunteers are needed to reach next week's finish line.

Gifts for hundreds of bags must be wrapped and sorted by next Friday for delivery on Dec. 16.

There are openings for wrappers on most days through Tuesday, Dec. 12.

Four more delivery vehicles and drivers are needed. These are typically full size vans with seats that can be folded into the floor or rem ved.

(See Friends, Page A8)

Inside 	Arts & Leisure.....A3	Letters.....A4	<p>Urbanna cat condo unveiled PAGE A2</p>	<p>Cruise tickets available PAGE A3</p>	<p>MHS hoops season starts PAGE B1</p>
	Business directory ... B2	Obituaries.....B7			
	Church.....B6	Sports.....B1			
	Classifieds.....B2	Weather.....A5			