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Norfolk Southern plan leads to concern among local officials

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

A plan proposed by Norfolk Southern Corporation has some local officials concerned about the future safety of the 130-mile Birmingham to Sheffield line.

On January 5, 2021, Norfolk Southern filed a Notice of Application for Approval of Discontinuance or Modification of a Railroad Signal System with the Federal Railroad Administration.

The public is invited to submit written views, data or comments, either in favor of or opposed to the plan. Comments may be submitted through the following website: <http://www.regulations.gov>. The docket number *FRA-2021-0002*



COURTESY PHOTO

A Norfolk Southern train travels through Phil Campbell.

should be included with any submission. Comments must be received by the FRA on or before March 11,

See 'PLAN,' page 8

Gas prices invoke discussion about state gas pricing laws

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The recent week of snow and ice saw some dramatic variations in gas prices in Franklin County, and those higher per gallon costs raised the ire of some local residents.

But a deeper look into Alabama laws relating to the price of fuel shows there are also legal issues as to the lower per gallon costs.

The Alabama Motor Fuel Marketing Act was passed more than 35 years ago by the Alabama Legislature. The

intent of the law, as described by lawmakers, was to encourage fair and honest competition, and to safeguard the public against creation of monopolies or unfair methods of competition, in transactions involving the sale of, or offer to sell, or inducement to sell motor fuel. Code of Alabama Sec. 8-22-3.

The Alabama Motor Fuel Marketing Act was designed to protect smaller independent gas station owners from the practice known as predatory pricing. Predatory pricing occurs when

See 'PRICES,' page 9

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Randy Lynn Morgan Jr., 35, passed away on
Friday, February 12th. Akins Funeral Home
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Larry Dale Porter, 57, passed away on
Monday, February 15th. Interment at Franklin
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Opal Carr Ross, 97, passed away on Saturday,
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Mansell hopeful for third fire station in Russellville

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

Before he retires, Russellville Fire Department Chief Joe Mansell has a goal to see his department housed in a third fire station to better serve Russellville City Schools and the citizens living in and around the area.

Although it wasn't a permanent station, Mansell got a sneak preview of his goal last week as his department created a makeshift fire station at the RCS Bus Barn, thanks to an invitation from the school system.

"Two firemen and one engine were housed at the bus barn all last week. The school asked us if we'd be interested in doing this and anytime we can place a truck and cut down on our call time, that's what it's all about," Mansell said.

"Especially with so much ice and snow, it would take Station Two, which is over the school area, having to get around Summit and that area. This made our response time a whole lot quicker," he added.

Russellville's two fire stations are located on South Jackson Avenue (Station One) and Highway 43 North (Station Two).

Mansell would like to see a Station Three located at the intersection of Duncan Creek Road and Clay Avenue. The school system owns land at that location and previously expressed a willingness to allow it to be used for a fire station.

Mansell said a study was done several years ago to determine the ideal location for a third station where its service area would not overlap with existing areas for Stations One and Two.

"We don't want to overlap but we do want to cover the most residents as possible and Clay/Duncan Creek was the recommended location," Mansell said.

RFD officials have researched grant possibilities to help with the cost of building and staffing a third fire station. Another truck would also have to be purchased, Mansell said.

"It's always been a goal of mine before I retire one day to get that third station," Mansell said. "It's something we're working on."

The temporary station at the bus barn will remain in place until schools reopen and area roads are clear enough for safe travel by Station Two trucks.

"Once that risk of getting our firemen hurt is gone, then we'll pull everything back to our normal station. We certainly appreciate the school system allowing us to use their facilities during this severe weather system," Mansell said.



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Tennessee Valley Museum of Art to host Black History Month exhibit

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Tennessee Valley Museum of Art is hosting a special exhibit in honor of Black History Month.

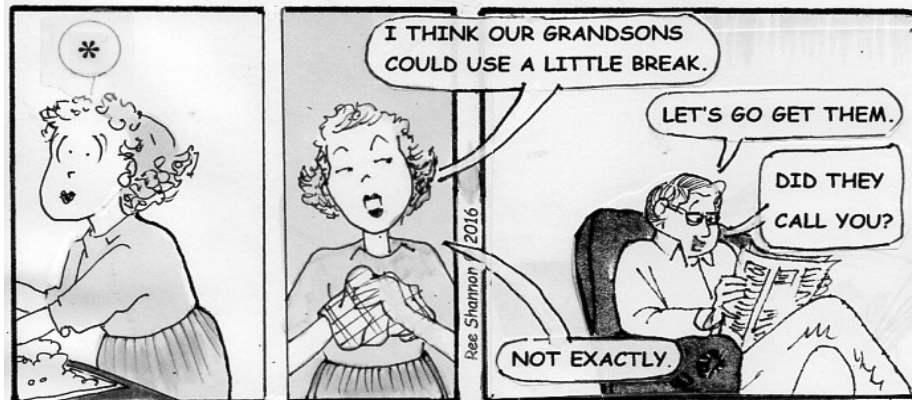
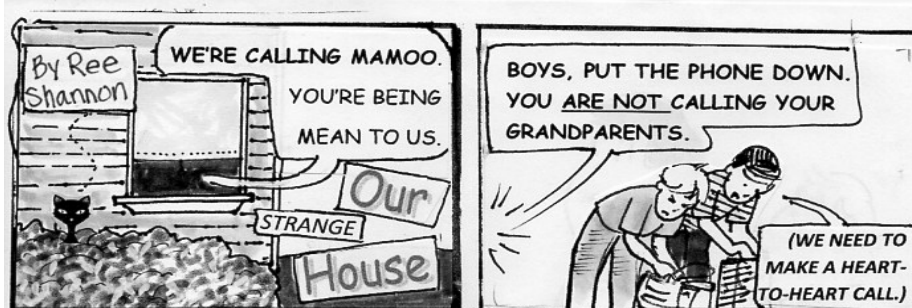
The museum, located at 511 N. Water Street in Tusculum, is featuring exhibitions by Southern Black Artists through April 2, 2021.

