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Russellville Hospital CEO address city council to participate in new Alabama rural hospital funding program

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

With an increasing number of Alabama's 52 rural hospitals at financial risk, the need for additional funding from the Alabama Legislature has been largely unsuccessful.

But a new program passed by the Legislature this year will at least provide an avenue for those rural hospitals to receive up to \$750,000 each year, though the source of those funds won't come from the state.

The Rural Hospital Investment Program Act allows a rural hospital to receive funds directly through

donations made by either individuals or business, up to a capped amount each year.

The benefit for donors is a dollar-for-dollar credit off their state income tax obligation. Donors will make contributions through the official Rural Hospital Investment Program website. Donation applications are completed through this website and sent to the Alabama Department of Revenue. Donors will be able to choose their local rural hospital from the list of eligible hospitals.

If your local hospital has met its individual cap, you may still make a donation to another eligible rural

See 'HOSPITAL,' Page 4

Latest acquisition brings CB&S Bank's assets to \$3.0 billion

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

While Russellville-based CB&S Bank continues its meteoric growth, CEO Mike Ross says that expansion has not, and will not, ever be more important than the bank's hometown, where it began almost 120 years ago.

CB&S Bank' latest acquisition is Trenton, Georgia, based Citizens Bank & Trust, a three-branch bank with more than \$128.5 million in assets.

The agreement was signed November 18, 2025, with the transaction expected to close in the first quarter of 2026, pending regulatory and shareholder approvals.

This merger will bring CB&S Bank's assets to a staggering \$3 billion. The

bank operates 55 branches in Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee and Georgia.

"I would attribute one of the biggest secrets to the success of our group is we maintain that small town service orientation. If we had not done that, our growth would not be nearly as robust it has been," Ross said.

"As we continue to grow and things change in our business, that customer service attitude will never change. That's been fundamental to our core values for many, many years and that will not change," he added.

CB&S Bank's past acquisitions have included several struggling banks but with Citizens Bank & Trust, Ross said CB&S brings into its family a high-performing bank on sound financial footing.

See 'CB&S,' Page 4

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Pamela "Pam" Lucretia Mancell Tackett, age 51, of Russellville, passed away on Wednesday, December 3, 2025. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted the family.

Mary Jo Motes, age 83, of Phil Campbell, passed from this life on Monday, December 1, 2025, at Burns Nursing Home. Spry Memorial Chapel assisted the family.

Margaret Rose Reeves, 85, of Vina passed away Thursday, December 4, 2025, at Terrace Manor Nursing Home, Russellville, AL. Deaton Funeral Home assisted the family.

Charles Mitch Lane, 64, of Russellville passed away on December 1, 2025. Service was held on Friday, December 5, 2025. Pinkard Funeral Home assisted with the preparations.

Gwendolyn Martin Holland, 89, passed away Monday, December 1, 2025 at North Mississippi Medical Center, Tupelo, MS. Deaton Funeral Home assisted the family.



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Correction Policy

The Franklin Free Press strives for excellence and accuracy, and we will be pleased to correct any error in our newspaper. To request a correction or clarification, call or e-mail our office.

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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Back to the Bible by Larsen Plyler:

Matthew 9:35-10:4

Jesus continued to teach and heal. The crowds flocked to Him. When He saw them, He was moved to compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Here Jesus makes a connection to Ezekiel 34. There God condemned the leaders of Israel because they took advantage of the people. But, He promised that He would come as the Shepherd. He would, in a new King David (pointing toward Jesus) shepherd His people. Jesus looked at the crowds in His day and saw that they were still being treated like the people of Ezekiel's day. They had been harassed by their leadership and were helpless. But, Jesus arrived to be the Shepherd (fulfilling the promise of God and a new King David because He was God with us).

He told his disciples that the harvest was plentiful, but there were few laborers to do the work. So, they needed to pray for laborers.

Then, Jesus called 12 of his disciples and gave them authority over demons, diseases, and afflictions. Matthew then lists the name of the 12 disciples who would be the apostles. The word apostle means "one sent" and they would be Jesus' official representatives in His work and His teaching.

Lessons to Learn:

See Jesus' concern for the people. He knew how the leaders were treating them. He knew that they lacked the guidance they so desperately needed. Later He will describe Himself as the Good Shepherd because He was going to lay down His life for the sheep (see John 10).

