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Russellville rental owner says he's entitled to judgment against the Russellville Water Board in pending lawsuit related to board's restoration policy

John Pilati
 Franklin Free Press

The attorney representing a Russellville rental property owner is asking the Franklin County Circuit Court to rule, as a matter of law, that he is entitled to an order in his favor on a lawsuit filed last November against the Water Works and Sewer Board of the City of Russellville (the Water Board).

William V. Lawson filed the lawsuit through his attorney, Evan Hargett, with the Russellville law firm of Rogers, Bowling & McReynolds, P.C.

The Water Board has denied the allegations of Lawson's lawsuit and maintains he is not entitled to any relief from the Court. Russellville attorney Danny McDowell, of McDowell & Beason, P.C., represents the Water Board in the lawsuit.

On February 18, 2026, Hargett filed a Motion for Summary Judgment, alleging that no genuine issue of material fact exists in the case and that Lawson is entitled, as a matter of law, to judgment in his favor.

The burden to prevail on a Motion for Summary Judgment is a high standard. Alabama law states that all

See 'LAWSUIT,' Page 4

Republican candidate roundtable brings statewide political focus to Franklin County

John Pilati
 Franklin Free Press

When candidates from across Alabama converged upon the Frog Pond Community Center on February 10th, it was a bit surreal to see the eyes of Alabama politics fixated upon Franklin County, but thanks to the work of the Republican Women of Franklin County Alabama (RWFC) that's exactly what happened.

The first of two Candidate Roundtables, organized and hosted by the RWFC, was more than just an event for local county candidates in the May 19, 2026, primary elec-



Lt. Governor candidate Rick Pate, left, visits with voter Paul Wardell during the February 10th candidate roundtable in Franklin County.

tion.

Republican candidates for all federal, state and county offices were sent invitations to attend one or both of

See 'ROUNDTABLE,' Page 5

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James Gary Montgomery, 70, of Florence, passed away February 23rd. Visitation will be from 5-7 on Thursday, Feb. 26th at Spry Memorial Chapel of Russellville. The funeral will follow at 7 pm.

Patricia Dianna Lovall, 79, passed away February 20th at Sanctuary Hospice in Tupelo. Deaton Funeral Home of Red Bay assisted the family with arrangements.

Gwendolyn Ann Bailey, age 76 of Russellville, passed away on Thursday, February 19, 2026. Pinkard Funeral Home assisted with the arrangements.

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Back to the Bible by Larsen Plyler:

Matthew 12:38-50

The Pharisees asked Jesus for evidence (as if He had not just healed a man with a withered hand and a blind and mute man!) Jesus said that they wouldn't get any more except for the sign of Jonah. Jesus used this to point forward to His resurrection. Jonah was in the fish for three days and nights— that's how long Jesus would be in the tomb,

Rather than giving them another sign, Jesus compared them to the people of Nineveh and the Queen of the South (all Gentiles!). The Ninevites repented at Jonah's preaching and the Queen was awed by the wisdom of Solomon. But Jesus, greater than both, stood right in front of those people and they weren't listening. So, the Ninevites and the Queen stood as judges of the generation of Jesus' day.

Jesus then told a parable about an unclean spirit that left a person, but couldn't find anywhere to go. The spirit decided to go back. When it arrived, the person was vacant. So, it invited more and worse spirits to dwell inside. The person was worse than they were at the beginning. Jesus said that's how the people of His day were.

As He spoke, Jesus' mother and brothers were outside wanting to talk to Him. But, Jesus questioned, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" Then, He pointed to His disciples and said, "These are my mothers and brothers." Why? Because they were doing the will of His Father. That was the connection that counted to make someone a brother, sister, or mother of Jesus.

Lessons to Learn:

Don't ignore the evidence in front of you. I'd suggest starting with the resurrection. If it is true, Jesus is who He claimed to be. If it isn't, it's all a sham. There's so much evidence. Don't overlook it.

What are you filling your life with? If we get rid of the bad, but don't replace it with good, we're in danger of returning to bad habits. Our lives will be filled with something. Notice Ephesians 4:25-5:2. Paul lists things to get rid of, and tells them what to replace them with. Replace lying with truth, stealing with work and generosity, corrupt speech with words that build up, bitterness and anger with kindness and forgiveness. Get rid of the bad in your life and fill your life with good.

What's your connection to Jesus? Jesus says that a relationship with Him comes through obedience. Even sharing DNA didn't make someone part of His fellowship. Commitment to the Father's will did. Be careful with thinking that our connection to Jesus comes with family heritage, church attendance, self-identification, or warm feelings. Connection comes through obedience to the Father.