Featured artists include Michi Meko, Lynthia Edwards, Charlie Lucas, Kerrigan Casey, Jason McCall and Cory Patton.

Exhibition hours are Monday thru Friday, 9-5, and Saturday 10-3. Admission is \$5 for adults and \$3 for students. Admission is free for Tennessee Valley Art Association members, and health care and education workers.

"These exhibitions explore the African American experience in the South, through the eyes of six established and emerging Black artists. The artists present a diversity of experiences within Black identity," said Christi Britten, TVAA Executive Director. "These artists emphasize and empower Black presence through stunning visual narrative."

For updates on news and sports throughout the week, be sure and visit us online at www.franklinfreepress.net!



FRANKLIN FREE PRESS

113 WASHINGTON AVE. NW
RUSSELLVILLE, AL 35653
256-332-0255

The *Franklin Free Press* is published weekly by Pilati Investments, Inc. Our publication is mailed to our readers at no charge.

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Letters to the editor

The *Franklin Free Press* is published by hometown people, for hometown people. We urge contributions of all kinds, including guest columns, picture submissions, cartoons or letters to the editor. Send any letters to our office via U.S. Postal Service or e-mail, and we will gladly publish them. Letters must be signed and contain the hometown and phone number of the author. The *Franklin Free Press* reserves the right to edit letters for style, length and content.

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My take on this... prepping during a winter storm!

We were told to prepare for freezing rain and possibly no power. So, I winterized my home the best way I could.

I laced rolled towels at the bottom of each outside door to keep out the wintery cold. I laced wind-chimes on top of the towels where I could hear music every time a puff of wind blew under the door. As I often say, always look for a positive among the negatives!

I placed electric heaters in front of my kitchen and bathroom sinks. Of course, I knew to open the doors. I'm smarter than some of you give me credit for. Ha! I realized this was only a temporary fix if the power goes off. If the pipes freeze and bust I already had a plan b.

I had my grandson's essentials by the door waiting for him to endure the freezing cold weather as he heads out complaining about having to go and turn the water meter off.

I had two pairs of socks and empty sandwich



Gail Motes

bags to go over his feet to keep his shoes dry and I had made one of those old fashioned masks to cover his face.

I had saved a big Christmas bag I had intended to use next Christmas, but I was willing to sacrifice my beautiful bag to keep his face dry. Once I cut the holes for his eyes and nose, he was good to go!

I put insulated underwear, a t-shirt and a long-sleeve flannel shirt and two coats for extra warmth. I've always been told to wear layers to keep you warmer. I even found an old "skullcap" to cover his head in case his hood blew off.

The older folks will have to explain to the younger generation what that is because it has nothing to do with a picture of a skeleton in any shape or form.

Of course, gloves were a "must-have". His fingers would need to stay thawed out where he could hold the screwdriver to turn the water off. I was very satisfied with my accomplishments.

See 'PREPPING,' Page 5

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'PREPPING,' from page 5

At least he would stay warm if he had to go turn the water off.

We all know how happy a nineteen-year-old grandson would be so thankful of a grandmother that had put so much love and thought into keeping him warm. I can imagine how you are picturing the smile he would have on his face!

Some of you might even be thinking how crazy I was to waste so much time getting all this stuff together. You might have a nineteen-year-old young man living with you and already know how this will end.

Let's just say that for now, it happened and I've told him what he needed to do. He would look at me and see what I had ready for him to put on, laying by the door.

He would look at me and say "I'm not putting all that crap on!" So he would then put his sockless feet into the clogs with the holes and no back. Wearing his pajama pants and a long sleeve shirt would walk the ten steps to the meter, turn it off and walk the ten steps back.

He would enter the house and take off the clogs, well more like *kick* them off, ha-ha! He might grab one of the two pairs of socks laying by the door to put on his cold feet. After he put

them on, he would look at me and say "done!" Smile at me and back to his room he would go.

Thank goodness I had done all of that preparation or those socks would not have been there for him to put on. Once again this lady he calls granny saved the day!

Of course I didn't have any idea what would take place. I liked to think that everyone would stay warm and safe but with an ice storm, I knew that would be difficult.

I know our linemen, road crws, firemen and ambulance drivers were busy in that cold doing all that they could to keep everyone safe.

I'm not about to forget our nurses, doctors and the entire medical staff who are already stressed out and exhausted to the core and had so much more added to their workload during that time.

Before closing, I want to tell you once again that y'all mean so much to me. I have been told I bring a smile to your face or the sound of laughter or just to say something that makes a difference and that means more to you than you could ever imagine.

May God bless you!
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EVENTS OF INTEREST • FAMILY REUNIONS • PLAYS • CHURCH GATHERINGS • EDUCATIONAL • CLUB MEETINGS


 The Franklin County Chamber of Commerce and the Franklin County Development Authority are accepting nominations for the 2021 Partnership Banquet, tentatively scheduled for Thursday, March 25th. Nomination forms are available on the Chamber's website (www.franklincountychamber.org) or at the Chamber office (located at 103 Jackson Avenue North, Russellville). Deadline for nominations is February 5th. For more information or details, please contact the Franklin County Chamber at 256.332.1760 or director@franklincountychamber.org.


