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## Ribbon-cutting ceremony held to celebrate completion of Freedom Fiber's county-wide build out

John Pilati  
 Franklin Free Press

As local leaders joined Freedom Fiber officials last Wednesday to celebrate the completion of the company's fiber internet build out across Franklin County, there was an interesting irony as contractors for another internet provider continued their work locally installing fiber optic cable to areas they previously weren't interested in serving.

Expansion of service by a Freedom Fiber competitor continues in Franklin County as Tombigbee Electric Cooperative's Freedom Fiber held a ribbon cutting at the

A.W. Todd Centre to announce what the completion of what the company calls 'world class fiber internet' now available to all homes and businesses in the county.

Vina Mayor Michael Moomaw shared the thoughts of many who attended Wednesday's ribbon cutting as he opened the celebration.

"I never thought we'd see the day where we have internet in Vina, but today, we can say we have it available to everyone in our city and the entire county," Moomaw said.

Tombigbee Electric's President/CEO Britton Lightsey said his company is now live throughout Franklin County with the exception of

See 'FIBER,' Page 3

## Commission approves \$18.43 million budget for new fiscal year with hourly raises for most employees

John Pilati  
 Franklin Free Press

The Franklin County Commission approved a \$18.43 million budget for the new fiscal year that includes raises for all employees except those in the Franklin County Solid Waste Department.

At a special called meeting held Monday morning, commissioners approved the FY2024-25 budget divided into three segments: General

fund \$10,492,821.98, Highway Department \$4,893,339.10 and Solid Waste Department \$3,045,766.71. (The Franklin County Sheriff's Office is funded through the general fund budget).

Beginning October 1, 2024, all General Fund and Highway Department employees receive a \$.50/hour base pay raise. Additionally, commissioners adopted pay scale adjustments recommended by the recent pay study

See 'COMMISSION,' Page 9


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Lowell Phillip Stephens, age 83 of Hackleburg, passed away Sunday, September 29, 2024. Visitation will be Wednesday, October 2, 2024, from 1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. at the Community Church in Hackleburg, where the service will be held at 2:00 p.m.

Harold Glenn Miller, of Russellville, passed from this life on September 29, 2024. A graveside service will be held at 3:00 p.m. Wednesday, October 02, 2024, at Oak Grove Cemetery, Cty Road 81, Phil Campbell.

Michael Hudson Franklin, age 31, of Russellville, passed away Sunday, September 29, 2024. The visitation will be 6:00 - 8:00 p.m. Wednesday, October 02, 2024, at Spry Memorial Chapel.

Scotty Bundy, 48, of Russellville passed away suddenly on October 1st, 2024. Visitation for Scotty will be 2:00 - 4:00 p.m. Friday, October 04, 2024 at Spry Memorial Chapel.

Annie Mae Borden, age 83, of Russellville, passed away on Tuesday, October 01, 2024. The visitation will be 6:00 - 8:00 p.m. Thursday, October 03, 2024, at Tharptown Friendship Holiness Church.

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## Franklin Free Press

113 Washington Ave. NW  
Russellville, AL 35653  
256-332-0255

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### Correction Policy

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# 'FIBER,' From Page 1

the City of Russellville, and residents in the county's largest municipality won't have to wait much longer.

"We will start connecting customers (in Russellville) in the next two or three weeks," Lightsey told the FFP Friday. "Next week we'll send out 9,000 postcards to the three zip codes in and around Russellville. We'll give it six or eight weeks and then do Red Bay and Phil Campbell with more postcards. By the first quarter of 2025, we'll have the entire city built out. And we've already got more than 400 preregisters in the system."

Russellville residents and business owners may preregister at [www.freedomfiber.com](http://www.freedomfiber.com) and will be notified by a Freedom Fiber employee when service is available at their address.

Celebrating a day when all Franklin County homes and businesses have reliable, affordable, high-speed fiber internet seemed a pipe dream until a few years ago, as efforts to woo companies including Charter and AT&T to expand beyond population-dense municipalities to rural areas were repeatedly unsuccessful.

It was that compelling need from which Freedom Fiber was formed.

The Tombigbee Electric Cooperative Board realized the need for its a majority of its members to have access to high-speed internet. That's how Freedom Fiber was born. Packages are available from 500 Mbps all the way to 10 gig fiber broadband. Franklin County was the first location in Alabama to have 10 gig fiber broadband available.

That 10 gig speed is an immense marketing tool in attracting industry to relocate or expand into Franklin County, Lightsey said. And with today's ever-changing world, Freedom Fiber is equipped to increase speeds by changing cards in its huts and cabinets located around Franklin County.

"As technology changes, we will upgrade our equipment to meet technology's ever-changing needs," Lightsey said.

With investments from companies like Freedom Fiber, Alabama has improved from 47th nationally when it comes to broadband connectivity to 24th among all states.

The company's mission is to provide 'world-class, ultra-high speed fiber-optic internet,' first in its electric service area, followed by expansion to Franklin County after relentless efforts from local, county, state and federal leadership.

The efforts began 12 years ago with the creation of the Franklin County Broadband Task Force. Franklin County voters approved an amendment that vested authority to regulate and pursue grant funding for broadband with the Franklin County Water Service Authority, which was largely responsible for bringing Freedom Fiber to Franklin County.