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reasonable doubts concerning the existence of a genuine issue of fact must be resolved in favor of the party asking for summary judgment.

The case centers around a Water Board policy enacted at its November 12, 2024, meeting, that deals with restoration of water service.

The policy language reads: "The Water Works and Sewer Board of the City of Russellville does not provide or restore water service to an existing property with an unpaid balance."

Such policies for Alabama utilities are in place with other utility districts but Lawson's lawsuit only addresses the Russellville policy that's impacting his rental property.

In cases where the person seeking to restore water service is the same person whose account is in arrearage, there is no dispute that the policy is enforceable. The legal question in this case, though, is whether a delinquent balance from someone other than the applicant for service may constitute grounds to deny service to a new applicant.

Lawson owns rental property at Mills Trailer Park in Russellville. The case centers around Lot 14, owned by Lawson. Lot 14 was occupied by a former tenant who received water and sewer service from the Water Board under a separate account in the previous tenant's name.

That previous tenant vacated the property, leaving an unpaid balance on the Water Board account. When Lawson attempted to open a new account for Lot 14, the lawsuit alleges, he was told the unpaid balance on the prior account must first be paid in full in order for him to receive water and sewer service.

Lawson's twofold argument for summary judgment is based first on Alabama's Statute of Frauds, which he maintains is being violated by the Water Board's policy. The motion cites Code of Alabama 8-9-2(3), which outlines certain agreements in Alabama that must be evidenced in writing to be enforceable.

Whether the provision applies to the Water Board policy, and whether there existed any agreement between the parties to be bound to a third party debt that would have triggered the language of the particular code section is a question to be determined by the Court.

Lawson's second argument is that Alabama law expressly prohibits landlords from being liable for tenants' debts.

The Alabama Supreme Court has ruled that, in the absence of a statute making a service charge a lien on the premises, a new customer cannot be denied utility service because a former customer left a delinquent balance and that payment of the delinquent balance may not be required as a condition to establish new service.

Again, a legal question for the Court to weigh is whether the Water Board's November 2024 policy meets the requirement of a statute making a service charge a lien.

Clearly, the Water Board enacted this as a policy. But Lawson argues that the original Certificate of Incorporation that created the Water Board in 1948 did not provide for a lien and, as a result, the Water Board has no authority to deny or refuse service to a new tenant based on the delinquency of someone else.

If the Court decides both issues in Lawson's favor and finds that no genuine issue of material fact or law exist to support the Water Board's defense, then the standard for a summary judgment order is met.

Conversely, if the Court determines issues of material fact and law exist then summary judgment is to be denied.

The Water Board has up to 30 days to respond to Lawson's Motion for Summary Judgment. Once that answer has been filed, the Court can set the matter for a hearing, grant the motion after a determination that no genuine issues of material fact exist in the dispute, or it may deny the motion outright.

A second civil action filed by Hargett against the Water Works and Sewer Board of the City of Russellville, seeks to have the Court certify it as a class action.

In that case, Hargett represents William D. Ragan, Jr., another property owner in Russellville, and relates to property Ragan owns on Stuck St. SW.

If certified as a class action by the Court, Ragan's case would move forward on behalf of all Water Board customers alleging similar claims regarding the restoration of service policy.

That matter is set for a hearing on June 2, 2026.

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'ROUNDTABLE,' from Page 1

the events, with the second one set for April 14, 2026.

The responses started with a few confirmations, and grew from there, with 12 candidates confirming for the February 10th roundtable.

They included Republicans running for United States Senate, the U.S. House of Representatives, governor, Secretary of State and more.

Denel Wardell, RWFCA President, said the format of the Roundtable allowed Franklin County voters to interact personally with each candidate. Voters were seated at tables and asked to remain at the same table through the event. Candidates rotated among tables, spending approximately five minutes with voters at each table, before moving to the next table when the cow bell sounded.

"This gave everyone a chance to hear from each candidate," Wardell said. "There was a mix and mingle before the start of the candidates speaking. It was a fun and informative evening for voters."

Wardell said candidate commitments to attend the April roundtable have already surpassed the first one. In addition to commitments from more federal and state candidates, the April event will include most all county candidates, most of whom chose to wait until the later date to address voters.

And the success of the February roundtable led to something 'unexpected and awesome,' Wardell said, as she received two sponsorship commitments for April. This will allow the RWFCA to rent a larger venue with the anticipated increase in candidates and members of the public.