 You are invited to Revival at the Church of God, 77 Mars Hill Road, in Phil Campbell, starting March 8th. Singers featured each night, including the Mary Bean Family. The Sutton Family will be preaching the Revival. Everyone is welcome. Starts at 6 p.m., nightly. For more information, call 256-324-5288.


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 Everyone is welcome to worship services at Duncan Creek Baptist Church, 3925 Duncan Creek Road, Russellville. Service times are Sunday School at 10 a.m., Worship Service at 11 a.m. and Bible Study at 5 p.m. Pastor is Bro. Joe Thorn.

 New Life Ministries invites you to join them for Sunday School at 10 a.m. on Sunday mornings and for worship services on Sundays at 11 a.m. and 5 p.m. and Wednesday nights at 7 p.m. On the first Sunday of each month, there will be a fellowship lunch after morning services. You and your family are invited to come worship and fellowship with the Lord of Hosts and his children. New Life Ministries is located on Hwy. 24 west toward Red Bay, behind Tompkins Feed.

 TOPS 0155 Russellville is now meeting at the Russellville Hospital Education Room at 4:30 p.m. every Monday. Everyone is welcome to drop in for a free meeting visit. Call 256-446-5962 or 256-412-2855 for more info.

 The Newburg Masonic Lodge #388 meets the first Thursday of every month. The Russellville Masonic Lodge #371 meets the first and third Tuesday of every month. The Franklin County Shrine Club meets the second Tuesday of each month. The Order of the Eastern Star Chapter 256 meets every second and fourth Tuesday of each month at the Russellville Masonic Lodge. Spruce Pine Masonic Lodge #608 meets the second and fourth Thursday of each month. Phil Campbell Masonic Lodge #880 meets the first and third Thursday of each month. Burleson Lodge #143 meets the second and fourth Monday of each month. Belgreen Lodge #428 meets the first and third Monday of each month. All meetings start at 7 p.m.

 Russellville Al-Anon is meeting at Russellville First Baptist Church at 6 p.m., each Thursday. We are wearing masks and social distancing.

Don't forget to visit us online at www.franklinfreepress.net!

Russellville Library celebrates 107th birthday by offering free craft bags

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the Russellville Public Library to come up with creative ideas to keep its patrons involved with the library.

Librarian Ashley Cummins, and her staff of Perla Martinez and Peggy Harrison, have worked hard to implement virtual programs and take-home activities for both adults and children.

The Russellville Public Library celebrates its 107th birthday this month. The original library was formed on February 14, 1914. In keeping with the Valentine's Day theme, the library is offering free craft kits for kids and adults through a partnership with the Franklin County Cooperative Extension Office. These craft bags include several different activities and some sweet Valentine's Day treats.

"They are wonderful educational craft kits," Cummins said. "They are available for pickup through appointments or we can give them out on a first-come, first-serve basis. Either way, we'll be happy to give them away while they last."

The library also has origami craft kits available at no cost. The kits include a book, a heart-shaped origami pattern, a ruler and instructions to make a beautiful heart-shaped origami out of a recycled book.

The Russellville Public Library is open Monday thru Friday from 9-5 and Saturday 10-2. Cummins said they are still encouraging patrons to call 256-332-1535 and make an appointment to come in, but they are accommodating walk-ins as well.

"We can have up to seven appointments at one time, so we haven't had to turn anyone away thankfully," Cummins said.

Even with the pandemic closing in on one year, Cummins said the library's circulation has not decreased, and has even shown a slight increase.

"People are reading more now that they're home. Our computer use has slowed down a little because people seem to enjoy the option of curbside pickup," Cummins said.

Patrons can schedule an appointment to have documents printed, faxed or scanned. Printing is 25 cents per page. Cummins said her staff has been printing a lot of tax forms since the first of the year.

The library will continue to offer story times by Zoom, something that has grown in popularity due to a great response from local schools.

Other upcoming programs include the annual gardening series in conjunction with the Alabama Cooperative Extension Office, and the summer reading program will also be offered.

Entertainer Steve Trash has been using the library's WiFi to do some of his virtual programming. Cummins said she hopes to partner with Trash for a summer program, but whether that's virtual or in-person is yet to be determined.

The Russellville Public Library is located at 110 Lawrence St. East, in downtown Russellville.



COURTESY PHOTO

The craft bags given out by the Russellville Public Library included Valentine's Day treats along with activities.

Highway Department dealing with multiple issues after winter storm

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The snow and ice on Franklin County roadways may be gone, but the problems are just beginning for employees of the Franklin County Highway Department as a result of the recent severe weather outbreak.

Highway Department crews worked through the weekend clearing fallen trees from the roads. But now that the ice has melted, there's a new problem to address—potholes.

According to Franklin County Engineer David Palmer, freezing temperatures combined with heavy snow and ice presence combine to dramatically change the surface temperature on roadways. Ice, unlike rainfall, just sits there on top of the road, resulting in seepage into already existing cracks on the surface.

"When it starts to melt, water has time to creep down into those hairline cracks, as opposed to rain, which has a quick runoff," Palmer said. "Then we saw that water freeze again and that expands, breaking the asphalt and the chip seal. It's the cycle of freezing and thawing that makes it different."

