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Hamilton expects minimal impact from 2025 launch of Alabama CHOOSE school voucher act

John Pilati
 Franklin Free Press

The arrival of 2025 is year one for Alabama's Creating Hope and Opportunity for Our Students' (CHOOSE) Act, which was signed into law by Gov. Kay Ivey on March 7, 2024.

The CHOOSE Act website, www.chooseact.alabama.gov, is now set up to accept family applications for what can be up to a \$7,000 refundable income tax credit, or Education Savings Account (ESA). Eligible families can use the tax credits to cover tuition, fees and other educational expenses at 'approved

education service providers' in Alabama.

After years of debate, the Alabama Legislature approved the CHOOSE Act last March, with both Franklin County legislators (Rep. Jamie Kiel and Sen. Larry Stutts) voting in favor of the act.

Essentially, the law provides annual \$7,000 tax credits for parents of students who enroll in private schools or \$2,000 tax credits per year for parents who home school their child, with a \$4,000 maximum credit for multiple students.

The act prioritizes siblings of participating students and dependents of active duty military. The tax credits

See 'CHOOSE,' Page 3



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Woodruff announces bid for second term for Russellville District Two council seat

Submitted
 Franklin Free Press

Russellville City Councilman Darren Woodruff has announced his candidacy for a second term representing District Two.

Woodruff was elected in 2020 after running a campaign based on a commitment to improve the infrastructure of District Two as well as making sure the citizens of District Two are fairly represented in the city. And he

continues to deliver on both pledges.

Work continues on the largest paving and infrastructure improvement program in the history of Russellville, more than \$4 million, with several repairs already completed and more to come in District Two. Additionally, Woodruff said three serious flooding issues within his district have been corrected with more due to be remediated.

With the support of the mayor and city council, Woodruff was instru-

See 'WOODRUFF,' Page 4

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'CHOOSE,' From Page 1



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are not taxable income and they are protected from offset or debt collection under the law.

The Alabama Legislature must provide at least \$100 million each year to maintain the CHOOSE Act fund.

For the years 2025 and 2026, the CHOOSE Act credit is available only for parents of an eligible student whose family has an adjusted income not exceeding 300 percent of the federal poverty level for the previous tax year.

Starting January 1, 2027, the credit will be available to any parent of an eligible student, with priority given to students who participated in the program the previous year.

The first 500 ESAs will be awarded to participating students with special needs each year.

A recent Rasmussen poll commissioned by the conservative Alabama Policy Institute showed, by a 54-24% margin, Alabama voters believe parents have too little control over their children's education.

The Republican-controlled legislature approved the CHOOSE Act over objections from Democrats concerned about the negative impact of decreasing funding for public education.

One Tuscaloosa representative shared his concerns the legislation constitutes 'use of tax dollars to create separation.'

Most Democratic legislators voted against the bill, and were joined by some Republican legislators representing primarily rural districts, including Rep. Tracy Estes (R-Winfield), who stated concerns about the act's potential negative impact on rural public schools.

Franklin County Schools Superintendent of Education Greg Hamilton believes the CHOOSE Act's impact will be minimal in Franklin County.

"I'm not sure we are a good measuring stick. There aren't many private schools in our area, so rural Franklin County isn't a good source to gauge the impact of this act," Hamilton said.

Franklin County Schools' enrollment has remained close to 3,500 the last six years, a number Hamilton "is right about where we need it."

The Franklin County Schools system has strengthened in recent years when it comes to students wanting to enroll in a school outside their district. This is a large reason why its enrollment numbers have remained consistent after a spike in 2017 resulting from Russellville City Schools' implementation of a \$600 annual tuition for students who live outside the Russellville city limits.

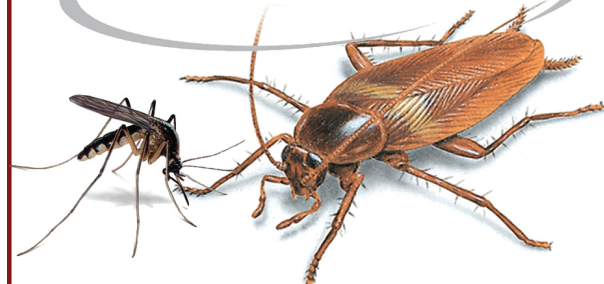
With federal funding approximately \$7,000 per child per school year, the tax credit in the CHOOSE Act is the same. While federal funding has always 'followed' the student from one school to another, the tax credit created a way for parents to receive a benefit even if their child

enrolls at a private school or is home schooled.

