Top Ten Stories: 2018

October 2016, areas like Fair Bluff, Nichols and Whiteville and communities on the Waccamaw River, many not yet recovered from the hurricane two years ago.

"It's going down, slowly and surely," Fair Bluff Mayor Billy Hammond said of floodwater levels downtown days after Florence hit. "We got a lot of water. A lot more than from Matthew."

Flood waters prompted evacuations and rescues in areas not previously impacted by rain events, including Pireway Place Apartments in Tabor City.

Loris City Hall was heavily impacted, it's roof severely damaged and the two story structure doused, it's future still uncertain at year's end, city hall staff relocated to the Public Safety Building as long-term plans are being made.

Recovery efforts continue with more than $122.6 million in Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) assisted to 34,000 households in North Carolina as of Dec. 25, 2018, another $354.9 million in low-interest Small Business Administration approved, more than 15,014 National Flood Insurance Program claims submitted and an estimated $556.3 million paid on those claims.

Long-term recovery efforts in communities hardest hit, including Fair Bluff and Whiteville's downtown business district, will be ongoing for years.

2) Political chaos

Incumbent Columbus County Sheriff Lewis Hatcher was among the first to file for office in February, Republican Jody Greene, a North Carolina State Highway Patrol trooper soon mounted a challenge.

Both would face primary challenges, Greene easily outdistancing Mark Lewis in the May GOP primary, Hatcher also dominant over Tim Floyd as the Democrats choice.

That set the stage for a hard fought campaign that remain officially unsettled as 2018 ended this week.

There were problems on election day, Nov. 6, most notably in South Williams Precinct at the Tabor City Court Building where ballots for those who live within the town limits were not delivered and available until nearly two hours after the polls opened.

There was a similar issue at the polling place at Lebanon United Methodist Church, with one ballot style not available when the polls opened.

Those and other issues prompted protests of the election results in the sheriff's race, with Greene a very narrow winner, finally with a 34-vote margin before the Columbus County Board of Elections completed an unusual canvas more than a week after election day.

A recount requested by Hatcher widened Greene's apparent margin of victory to 37 votes, and the local board of elections either denied protests on procedural issues, or ruled against one finding that any errors were not sufficient to have changed the outcome of the vote.

Greene was sworn as sheriff on Dec. 3, and nearly three weeks later the state's Board of Elections and Ethics was crying foul, saying through a spokesman that Greene should not have been sworn because protests of the vote not completed an appeals process.

Greene remained in office this week, Hatcher saying he was willing to serve again if called, with no sign when the issue will ultimately be resolved.

State board officials said hearings on the sheriff's race won't take place before hearings on a disputed congressional race involving Bladen County are heard, those now scheduled for Jan. 11.

But the state board, its creation ruled unconstitutional earlier in the year, was dissolved at noon Friday, staff members of the new office which does not yet have board members saying hearings will go on as planned on Jan. 11.

If that wasn't enough, a political consultant and consulting firm at the heart of the Bladen County congressional investigation also did some work for Greene's campaign.

In Bladen County McCrae Dowless is accused of collecting absentee ballots and discarding them if they appeared to be unfavorable to the candidates he represented, including a GOP congressional candidate and possibly the incumbent sheriff there.

An unusually large number of absentee ballots were requested and not returned in Bladen County, elections officials said, and that pattern appeared to be similar in Columbus, with 557 absentee ballots requested, 181 not returned, WECT TV reported.

3) Trooper murder

There apparently seemed little unusual when Master Trooper Kevin Conner made a traffic stop on US 701 at Sellerstown on the early morning of Oct. 17.

In moments the veteran law enforcement officer was gunned down, gunfire coming from inside the white GMC truck he had stopped for speeding, the two men inside the vehicle on the run as Conner, who was 38, fought for his life.

Conner would succumb to his injuries at New Hanover Regional Medical Center in Wilmington, taken there after first being taken to Columbus Regional Healthcare in Whiteville.