Rep. Jamie Kiel's support helped secure state grant funding, U.S. Rep. Robert Aderholt helped obtain federal funding, and the Franklin County Commission made more than a \$5 million commitment out of its American Relief Plan Act funds that, combined with Freedom Fiber's own investment, allowed the entire county build out to become a reality.

"It's a win-win for everyone and we at the (Franklin) County Commission are excited for the growth potential this brings to everyone in Franklin County," said Franklin County Probate Judge Barry Moore.

Lightsey also credited the electric utilities, Franklin Electric Cooperative and Russellville Electric Board, for their willingness to allow build out on their existing infrastructure in their service areas.

No longer will Franklin County rural residents and businesses have to stand in the corner waiting for reliable, high-speed fiber internet.

"We are rural based. We serve rural Alabama. We try not to lose the fact that's where we came from," Lightsey said. "We carry that same vision from the electric world into the fiber world. They deserve fiber-optic internet as much as people in larger populated areas do."

Franklin County's high-speed fiber-optic internet build out could have been done many years ago had the companies serving the county's municipalities shown an interest and willingness to step up and truly serve rural residents. The opportunity was there. The interest from county leaders, businesses and residents was there. But larger ISPs weren't willing to make the investments in rural areas. Enter Freedom Fiber.

"At Tombigbee, we're comfortable in our own skin. We would have been okay serving our members with internet service," Lightsey said. "But the opportunity was there to serve our neighbors in Franklin County and now we've done our build out and it's amazing to see these other traditional ISPs all of a sudden have interest. Other companies had the opportunity to do this long before we came around."



COURTESY PHOTO

Freedom Fiber representatives joined local and state officials at a ribbon-cutting held September 25th.

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# 2022-23 RHS Annual one of three selected for inclusion in Balfour Yearbook Yearbook

Submitted

Russellville High School Annual Staff Advisor Kellie Singleton shared some big news Monday about her students' 2022-23 yearbook staff.

Russellville High School is one of only three schools in the state of Alabama to be selected for inclusion in the 2024 Balfour Yearbook Yearbook, which is a compilation of the best pages and spreads from the previous year.

The 2023 RHS Tiger Track was included for a photo spread featuring the Class of 2023.

"Less than 1% of the schools Balfour represents across the nation (including colleges) get included in the Yearbook Yearbook, so this is a big accomplishment for us," Singleton said.

The 2022-23 student leadership team for the Tiger Track included Jared Davis, Chief Photographer, Thania Barrientos and Kate Grissom, Co-Editors-in-Chief and Abigail Jimenez, Creative Director.

**CONGRATULATIONS**

**TO THE 2022-2023 RHS ANNUAL STAFF**

for being **1 of only 3 schools in the State** selected for inclusion in the 2024 Balfour Yearbook Yearbook! The RHS Tiger Track was selected for their photo spread featuring the Senior Class of 2023!

**2022-2023 Leadership Team**

<p>2022-2023 Chief Photographer</p> <p>Jared Davis</p>	<p>2022-2023 Co-Editors-in-Chief</p> <p>Thania Barrientos &amp; Kate Grissom</p>	<p>2022-2023 Creative Director</p> <p>Abigail Jimenez</p>	<p>RHS Annual Staff Adviser Kellie Singleton with the Yearbook Yearbook banner for RHS</p>
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**COURTESY PHOTO**

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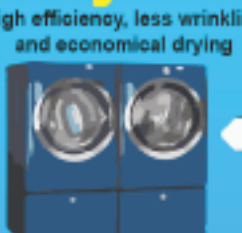


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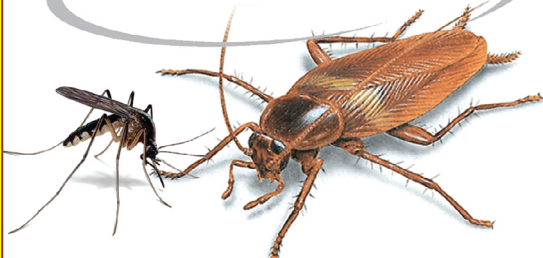
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 **N**orth Russellville Baptist Church presents the second annual October Youth Fest, Sunday, Oct. 6th, 5 p.m.-until. Guest speaker will be Shannon Knight. Praise and Worship by Dustin Richardson, Dry Bones Revived and Jacob Feltman. Drama by the Bethel Drama Team. There will be door prizes, Youth Fest t-shirts for sale and finger foods following the event. Adults and Youth invited to come join the congregation for a great night of worship. A love offering will be taken up. Youth are asked to bring a stuffed animal for Cahaba Shriners for 'Shriner Kids.' For more information or to reserve seating for large groups, call Youth Pastor Randy Bracken at 938-646-4656, La Shawn Fortuna at 256-460-9510 or Lyndsey Marshall at 205-269-7429. Church located at 1401 Waterloo Road in Russellville.

 **C**ommunity Action Partnership of North Alabama, also known as Russellville Head Start and Early Head Start, is a non-profit agency serving 3, 4 and 5 year old children absolutely free. We are located at 976 Ronnie McDowell Avenue in Russellville. Our hours are from 7:30 a.m.-2 p.m., Monday thru Friday. Call for an appointment today at 256-331-0162. Give your child a Head Start on school readiness! We offer top-quality, comprehensive early childhood educational services provided at no cost to your family. To learn more, visit [www.capna.org/children-services](http://www.capna.org/children-services).