Palmer said his crews worked much of last week dealing with downed trees and debris clean up, with a major assist from Franklin County volunteer fire

departments and law enforcement.

"We really appreciate their assistance. It takes everyone working together on these kinds of issues," Palmer said.

With more than five inches of snow that followed three days of freezing rain, that was a recipe for disaster, literally, for Franklin County. And the repeated freezing, thawing and re-freezing compounded the damage to roads.

"I expect the county will apply for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) disaster relief and I think it will be declared a disaster area," Palmer said. "That would help with the cost of overtime hours for clean up as well as equipment purchased or rented to help with debris removal.

"Unfortunately, FEMA funds generally won't fund pothole patching on roads related to freezing and thawing. As always, we'll try to get what we can and it will be a huge help to offset overtime costs, equipment and debris removal costs," he added.

Highway Department crews will complete work orders as they can around their added duties of tree removal from roadways and debris cleanup.

"After an event like this, the damage is widespread. That's a problem. There's only so many of us, so we ask people to be patient and we'll do work orders on these issues as they come in. We'll get to them as quick as we can," Palmer said.

For news updates throughout the week, don't forget to check us out on the web at www.franklinfreepress.net!

'PLAN,' from page 1

2021.
That rail line, which begins at the Sheffield Rail Yard, runs through Littleville, Russellville and Phil Campbell on its way to Birmingham.

Norfolk Southern is seeking to discontinue its traffic control system on the West End line. The plan involves "retiring the signal system and changing the method of operation to Norfolk Southern Operating Rule 171," according to the company's statement filed with the FRA.

Currently, the line includes lighted traffic control systems that warn train conductors of problems with the tracks, other trains approaching and/or the need to switch lines.

The company cites the reason for the request as "operations no longer require traffic control system," according to the petition.

Norfolk Southern Rule 171, which addresses Non-Signaled Main Track, requires conductors, prior to passing each station sign, to "announce by radio the Timetable station name and specify the track designation when operating in multiple track territory."

The West End Line includes control points at Brookside, Blossburg, Locust, Bryan, Standard, Parish, Gamble, Burton, Nauvoo, Ash, Lynn, Bankhead, Yankee, Delmar, Haleyville, Phil Campbell, Franklin, Hyde and Littleville, along with 38 automatic signals.

If approved, the plan calls for "all signaled sidings within the application limits to be made non-controlled, other than main track."

The proposed change would be "permanent," according to the company's petition.

When Phil Campbell Councilwoman Lynn Landers learned of Norfolk Southern's proposal, she had immediate concerns for the safety of businesses and residents in her town.

"Without these signals, there could be a potential for derailment and as close as they run through Phil Campbell to businesses and residents, especially if the train is carrying hazardous materials, there could be a disastrous result," Landers said.

"Those signals alert them of problems with the tracks, or if a switch did not change and those are important for the safe operation of the trains. If they go

across the Reedy Branch trestle, where there is a signal, and it doesn't alert them if the signal isn't working properly, that could be harmful to us as well as harmful to Norfolk Southern's employees," she added.

Landers said she plans to submit her opposition to the elimination of the traffic signals through the FRA website and she encourages Phil Campbell residents to do the same.

The *Franklin Free Press* spoke with a former Norfolk Southern employee who said the proposal was primarily a 'cost-saving measure' for the company and that safety issues could arise if the system is deactivated.

"It is a step back in maintaining, and/or improving infrastructure needs for the public," the source said. "If these main tracks and sidings were to have an emergency or derailment, Alabama cities, towns, communities, businesses and people would be devastatingly affected."

"It is in the best interest of the public, residents, railroad employees and the environment to have the safety assurances which are provided by a fully functioning signal system," the source added.

Norfolk Southern officials did not respond to emails from the *Franklin Free Press* asking for comment on the plan.

The company's statement filed with the Federal Railroad Administration states that "the existing safety of operations will be maintained" if the proposed change is approved.

Rep. Proncey Robertson (R-Mount Hope) said he has been contacted by constituents concerned about Norfolk Southern's proposal. Robertson said he planned to contact Congressman Robert Aderholt's office about the matter and he encouraged residents with concerns to do the same.

"The federal government deals with railroad issues much more so than the state level. Over the years, they've closed more and more crossings and tried to eliminate them completely because of safety concerns they have with them, so it's a little surprising to hear they want to do away with signals," Robertson said.

"The best hope is that we receive help from our federal delegation willing to regulate this correctly. I encourage people to reach out to Congressman Aderholt and I will be doing the same," he added.

Franklin County Commission vacates portion of highway 524

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Franklin County Commission conditionally approved the vacating of a portion of Highway 524 at the commission's business meeting held February 18th.

After rescheduling the meeting from Tuesday morning due to severe weather concerns, commissioners met at 12 p.m., Thursday, for a public hearing to receive citizen input on the proposed road closing.

Although there was no opposition to the vacating of the road at the public hearing, Franklin County Probate Judge Barry Moore asked commissioners to approve the measure conditionally to allow anyone wanting input on the vacating to have an opportunity to do so.

The move was approved, subject to reconsideration in the event there is any public opposition presented to the commission.

The 3,380-foot portion of 524 runs from the Franklin County Landfill to the previous location of the Cedar Creek Bridge. That bridge was removed more than 20 years ago and the portion of 524 has seen a lot of illegal activity and illegal dumping, according to Mickey Gentry, who petitioned the commission for the vacating.