Consider the work that can be done. Jesus saw the crowds that needed help. There are plenty of people still who need the gospel that Jesus was proclaiming. We need to embrace Jesus' teaching and then be ready to share the message with others. We also need to be praying for the Lord's work all over the globe so that the Lord will have laborers to bring in the harvest wherever it may be.

See the role of the apostles. This will be a note that we will come back to throughout the book of Matthew. We might think of the apostles as ambassadors. Jesus entrusted them with the authority that He had over demons, diseases, and afflictions. They were going to be "sent out" (v. 5) to proclaim the same message of Jesus. People's response to them indicated where they stood in relation to the Lord (see Matt. 10:14-15). In order to know about Jesus and His will we depend on the apostles. For example, Matthew, who wrote the gospel account we're studying, was an apostle. Also, consider Matthew 28:18-20, the last verses of this gospel account to see what the apostles were commissioned to do.

Tune in to 100.7 WGOL Sunday at 8:30am for our Back to the Bible Radio Program.

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‘HOSPITAL,’ from Page 1

hospital on the list and still receive the state tax credit. The donation cap in 2026 per hospital is \$750,000. It increases to \$1,000,000 in 2027 and \$1,250,000 in 2028, where it will remain.

Caps for individual donors are \$15,000 per year. A married couple filing jointly has a \$30,000 donation limit. Corporate caps are \$500,000 and for pass through entities, \$450,000 each year.

There is a catch, though, for a rural hospital to be eligible for the program. The statute states that a rural hospital shall only be eligible for assistance through the Rural Hospital Investment Program in a year where at least 10% of the assistance provided to the hospital comes from the local governing body.

That’s why Russellville Hospital CEO Chris Ware requested time to address the Russellville City Council at its December 1st meeting. The local governing body’s assistance may be in the form of direct tax revenue, budget appropriations, in-kind services or other financial assistance.

And if local governing body is already providing financial assistance to its local rural hospital, that assistance will qualify. It doesn’t have to be new financial assistance.

And in-kind assistance cannot count more than 5% of the total required matching funds.

Without this local match, a rural hospital is ineligible to benefit from the program.

“The Alabama Hospital Association worked tirelessly to get funds,” Ware told the council. “This program is designed to strengthen the stability of rural hospitals and these funds will help Russellville Hospital continue its vital role in the Russellville community.”

In order for Russellville Hospital to receive the maximum \$750,000 assistance, the local governing body must allocate \$75,000 in 2026, 10% of that cap.

“We are asking you to match that 10% amount each year,” Ware told the council. “Without it, we can’t participate in the program and receive vital assistance that’s otherwise available.”

While the council took no official action on Ware’s request, council members said they are interested in donating the 10% match. Russellville City Attorney Danny McDowell was asked by the council to research the new law and how the city would participate, and in what amount.

“This is an important program that can provide essential funding for our local hospital. I support our participation and also plan to donate personally and/or through my business,” Woodruff said.

Although Woodruff supports the proposal, he said he would not be able to vote on it because his company has an existing business relationship with Russellville Hospital and it would be a conflict of interest.

That’s why he plans to make a business and/or personal donation though.

For more information on the Rural Hospital Investment Program Act, visit the Alabama Department of Revenue website, www.revenue.alabama.gov.

‘CB&S,’ from Page 1

Citizens Bank & Trust was founded in 1988 and has built a solid reputation as a community bank with a long history of serving local families and businesses across northwest Georgia and northeast Alabama.

“They are a very profitable bank and we’re excited about them becoming part of our team,” Ross said. “We try to focus on banks headquartered in relatively small towns. We’re a small town bank ourselves. We just happen to be a large small town bank and we think like a large bank.”

“We’ll try as best we can to allow them to continue doing things that have made them successful in their community, but with some additional options not currently offered,” he added.

Ross said Citizens Bank & Trust will now be able to make larger loans, and our financial services business will provide insurance and retail brokerage to their customers. CB&S Bank owns a secondary mortgage business and that makes the market more accessible with more choices in mortgage type products as well.

“Those options are not currently available today, so it will add earl value to their customers,” Ross said. “We have some treasury management product offerings Citizens Bank & Trust does not have today. They’re an out-standing bank, but these products we’ve developed because we’re larger in size.”