"We never even thought about sponsorships for the events," Wardell said. "We had about 3:1 ratio of public to candidates and I'm sure we'll have more participation in April, since we have many more well-known candidates coming to that one, like Lieutenant Governor candidate John Wahl and United States Senate candidate Morgan Murphy.

"Plus, almost all the county level candidates will be there. All five county commissioner candidates (for District One) and both Franklin County Sheriff candidates are already committed," she added.

Wardell expects anywhere from 18-25 candidates on April 14th, and the RWFCA is looking into several larger venues to accommodate more people.

Last fall, the Franklin County Democratic Executive Committee hosted a United States Senate forum for the three Democratic candidates. All three attended the event held at the A.W. Todd Centre. It was a first-of-its-kind event that saw all candidates for a federal primary come to Franklin County for a candidate event.

Similarly, the Republican Women's candidate roundtables are a new concept locally. While candidate events have taken place in Franklin County for decades, the magnitude of the roundtables and the tremendous response from candidates was a first.

Candidates who attended the February 10th RWFCA Roundtable included:

—United States Senate candidate Seth Burton, United States House of Representatives candidates Tommy Barnes and Caroline Aderholt, wife of Congressman Robert Aderholt, Governor candidate 'Alabama' Will Santivasci, Lieutenant Governor candidates Pat Bishop and Rick Pate, Secretary of State candidate Christopher Christian Horn, State Auditor candidate Derek Chen, Public Service Commission Place Two candidate Brent Woodall and Franklin County Coroner candidates Charles Adcox and Jeff Clark.

Feedback from candidates indicated they enjoyed the event and the opportunity to visit with Franklin County voters.

"I had an amazing time with the Republican Women of Franklin County in Spruce Pine Alabama Tuesday evening at the candidate round table," said Lieutenant Governor candidate Pat Bishop. "Several voters stated they are troubled by the issues facing this state with the lack of honor and integrity!

"For whatever reason, the media and some candidates for offices feel like whoever has the most money is the front runner and presumptive winner. I will always put it in the hands of the individual voter," Bishop added.

Candidates were not endorsed by the RWFCA as the group's policy does not allow for endorsements during a party primary.

The April 14th event is free and open to the public. Information on the location will be posted once a venue is confirmed.



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 **A**uditions for 'Murder in the Magnolias,' a play directed by Matt and Laura McDuffa, are set for Friday, Feb. 27th at 5 p.m., and Saturday, Feb. 28th at 3:30 p.m., at the Roxy Theatre in Russellville. Actors of all experience levels are encouraged to audition. Cold readings from the script will be requested.



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County Commission authorizes county attorney to take steps necessary to halt Lightning Ridge subdivision development

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Franklin County Commission authorized County Attorney Evan Hargett to take any legal action necessary to prevent the development of a western Franklin County subdivision that Hargett said was being marketed in violation of county ordinances.

Commissioners took the action at their February 17th meeting to allow Hargett to move forward against the owners of Lightning Ridge, a land development located in both Franklin and Colbert Counties that encompasses more than 1,115 acres with 150 lots.

The lots are offered for sale, with only \$199 down, with financing available. The 'lots, or tracts, are undeveloped raw land with no infrastructure in place, nor have the developers submitted the required subdivision plans with the Franklin County Commission, Hargett said.

After repeated correspondence with the developer, Hargett said Lightning Ridge subdivision has been removed from the Classic Country Land LLC website that shows properties across the country for sale.

The commission authorized Hargett to move forward with any available legal action to stop the development of the allegedly violative subdivision, including filing for injunctive relief in Franklin County Circuit Court.

Alabama law describes the procedure for subdivision approval to include submitting a proposed plat to the County Engineering department or planning commission, which reviews it for compliance with local regulations on infrastructure, drainage, and street design. The process may require a public hearing and, if outside a municipality, final approval by the County Commission.

The developer was offering the tracts starting at \$25,000, with no credit checks, payable in 'affordable monthly installments' according to www.classiccountryleland.com.

Those installment payments also include interest payments that can add significantly to the buyer's cost.

Hargett said a citizen contacted the Franklin County Commission about the development and that neither the Franklin County Highway Department nor the commission had received notice or any required filing for Lightning Ridge.

According to the company's marketing literature, the company markets raw land tracts that are off-grid friendly and targeted for those seeking rural, affordable land.

Hargett said the company had sold seven lots in the Franklin County development before pulling Lightning Ridge off the website of available properties. The proposed subdivision is located off Highway 247 near Troy Thorn Road according to county officials.