In other agenda items, the commission:

—approved the hiring of Edgar Bahena as a temporary property appraiser in the Franklin County Revenue Commissioner's Office, effective January 25, 2021.

—approved the employment of Jesus Luna Bailon as a temporary custodian/housekeeper/groundskeeper at the Franklin County Courthouse effective

February 8, 2021.

—authorized Solid Waste Manager Gene Ward to submit a bid to the City of Russellville for transport and hauling of solid waste to the transfer station. The bid must be submitted by March 1, 2021.

—approved the employment of Heath Boyles as a corrections officer/dispatcher at the Franklin County Jail, effective February 9, 2021.

—approved the contract service of Barry Jones to perform basic maintenance at the Franklin County Jail on an as-needed basis.

—approved the hiring of Kelsey Brooke Harbin as a temporary accountant/payable clerk at the Franklin County Courthouse Annex effective February 22, 2021.

—set a date of February 25, 2021, at 6 p.m., as the time for a public hearing on the proposed expenditure of funds for fiber-optic broadband service to businesses in and around the Russellville Industrial Park. The hearing will be followed at 6:30 p.m., by a business meeting to consider approving the expenses.

—authorized Moore to work with Franklin County Emergency Management Agency Director Mary Glass and Franklin County Engineer David Palmer to execute any documents necessary relating to the State of Emergency resulting from the severe weather outbreak.

—re-appointed Angela Townsel to the Riverbend Center for Mental Health Board of Directors for a six-year term.

—tabled consideration of retirement conversion for Franklin County employees from Tier II to Tier I employees in the State of Alabama Retirement Systems, pending action by the Alabama Legislature regarding the matter. The matter will be revisited next month.

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'PRICES,' from page 1

goods or services are priced so low that other suppliers cannot compete and, as a result, are forced to leave the market.

The act prevents big retailers from pricing gasoline below its cost to purchase and transport it to the station.

While it may seem strange that a law would place a floor on the price of a gallon of gas, the public policy behind the act is to protect smaller station owners and independent owners from being forced out of business. When that happens, the legislature believed, the resulting monopolies by large oil companies would then create an environment where they could set fuel prices at an unreasonably high cost, thus hurting consumers.

On Wednesday, February 17th, a gallon of gas at Murphy USA (in front of Walmart) was \$2.169. That same price was posted at Southside Grocery on Highway 43 South.

Chevron stations in Russellville, including Chevron's anchor store, Legacy Chevron on Highway 43 North, had a \$2.359 per gallon cost for unleaded gasoline.

Three citizens contacted the *Franklin Free Press* to voice their concerns about whether Chevron was price gouging consumers with its higher costs.

The *FFP* reached out to Jim Sibley of Sibley Oil Company, which owns Chevron stations in Russellville, Littleville and the Shoals, to inquire about his higher costs.

On Thursday, Southside increased its regular unleaded cost to \$2.359 per gallon. The Murphy station in front of Walmart increased to the same price when it reopened Thursday.

Sibley explains a practice for many years in Russellville, where gas prices are dictated by the 'biggest fish in the pond,' Murphy USA. Sibley said he traditionally prices fuel two cents above Murphy. Mark "Yogi" Welborn, owner of Yogi's Citgo on Waterloo Road, said he generally stays one cent above Murphy.

That has changed in recent months, though, as Southside has set per gallon costs at numbers that have other station owners questioning whether prices comply with the Motor Fuel Marketing Act.

As Southside has gone lower and lower on its prices, Murphy has followed suit, according to Welborn and Sibley.

"You have to mark up each gallon 6.8 cents to be in compliance with the Motor Fuel Marketing Act," Welborn said. "Murphy has matched that bottom

price, but I can't sit there and lose 12 cents a gallon.

"We make about five cents a gallon. When people use a credit card, I actually lose money. We add around 2.5 cents per gallon transport costs in addition to the rack price we pay. Murphy has responded to Southside going way down (per gallon). But Murphy owns 3,000 stores and their own refinery. They do business all over the country," Welborn added.

The Motor Fuel Marketing Act has an exception for retailers who drop prices below cost if they are responding to a per gallon price already being charged by another station in the market. In other words, the first station could have issues with the act, but those who follow suit would not.

The *FFP* has learned that complaints against both Southside and Murphy have been filed through the Petroleum & Convenience Marketers of Alabama.

The Motor Fuel Marketing Act provides for a civil penalty of up to \$10,000 for those found guilty of violating it. The civil action may be commenced by either the district attorney or the Alabama Attorney General's office.

Franklin County District Attorney Joey Rushing said he has never received a request to pursue prosecution under the Motor Fuel Marketing Act. Rushing did receive complaints last week about a gas station in Red Bay allegedly raising premium gas prices to \$3.55 per gallon.

Rushing referred the complainant to the Attorney General's office website, where citizens can complete reports asking for price gouging investigation to be initiated.

"I've never received any evidence from anyone as far as someone selling below market price," Rushing said. "If we do receive it, it will be subject to prosecution like any other criminal offense."

Through the years, the Motor Fuel Marketing Act has been met with mixed reviews. A 2004 study by the Federal Trade Commission concluded the act was "likely to harm consumers by restricting competition."

The FTC staff described the act as "unnecessary" because federal antitrust laws already make below-cost pricing and price discrimination illegal.

A lawsuit based on the act was filed last year against Buc-ee's convenience stores, alleging illegal gas pricing in south Alabama.