Although not a supporter of the legislation, Hamilton said the bill's passage wasn't a surprise to him.

"They've been trying to get it through every year I can remember, until they finally got the support needed to pass it," Hamilton said.

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'WOODRUFF,' From Page 1

mental in bringing free WiFi to downtown Russellville, which gave students a reliable source of broadband internet to complete school assignments during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Woodruff is committed to his pledge to have a District Two appointee on the Russellville City Schools Board of Education.

Since he took office, Woodruff has actively fought what he describes as wasteful spending and mismanagement in a local utility.

"Serving in elected office should be about listening to and responding to concerns of the

people you represent," Woodruff said. "Four years ago I was blessed to have the chance to representing the citizens of District Two. While we've addressed many of those concerns, there remains work to be done.

"We've seen job growth, infrastructure improvement, increased funding for our city's police and fire departments, all while improving the voice District Two has in city government," he added.

Woodruff was born and raised in Russellville and specifically, District Two. He is married to Margie Harmon Woodruff. They have two children and five grandchildren.



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Woodruff has owned his company, Petro Chemical Energy, for 26 years. 12 years ago, Woodruff moved his company headquarters to Russellville.

Woodruff served on the Russellville Electric Board for six years, including four as chairman. He's volunteered with the Russellville City Schools Education Foundation, the Russellville Booster Club and served on the board of the Russellville Dream Center.

If you have a question or concern for Woodruff, or would like a campaign sign or to get involved in the upcoming campaign, please call him at 256-577-0030.

Woodruff humbly asks for your vote in the 2025 City of Russellville Municipal Election.

Alabama municipal elections are set for Tuesday, August 26, 2025.

Managing your persistent fears and anxieties

Stan Popovich
Special to the FFP

Are you looking for all of the answers on how to reduce your persistent fears and anxieties?

Fear and anxiety can ruin your life if you do not know how to overcome it.

As a result, here is a brief list of techniques that a person can use to help manage their everyday anxieties, stresses, and fears.

1. Take your fears apart: When facing a current or upcoming task that overwhelms you with a lot of anxiety, divide the task into a series of smaller steps and then complete each of the smaller tasks one step at a time. Completing these smaller activities will make the stress more manageable and increases your chances of success.

2. Take a break: Sometimes we get stressed out when everything happens all at once. When this happens, take a deep breath and try to find something to do for a few minutes to get your mind off of the problem. A person can get some fresh air, listen to some music, or do an activity that will give them a fresh perspective on things.

3. Get all of the facts of the situation: Gathering the facts of a certain event can prevent us from relying on exaggerated and fearful assumptions. By focusing on the facts, a person can rely on what is reality and what is not. This is a great way to take control of your mental health.

4. Use Self-Visualization: Sometimes, we can get anxious over a task that we will have to perform in the near future. When this happens, visualize yourself doing the task in your mind. For instance, you have to play in the championship volleyball game in front of a large group of people in the next few days. Before the big day comes, imagine yourself playing the game in your mind. By doing this, you will be better prepared when the time comes.

5. You can't predict the future: While the consequences of a particular fear may seem real, there are usually other factors that cannot be anticipated and can affect the results of any situation. We may be ninety-nine percent correct in predicting the future, but all it takes is for that one percent to make a world of difference.

6. Think of a red stop sign: At times, a person might encounter a fearful thought that may be difficult to manage. When this happens, visualize a red stop sign, which can serve as a reminder to stop thinking about that thought. Regardless of how scary the thought may be, do not dwell on it. This technique is great in dealing with your negative thinking and will help reduce your fears.

7. Get some help: Sometimes, it helps to be able to talk to someone about your stressful situations. Talking to a trusted friend, counselor, or clergyman can give you additional advice and insights on how to deal with your current problem. Overcoming fear and anxiety takes practice. In time, you will become better able to deal with your stressful problems.

BIOGRAPHY

Stan is the author of "A Layman's Guide to Managing Fear" which covers a variety of techniques that can drastically improve your mental health. For more information, please visit Stan's website at <http://www.managingfear.com>



Regina Lawler Retirement Party!