"You simply can't sell lots in a subdivision that doesn't legally exist because its owners have not complied with legal requirements to plat and request approval of a subdivision," Hargett said. "There is a \$1,000 per lot fine for not doing so and it doubles after 30 days."

In other agenda items at its February 17th meeting, the commission: —approved a \$638,750 low bid from CMI, Inc., for the sale of 1,750 breath testing devices to be distributed statewide. Although the purchase is coordinated through the Franklin County Commission, the purchase is fully funded by a grant from the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs.

—approved hiring Ron Coats a temporary, part-time assistant in the Franklin County Emergency Management Agency.

—approved an amendment to the Alabama Department of Environmental Management stormwater grant projects on Highway 90 and Highway 72. The Highway 90 culvert replacement low bid of \$114,392.50, from TJ Construction, Inc, was approved by commissioners. The projects are funded with ADEM grant monies.

—approved hiring Allison Odom as a non-certified real property appraiser in the Franklin County Revenue Commissioner's office.

—approved hiring Kayla Tavares as a temporary corrections officer/dispatcher in the Franklin County Sheriff's Office.

—approved the resignation of Chase Oliver as a courthouse security officer and authorized advertising for the position.

—approved the hiring of Joe David Crittenden as a full-time temporary courthouse security officer.

—heard a request from Sherry Jolley with Red Bay Hospital asking the commission to donate more than \$12,000 to Red Bay Hospital as part of the required 10% local governmental pledge in order for the hospital to receive donations through the Alabama Rural Hospital Investment Program, which allows individuals and businesses to donate state tax obligations to rural hospitals up to a certain limit per year. Red Bay Hospital received \$245,000 in commitments, requiring \$12,450 in local government matching funds, half of which has been committed by the Red Bay City Council, Jolley said.



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Russellville City Schools BOE approves 2026-27 school calendar, honors students and teacher at Feb. 17th board meeting

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

The Russellville City Schools Board of Education approved the school calendar for 2026-27 that includes 176 student days and 187 teacher days. The board approved the calendar at its February 17th meeting.

The new school year will begin for students on Thursday, August 6th. Teachers will report on Monday, August 3rd. Fall break will be three days for students, Monday, October 12th through Wednesday, October 14th, with teachers returning Wednesday. The Thanksgiving break will be a full week, November 23rd-27th, and Christmas break will run from Friday, December 18th with early dismissal through Wednesday, January 6th for students. Teachers will have work days starting Monday, January 4th. Spring Holiday/Spring Break will run from Friday, March 26th through Friday, April 2nd. The final day of classes will be Tuesday, May 25th with an early dismissal for students. Teachers will work through Friday, May 28th before concluding their year.

A copy of the 2026-27 school calendar is available online at www.rcs.k12.al.us.

In other agenda items at its February 17th meeting, the board:

—recognized the outstanding performances of four students at the recent AHSAA Class 4A/5A State Indoor Track Meet. They included Darron Jones, who earned a silver medal in the 60m hurdles and set a school record in the event, and the boys 4x200 relay team of Connor Delaney, Julyun Francisco, Jamaricus Mitchell and Jones, as the team earned the bronze medal.

“The indoor track team as a whole had a great year with many milestones being set. They put the work in and accomplished their goals. And now the same kids come back for the outdoor track season and we’re excited about that. I couldn’t ask for a better group,” said RHS Track Coach Deion Belue.

—recognized English Second Language teacher Carley Andrews Tellish, who was named the 2026 Spezzini Rural Teacher of the Year at the recent AMTESOL Conference. The award recognizes one Alabama teacher and one Mississippi teacher for teaching excellence and mentoring of others to support English Learners in rural areas.

—approved facility use requests from RHS volleyball for the Russellville Middle School gym on March 21st for the Level Elite Volleyball tournament, the RMS gym on May 17th for the RHS Girls Basketball program to host the Studio Extreme Twirling Performance fundraiser, RHS Driver’s Education Parking Lot on February 7th for the United Way of Florence to hold a food drive and RHS gym from February 4th through March 26th for agility and basketball training with Rayfield Ragland.

—approved trip requests for RHS HOSA students to attend the State Leadership Conference in Montgomery February 26th-27th, RHS students to attend the Alabama All-State Choral Festival at Samford University March 12th-14th, and RHS 11th and 12th grade Talent Search students to tour Mississippi State University on March 5th.

—approved the purchase of a Groen Tilt/Braising Skillet for Russellville Middle School from Mobile Fixtures for \$35,544. Child Nutrition Program funds will be used to purchase and install the equipment.