 **T**he Cowboy Church of Franklin County will host its annual Fall Fest, Thursday, October 31st, at 6 pm. Join them for this fun event with a Chili Cookoff. Have your chili at the church by 5:30 pm. Fall Fest starts at 6 p.m., and ends at 8 p.m. Free hot dogs and chili until gone. Games, candy and cake walk. Everyone is welcome! Church is located at 25100 Highway 24, Russellville.



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# State, local events part of Cattlemen's Association October celebration of Beef Month

John Pilati  
Franklin Free Press

October in Alabama means Fall Festivals, cooler weather, leaves changing colors and, of course, beef.

The Alabama Cattlemen's Association's Beef Month began October 1st. The annual designation is to highlight Alabama's sizable cattle industry and the people who work hard every day to allow us to enjoy beef at our dinner tables.

Michael Pounders, President of the Franklin County Cattlemen's Association, was a guest on WFMH-FM 95.5 last week to promote some of the beef-featured events taking place across Franklin County.

The Franklin County Cattlemen served up their popular steak sandwiches at last weekend's Red Bay Founders' Fest. The steak sandwich sales, held several times through the year, raise funds that remain entirely in Franklin County, as they are used to provide scholarships for Franklin County high school seniors.

Last weekend's sandwich sale was the association's final one of the year.

The state association also conducts several events to celebrate Beef Month, including the Alabama Beef Cattle Conference set for October 3-4 in Auburn. The Alabama Cattlemen's Association will host a workshop on calf management October 8th in Monroeville and the Blackbelt Beef and Forage Field Day is set for October 18th in Marion Junction, Al.

According to the Alabama Cattlemen's Association, there were approximately 1,170,000 head of cattle and calves on Alabama farms as of January 2024. That number ranks Alabama 17th among the 50 states in beef cattle numbers nationwide.

Beef demand remains strong both domestically and internationally. The top five importing countries of American beef are Japan, China, Taiwan, South Korea and Canada. The total export value of U.S. beef and beef products in 2023 was \$10 billion.

You can follow events hosted by the Franklin County Cattlemen's Association by following their page on Facebook. The page also provides helpful tips and management information for cattle farmers.

Franklin County cattlemen will be participating in 'Cowboys in the Classroom' during October. The program brings local cattlemen into classrooms to share with elementary students about raising beef cattle.

Second only to poultry production, cattle production is Alabama's second-largest animal agriculture industry. According to the state association, beef cattle production in Alabama is a \$2.5 billion annual industry that provides more than 7,000 jobs in the state.

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**Pilgrim's**

(The following is a contributed column from Franklin County resident James Bonner, a veteran of state and local politics. He will be an occasional contributor to the FFP to share his unique, and often controversial, thoughts on politics. Your opinions and responses are welcome.)

I honestly try to avoid a first person narrative. And like a used car salesman who begins every sentence with "I'm gonna be honest" we both know it is a lie. But I am a gun nut.

I am forever amused by news reports that include "the suspect had hundreds of rounds of ammunition." Really? Hundreds? I am a lifetime NRA member, a Civilian Marksman Club member and I carry a pocket constitution all rolled up ready to poke you in the eye. I am neither schizophrenic nor suffer from incurable Cognitive dissonance, { the psychological discomfort that occurs when someone holds two contradictory ideas at the same time}, but it is time to consider banning scary guns.

We are all aware that the Mini14 is exactly the same gun as an AR 15 mechanically and functionally. If your goal is to kill five year olds it will do the job. But it's not scary.

If you are a Transgender ADHD kid that plays World of Warcraft the purpose of shooting up a school is not death and destruction. It is terror. TERROR AND NOTHING ELSE. That is what everyone seems to have missed. It is about power, and TERROR..

Make semi auto rifles pink camo with pearl handles and that wannabe terrorist would think twice about carrying it in public. 100% of our school shooters admired scary guns, were on medication and played violent video games. 100% of all of them are like spokes in a wheel. Unrequited teen angst, weapons of terror, practice practice practice on your home computer, and chemically altered states. One hundred percent.

A Bazooka is not necessarily an effective weapon against five year olds but it is banned. An obvious violation of the Second Amendment. Why? Because it is scary. Trump would still have both ears if ADHD meds and AR15s were banned. So of the things we can ban, and short of issuing all teen boys a girlfriend, I might propose a ban on scary things. Scary movies, scary drugs, scary video games and scary words. But at the risk of being labeled a Democrat, I don't see the problem with banning scary guns. Grandpa's 1100 wasn't scary but it would k\*ll you graveyard dead if you broke into his house. So if you want to stop school shootings, stop training kids to kill. Teach them to make bombs to blow up mailboxes like we did.

P.S. Look up the meaning of satire before you shoot up my house.

## Russellville Parks and Recreation Department to host 'Countdown to Christmas' event to promote local vendors

Kadin Pounders  
Franklin Free Press

It is too early to put out your Christmas lights, but it's never too early to start thinking about your holiday gift shopping.

Though still a few months out from the most wonderful—and most hectic—time of the year, the Russellville Parks and Recreation Department is organizing its first Countdown to Christmas event, set for early November. The event, which will be held at the A.W. Todd Centre in Russellville, will allow holiday shoppers to find some "must-have" gifts in a convenient location and give local vendors an opportunity to sell their wares and promote their businesses.