Ross said it’s a learning lesson each time CB&S acquires another bank. With Citizens Bank & Trust, its non-mortgage consumer lending business is thriving, Ross said.

“Our board recognizes they do some things in consumer lending areas where we can learn from them and do a better job in that area. We’re looking forward as we start integration talks about learning more about how they do that,” Ross said.

CB&S Bank’s aggressive acquisition strategy has not come at the sacrifice of serving Franklin County customers, though.

“We watch closely how we perform in each market. One thing we’re really proud of our team for is that with this growth, we continue to gain market share in Franklin County. Our core customers are the reason we’re in business in the first place and we’re not going to forget that,” Ross said.

Trenton’s proximity to Chattanooga, Tenn., strengthens CB&S’ presence in the Chattanooga market. Chattanooga is located between the high-growth markets of Nashville and Atlanta and is supported by a regional workforce exceeding 295,000 and a strong pipeline of 12,000 university students.

“We are excited about this partnership and the opportunities it will bring to our customers and employees,” said Chris Powell, CEO of Citizens Bank & Trust. “Joining the CB&S Bank family provides us with additional resources, technology and scale to continue providing exceptional service across our markets.”



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Russellville City Council approves final inspection of Harrison Avenue box culvert project

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Russellville City Council authorized some additional shotcrete work for the recently completed Harrison Avenue box culvert project at a short meeting held December 1st.

District One Councilman David Palmer said the shotcrete will reinforce and strengthen the rocks around the new culvert.

The council also approved the final letter of inspection and accepted the contractor portion of the project Monday. The project was completed November 20th with the contractor fulfilling all plans and specification. The shotcrete installation was not part of that contract. Palmer said he expects the additional work will come at a nominal cost to the city.

Palmer abstained from the vote due to his employment with CivilGroup, the principal engineering firm on the box culvert project.

In other agenda items at the December 1st meeting, the council:

- approved the hiring of Brenda Sombra as a patrol officer in the Russellville Police Department.
- approved a 36-month lease with PSI for a copier/printer for the Russellville Fire Department
- heard from Michelle Nelson, who owns property located at 64 Hamilton St. SW, seeking clarification on the city ordinance regarding inoperable vehicles.

Nelson said she has received notice of compliance violations based on several vehicles in her yard, including her son's race cars that are not street legal, a truck and a mini-bus she plans to use to start a local business.

Russellville Police Chief Chris Hargett said the ordinance requires all vehicles to be tagged, insured and operable.

Nelson questioned the applicability of the ordinance to the race cars, which were on trailers and are not used on public roadways. She asked for additional time to tag and insure the mini-bus once she has enough funding to start the new business.


"The city keeps citing me but the (municipal court) judge said the race cars didn't have to be tagged or insured," Nelson said. "If I'm not clear on something, I ask for clarification so I do understand what the ordinance says."

City attorney Danny McDowell said he would arrange a meeting with Nelson and RPD Compliance Officer Chad Sheffield to discuss the ordinance in more detail.

—heard a report from Russellville Hospital CEO regarding Alabama's new Rural Hospital Investment Program, that takes effect in 2026. The program allows businesses and individuals to offset their state tax in an amount equal to their donation to the hospital.

The Alabama Legislature passed the law as a way to provide much-needed funding to Alabama's rural hospitals. In order for the hospital to participate, at least 10% of funds must come from local government.

The next regular meeting of the Russellville City Council is December 15, 2025, with work session at 6 p.m., and meeting to follow.



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State Senate, Congressional candidates meet with Franklin County Democrats

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Franklin County Democratic Executive Committee hosted two candidates seeking office in the 2026 Alabama Democratic Primary at its December 9th meeting.

Bobby Martin Jr., a candidate for Alabama State Senate District 6 and Amanda Pusczek, candidate for United States Congress, Congressional District 4, were scheduled to meet with local Democrats at their Tuesday night meeting. The meeting is at Northwest-Shoals Community College, Phil Campbell campus, from 6:30-8 p.m., next Tuesday. The public is invited to attend.

Martin, a pastor and a father, describes himself as someone who 'has lived the realities that so many families across our district are facing right now' as a driving force for his candidacy.

The winner of the May 19, 2026, Democratic Primary for Alabama House District 6 will face the Republican nominee in next November's general election.

Incumbent District 6 State Senator Larry Stutts has announced he will be seeking a fourth term representing the district, which includes Colbert, Franklin and a portion of Limestone Counties.