—approved the purchase of a Rational Combi Oven for Russellville Elementary School from Singer HR for \$39,990. CNP funds will be used for the purchase and installation of the equipment.

—Personnel moves including the following: Retirements/Resignations/Terminations/Leave of Absence: Resignation of Dylan Seabolt, RMS teacher, effective 1/15/26, Natalie Bendall, RCS Curriculum Coordinator, effective 2/27/26, Lena Soto, CNP Worker, effective 2/17/26 and Denese Gault, Park & Rec Concession Manager, effective 2/27/26. Employment: William Kilpatrick RMS PE teacher, Nelda Martinez and Jesus Betancourt, substitute bus drivers, contingent upon completion of CDL certification.

Temporary Employment in Position: John Seal, RHS Golf volunteer, Chris Balentine, RHS teacher as a part-time retired teacher, Johnna Robinson and Kaylee Smith, West Elementary temporary teachers to fill leaves of absence. Transfer/Reassignments: Caley Farris, from RCS Tech. Services Assistant to Technology Specialist, Amanda Taylor, CNP worker from RES to RHS and Amanda Butler, CNP worker, from RHS to RES.

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Rev. Jesse Jackson's visit to the Shoals was a life moment for many NW Alabama residents

Sheryl Hamilton
Special for the Franklin Free Press

(The Rev. Jesse Jackson passed away February 17, 2026, at the age of 84. Jackson leaves a lasting legacy upon our country as he inspired hope in all people. Russellville resident Sheryl Hamilton recalls her family's excitement when they heard Jackson was going to visit Colbert County High School many years ago. This is her story.)

Excitement was capturing the minds of residents around the Tri-County Area when the word circulated that Rev. Jesse Jackson was coming to the Shoals.

The children of Sheryl Hamilton were young but she knew one day they would be carrying on the legacy of HOPE.

The theme of Rev. Jackson's speech was HOPE for a better Tomorrow. His vision was that there could be a better day ahead. Also, HOPE that all people could one day share the same benefits that these United States has to offer. A brighter day would come and equal opportunities would knock at our doors.

Rev. Jackson had always been in the lives of the Hamiltons. Every year there was a call to go back to Selma to the Bridge Crossing. So many of our friends were there at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge waiting for the signal to start the march. Some were there because they knew the true meaning of that moment back in the sixties; some were there because they were just learning what had taken place during the Civil Rights Era and the changes that were occurring. We were there because the late Rev. Hamilton was a Foot Solidier.

With joyful hearts, the Hamiltons traveled to Colbert County High School with anticipation of what Rev. Jackson would say. Carla Hamiton with her red pants and Darryl Hamilton with his gold outfit could not be still.

As children they knew something extra special was happening.' "Keep Hope Alive" resounded all thru his message, said Sheryl Hamilton. "Rev. Jessie Jackson was a Presidential Candidate in the eighties and he wanted to represent all people. He loved people no matter their color or nationality, he wanted to be their leader."

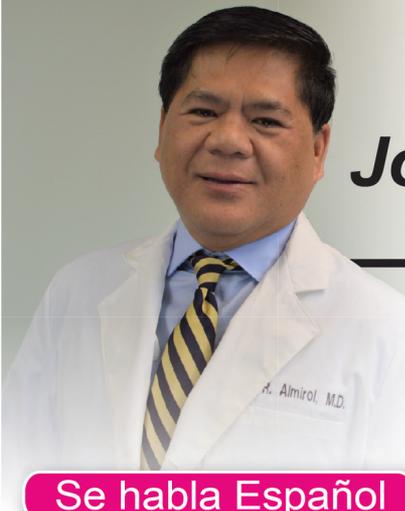
The late Rev. C. D. Hamilton would share Bloody Sunday each year in March with the Rev. Jackson. Our family looked forward to that special trip to Selma to learn more about our history. These two men were activists at an early age and wanted to see change come to America.

Rev. Jesse Jackson proudly walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge each year in a reenactment of the Selma to Montgomery march. The late John Lewis, Joseph Lowery, and Jesse Jackson led the march. Rev. C.D. Hamilton was not far behind. Jackson helped to shape history with his Rainbow Coalition. Operation PUSH (People United to Save Humanity) and the National Rainbow Coalition organizations pursued social justice, civil rights, and political activism. Whether black, white, brown, red, yellow, young, or old; he wanted to be a leader for all God's people.

As we celebrate Black History Month, we will always remember a true leader was called to rest. A historical figure that helped pave the way for so many. We will stand on his shoulders just as we have stood on the shoulders of Dr. Martin Luther King.