"This is the first time to ever host this event," said organizer Denese Gault. "The reason for having Countdown to Christmas is to help out local vendors sell and promote their products on top of giving the community a chance to go out and purchase a few unique gifts for Christmas."

Gault said around 30 vendors will be setting up shop at the Todd Centre, and they'll have many different types of items to catch the shoppers' eye.

"Some of the items that will be there are personalized wrapping paper, pain creams and ointments, boutique clothing, candles, yummy treats, baby items, personalized cups, permanent jewelry, scentsy, trucker caps, stationary, scrapbooking, purses, homemade quilts, colorstreet nails, bath bombs and detergents," Gault said. "Just a wide variety of vendors will be there. Maybe this will help ease some of the holiday shopping."

Gault and the Parks and Rec. Department hope the Countdown to Christmas event will be a nice holiday present for shoppers and gift givers in the community.

"I got the idea because it is part of my job to help build up community events. Women love to shop and Christmas can get so hectic for us," Gault said. "I thought this might ease some of that gift-giving burden that we all go through."

"I really hope this will be a success and can continue doing this every year," she added.

Countdown to Christmas will be at the A.W. Todd Centre in downtown Russellville on Saturday, November 2nd from 8 A.M. to 4 P.M.



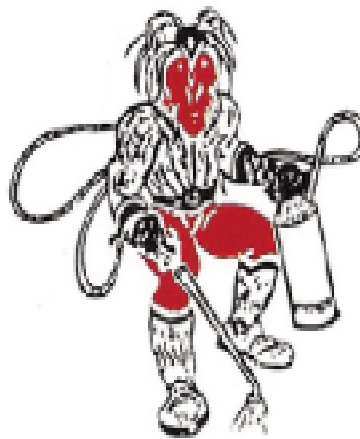
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# 'COMMISSION,' From Page 1

conducted by the University of North Alabama.

According to Franklin County Administrator Leah Mansell, that study showed the majority of employee salaries to be consistent with nearby municipalities and counties of similar population as Franklin County.

"They compared us to surrounding municipalities and counties our size and made recommendations off that information," Mansell said. "There were just a handful that were out of range and those are adjusted (upward) in this new budget."

The new budget includes a 4.75% increase in health insurance premiums that will be absorbed by the county and not passed on to employees. And county employees who retire with at least 10 years of service with Franklin County will now receive \$600 per month reimbursement for single coverage health insurance for a three-year period. Previously, that benefit only applied to employees retiring with at least 15 years' service.

Family coverage for county employees increased to approximately \$1,100 per month, with employees paying \$313 and the county paying the balance, Mansell said.

The shortfall between the new FY24-25 expenditures compared to revenues will be made up from transfers from the Capital Improvement Fund, Public Building Fund, Public Highway and Traffic Fund and the approximately \$1.5 million general fund balance carried over from the current fiscal year.

The reason Solid Waste Department employees did not receive the \$.50 per hour raise is because the department's budget remains unsettled as a result of increased solid waste hauling fees in the new fiscal year combined with no corresponding increase in garbage fee rates charged to customers.

Last month, the Franklin County Commission approved a one year contract with Republic Morris Farm to continue the transport and disposal of household waste collected at the Franklin County Landfill Transfer Station. The new contract begins October 1, 2024, with a per ton cost of \$53.60, compared to a \$30.48 per ton rate in the expiring contract.

But commissioners voted to table consideration of any increased fee schedule for residential and/or commercial garbage collection, as well as any proposed increases in the per ton cost of construction and demolition debris transported to the landfill by county residents.

Franklin County Solid Waste Manager Gene Ward asked commissioners to approve increasing residential monthly garbage fees to \$25, \$15 for an extra can and a \$5 late fee. He also requested increases on all dumpster fees as well as the per ton cost of debris transported by residents to the landfill from \$25/ton to \$35/ton.

But the commission voted 4-0 to table any consideration of fee increases until November 2024. The significance of that date is that the new Franklin County Commission will take office in advance of the November commission meeting.

New commissioners Tracie Clark and Greg Hovater will join incumbent Joseph Baldwin and the winner of the District One general election between Republican Michael Murray and Democrat Charles Mitchell on the new look county commission.

The outgoing commissioners believe any decision on rate increases should be made by the new commission, resulting in the vote to table the issue until November. That decision drew the ire of new commissioners though, as Hovater explained to the FFP last month.

"It's really a disservice to the county because they voted to accept a new contract then allowed the county to lose money for however long it takes for us to get into office. And there is a risk the landfill would have to close down as a result. It puts the county in a difficult situation," Hovater said.

Mansell explained that the county's budget must be approved for the entire new fiscal year, so it had to be made based on the new hauling price without any increase in fees.

When the new commission approves rate increases to offset the increased cost of hauling municipal solid waste, any raises for Solid Waste Department employees can be approved at that time, but not retroactively.

"We can't pay any raises retroactively so they would be from the point forward when they are approved," Mansell said.

The earliest that could be done would be the November 2024 business meeting, the new commission's organizational meeting. But even if rate increases are approved in November, they would not take effect until January 2025 to allow time to get notices out to customers and to get the new costs updated in the county's billing system, Mansell said.