Martin said he is concerned about new industries with high-paying jobs 'coming to other parts of the state and consistently skipping District 6.'

His campaign will have its foundation on six issues: Attracting and retaining good-paying jobs, making it possible for working families to afford homes and build stability, eliminating property taxes on primary residences, eliminating state income tax for those earning under \$100,000, creating new revenue and jobs through an Alabama-grown, Alabama-taxed cannabis program using the ABC model and lowering utility costs and increasing accountability.

Pusczek, a Missouri native who moved to Alabama with her mother in 1996, earned an associate degree in Nursing from Calhoun Community College in 2008. Her biography states she focuses on psychiatric nursing and mental health advocacy.

In 2020, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pusczek traveled to New York City, serving on the front lines while completing her bachelor's degree in Nursing with an emphasis on scholarly analysis.

A self-described openly queer woman, Pusczek and her spouse Trever live in Cullman. She cites Alabama's 'growing restrictions on healthcare and reproductive rights that make it nearly impossible for her and Trever to start the family they dreamed of,' a driving force in her decision to seek the Democratic nomination for Alabama's Fourth Congressional District.

After voting last November, Pusczek said she was frustrated by a ballot full of uncontested seats with no options for voters.

"If no one was going to fight for women, for queer people, for working families, and for access to healthcare, then I would," Pusczek said on her website www.amandaforalabama.com.

She's running for Congress to bring 'science, empathy and accountability back to Washington—and to ensure that every Alabamian has the freedom, dignity and opportunity they deserve.'

The winner of the May 19, 2026, Democratic Primary will face the Republican nominee for United States Congress, Fourth Congressional District, in November.

Veteran Congressman Robert Aderholt, who has represented Alabama's Fourth District since 1997. He has announced plans to seek another term in 2026.

Neighbors said it is vital for Democrats to have candidates in all elections next year.

"Thank you both, Mr. Martin and Ms. Pusczek, for standing up when it would have been easier to sit down. Thank you for refusing to accept the status quo and for daring to imagine a better future for all of us," Neighbors said in announcing the candidates' December 9th visit to Franklin County.

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1865 Waterloo Road, Russellville, Al., 35653, for the State of Alabama and the City of Russellville, the Russellville City Board of Education, and have requested final settlement of said Contract. All persons having any claim for labor, materials, or otherwise in connection with this project should immediately notify Ward Scott, Morris Architecture, Inc., 1606 Paul Bryant Drive, Tuscaloosa, Al., 35401, (205)345-6110.

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Phil Campbell Masonic Lodge hosts Christmas party for underprivileged children

*John Pilati
Franklin Free Press*

Some Phil Campbell area kids were the guests of honor at a Saturday morning Christmas party hosted by Phil Campbell Masonic Lodge #880.

For the second consecutive year, the Lodge made a donation through Franklin County Schools to help some underprivileged students. The students enjoyed a Christmas meal at the Lodge and were surprised by guest appearances from Santa Claus and the Grinch.

Past Master Greg Williams presented a \$1,000 donation from the Lodge to Jennifer West, Mental Health Services Coordinator for Franklin County Schools. The donation will be used to help ensure these children enjoy a Christmas with some gifts under the tree.

"We did this last year, too," Williams said. "We wanted to help some underprivileged kids in our community and Jennifer came up with the list of students to participate."

Williams stood in for Worshipful Master Robert Parrish, who had a prior commitment at the time the check was presented.

Lodge #880 raised funds for the donation through raffles it held during the past year. They involve Lodge member selling chances to win various guns, with proceeds used to benefit the community.

The next raffle will be held at the Phil Campbell Festival next June. Chances are sold for \$5 or five for \$20 and are available from any Phil Campbell Lodge member, Williams said.

Phil Campbell Masonic Lodge Past Master Greg Williams presents a donation to Jennifer West, Mental Health Services Coordinator for Franklin County Schools, to help local kids have a special Christmas. (Courtesy photo)



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Russellville native Gaston ends 32-year run as Mountain Brook City Manager

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

When Russellville native Sam Gaston retired in November from his position as Mountain Brook City Manager, he ended a 32-year run as the city's longest serving city manager.

Gaston was hired in 1993 by a split vote of the Mountain Brook City Council. To survive a politically-tied career through eight municipal elections is a rarity, indeed, and his tenure was much longer than he expected when he was hired.