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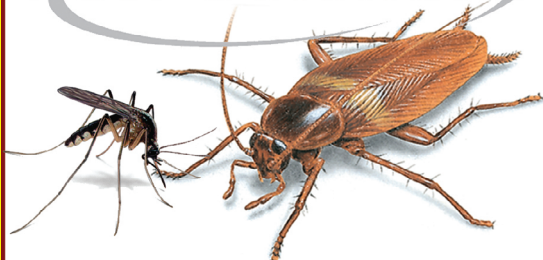
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 **G**ateway Church of God will be in a two day revival with Rev. Michael Rowan. Sunday Morning January 12th at 10:30 a.m. and Sunday Evening at 5:00 p.m. Monday Evening January 13th will begin at 6:30. Rev. Rowan is a Christian Comedian. Monday Evening he will be doing his Christian Comedy Show. You will not want to miss this. Please come out and bring your families. If you have any questions, please call 256-627-7935.

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Pilgrim's

After quarter century, Lawler to retire from Country Cottage Russellville

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When you work at the same place for more than a quarter century, it becomes a second home, with those you work with forming a second family.

When Regina Lawler goes to work on Friday, January 17th, it will be her final day as managing director of the Country Cottage in Russellville.

When the Cottage opened its doors on March 1, 1999, Lawler was part of the original staff, hired as a homemaker on the floor. A few years later, Lawler was promoted to residential services coordinator and eventually hired as managing director for the 27-room assisted living facility.

But the 72-year-old Lawler recently decided it was time for her to turn over the reins to Kim Homer, who will succeed Lawler as managing director once her certification is complete.

"I'm getting older and decided it's just time to stay home," Lawler said Friday. "I have a cousin who moved to Ft. Morgan, so I'm sure we'll go down there some."

A retirement reception for Lawler will be held Friday, January 17th at 2 p.m., at the Country Cottage, 900 N. Jackson Ave. The public is invited.



COURTESY PHOTO

Regina Lawler with some holiday visitors at the Country Cottage Russellville's Christmas Party.

Lawler and her husband Perry have lived in the Oak Hill subdivision for 52 years. They have one son, who will turn 50 this year. Lawler was raised in the Mount Hebron community.

Lawler is the last of the original employees who started with the Country Cottage in Russellville in 1999. But she's worked with Anita Howard for 13 years, Kim Boyles 12 years and Homer 12 years. And she considers each employee, as well as her residents, family.

"We have a really good group of ladies living here, and two fine men," Lawler said. "And you definitely get attached to the residents. You grow closer with some but I love all of them, as well as the people I'm blessed to work with every day."



While Lawler's passion for the Cottage residents has never changed, plenty of other things have during her 25-year tenure.

"The paperwork is still the same but now it's all done on the computer through the ALIs program. The girls have a table to use to mark off what they've done each day. So it's changed a little in how we do it, but not that much," Lawler said.

Through her 25 years, Lawler, her staff and residents, have endured severe weather events as well as the global COVID-19 pandemic.

"There have been times we've stayed here and slept on blow up mattresses, and of course COVID was a difficult time for our residents and their families," Lawler said.

Those difficulties aside, Lawler knows her life will be vastly different after January 17th when she says goodbye to her 'second home.'

"When I finally sit down and think about it and it finally soaks in, that's when it will probably hit me," Lawler said. "It will be strange not getting up and going to (the Cottage) every day, but I think I'll enjoy staying home, especially in the winter when it gets cold. But I'll definitely miss it."

And after 25 years, there's no doubt the Country Cottage employees and residents will miss Lawler as well.

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Hillcrest drops Golden Tigers in final tune-up before area play

Kadin Pounders
 Franklin Free Press

The Russellville High School varsity boys' basketball team dropped to 7-5 overall after a 10-point loss to visiting Hillcrest Tuscaloosa on Friday night. After trailing in the first half, Russellville took the lead but was unable to hold on to it as the Patriots won out in the end 64-54.

"You credit (Hillcrest)," Russellville head coach Patrick Odom, now in his 10th season in charge of the Golden Tigers, said. "They're a really good basketball team. If you look at what they've done this year, they've beaten some of the best in the state."

The Golden Tigers had a tough time rebounding against the Patriots, allowing for second chance baskets on the visitors' end, and the hosts didn't get every call they wanted, but Odom said he was proud of the energy his team displayed in the defeat.