In order to be successful, a lawsuit or prosecution under the Motor Fuel Marketing Act requires proof the defendant priced gas below its cost and that it did so to eliminate competition.

Census data delay a concern for Merrill

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The United States Census Bureau's announcement last week that it will delay delivery of 2020 redistricting data to all states until September 30, 2021, is not sitting well with some state officials, including Alabama Secretary of State John Merrill.

The Census Bureau previously extended the original March 31, 2021, deadline to April 30, 2021, due to "COVID-19 delays," according to a Census Bureau statement. Now that deadline has been pushed back an additional five months until the end of September.

Data from the Census Bureau includes county of population by race, ethnicity, voting age, housing occupancy status and group quarters population, all at the census block level. States then use this data to draw or redistrict their legislative boundaries.

In a February 19th letter to President Joe Biden, Merrill expressed his concern in the delay saying it would "jeopardize states' ability to effectively administer elections."

The Census Bureau statement says states have had access since 2018 to prototype geographic support products and data tabulations from the 2018

Census test and that this information allowed states to "begin to design their redistricting systems."

Merrill's letter expresses concern that Alabama is "in a position to possibly lose a seat in the United States House of Representatives," and that the delay would place "an extreme burden on citizens, candidates and election officials alike."

As Alabama's chief election officer, the Secretary of State is in charge of the election process across the state.

Merrill told Biden that further delay of Census data would prohibit the Alabama Legislature from completing redistricting prior to the 2022 election cycle. That could put the state in a position where it might violate laws related to the apportionment process, Merrill said.

"Seeing as fair redistricting cannot take place without the timely delivery of Census information, I respectfully urge you to avoid additional delays beyond April 30," Merrill said in his letter.

Census information is also instrumental in calculating how much counties receive in federal funding for a variety of programs.

Last year, the Franklin County Census Committee worked hard to encourage local participation in the Census, particularly among Hispanic families, to insure an accurate population of the county is reported.

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Boutwell commits to University of Montevallo to continue golf career

Brady Petree
 Franklin Free Press

RUSSELLVILLE - As the basketball playoffs are heating up and baseball and softball is slowly starting to begin, the Russellville golf team finally got the green light to begin practice on Monday. And once the season begins for the Golden Tigers, they'll have one more college commit on the roster after senior golfer Eric Boutwell recently announced his commitment to the University of Montevallo.

While Boutwell had a few different offers under his belt, the Golden Tiger eventually settled on Montevallo after much deliberation. The key factors for Boutwell's decision revolved around multiple things, but the real kicker was the golf course he would get to call home over the next four years. "I had a couple of different offers on the table but I really liked where Montevallo plays. They play at Timberline Golf Club every day and it's such a beautiful course with good facilities to practice at and work on my game and that was what led me there," Boutwell said.

Competing in the Alabama Boys Junior State Championship last July (in which he finished 19th out of over 120 participants) Boutwell has made a name for himself amongst golfing circles across the state.

Now that he has his college commitment in-hand, Boutwell knows exactly what he and his team are setting their sights on as they prepare to

See 'BOUTWELL,' page 14

Destination: Hanceville

After a thrilling finish in the final minute in their regional semifinal matchup win, Belgreen is staring down the programs first elite eight appearance since the 2013-2014 season.



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN MEDINA

Belgreen possesses a resource that most teams don't: a deep bench. That depth is part of the reason that Bulldogs advanced to the elite eight after a 63-61 victory over Holy Spirit.

Brady Petree
 Franklin Free Press

TUSCALOOSA - It might have only been 1.6 seconds, but it felt like an eternity for Belgreen head coach Marty Cooper and his squad. The ending to the Bulldogs 63-61 regional semifinal victory over Holy Spirit ultimately came down to a scrap over the ball as time expired after an inbound play under the basket for the Saints set up a potential game-tying basket. But the moments leading up to that point were nerve wracking to say the least for the Bulldogs who were seeking their first trip to the elite eight since the 2013-2014 season.

"It was the true definition of a nailbiter," Cooper said. "I thought we had the rebound and they called a jump ball. Then they set up a play and we called a timeout once we saw a little bit of what

they might be trying to do and boy that was a long 1.6 seconds."

The final half of the fourth quarter might have had Belgreen fans on the edge of their seats, the first three and a half quarters were no different.

After junior forward Collin Bonner got into foul trouble early on in the first half, Belgreen was forced to dip into their bench. On the surface, that might have spelled ultimate doom for any casual fans pulling for the Bulldogs to pull off a win in their sweet sixteen matchup, especially after the Saints jumped out to a commanding 18-9 lead after the first quarter.

But if you have followed this team closely throughout this season, you know that the Bulldogs got where they are thanks in part to the fact that if needed they can go 12 players deep when in a bind.

See 'HANCEVILLE,' page 12

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'HANCEVILLE,' from page 11

While others might have started to worry once Bonner got into foul trouble, his brother Will Bonner knew that the Bulldogs had the depth to remain competitive across however long they might be without his brother and counterpart.

"We trust our bench. If one of us gets into foul trouble we know we can depend on a couple of guys to get out there and get after it for a little bit," Will Bonner said. "We trusted our bench a lot in that game because Collin got into some of that foul trouble and we had to have some breathers. So those guys stepped up and kept us in the game and we sorted things out."

And boy did they sort things out.

After entering the second quarter down nine points, Will Bonner would put the Bulldogs on his back and shoulder the scoring load as the Bulldogs were able to rout the Saints before halftime, outscoring them 24-12 to enter halftime with a 33-30 lead.