"Mountain Brook was the first city in the state to have a city manager when it was incorporated in 1942," Gaston told the *FFP*. "You work for the entire governing body. At Mountain Brook, we have our share of ego and opinion but not of nasty politics."

"The average tenure of a city or county manager is between 7-8 years. I thought I'd be there for that same range of time, but the job continued to be fun. We were doing exciting things and building a great staff, so I lasted 32 years and the job always remained enjoyable," he added.

In Mountain Brook, the mayor and city council are unpaid positions. It was The full-time city manager works for a part-time, volunteer mayor and council that relies on the manager to navigate through the town's municipal code and ordinances, handle staffing decisions and citizen complaints, supervise all city departments and explain why certain things can or can't be done.

Gaston's passion for municipal government work really grew when he interned with the Northwest Alabama Council of Local Governments under Jim Price, while attending Northwest Alabama State Junior College.

"He was a real role model and mentor for me. That internship cemented my decision to pursue this as my career. And meeting a man named Gary Roberts, who was hired as Tuscumbia City Manager, allowed me to learn what a city manager did and he was such an inspiration to me," Gaston said.

If not for the political turbulence of his hometown, though, Gaston might have never made his way to Mountain Brook.

After earning his undergraduate degree in Public Administration from Auburn, and his Master's in Public Administration from Auburn University Montgomery, Gaston had the opportunity to return to Russellville as city clerk. He lasted only nine months on the job.

"I found out at a young age of 23 how political my hometown could be. They had an election that summer and there were a lot of changes. It was touch and go for several months, then (the new administration) went in a different direction," Gaston said.

Gaston landed a job as city planner in Decatur, and went on to municipal jobs in Gulf Shores and Anniston before he wanted more 'big picture' work, as he describes it. So Gaston accepted his first city manager position in Powder Springs, Georgia, where he remained until the Mountain Brook position came open.

And Gaston wasn't alone in following the Russellville-to-Mountain Brook professional pathway.

At one time, incredibly, there were four men from Russellville serving in leadership positions for the City of Mountain Brook. Don James served on the Mountain Brook School Board, including a term as President. Jim Felton was the first Community Education Director for Mountain Brook and Tim Norris was the Mountain Brook High School Principal and later, Assistant Superintendent of Mountain Brook City Schools.

"The small-town values I acquired growing up in Russellville helped shape who I am today, and who I became over time. The example my parents (Carl and Ruth Gaston), grandparents and other immediate family members made helping and serving others with honesty and integrity as their guidepost along with their spiritual values," Gaston said. "Those things left big impressions on me."

Now that he's 'retired,' Gaston still finds a way to serve. As a senior advisor for the International City-County Management Association (ICMA), Gaston serves as a volunteer mentor/coach to help city managers or aid cities in filling a city manager vacancy.

"There are three cities in the Birmingham area with new mayors. I'm working to help them hire a city manager or to make decisions in their new positions. I've tried my whole career to mentor, help and encourage other people and that won't stop with my retirement," Gaston said.

His retirement plans also include doing some traveling with his wife of 44 years, Debby, volunteering as a board member of the North Shelby County Library and spending more time with his children and grandchildren.

He and Debby have two children, Bethany Sheffield (Brad) and Hayden (Whitney), and four grandchildren.

At his final Mountain Brook City Council meeting as City Manager, Gaston was recognized for his 32 years of public service.

At a reception following the meeting, Russellville native Kitty Rogers Brown presented Gaston with a proclamation from Russellville Mayor David Grissom in honor of Gaston's years distinguished public service and leadership.

"Sam is just a great person. He's done an outstanding job as City Manager in Mountain Brook, where he embodies the highest standards of public service, doing so with integrity, foresight and a heart of the people he served," Grissom said.

"So it was my honor to recognize this 1974 Russellville High School graduate with a mayoral proclamation," Grissom added.

The Mountain Brook City Council declared November 10th to be Sam Gaston Day and the city's council chamber was renamed in his honor.



Sam Gaston proudly displays the Mayoral Proclamation signed by Russellville Mayor David Grissom honoring Gaston's distinguished career in public service. (Courtesy photo)



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Red Bay lands eight on All-Region Team, Jeffreys named region's Co-Coach of the Year

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

Eight players from this season's Red Bay High School varsity football team were tapped for the Class 2A All-Region 8 Team, it was announced on Wednesday. Red Bay head coach Tyler Jeffreys was named the region's Co-Coach of the Year along with Lexington's Brett Mask.