Until any rate increases are approved, the county will be operating solid waste collection at a loss of approximately \$23/ton based on the new contract price compared to the current rates.

In other agenda items at the September 30th meeting, the commission:

--approved naming Mansell as Franklin County Public Officer for the purpose of receiving and responding to information requests pursuant to the Alabama Open Records Act.

--approved hiring Taylor Crumpton as a temporary employee in the Highway Department and the termination of Brock Britton from the Highway Department.

--approved hiring Ella Franks as a temporary property clerk in the Franklin County Revenue Commissioner's Office.

--approved hiring Jeffrey Davis as a permanent Deputy in the Sheriff's Office.

--approved a memorandum of agreement with Franklin County Schools for FY24-25 to employ four school resource officers: Regina Cantrell at Belgreen, Greg Baker at Phil Campbell/East Franklin, Charles Hamby at Tharptown and Shane Mason at Vina.

**For updates on news and sports throughout the week, visit us online at [www.franklinfreepress.net](http://www.franklinfreepress.net).**



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**YARD SALE**

Brookewood Subdivision Neighborhood Yard Sale. Friday/Saturday, Oct. 4-5. 7am-until. Multiple homes participating. Turn onto Underwood Road at McDonald's. Look for signs and follow from there.

Two-family yard sale. Saturday, Oct. 5, 7-1. 3870 Hwy. 61 and 3719 Hwy. 61 in Spruce Pine. 5 miles

south of Russellville. Turn right off 43 South onto CR36, go 1/2 mile then turn left onto 61. Second house on right and third house on left.

Two Family Yard Sale. Saturday, Oct. 5. 7am-until. 100 Spring Street, near Russellville High School. Clothing, household items.

Five-Family Yard Sale. Thursday-Saturday, Oct. 3-6. 8am-until. 1719 North Jackson Ave., Victoria's Secret items, dishes, lots of new items!

Yard Sale. Thursday-Saturday, Oct. 3-6, 7am-until. 460 Second Street, Russellville. Name brand men's/women clothing, new items, free recliner.

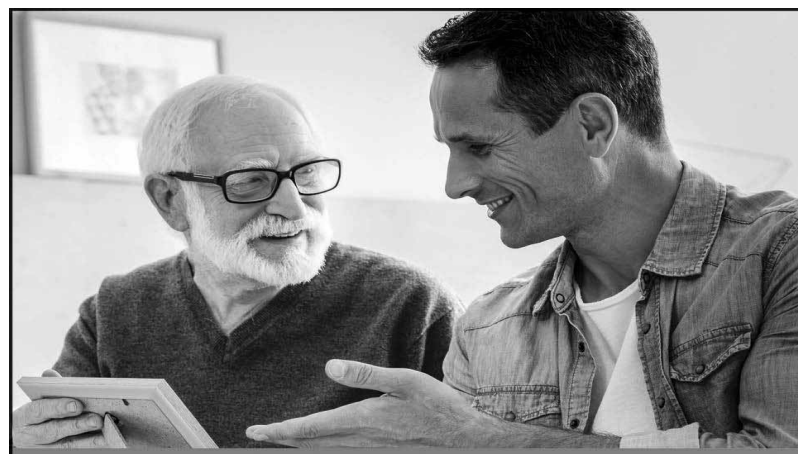
Yard Sale. Friday/Saturday,

Oct. 4/5, 7am-until. 229 Glenwood Avenue, Russellville. Furniture, glassware and more!

Multi-Family Yard Sale. Friday and Saturday, Oct. 4 & 5. 8a.m.-until. Southwood Gardens Apartments in Russellville. Apartments located behind Walmart.

Woodridge Neighborhood Yard Sale. Friday/Saturday, Oct. 4/5.

7am-until. Multiple families participating. Waterloo Road north past Franklin Memory Gardens. Subdivision is on the left. Lots of items to choose from!



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**Main lock chamber at Wilson Lock closed after inspection reveals cracks, leaks**

John Pilati  
 Franklin Free Press

After divers from the United States Army Corps of Engineers discovered cracks and leaks in the lock gates on both the land and river sides of Wilson Lock and Dam engineers have closed the main lock chamber indefinitely.

The closing was announced in a news release from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Public Affairs Office last Thursday.

"Closing the lock is a precaution to prevent further damage to the gates and any possible loss of the lock's functionality," Lt. Col. Robert Green, Nashville Engineer District commander, said. "We value our partnership with the navigation industry and recognize the economic importance the inland waterway lockage system serves for delivering goods to the public. We are assessing the situation and formulating a plan of action to repair and reopen the lock chamber."

Green stressed the importance of safety as continued operation of the lock without repairs could result in the gates becoming jammed, trapping any vessels inside the lock.

The district advised the public that the 60-foot by 300-foot auxiliary lock at Wilson would open at 6 a.m., September 27th, and be ready for navigational use. Passing navigation traffic through the auxiliary lock is expected to increase locking time by up to 16-24 hours for a typical 15-barge tow.

The Tennessee Valley Authority owns the locks and dams along the Tennessee River, with the Corps of Engineers maintaining and operating the locks for navigational purposes in partnership with TVA.

The main lock chamber was completed in 1959, according to the Nashville Engineer District, meaning it is beyond its 50-year design life. The auxiliary lock chamber will turn 100 years old in 2025.