Two men have been charged, Raheem Cole Dashanell Davis, 20, of Braswell Road in Chadbourn arrested in Fair Bluff just hours after the shooting when police in Fair Bluff spotted the truck; and Chauncey Demez Lamar Askew, 18, of East Third Avenue in Chadbourn, apprehended in Horry County nearly a week later.

Prosecutors have announced that they will seek the death penalty for Askew, with no decision on a capital trial for Davis made at years end, a new hearing for him scheduled for later this month.

Thousands turned out for visitation, waiting in long lines ahead of the funeral at South Columbus High School, where hundreds filled the auditorium to hear tributes for Conner from family, co-workers, and Gov. Roy Cooper.

Burial, in a family cemetery, was private.

4) Loris talks trash

City council started talks on a new contract for trash collections in Loris in early April, but the process got strange before Jordan Waste, Inc. of Marion was awarded a $365,100 contract in May.

It was never clear what the city gained by spending $378,000 more during the five-year life of the new contact than would have been paid to American Waste Systems (AWS), which had held the previous contract.

AWS did not submit a formal bid, but its leaders said it had made clear to Loris officials that the existing contract would have been extended for five years if asked, a savings of nearly $75,500 per year for city taxpayers.

Council's talks on the contract were held in secret, action taken a week after bids were opened, and after council had refused to make those bid documents public, in violation of South Carolina's Freedom of Information Act and state law, media attorney Jay Bender of Columbia said.

Those documents were eventually released, while the city engaged in similar tactics withholding budget proposal documents for the year that began July 1 until one councilman, Mike Suggs, provided those documents while redacting the names of some personnel benefiting from some unusual pay hikes.

Meanwhile, Loris ended the year with audits for the past several years still not complete, not even assigned. Mayor Henry Nichols last January said process had been made in hiring a CPA to straighten out the city's books, but that work had not yet begun in 12 months.

South Carolina officials are withholding more than $60,000 in state revenues due to the city until completed audits for the past three years are submitted.

5) School merger talks

Talk of merging the Columbus County and Whiteville City public school systems renewed in 2017 as county commissioners considered the costs of badly needed new schools led to serious study in 2018, and a conclusion more pleasing to city school leaders than to their county counterparts.

An ad hoc committee appointed early in the year selected Raleigh based Emerald Education in July to thoroughly weigh the pros and cons of merger for $19,500, $56,000 less than the next lowest bid from Evergreen Solutions of Tallahassee, Florida. A third bid for $119,000 bid was from School Efficiency Consultants of Raleigh, Charlotte and Lexington.

That report was delivered on Dec. 3, the conclusion that the cost of merger would be more than $1 million in state funding for funding for public education in the county in two years with only minimal cost savings.

"A merger would not be in the best interest of the public school students in Columbus County at this time," consultant June Atkinson of Emerald Education told commissioners.

Atkinson and Phillip Price outlined their findings in a detailed 47-page document.

Commissioners took the report under advisement, with no commitment to discuss the issue again.

Voters, in November, rejected a quarter cent sales tax proposal that, if approved, would have generated about $1 million per year to address school construction needs.

6) Dr. Kim's arrest

A doctor's office described as a "pill mill" by District Attorney Jon David was shut