The eight players selected for the All-Region team were senior running back and linebacker Jaxon Vinson, who rushed for over 2,000 yards and scored 27 touchdowns; senior quarterback Jeremiah Thorne, who threw for 11 touchdowns and 1,293 yards; senior fullback Ayden Pruitt; sophomore wide receiver Davien Colburn, the team's leader in receiving yards and receiving touchdowns; senior offensive lineman Rhett Lockhart; junior defensive back Jaxson Swann; sophomore defensive lineman Hayden Sartain; and junior offensive lineman Carson McGee.

"I'm proud of all our kids' efforts this year. They've worked extremely hard and I'm excited they were chosen," said Jeffreys, who led his team to the program's first region title in five years in his first season with the Tigers.

"As for me, I just appreciate that opportunity

See, 'RED BAY,' Page 12

Russellville volleyball's Hill to continue career with nascent NWSCC program

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

One of the most prolific offensive threats in the history of Russellville High School volleyball has determined where she will be taking her talents after graduation next spring.

The Lady Golden Tigers' senior outside hitter Laila Hill signed with the up-and-coming Northwest Shoals Community College volleyball program—just wrapping up its first season after being reestablished—it was announced on Monday.

Hill led Russellville in kills her junior and senior campaigns and set the program record for kills in a season this past year with 450. Hill, one of just two seniors on the squad, helped propel the Lady Golden Tigers to one of the best seasons in program history in her final year: RHS won a program-record 41 games and captured the first area tournament championship in program history on the way to the second round of the AHSAA North Regional Tournament.

For her efforts, Hill received *Franklin Free Press* All-Franklin County First Team recognition for the second straight year, and she was named an Alabama High School Volleyball Coaches Association Class 5A All-State Honorable Mention.

"I'm incredibly proud of Laila for committing to further her academics and athletic journey at Northwest Shoals Community College," Russellville head coach Madison Lamon said. "Her hard work and dedication have been evident this season, and seeing her hard work pay off is truly amazing. She has set a remarkable example for her teammates, and I have no doubt she'll continue to excel and make an impact both on and off the court. She is so

See, 'HILL,' Page 13

Belgreen, Russellville grab a game each in basketball doubleheader

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

The Belgreen High School and Russellville High School varsity girls' and boys' basketball teams met on the hardwood December 2 and each school came away with a victory apiece. Russellville, the visitor in the contests, secured a 72-62 win in the girls' game, while the Belgreen boys toppled the Golden Tigers 45-38.

The game between the Lady Bulldogs and the Lady Golden Tigers was a back-and-forth affair with multiple lead changes. Ultimately it was RHS, which trailed by a point heading into the fourth quarter, that overtook BHS and won by a 10-point margin.

To start the contest, the hosts jumped out to a 13-8 lead which they took into the second quarter. Russellville rebounded in the next period, though, outscoring Belgreen 22-13 to take a 30-26 advantage into the halftime break.

Coming out of the locker room, Belgreen, led by a 10-point period from Randi Terry and nine points from Jemma Moore, found another offensive surge and won the third quarter 26-21 to retake the lead, 52-51.

In the end, however, it was RHS that finished strongest. In the fourth, the Lady Golden Tigers matched their total from the third period—21 points—while holding the Lady Bulldogs to just 10.

Russellville guard Ella Copeland, who reached the 1,500 career points milestone during the contest, took over in the second half and scored 25 of her 31 total points in the final 16 minutes of play to help lead the Lady Golden Tigers to victory.

Three other players also reached double digits for RHS: Angeleah Smith and Laila Hill each scored 12 points and Sadie Odom added 10.

For Belgreen, Terry finished as the team's top scorer in the game with 18 points. Moore also

See, 'DOUBLEHEADER,' Page 12

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'RED BAY,' from Page 11

and give all the credit to our staff and kids," he added.

Jeffreys was assisted by Jamie Purser, Joseph Boyd, Jason Vinson, Taylor Hamilton, Dale Jeffreys, Chris Daily, and Chad Holcombe.

'DOUBLEHEADER,' from Page 11

finished in double figures with 12 points.