Rev. Jesse Jackson at his visit to Leighton, Alabama. (Courtesy photo)



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Lady Golden Tigers' season ends with loss to No. 2 Guntersville at Northwest Regional

*Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press*

The 2025-26 campaign came to a close for the Russellville High School varsity girls' basketball team Thursday morning with a 60-36 loss to the No. 2-ranked Guntersville Lady Wildcats (30-4) at the Northwest Regional tournament semifinal in Hanceville.

After falling behind by as many as 16 points in the opening period of play, Russellville (19-13) surged in the second quarter to pull back to within five late in the half. However, that would be as close as the Lady Golden Tigers would come to touching the Lady Wildcats. Guntersville responded to Russellville's quick burst and closed out the first half with a 12-0 run to take a 40-23 advantage into halftime.

In the third quarter, Russellville kept within striking distance of the Lady Wildcats but ran out of steam in the fourth. Up 11 with eight minutes to play, Guntersville slowed the game down, ultimately forcing Russellville to foul late. That sent Guntersville to line where it scored seven of its 16 fourth-quarter points; meanwhile, the Lady Golden Tigers hit just one of their 12 shots in the final period.

Russellville head coach Jermaine Groce said he was proud of the way his team com-

See, 'RVL,' Page 14

Birmingham bound: Red Bay boys clinch berth in Class 2A Final Four

*Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press*

The Tigers are B'ham bound. For the first time since 2020, the No. 3-ranked Red Bay High School varsity boys' basketball team has clinched a spot in the AHSAA Class 2A basketball final four after defeating Cold Springs 64-52 in the Class 2A Northwest Regional championship game in Hanceville Monday morning.

"I really felt that we were good enough to win this regional," RBHS head coach John Torisky told the media after the game. "We knew it would be hard, but these guys really developed along the year—probably more so than I thought they would, to be honest with you. I think this is one of the best offensive teams I've ever coached. But it's just one of those things where everything's coming together at the right time."

All was well in the end, but it was an inauspicious start for the Tigers against Cold Springs.

Red Bay fell behind by eight points midway through the first quarter before making an explosive response. Sophomore Khalil Luster, who finished with a game-high 23 points,



See, 'FINAL FOUR,' Page 12

Belgreen's season ends in Elite Eight after 45-42 loss to Cold Springs

*Kadin Pounders
Franklin Free Press*

"Like a gut-punch." That's how Belgreen High School varsity girls' basketball head coach Chad Green described his feeling after his Lady Bulldogs team fell 45-42 to the No. 10-ranked Cold Springs High School Lady Eagles (22-10) in the Northwest Regional championship game Monday morning.

The hard-fought contest was there for either team to win late, but it was the Lady Eagles that were able to hit enough shots to win in the end.

After falling behind early, Belgreen (24-10), using its half- and full-court press to great effect, was able to create turnovers and fast-break opportunities to take the lead, 11-10, in the dying seconds of the first period. A three-pointer by junior Jemma Moore followed by a steal and fast-break lay-up by senior Makenna Fisher at the buzzer put BHS ahead for the first time.

The Lady Bulldogs' advantage held to halftime and they went into the break leading 25-20.

Starting the second half with a quick run to go up by nine points, Belgreen looked like taking even firmer control of the contest; however, a Cold Springs timeout halted the Lady Bulldogs' momentum: the Lady Eagles responded with a 9-0 run after the timeout to tie the game up at 31 with under three minutes to play in the third. Later in the period, Cold Springs went in front for the first time since the first quarter after an Ella Dickerson three-pointer made it 36-34 with a minute remaining. A steal and fast-break lay-up by Belgreen's Fisher tied the game back up 36-36 right before the buzzer.

All even heading into the final eight minutes of play, the game came down to a few final shots. Belgreen had its chances to tie or go ahead late in the game but the shots would not fall.

Cold Springs' Dickerson, who was named MVP of the regional tournament, hit two free

See, 'BELGREEN,' Page 13

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'FINAL FOUR,' from Page 11

and senior Jaxon Vinson led the charge and helped Red Bay tie the game up 16-16 before the end of the first. Then in the second quarter, Luster scored 10 of Red Bay's 24 points as the Tigers doubled up on the Eagles to take a 40-28 lead into halftime.

After going down by eight points early, Red Bay closed out the first half on a 36-16 run.

In the second half, Red Bay maintained a comfortable double-digit lead, pushing its advantage as high as 16 points early in the fourth. The Tigers would go on to win by 12.