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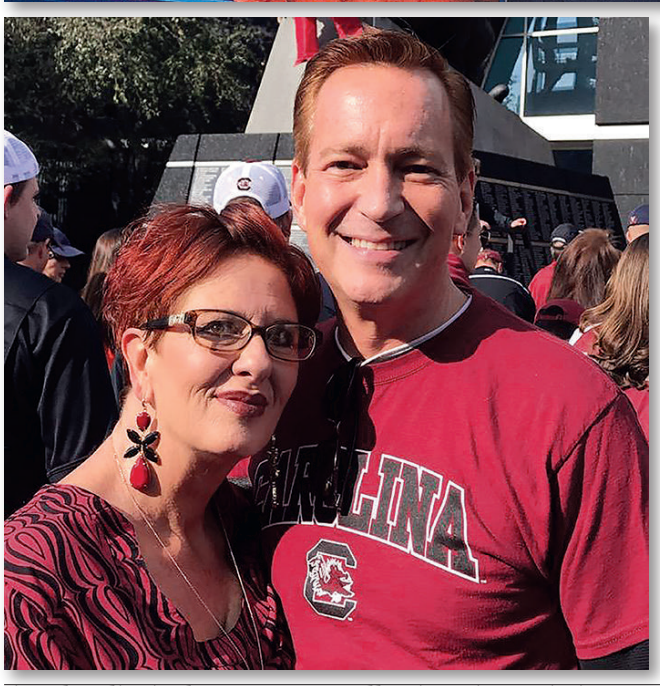

Bowl ready

College football bowl season was well represented by Loris residents, including Ricky Dew and Robert Boyd (from left, above) in Dallas for the Cotton Bowl, where Clemson claimed a 30-3 win over Notre Dame in Arlington. Jeanie Tyler Fox and Joel Powers, left, attended the Belk Bowl in Charlotte, where Virginia won 28-0 over University of South Carolina.

TC liquor vote still unsettled

By DEUCE NIVEN
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Protests focusing on the still unsettled race for Columbus County Sheriff have also left the future of liquor by the drink in Tabor City in limbo, a North Carolina Board of Elections spokesman said Monday.

Certificates of Election have not been sent in the sheriff's race, or for the mixed drink referendum that appeared to narrowly win election on Nov. 6, elections spokesman Patrick Gannon said.

Voters in Tabor City for the first time appeared to approve the referendum to allow the sale of mixed alcoholic beverages in restaurants and other locations, but the victory was by a slim 11 votes, that outcome challenged in protests that seemed mostly focused on the sheriff's race.

Columbus County Board of Elections staff was instructed by the now dissolved NC Board of Elections and Ethics earlier this month not to issue those certificates to Jody Greene or to town government in Tabor City because protests of those results are under appeal.

Greene was certified as the winner of the sheriff's race by a 37-vote margin on Nov. 30 following a series of local board meetings that included a recount requested by incumbent sheriff Lewis Hatcher and protests that centered, in part, on election day problems at South Williams Precinct, the Tabor City Court Building.

Three of four protests filed in the election were dismissed by the county Board of Elections, two outright because paperwork was not properly completed, a third because the board found that there was no probable cause in the complaint to move forward with a hearing.

Procedural errors prompted the dismissals of complaints from outgoing Columbus County Commissioner Amon McKenzie and Columbus County Democratic Party Vice-Chair Gloria Smith. Democratic Party Chair Franklin Thuman's complaint failed to meet the probable cause test, the board ruled.

Brunswick Mayor Nancy Hill's protest was heard, with several witnesses who testified to problems primarily at South Williams Precinct in Tabor City, where ballots for voters living inside the town limits were not delivered to the polling place until nearly two hours after voting began on Nov. 6.

Appeals of the local board decisions were filed by three of the four, McKenzie the exception, and a new protest was filed by former Columbus County Sheriff's candidate Calvin Norton, who in his challenge alleged that Greene is not a resident of Columbus County.

It's unknown when the Columbus County issues, the sheriff's race or Tabor City's liquor vote, will be taken up by the state Board of Elections, or even who those members will be. The former board was dissolved by court order at noon Friday, Gannon said.

Gov. Roy Cooper has said he wants to appoint a new board, state Republican leaders have pushed back on those plans by the Democrat governor, and state law says the new board won't be seated until Jan. 31.

State board staff, in the meantime, are moving ahead to prepare for a scheduled Jan. 11 hearing involving the 9th Congressional District, its election in dispute amid allegations of voter fraud that center in Bladen County and on political operative McRae Dowless and consulting firm Red Dome.

Although the previous state board had said Columbus County's issues won't be addressed until he 9th congressional questions are settled, a new board could choose differently, Gannon said.