Russellville's girls improved to 5-3 with the win while Belgreen dropped to 5-3 overall.

In the nightcap, Belgreen's boys defeated Russellville by seven points to improve to 4-3 on the year.

The Bulldogs led throughout the low-scoring affair. Holding a 16-11 advantage after the opening eight minutes, BHS took a 27-19 lead into the halftime break.

In the third quarter, Russellville, led by a six-point period from Daniel Aycock, managed to cut the deficit to two points by doubling up on Belgreen 12-6. But the hosts took care of business in the final period, outscoring the Golden Tigers 12-7 to win the game 45-38.

Sir Williams, with 16 points, was the top scorer for Russellville in the loss. Aycock finished with 11 points for the Golden Tigers, who dropped to 1-3 this season.

The Bulldogs' Jake Dill and Jonathan Mendoza both had game-high 17-point performances to propel BHS to victory over their Class 5A opponent.



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'HILL' from Page 11

deserving, and we cannot wait to watch and cheer her on next year!"

In its first season back, NWSCC finished with a 9-25 overall record and a 2-12 record in the Alabama Community College Conference. Hill will certainly be a welcome addition to the nascent Patriots volleyball program when she gets there.

"Standing at 6'2", Laila Hill from Russellville High School is officially joining our front-row firepower," it was stated on the Northwest Shoals Volleyball Facebook post announcing Hill's signing. "A dynamic (outside hitter/opposite) with a heavy arm and huge presence at the net, Laila brings size, grit, and a competitive edge that will elevate our offense immediately."



Russellville High School volleyball senior Laila Hill during a game against Phil Campbell.

Spoils split in Belgreen-Red Bay varsity basketball doubleheader

Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press

The spoils were split when Belgreen High School and Red Bay High School met in girls' and boys' varsity basketball action on Thursday night.

Traveling to Red Bay, Belgreen's girls got a big win over the Lady Tigers, 63-28; but Red Bay's boys' team were able to return the favor in the nightcap, beating the Bulldogs 56-38.

In the girls' game, it was all Belgreen as the Lady Bulldogs jumped out to an early 19-7 lead at the end of the opening period. The visitors extended their lead by 20 points at halftime and continued to widen the gap until the final buzzer sounded.

Led by a game-high 12 points from Lilliana Willingham and 11 points from Makenna Fisher, 10 different Lady Bulldogs scored a basket in the win over Red Bay.

The Lady Tigers were led by seven points from Julianna Eaton in the loss. Gracie Edgmon, Katlyn Lindley, and DaRilee Colburn each had five points for RBHS.

The result improved Belgreen's record to 6-3 while Red Bay dropped to 1-6.

In the proceeding boys' game, Belgreen and Red Bay played it close for the first 16 minutes, but the hosts were able to open up a commanding lead in the third quarter and stretched it to 18 points by the end of regulation.

A 10-point first quarter by Red Bay's Khalil Luster, who ended his night with a game-high 28 points, saw the Tigers up 11-7 at the end of the first quarter. Then in the second quarter, it was Belgreen's Jake Dill's turn to score nine points as the Bulldogs and Tigers battled basket for basket before the half. At the break, RBHS maintained its four-point advantage, 23-19.

In the second half, Red Bay used a 20-point third quarter to ultimately propel the team to the win. Bryant Harris hit two big threes and Luster gave Red Bay eight points in the third as the Tigers outscored BHS 20-9 to open up a 43-28 lead heading into the final eight minutes.

Red Bay outdid Belgreen again in the fourth quarter, 13-10, to cruise to a 56-38 win.

To go with Luster's 28 points, senior Jaxon Vinson added 12 points for the Tigers. Dill finished with a team-high 14 points for the Bulldogs in the defeat and Gabe Estrada added nine.

With the win, the Tigers improved to 5-3; the Bulldogs dropped to .500 with a 4-4 record.

Up next for Red Bay is a doubleheader at state-line rival Belmont on Friday, December 5. Belgreen's teams are next set to travel to Russellville on December 9.



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14 Golden Tigers receive Class 5A All-Region 7 Team recognition

*Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press*

The 2025 Class 5A All-Region 7 Team consists of 14 Russellville High School football players—10 Golden Tigers on the First Team and four Honorable Mentions. The announcement was made on Wednesday.