According to the Corps of Engineers, more than 11.4 million tons of goods are transported to and from the Ohio River by way of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers managed locks on the Tennessee River.

To receive news and updates from the Corps of Engineers, visit Facebook at [www.facebook.com/nashvillecorps](http://www.facebook.com/nashvillecorps) or on X at [www.twitter.com/nashvillecorps](http://www.twitter.com/nashvillecorps).

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### How an Alabama-Texas football game rekindled a 40-year friendship

John Pilati  
 Franklin Free Press

When my cell phone rang last July showing a number with a 214 area code (Dallas), I was immediately suspicious.

In today's world, unfamiliar, out-of-state calls to our cell phones usually mean one thing—telemarketers.

99 times out of 100, I'll ignore a call from an unfamiliar number. For some reason, though, I answered this particular Dallas-based call and it turned out to be a blessing.

It was Todd Wills, one of my best friends from college, on the other end of the line. You won't find a bigger University of Texas sports fan than Todd. And with the Longhorns' football team visiting Alabama last September, Todd wasn't going to miss that game. He asked me to help find him two tickets for the Bama-UT game, which I did. I actually bought four, and my wife Angel and I went with Todd and his friend to watch Texas defeat the Crimson Tide 34-24 in Tuscaloosa.

In the game's final minutes, most of those wearing crimson and white had already departed Bryant-Denny Stadium, leaving a burnt orange wave of ecstatic Longhorn fans who watched their team get payback for Alabama's win in Austin the previous year.

See, 'FRIENDSHIP,' Page 14

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### Vina rolls to fourth varsity football win with 50-6 blowout of Tharptown

Kadin Pounders  
 Franklin Free Press

The Vina High School varsity football team got back to its winning ways on Thursday night, routing the Tharptown Wildcats (0-5, 0-1 2A Region 8) 50-6 on Homecoming night. The win improves the Red Devils' record to 4-1 overall.

Due to the chance of severe weather on Friday, the decision was made to move the game up a day to Thursday; that change of plan didn't appear to affect the Red Devils on the field.

"Homecoming week is always crazy and a busy week," Vina head coach Cody Renfrow said. "When you have to pivot and make the decision to move the game up a day early it kind of adds to that, but I'm proud of the way our guys stayed focused all week and rebounded from that tough loss (the prior week) to Cherokee.

"We were excited to come out on top," Renfrow added.

Vina received the opening kickoff, but it was the Wildcats that got the first offensive drive and the opening score. The Red Devils muffed the kick and Tharptown recovered, setting up the Wildcats for what would turn into a passing touchdown to make it 6-0 early in the visitors' favor.

The Tharptown touchdown didn't dampen the spirits of the Vina players, though. The Red



COURTESY PHOTO

.Vina players celebrate their win over Tharptown on September 26th.

See, 'VINA,' page 12

### Russellville's region battle with Fairview highlights week six local matchups

Kadin Pounders  
 Franklin Free Press

Belgreen (2-3)  
 BYE

Last week: Belgreen stumbled at home against Tanner, who was winless coming into the game. The Bulldogs lost to the Rattlers 47-13.

Next week: BYE

Phil Campbell (1-4, 1-2)  
 at Midfield (1-4, 0-3)

Date: Friday, October 4, 2024  
 Time: 7 p.m.  
 Location: Winfred E. Jackson Stadium

Last week: Phil Campbell lost to unbeaten Hackleburg 42-12 in a non-region game.

What to watch: The Bobcats started the season with a tough five games. Their opponents to this point are a combined 23-4. This week's game against Midfield is the Bobcats' first against

See, 'PREVIEW,' Page 15

**GENERAL NOTICE ANNOUNCEMENT  
CITY OF RUSSELLVILLE  
STREET DEPARTMENT  
EQUIPMENT OPERATOR II**

**MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS:** Drives and operates equipment to accomplish a full range of assignments and tasks. Operates heavy equipment on job sites, such as, but not limited to: back hoe, bobcat, loader and knuckle booms.

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**The Russellville Civil Service Board  
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**The average pay for this position is \$40,060.80 – 61,734.00**

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# **'VINA,' From Page 11**

Devils responded quickly after falling behind and would go on to score 50 unanswered points, 42 of those in the first half.

Cai Lawler, who led the team in scoring Thursday night, hit on two long touchdown rushes of 60-plus yards in the opening half; the senior would also score the final touchdown of the game, recovering a fumble on defense for another six points in the second half. Seniors Trevor Baker and Christian McCarley and freshman Branson Vick found their names on the scoresheet, as well. Baker and McCarley rushed for 15- and 10-yard touchdowns, respectively, before Vick was found for a 44-yard touchdown reception as time expired in the second quarter.

After falling behind to start the game, Renfrow said what most impressed him was his team's ability to put that early error behind them.

"I'm really just proud of (Vina's) composure after Tharptown went up 6-0," he said. "Times in the past, it kinda seems like that would (turn into) a snowball effect with past teams.

"This team, they never blinked. They stayed composed and they responded extremely well," Renfrow added. "That's probably the number one thing that I'm most proud of from Thursday night."

Vina's huge non-region win swings momentum back in its favor after a tough region defeat on the road at Cherokee on September 20th, which dropped the Red Devils to 2-1 in Class 1A Region 7. Reclaimed momentum is a little different, though, from confidence, which Renfrow said the Red Devils have continued to maintain even after a small bump in the road. That swagger and confidence is what helped Vina beat Tharptown and it will be important as the Red Devils play host to region rival Hackleburg, one of the top teams in Class 3A and a program that Vina hasn't beaten since 2001.