"I love how we played," he said. "We didn't finish real well. You know, they amped up the physicality a little bit and I thought the game was— some fouls that were called early weren't called in there, which is frustrating. But love how we played, love how we competed. That's as high level (of basketball) as you're going to see, we just didn't finish

See, 'RV,' Page 13

Belgreen girls improve to 16-4 with victory over Hackleburg

Kadin Pounders
 Franklin Free Press

The Belgreen High School varsity girls' basketball team won one and lost one in its two games at a post-Christmas tournament hosted by Haleyville High School December 26-28.

On December 26th, the Lady Bulldogs rolled past Carbon Hill 71-30 before suffering just the team's fourth defeat of the season against Danville on December 28th, 64-56.

Belgreen had no problem dispatching the Lady Bulldogs of Carbon Hill to start the tourney. BHS jumped out to a 21-2 lead after the opening eight minutes, and then added another 20 points in the second quarter to take a 41-16 advantage into the halftime break.

Led by senior Dakota Green, who scored 11 of her 18 total points the first half, continued to

See, 'BELGREEN,' Page 12



COURTESY PHOTO

Belgreen's Makenna Fisher at the line.

Russellville girls' varsity splits pair in holiday tournament

Kadin Pounders
 Franklin Free Press

The Russellville High School varsity girls' basketball team went 1-1 at the West Morgan Holiday Classic, hosted by West Morgan High School December 27-30. The Lady Golden Tigers defeated Lexington 72-55 on Dec. 27 before falling to Clements in a close one 47-45 on Dec. 30.

After trailing 19-12 after the opening period against Lexington, Russellville went on a 21-10 run in the second quarter to take the lead and a 33-29 advantage into the intermission.

Led by 23 total points by sophomore Ella Copeland, the Lady Golden Tigers continued to outpace the Lady Bears in the second half. RHS outscored Lexington 20-15 in the third and then added another 19 points to the Lady Bears' 11 points in the final period of play.

Russellville's Angeleah Smith scored 13 points in the game and Jemma Moore contributed 10 total points, as well.

Against Clements a few days later the narrative was reversed for Russellville. The Lady Golden Tigers led after the opening eight minutes 17-7, but the Lady Colts shutout RHS in the second quarter to go up 22-17 at halftime.

In the second half, Russellville fought to narrow the deficit. The Lady Golden Tigers pulled within three points after the third, but in the end couldn't complete the job; Russellville fell by two points, 47-45, to drop to 5-8 on the season.

Moore led RHS with 14 points in the defeat. Copeland scored 13 points and Laila Hill added nine points.

Russellville's next contest will be its area-opener. The Lady Golden Tigers will host West Point at the Russellville Middle School gymnasium on January 7th.

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'BELGREEN,' From Page 11

dominate in the second half. BHS doubled Carbon Hill's nine points in the third quarter and then outscored CBHS 12-5 in the final period of play.

"Against Carbon Hill, we played well," Belgreen head coach Chad Green said. "I think everyone scored in that game."

Next to Dacota Green's 18 points, Belgreen's Lilliana Willingham added 12 points and Bryn Scott scored eight points in the win, the 14th of the season for the Lady Bulldogs.

Belgreen's runaway success against Carbon Hill, however, did n't—in terms of the result—carry over to its next game against the Danville Lady Hawks a couple days later, as the Lady Bulldogs fell to one of the top teams in Class 4A by eight points.

"Danville is a good team," Green said. "They're the No. 10-ranked 4A team, so it was good for us. They had a couple of good players that definitely hurt us."

"We scored well—we scored 56 points—but we just gave us too much defensively," the head coach added.

The two squads traded blows throughout the contest, with Belgreen taking an initial two-point lead after the first period. Danville regrouped in the second quarter and outscored the Lady Bulldogs 18-10 to take a 31-25 advantage into the break.

Belgreen once again came out strong to start the next period, outpacing Danville 18-16 in the third, but it wasn't enough for the Lady Bulldogs to retake the lead. The Lady Hawks 17-13 run in the fourth to close the game out and hand Belgreen its fourth defeat of the campaign—all of which have come against schools in Class 4A or higher.

"We wanted to beef up the competition this year," Green said. "Last year we had a good year in Class 1A. We went to the region finals, one game away from Birmingham. We knew we were stepping up to 2A, so thought we needed to make our schedule a little bit tougher, and we have."