During his two seasons at the helm of the Bulldog program, Cooper has seen Will Bonner take over games more times than he can count. However, showing up the way the junior guard did in such a tight spot in a playoff game, Bonner was on an entirely different level according to Cooper.

"He had that look in his eyes. He was determined that he was not going to let us lose this game. I guess we just get accustomed to seeing this kind of performance from Will but tonight was something special. Tonight was more special than what Will Bonner typically does," Cooper said.

Not lost on Cooper is how key his bench depth was in the win. And getting contributions from multiple guys coming off the bench will be key as the Bulldogs make a legitimate push for the programs first final four appearance since the 1999-2000 season.

"Adrian Reaves came off the bench and did a great job for us and Austin James hit a couple of big threes for us as well. Scout Bragwell only had six points but it seemed like both threes he made came at critical times for us," Cooper said. "Isac Willingham was battling a good player inside all night long and that guy got 17 points, but Isac made him earn every single one of them. It was just a good all-around team win for us tonight."

Willingham, who has become the unsung battle-tested vet for this Belgreen squad, has taken on the role of doing the dirty work that most other players try to avoid over the course of 32 minutes. However, it's not just the diving

after loose balls and grabbing the tough rebounds that has gotten the attention of his head coach over the past two years. But rather something that won't show up in the box score at the end of the night.

"He's one of the glue guys for our team. He doesn't always show up big on the stat line but everyone on this team knows how important he is to us and what he does to help us win every night," Cooper said.

As they prepare for their elite eight matchup against last year's 1A state champion Pickens County, Will Bonner knows exactly what the Bulldogs primary focus will be leading up to tipoff on Thursday evening: defense.

"Our offense has been really efficient this year and we average about 70 points a game so our offense will take care of itself. We've just got to make sure we're up to our standards on the defensive side of things," Bonner said. "Our defense will win us a game if we let it and while we didn't play that well on that side of the ball tonight, I know if we keep working at it, we'll get to where we want to be."

As for Cooper's mindset when it comes to the matchup against Pickens County, he keeps it plain and simple.

"If you want to be the champs, you've gotta beat the champs," Cooper said.

Will Bonner led the Bulldogs in scoring on the night with 32 points while going 8-9 from the free throw line (including knocking down five crucial free throws in the final quarter). Despite sitting for a majority of the game due to being in foul trouble, Collin Bonner managed to rack up 12 points in the win, knocking down his only two free throws. The aforementioned Bragwell finished with his two three-pointers on the night while Canaan Stough and Austin James both added five points for the Bulldogs while Reaves knocked down a three-pointer in the second quarter for his lone scoring on the night.

The Bulldogs will take on Pickens County at 4:30 on Thursday at Wallace-State Community College in Hanceville.

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Lady Bobcats fall one game short of return to Hanceville

Staff Reports

After a highly contested back-and-forth for a majority of the game, a strong final quarter from their opponent proved to be too much for Phil Campbell to overcome in their regional semifinal matchup.

The Lady Bobcats fell 45-41 to the second-ranked team in 3A girls basketball, Susan Moore on Monday night, ending an impressive season for Phil Campbell.

The Lady Bulldogs (25-2) took an early 11-7 lead over the Lady Bobcats (23-5) in the first quarter as Phil Campbell got two points each from Katie Thomas, Kenner Scott and Faith Cook.

In the second quarter, the Lady Bobcats were able to limit the damage as they paced the Lady Bulldogs at ten points apiece in the quarter. Thomas led the Lady Bobcats in scoring for the quarter with six points while Scott and Branch each chipped in two points each in the quarter.

After halftime is where Phil Campbell was able to make up ground against Susan Moore, holding the Lady Bulldogs to just five points in the quarter while scoring 11 points and getting key scoring contributions from four different Lady Bobcats.

Thomas continued to lead the way for Phil Campbell with five points in the third quarter with Scott knocking down a three-pointer in the quarter. Seniors Olivia Taylor and Caitlynn Mills were both able to get on the board in the third

See 'BOBCATS,' page 15

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Bobcats bang out 29 hits, post pair of shutouts in doubleheader sweep

Staff Reports

Phil Campbell pounded out 29 hits and got great work on the mound from four different pitchers Saturday, shutting out Curry 13-0 and Addison 10-0 in a season-opening doubleheader.

John Miller Lawson led the offensive onslaught for the Bobcats (2-0), finishing the day 7-for-8 with a home run, a double and five RBIs. Austen Baker homered in the second game and finished the day 4-for-7 with three RBIs and four runs scored.

Mason Swinney dominated on the mound in the opener against Curry, striking out seven batters and walking two in four innings of no-hit ball. Swinney (1-0) had three strikeouts in the bottom of the first inning, induced an inning-ending double-play ball in the second, and then retired six of the seven men he faced in the third and fourth before giving way to reliever Luke Barnwell.

Barnwell, who entered the game with Phil Campbell leading just 2-0, earned the save. The senior right-hander pounded the zone in his three shutout innings, throwing 28 of his 36 pitches for strikes. He struck out two, walked none and allowed two hits.

The Bobcats jumped in front in the top of the second, scoring twice on a pair of walks, a wild pitch, an RBI groundout by Bryant Anthony and a passed ball. The score remained 2-0 until the top of the sixth, when a double by Bryant Hyde sparked a seven-run inning by Phil Campbell.