Luster, who was named to the All-Northwest Regional Team and tabbed as the regional MVP, finished with a double-double after grabbing 10 rebounds in addition to his 23 points. Vinson, Red Bay's other all-regional selection, scored 15 points. Senior Bryant Harris also hit double figures with 11 points.

As a team, the Tigers were prolific from beyond the arch making 10 of their 19 three-point attempts. The Red Bay head coach believed it to be a complete team effort.

"I thought we played really well," Torisky said.

"The kids kept their composure the second half and we just did what we do. I mean, we've got good players, and I try not to make it too complicated. We let these guys make plays and they made enough today," he added. "I was really happy with our defense—I thought we got some big stops. Cold Springs is a really good offensive team. Defense and rebounding travel, you just don't plan on making 10 for 19 from the three-point line, so we'll take that, too."

Torisky also praised leaders Luster and Vinson—both joined him in the postgame press conference—and the Tigers' selfless senior leadership for helping the team reach semifinal round.

"These guys are just winners and my job is to put them in a position to be successful," Torisky said.

"I'm lucky to have someone like Jaxon who's got some experience—Khalil got some (experience) last year as a freshman—but Jaxon's really matured this year and taken a bigger role. And then we've got Bryant Harris who's just a lights out shooter for us, really hit some big threes. Landyn Lewey's one of our best defenders," he added. "Those seniors just lead by example. They're not necessarily the most vocal guys, but they want to win. And because they want to win they do things the right way."

"Just a great team effort today. These guys, they've been doing this all year so it's nothing new."

Red Bay will face the champions of the Central Regional, LaFayette High School, in the semifinals at Legacy Arena in Birmingham on March 2. Tip-off is set for 4:30 p.m.

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'BELGREEN,' from Page 11

throws late to give the Lady Eagles a three-point lead with 11 seconds remaining before Belgreen's Moore's three-point shot at the buzzer bounced off the rim and the game was over.

After the game, Green told the *Franklin Free Press* there wasn't one or two specific things that led to the losing outcome; collectively, the Lady Bulldogs didn't do quite enough to win the game against a talented and experienced Cold Springs squad.

"There were a couple times we didn't rotate correctly and we were maybe a little bit late on some stuff, but I thought down the stretch we just didn't get the shots we wanted," he said. "Of course, you can go back to the first quarter and you have a turnover and in the second quarter you don't get an offensive rebound and a put-back you can make. Everybody thinks it's the end of the game (that matters) but it's really a four quarter game."

Fisher, who was selected to the All-Regional Tournament Team, led the Lady Bulldogs with 11 points in the loss. Sophomore Randi Terry, also selected for the all-tournament team, added nine points, as did junior Lilliana Willingham. Moore was Belgreen's third all-tournament team pick; she finished the final with two steals, two assists, and a team-high seven rebounds.

The defeat ended the 2025-26 campaign for Belgreen, but it also ended the basketball careers of five decorated Lady Bulldog seniors—Fisher, Carson Hovater, Mackinley Hogan, Isabella Tate, and Alayna Tate.

An emotional but gracious Fisher, who participated in the postgame press session with Green and her teammates Terry and Moore, told the media she was proud of the season her team had her final year and attributed their success to the great relationships built within the team.

"I'm just proud of our team," Fisher said. "I've been growing up with them pretty much my whole life, since seventh grade. I think this is one of the best teams that we've had. We don't have drama or anything like that. We're just a good team, and I think that really helps us on the court.

"It's hard, but I'm so proud of our team," she added. "I'm happy the seniors for Cold Springs get to go on....I hope they go far and make it. But I'm going to miss playing with my teammates."

Green ended the postgame press conference by praising Fisher—Moore described her as the "glue" of the team—and his entire senior group for their accomplishments and contributions to the BHS girls' basketball program during their careers.

"She's had a great career," Green said of Fisher. "This girl didn't even start at junior high when she was in the seventh grade—she wasn't even first off the bench. Now she's sitting in the press conference room at Wallace (State) her senior year. Hard work pays off.

"(Belgreen's five seniors) have been with us for a long time, contributed a lot to the program, and had a lot of success," he added. "They've done a lot of good things for us, won a lot of ballgames, and we feel like we've been punched in the gut right now, but time heals things, right?"

"I do want to thank the good Lord for all his blessings, letting me be able to coach this group, and letting them have the health and strength to play."



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'RVL,' from Page 11

peted against one of the top teams in the state and battled for all four quarters.

"They showed determination and grit," Groce said of his team. "They played hard and they played aggressive. We were down early as we have been before, but we cut that margin to five points at one point in the first half. I thought the zone scheme we were running kind of gave (Guntersville) fits and slowed them down a little bit, but we just need a few more shots to fall.