"We've done well," he added. "Every coach wants to be undefeated, but I'm proud of my team. I'll be honest, from last year to this year, offensive-wise, we're better than we were last year. But defensive-wise, I don't think we're quite where we were last year, but hopefully we get there before the year ends."

Makenna Fisher was the Lady Bulldogs' top scorer in the defeat, dropping 18 points. Randi Terry added a season-high 12 points and Bryn Scott scored 10 points.

"Makenna Fisher had a good game," Green said.

"Randi came in in that game against Danville and had 12 big points for us. She rebounds, she's a good on-the-ball defender, so she's definitely been a great addition to our team," Green added. "Bryn has always been a good ball-handler and on-the-ball defender, but she's starting to score more this year and we're really pleased with that."

Belgreen had an opportunity to avenge the loss to Danville soon after, as the Lady Bulldogs took on the Lady Hawks again in their next game on January 2nd. BHS knocked off Danville 55-51 at Wallace State Community College. Fisher led the Lady Bulldogs with 15 points while Terry scored 14 and Willingham added 13 points.

Most recently, Belgreen traveled to Hackleburg and took down the Lady Panthers 46-37 to improve to 16-4 overall. Fisher once again led her team with 13 points in the victory.

**For updates on news and sports, visit us online at
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'RV,' From Page 11

real well tonight. Still, it's a great opportunity for us to get ready for area play.

"We had a chance to win this game," he added. "To be able to do that against elite competition, you gotta feel good about where your guys are and what we're doing."

Senior guard EJ King, who is averaging 30.9 points-per-game this season, led the Golden Tigers with a 31-point performance in the loss. Daniel Aycock finished with nine points off three three-pointers for RHS and Jah Williams ended the game with eight points.

Going into the Hillcrest game, Russellville was coming off a run of three games at the Bracy Invitational held at Deshler High School December 26-28. The Golden Tigers picked up a 72-49 win over Central on the 26th and routed South Lamar 70-31 on the 28th. In between those two victories, RHS fell to Brooks 51-48 on the 27th.

Odom said the Bracy Invitational was another chance for his squad to get better and see different looks.

"I feel like we've gotten better through this stretch," he said. "We played a lot of good people, and I think we've seen a lot of different styles of basketball that I think helps prepare you for the craziness of what you might see in an area game."

King led the Golden Tigers in scoring in each of their three games at the Bracy Invitational, averaging 35 points per. The all-state senior scored a season-high 39 points in Russellville's tournament-opening win over Central.

Williams also had a good tournament, scoring 10 points in each contest against South Lamar and Brooks.

The Golden Tigers will begin Class 5A Area 15 play at home in their next game on January 7th as the West Point Warriors come to Russellville.



COURTESY PHOTO

Russellville's EJ King drives the ball against Hillcrest.



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Four local student athletes sign with NWSCC to join cross-country team

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

Four Franklin County student-athletes signed to continue their cross country careers at Northwest Shoals Community College recently. Three runners from Russellville High School and a runner from Tharptown High School made their intention to compete at the junior college level for the Patriots known with official announcements over the last couple weeks.

From Russellville, Airielle Cooper, Jassenia Mateo, and Emily Martinez signed with the Patriots with Angel Garcia from Tharptown inking his signature, as well.

Cooper and Mateo both competed for the Golden Tigers at the AHSAA Class 5A Cross Country Championships at the end of the season. Cooper finished 77th in the state 5k race with a time of 23:59.55, while Mateo placed 100th with a time of 25:49.28. The performances by the duo helped the RHS girls to a seventh place finish overall.

Martinez's final race of the season came at the Northwest Alabama Championships where she finished her 5k race 109th with a time of 27:06.45, helping Russellville claim second place.

Garcia also raced in the AHSAA Cross Country Championships. He finished just outside the top 10 at 11th overall in the Class 1A-2A boys' 5k race, completing it in 17:44.37. The Wildcats finished 12th overall as a team in the championship standings.

The four student-athletes are joining a Northwest Shoals Community College cross country program that likes to pull from the talent in Franklin County. The Patriots 2023 men's and women's cross country squads featured six student-athletes that hail from Franklin County.

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UNA announces National Girls and Women in Sports Day Clinic for February 1

Mike Ezekiel
Submitted

FLORENCE, Ala. (January 6, 2025) – The University of North Alabama Department of Athletics will host a free youth clinic to celebrate National Girls and Women in Sports Day on Saturday, February 1 from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. at the UNA Rec Center.