"I don't believe we lost any confidence after the Cherokee loss. That's not to say that the win over Tharptown wouldn't help build any confidence, but our guys are confident as it is," Renfrow said. "They responded very well coming off that loss, and they came ready to work all week.

"I know they're going to come ready to work this week, too, as we prepare for a Hackleburg program that's very tough, very talented," he added. "They're (ranked) third in the state in 1A; we know the challenge ahead of us, but I know our guys are going to come ready to compete Friday night."

The game against the Panthers this weekend is just the first of a four-game stretch of crucial region matchups for Vina, the results of which will have major implications in the playoff race. Renfrow said each game in his team's remaining region schedule is important, but the Red Devils can't play them all at once—that's the approach they have to take.

"These games are extremely important. All of them are. We know that, our team knows that, but they also understand that it's one game at a time," Renfrow said. "Right now it's Hackleburg. They're a region team, they're the standard of our region, so it's like another measuring stick for us this weekend.

"Then we've got Waterloo and Addison and Meek and we're really just going to try to take it one game at a time," he added. "They're all important, but the most important is the next game, so that's the one we're focused on right now."

Vina hosts Hackleburg at Franklin-Hester Stadium at 7 P.M. on October 4th.

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*Cameron Phinizee - Russellville football*  
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**Congratulations to  
Preston Strickland!**

**Vina Junior Varsity Defensive  
Player of the Week**



# 'FRIENDSHIP,' From Page 11

We stayed until the Longhorn Band performed The Eyes of Texas, and Todd had a smile as wide as Texas as he held up his right hand displaying Texas' world-renowned Hook 'em Horns sign.

It was a magical football day for Todd. In the fourth quarter, he began receiving text messages from fellow Longhorn fans who knew Todd was watching a historical regular season victory in person. And as much as his friends and family celebrated Texas' upset of Alabama, they celebrated that Todd was able to be there in person.

That's the kind of person Todd was. You rooted for him to succeed. He effused optimism. He was that underdog character in a movie everyone wanted to see win in the end. And he was a great listener, something I'd forgotten about Todd until I saw him again.

Listening and absorbing the opinions of others is a lost art. And we should appreciate those people in our lives who care enough about us to really listen. People like Todd Wills.

Seeing the joy in his eyes erased any frustration I had about Jalen Milroe's two interceptions or the fact that Texas outscored Alabama in the fourth quarter 21-8. Todd savored every minute, every play of the game. And his smile when it ended was something I'll never forget.

But the eight hours or so we spent together that Saturday weren't about football. Yes, that was the calling card that brought Todd to Tuscaloosa, but the day was special for my wife and me because of who we shared it with.

It was also an opportunity to tell a longtime friend how much I loved and respected him, something I should have done decades earlier. It would be the final time I saw Todd, but that Tuscaloosa visit reignited our friendship and we spoke and texted regularly thereafter.

In the days leading up to the Texas game, I learned Todd had been diagnosed with cancer about a year earlier. It was serious and life-threatening. But Todd was the most positive person I knew and he downplayed his battle with cancer, instead choosing to remain upbeat and positive.

I never grilled Todd with a bunch of questions. We talked about his diagnosis, treatment plan and how he remained confident he would defeat cancer, just like his Longhorns defeated Alabama that September night.

Less than a year later, the battle Todd refused to let define him took his life on July 29, 2024. Todd left four children, two brothers and countless

friends behind, though each of them was a better person through their relationship with him.

Todd was a talented sportswriter whose career included stops at the Corsicana Daily Sun, Dallas Morning News, Arlington Morning News and ESPN.

It took Todd a long time to find a career. His Bachelor of Arts in History degree wasn't exactly the ideal foundation for a sports journalist. But Todd's writing spoke for itself, as did the passion he had for all levels of sports.

Todd was also the longtime radio voice of the Corsicana High School Tigers for football, basketball and baseball.

And Todd was a walking encyclopedia when it came to sports, especially his Dallas Cowboys, Dallas Mavericks, Texas Rangers and his Longhorns. But when it came to covering sports as a journalist, he was professional all the way. It had to be difficult for Todd to remain neutral while covering his beloved teams. Cheering or celebrating the game is taboo for working media at stadiums. Somehow, though, Todd was never kicked out of a press box, but he laughingly told me showing no emotion wasn't easy.

But on Saturday, September 9, 2023, Todd had a lot to cheer about. That night, he was a Texas fan, not a journalist. His Longhorns had taken a major step toward football dynasty status right before his eyes, which by the way were watery with emotion as Todd absorbed the moment.

It had been nearly 20 years since we'd spoken to each other, not because of some argument or dispute though. Life opens new doors and sometimes we forget about who we left standing behind the previous one. People we admire and love. The friends who helped shape the person we become. All too often they become memories. And memories can fade.

That's not an excuse, just a reality. And with my professional and personal life crashing and burning 20 years ago, it was that much easier to let go of friendships I should have held onto as my life spiraled into oblivion.

Many of you know I attended the University of Texas at Austin, where I earned my Bachelors Degree in Journalism. I pledged Chi Phi, a relatively new fraternity, my freshman year at UT.