"Our girls fought hard. Ella (Copeland), Laila (Hill), Angeleah (Smith)—they led the way offensively. The rest of our girls—Sadie Odom, Blevyn Sappington and the rest of that starting lineup—definitely made it tough for Guntersville for three quarters to get what they wanted," he added.

"We kept it close the first through the third quarters...but they started to slow their game down and stall us out of the zone in the fourth, so the only way we could get them to speed up and try to get more possessions was to go man (defense), which is the last thing you want to do against a team that has great guard play. But we had to do it based on the clock. There at the end they (GHS) were able to capitalize on it and put the game out of hand. That's just a great testament to them as a team, being well-rounded."

RHS ended the game shooting 29.2 percent from the field compared to Guntersville's 40 percent. And while both teams forced turnovers, the Lady Wildcats consistently took advantage of their chances, scoring 17 points from turnovers compared to Russellville's four.

Junior Ella Copeland, who averaged 25 points per game for the Lady Golden Tigers this season, led RHS with 17 points in the loss. Senior Laila Hill scored nine points, sophomore Angeleah Smith added eight points, and eighth-grader Samantha Wilson rounded out the scoring for RHS with two points. Hill recorded a team-high seven rebounds and also added a block. Wilson and sophomore Blevyn Sappington had two assists each.

The defeat ended the most successful campaign for the RHS girls' basketball program in over 15 years. Russellville's regional appearance was the first for the program since 2010 and its 19 wins the most since the 2011-12 campaign.

As disappointing as Thursday's result was for the Lady Golden Tigers, there's a lot for RHS to be optimistic about when thinking about this season and the ones to follow. The program has obviously developed and improved over the past few years with RHS reaching the postseason in each of the last three seasons. Groce hopes this campaign's experience can continue to propel the program in the years to come.

"A lot of the girls on this team have endured the previous two post-season losses in the sub-region and contributed in some way in those games," Groce said. "I've talked to the girls all year about building on the season before. To go on the road in the sub-region for the third year in a row and then beat Sardis this year, a top 10 team, and have an opportunity to step on the court at Wallace (State), it's just a testament to their continual hard work.

"We had belief this year that we could step on the court and win and we scheduled it that way. I think we played 15 or so teams that were ranked or made it to the postseason, so it was a tremendously tough schedule, but I think it prepared us for what we were able to accomplish here at the end," he added. "To play within five points of knocking off a top five team in West Point in the area championship game and then to compete and battle with Guntersville for three quarters, it just proves that the schedule and everything these girls have done this year has prepared them for these moments and hopefully gives them the experience and belief that next year we can do it again.

"We only lose one piece next year—a tremendously big piece in Laila Hill, but she's the only one we're losing; we're bringing everybody else back—so we just talk to the girls about continuing to build off what we've done. We made it to Wallace this year so step one next year is to repeat that. Obviously with the realignment it'll be more difficult but not impossible, and we fully believe our girls, with the experience they've gotten this year, they're capable of doing that. It won't be without its challenges, but hopefully next year we can punch our ticket through to the Elite Eight."

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Sheriff's Office, Red Bay PD to square off in hoops fund-raiser for two local families

John Pilati
Franklin Free Press

A first responders basketball game set for next Saturday will benefit families of two children who are battling cancer.

The game will feature employees of the Franklin County Sheriff's Office taking on the Red Bay Police Department in a basketball game that tips off at 7 p.m., in the Red Bay High School Gym. Doors will open at 6 p.m. Admission is \$5 and concessions will be available.

Kyle Palmer, Investigator with the Franklin County Sheriff's Office, said the fun event will be for a good cause—with all proceeds and donations going to the families of Sawyer Knoblock and Paxton Brooks, two local children fighting to beat cancer. Knoblock lives in Red Bay and Brooks and his family live in Vina.

The public is encouraged to come out and show your support for this worthy cause—and you might see some decent basketball talent in the process!

The Franklin County Sheriff's Office faces off with the Russellville Police Department each year in a fund-raiser basketball game, but this time the Red Bay PD will attempt to defend their home court in what should be a fun event for everyone in attendance. This will be the first time for the two departments to get together for a basketball game.

"We would love to have as many people as we can at the game to help these families out," Palmer said. "We're looking forward to doing this, helping these families and having some fun in the process."

"Please come out and show your support," Palmer added.

Palmer said the idea for the game came from former FCSO employee Chad Holcombe, who suggested the two departments get together for a basketball game with proceeds benefiting these two local families going through a difficult time.

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