The free clinic is sponsored by Blue Cross Blue Shield of Alabama and is open to ages 4-12.

“We are thrilled to host this clinic in celebration of National Girls & Women in Sports Day,” said Debbie Williams, UNA Associate Athletic Director for Business Affairs and Senior Woman Administrator. “It’s a fantastic opportunity for our female student-athletes to connect with young athletes in our community and share their passion for sports. This event emphasizes our commitment to empowering girls through athletics and developing meaningful connections between our university and the local community.”

All of UNA’s women’s sports programs, including student-athletes and coaches, will be involved in the camp. This includes women’s basketball, beach volleyball, indoor volleyball, cheer and dance, cross country, women’s golf, soccer, softball and women’s tennis.

“One of my favorite things as a coach is giving back to the community and creating opportunities for our youth to participate in sports and things they love,” said UNA head softball coach Ashley Cozart, who enters her 12th season in 2025. “Having this National Girls and Women in Sport Day Clinic will be a great day for coaches, student-athletes and the community. What a great day to celebrate our youth and create opportunities for them to connect, have fun and be themselves.”

This will be the same night that the UNA women’s basketball team hosts West Georgia at 5:30 p.m. inside CB&S Bank Arena. Fans are invited to attend and continue in UNA’s celebration of National Girls and Women in Sports.

NGWSD is an initiative created by the Women’s Sports Foundation. The annual observance is the first Wednesday of February during National Signing Day.

“National Girl’s & Women’s in Sports Day continues to highlight and spread awareness about the talent and excitement of women’s athletics, which is really encouraging for female student athletes like myself to see,” said Beth Ann Tucker, a four-year member of the UNA cross country program and an officer for UNA’s Student-Athlete Advisory Committee. “Being a female student athlete has been the most rewarding experience. Not only have I had the incredible opportunity to compete in the sport I love, but I have also been surrounded by talented, hardworking and inspiring women.”

For more information on North Alabama Athletics, visit www.roarlions.com and follow UNA Athletics on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

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RV City Council approves \$415,000 bid for large scale micro-surfacing paving project

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Russellville City Council approved a \$415,381.60 bid for a large-scale micro-surfacing paving project, part of a more than \$4 million infrastructure improvement package, the largest paving project in city history.

The council accepted the lowest responsible bid from Florence-based Vulcan Materials Asphalt and Construction, LLC. The city received two bids, Vulcan and Wiregrass Construction out of Birmingham.

The project is expected to begin this spring, weather permitting.

The action was approved at the council's January 6th meeting. In other agenda items, the council:

—approved spending the city's remaining American Rescue Plan Act funds, in the amount of \$288,347.03, for a second Sutphen Heavy Duty Custom Pumper for the Russellville Fire Department.

—declared a 2007 Spartan Rescue Pumper, 2007 Emergency One Spartan Pumper and a 2003 Spartan Ladder Truck as surplus property and authorized the sale of the same through GovDeals or through advertisement of bids, with the condition the vehicles shall not be sold until the new fire vehicles are delivered to the city.

—approved a work project service agreement between the City of Russellville and the Alabama Department of Corrections to provide inmate labor for a 12-month period, for the Russellville Street Department.

—renewed an annual workers' compensation agreement with the Alabama Municipal Workers Compensation Fund, Inc., with a total premium of \$58,213.


—accepted a bid of 3.74% fixed interest for two years on a \$500,000 unsecured line of credit for the City of Russellville. This was the lowest interest rate submitted on the bid.

—declared a vacancy for a patrol officer in the Russellville Police Department and agreed to extend the application deadline to January 24, 2025.

—appointed Kathy Hall and James Griffin to the Russellville Civil Service Board.

—approved an updated volunteer list for the Russellville Fire Department with 20 names, including 11 nonpaid volunteers. Those approved include: Mark Wilson, Ken Shannon, Ayden Presley, Caleb Mansell, Rodney McAnally, Dustin Wright, Austin Gentry and Matt Murray. Non paid volunteers include John James, Robbie Richardson, Joel Bridgewater, James Michael Horton, Brian Shackelford, Tim Guinn, Mike Conner, Norman Lier, Kyle Palmer, Bill Fuller, Roger Cassel, Johnathan Pace and Neil Willis.

The next regular meeting of the Russellville City Council will be January 21, 2025, with work session at 6 p.m., and meeting to follow.



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