Anthony delivered a two-run double to make it 4-0, and the Bobcats also got RBI singles from Lawson and Ridge Raper. Hyde capped off the rally with his second hit of the inning, a two-run single that made it 9-0.

Baker added an RBI single in the top of the seventh, and then Lawson finished off the scoring with a three-run homer to left to make it 13-0.

Lawson went 4-for-4 in game one with four RBIs, and Hyde was 2-for-4 with two RBIs and two runs scored. Anthony was 2-for-4 with three RBIs, and Raper went 2-for-5 with an RBI and a run. Baker and Levi Crittenden each

scored two runs. Barnwell and Trey Leindecker had one hit apiece.

Raper (1-0) got the start on the mound against Addison in Saturday's second game and tossed four shutout innings, allowing just two hits and striking out eight. He walked two batters and hit two. The senior right-hander threw 39 of his 60 pitches for strikes and improved his career varsity record to 18-2 while lowering his career ERA to 1.91. Raper is quickly closing in on 200 career strikeouts, with Saturday's eight punch-outs giving him 186 in 135.2 career innings.

Phil Campbell got five hits (including an RBI single by Lawson) in the top of the first inning but managed only two runs, running into a pair of outs on the bases.

Raper then worked around a hit batter and a walk in the bottom of the first, striking out back-to-back batters with runners at second and third to end the inning.

The Bobcats added three more runs in the top of the second, getting a double from Leindecker, an RBI single from Barnwell and RBI doubles from Swinney and Austen Baker. Raper struck out three batters in the bottom of the second, and doubles by Hyde and Leindecker in the top of the third stretched the lead to 6-0.

Raper racked up two more K's in the bottom of the third, and Baker blasted a two-out home run in the top of the fourth to make it 7-0. Phil Campbell scored twice in the fifth on three walks, a wild pitch and an RBI single by Swinney. Lawson singled and scored on a base hit by Hyde in the top of the sixth to make it 10-0.

Cam Habada pitched two hitless innings in relief for the Bobcats, striking out five and walking one. He threw 18 of his 30 pitches for strikes.

Swinney and Baker each finished game two 3-for-4 with two RBIs and two runs scored. Lawson also had three of Phil Campbell's 16 hits. Hyde was 2-for-3 with two runs scored, and Barnwell went 2-for-3 with an RBI and a run. Leindecker was 2-for-3 with a pair of doubles, and Raper went 1-for-4.

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'BOUTWELL,' from page 11

begin their season in the coming weeks.
"We don't have as much experience as a team this year as we have had in recent years and we've got a lot of guys that are relatively new to the game this year. Obviously getting to state is the main goal but I think if we can make it through sectionals as a team that will be huge for us," Boutwell said. "As for myself, I want to win a state championship and be the best that I can be. But as an individual golfer, winning state is on my list for sure."

Boutwell has been a part of the Russellville program for years now and naturally, his game has progressed an extensive amount.

"I've been working a lot on my short game. I've always hit the ball pretty far for my age and size so I haven't been too worried or focused on that," Boutwell said. "I've been working on keeping the ball in play just chipping and putting. I've started playing a lot smarter so I'm not having to work near as hard to shoot and get good scores."

Learning how to play "smart" is a large part of the reason as to how Boutwell snagged a college commitment to play golf. And according to Boutwell, the learning process behind playing smarter essentially came down to changing the way he played golf entirely.

"Growing up I've always played aggressively just using drivers everywhere and trying to cut corners and make the course play shorter than it should really. And playing like that can get you in a lot of trouble and I've finally realized that there's a time and place for that," Boutwell said. "I could go play ten rounds at my home course and before I would always use a driver on every hole. Now I'm probably hitting three drivers around. Using clubs that I know I can handle and keep the ball in the fairway and put myself to where I'll have good yardage to the hole that I'll like is how I've refined my game the most over the years."



COURTESY PHOTO

Over the years, Boutwell has learned to play golf smarter, which involves learning how to keep the ball at a yardage that he feels comfortable with.

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'BOBCATS,' from page 12

quarter as both chipped in with two points apiece. Carrying a 28-26 lead into the fourth quarter, things looked to be trending upwards for the Lady Bobcats. Then the Lady Bulldogs flipped a switch.

Phil Campbell got six points from their senior leader, Katie Thomas and two points each from Branch and Scott in the fourth quarter, but it wouldn't be enough as the Lady Bulldogs would go on a 19-13 run through the final quarter, giving Susan Moore the 45-41 victory and sending them to the elite eight with an appearance at Wallace-State in Hanceville later this week.

Thomas led Phil Campbell in scoring with 18 points while pulling down seven rebounds to go along with an assist on the night. Scott finished her night with nine points to go along with four rebounds and four assists while Branch would chip in with six points and four rebounds for the Lady Bobcats. Mills added five points for Phil Campbell while dishing out two assists and bringing in two rebounds. Taylor added two points in addition to two rebounds and four assists for the night.

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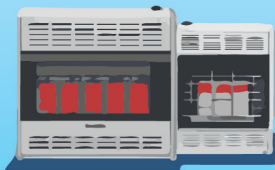
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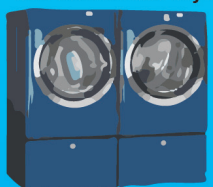
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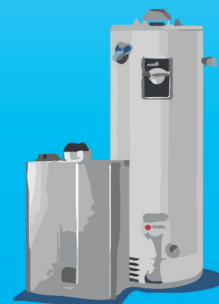
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