Highlighting the All-Region First Team for Russellville is sophomore quarterback Whit Goodwin, who was also named the Offensive Skill MVP for the region. Goodwin completed his second season as the starting QB at RHS with 2,120 yards passing, 21 passing touchdowns, a .636 completion percentage, 518 yards rushing, and a team-high nine rushing touchdowns.

The Golden Tiger signal-caller is joined on the First Team by senior receiver Connor Devaney, who led the team with 643 yards receiving and five touchdown receptions; senior wide receiver Bryson Cooper, who also had five touchdown catches; senior receiver and safety Ben Pounders; senior offensive lineman Tyrese Wilson; junior linebacker Kiefer Hallmark, who ended his campaign with a team-high 95 solo tackles; junior linebacker and tight end Daniel Aycock; junior running back Tarus Davis; sophomore linebacker Braxton Duncan, Russellville's leading tackler with 147 total takedowns; and sophomore defensive back Darron Jones, who had four interceptions, two of which he returned for touchdowns.

Russellville's All-Region Honorable Mentions were senior safety Malaki Groce, senior receiver and defensive back Houston Askew, senior defensive lineman Andres Gaspar, and junior defensive lineman Patrick Johnson, RHS' sacks leader in 2025.

"It's great to see these guys get recognized for their on-field production," Russellville head coach Dustin Goodwin told the Franklin Free Press. "I know the first thing any one of them would say to anyone asking about the honor is that they couldn't have done it without their teammates."

Russellville finished the 2025 season in the second round of the AHSAA Class 5A playoffs with a 7-5 overall record. The Golden Tigers were runner-up in Region 7 with a 5-1 record.

Tharptown softball camp a foundation for building successful program

*John Pilati
Franklin Free Press*

Tharptown High School's varsity softball coach Jonathan Jones knows that building a successful program begins well before his players reach high school.

That was the motivation for Jones and his team to hold a recent softball camp for students in the 3rd-6th grade—to generate momentum for younger students.

"We hope to keep growing our camp each year," Jones said. "Our youth programs are the lifeblood to our school program and we want to thank all the people who have helped us with our youth programs the last few years."

The two-day camp focused on fundamentals, including footwork, throwing and fielding, hitting mechanics and base running. The camp was held November 6th-7th on the school's football/soccer practice field due to ongoing construction as a new turf surface is installed on the softball field.

The Wildcats made the Regional Tournament last season and Jones hopes his team will build off that success this spring.

He expressed his appreciation to all the kids who attended the camp and the parents who supported it.

Tharptown will host an umpires tournament on February 14th as a kickoff to the 2026 season.



Campers from the recent Tharptown softball camp held November 6th-7th (Courtesy photo)

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#11 Tulane at #6 Ole Miss
December 20, 2025 | 2:30 PM CT

#12 James Madison at #5 Oregon
December 20, 2025 | 6:30 PM ET

SECOND ROUND

#2 Ohio State vs. Texas A&M/Miami
Goodyear Cotton Bowl Classic | December 31, 2025

#4 Texas Tech vs. Oregon/James Madison
Capital One Orange Bowl | January 1, 2026

#1 Indiana vs. Oklahoma/Alabama
The Rose Bowl Game | January 1, 2026

#3 Georgia vs. Ole Miss/Tulane
AllState Sugar Bowl | January 1, 2026

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The *FFP* Athlete of the Week for Nov. 24-29 is Belgreen boys' basketball's Jake Dill. Dill had games of 9, 23, and 31 points, hit a game-tying three-pointer against Rogers to take that contest to OT, and helped lead the Bulldogs to a 3-0 week during the Thanksgiving break. Congrats, Jake!

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What's Happening with Your Franklin County Extension Office!

Franklin County Extension Director Katernia Cole-Coffey was named the 2025 County Extension Director of the Year.

She received the award at last month's annual meeting of Alabama Extension County Directors.

This award is given to a director who demonstrates exceptional educational impact through programming and partnerships, professional development and active involvement in professional organizations.

As the Franklin County Extension director, she has positioned Extension as a vital and responsive resource for a county that is marked by poverty and growing diversity.

Serving the community for more than 20 years, Cole-Coffey fosters a positive and inclusive culture by engaging all community members, regardless of their background.

And we are fortunate to have her in Franklin County!



Congratulations County Extension Directors

Their outstanding work and contributions were recognized at the annual Alabama Extension county directors meeting.



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