Through my four years at Texas, I twice served as fraternity president, and I made some friendships I was sure would last a lifetime. Todd Wills was near the top of that list.

After graduation, my journey carried me to Alabama, and in the process I lost contact with most of my college fraternity brothers. Not my fault or their fault. It's just something that happens as our lives move in different directions.

Thanks to a college football game, though, our friendship was jump started. Over the next 10 months, we talked regularly about sports, politics and country music, three of our favorite topics.

We also talked about his cancer, but only to a degree he felt comfortable with. Those conversations would be on his terms. And in typical Todd fashion, he'd put an optimistic spin on each medical update, even as those became graver each month.

Three days before he died, Todd posted an update on social media after a visit with his oncologist. His diagnosis was grim and the pain Todd felt was severe enough that he wasn't sure when, or if, he'd be able to return to work. He shared something his oncologist told him that day: "I can kind of see you're going downhill. We need to stop that."

The realization that Todd, an eternal optimist, was losing the battle seemed bitterly ironic. But in true Todd fashion, his final social media post was a positive spin on a very difficult situation.

The more I read his final post, the more I'm convinced Todd wrote that not for himself, but to reassure the people he loved that he would be okay. I think he knew more about his condition that day than he revealed. Maybe he even knew the end was near.

But until the end, Todd lifted up those who loved him and stayed true to the optimist he was.

"Thanks for your prayers. All of you mean so much to me.

We're going to start going uphill. Screw going downhill. We've got football season coming up. I've got games to go to.

Onward."

I'll always treasure the game we attended together on September 9, 2023. It didn't matter whether Texas or Alabama prevailed because when my friend Todd came back into my life, I was the true winner that day. And I'll always be thankful for that.



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# 'PREVIEW,' From Page 11

an opponent with a losing record, so this will be a great opportunity for Phil Campbell to get back to

Series history: This is the first meeting between Phil Campbell and Midfield.

Next week: The Bobcats return to Parrish Stadium for another region game against Carbon Hill, their last home contest of the regular season.

Red Bay (0-5, 0-2)  
BYE

Last week: Red Bay dropped to 0-5 with a 40-14 loss at Belmont.  
Next week: Red Bay travels to Tharptown for a region game against the Wildcats.

Russellville (4-1, 3-0)  
vs. Fairview (4-0, 3-0)

Date: Friday, October 4, 2024  
Time: 7 p.m.  
Location: Golden Tiger Stadium

Last week: **BYE**

What to watch: Barring any region upsets the remainder of the year, the Russellville-Fairview game will serve as the de facto Class 5A Region 7 title game. Needless to say, it's a game with plenty of implications. Both teams are coming into this contest off bye weeks, so have had two weeks to prepare for each other. Though the Aggies barely scraped by against Lawrence County, a team the Golden Tigers beat by four touchdowns, Fairview has won comfortably in its other three games and has been ranked in the ASWA poll every week. Russellville has the home field advantage, but the hosts will need another great performance by junior running back Cam Phinizee, a well-managed game by freshman quarterback Whit Goodwin, and another stingy defensive effort to come out of this one with a W.

Series history: This will be the fourth meeting between Russellville and Fairview. The Golden Tigers have won the last two contests, a 41-14 win in 2022 and a 31-14 victory last season. The Aggies won the first matchup 35-21 in the 2021 playoffs.

Next week: The Golden Tigers host Class 4A Hatton in a non-region contest.

Tharptown (0-5, 0-1)  
at Tanner (1-5, 0-2)

Date: Friday, October 4, 2024  
Time: 7 p.m.  
Location: Rip Swanner Stadium

Last week: Tharptown fell 50-6 at Vina.

What to watch: Tharptown's game against a struggling Tanner side represents one of the Wildcats' best opportunities to get a win this year. The Rattlers have been shutout four times this year and allow 43 points per game. Likewise, Tharptown has been shutout three times and is allowing 50 points per game. This may be a game about who wants the win more.

Series history: Tharptown has not beaten Tanner in the four previous meetings between the two teams. Last season, the Rattlers beat the Wildcats 74-8.

Next week: Tharptown hosts Red Bay in Class 2A Region 8 play.

Vina (4-1, 2-1)  
vs. Hackleburg (5-0, 3-0)

Date: Friday, October 4, 2024  
Time: 7 p.m.  
Location: Franklin-Hester Stadium

Last week: Vina defeated winless Tharptown 50-6 on Homecoming night.

What to watch: Vina got back to winning ways with a big, blowout win over Tharptown on Homecoming, but this week's game against Hackleburg will be the toughest yet for the Red Devils. The undefeated Panthers have averaged 35 points per game and allowed less than 10 points per game. An established run game may shorten the game and can work in the Red Devils' favor, if the hosts can get the ball into the endzone when they have it. Vina will need another excellent game from the trio of seniors in the backfield and play rigid defense if the Red Devils want to earn its first five-win season since 2015.

Series history: Vina is just 9-59-3 against Hackleburg since the series began in 1929. The Red Devils haven't beaten the Panthers since 2001. Last season Hackleburg won 43-6.

Next week: Vina hosts Waterloo in Class 1A Region 7 play.

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STATEWIDE AMENDMENT 1

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YES

NO

**Vote *Yes* on Amendment One!**