

## Weather Related VCS School Closure on Wednesday, March 27<sup>th</sup>



By Carol A. Gasser Moore

VALDOSTA, Georgia – Wednesday's pre-dawn closing of all Valdosta City Schools (VCS) was the first significant regional indication that the weather was bad enough in some areas as to keep students at home for a day. Power outages and some damage affected our regional area. The following counties reported weather related problems:

- In Berrien County: There are reports of down trees and a few washed out roads. Hail the size of ping pong balls has been reported in some areas of the county. Poor drainage areas were warned about heavy rain and related flooding.

- In Coffee County: A few isolated areas experienced some large hail.

- In Cook County: A limited portion of the county experienced ping-pong-sized hail during the pre-dawn time frame. The Sparks and Lenox areas west of I-75 were the primary areas affected by hail. No other damage has been reported.

- In Lanier County: A limited amount of large hail was reported in the Stockton area.

- In Lowndes County: Storm related downed trees affected 32 houses in Valdosta. Some trees were near VSU, near the YMCA and near the West Alden Avenue and Jerry Jones Drive areas. Over 4,000 power customers were without power. Crossroads Baptist School, Scintilla Charter Academy and Valdosta City Schools were closed.

- In Tift County: Experienced large hail throughout the county.

Weather related flood warning continue through Thursday, March 28 for the following regional areas:

Portions of Florida, including the following areas - Coastal Dixie, Coastal Franklin, Coastal Gulf, Coastal Jefferson, Coastal Taylor, Coastal Wakulla, Gadsden, Inland Dixie, Inland Franklin, Inland Gulf, Inland Jefferson, Inland Taylor, Inland Wakulla, Lafayette, Leon, Liberty and Madison

Portions of Georgia, including the following areas: Ben Hill, Berrien, Brooks, Colquitt, Cook, Decatur, Grady, Irwin, Lanier, Lowndes, Mitchell, Thomas, Tift, Turner and Worth counties.

## Local First Responders Successfully Rescue a Missing Alapaha River Canoeer

By Carol A. Gasser Moore

LANIER COUNTY, Georgia – The 38<sup>th</sup> Rescue Squadron of Moody AFB (Air Force Base), the Georgia DNR (Department of Natural Resources) Game and Fish Division, the Georgia State Patrol, the Lanier County Emergency Management Agency, the Lanier County Fire & Rescue Department, and the Lanier County Sheriff's Office (LCSO) teamed up Monday, March 25<sup>th</sup> to locate a female canoeer (66), who became separated from a group of canoeers on the Alapaha River.

Individuals in a vehicle, which was traveling over the Highway 37 Bridge in Lakeland, had spotted the woman about 4:30 p.m. The First Responders successfully located the woman about 8:30 p.m. when she was spotted about 1 mile south of the U.S. Highway 84 bridge south of Stockton. It has been pointed out that the canoeer traveled a long distance in a very short period of time.

Lanier County EMA Director Tony Galardo has extended his thanks to everyone involved for their hard work.

If any Lanier County resident noticed a low flying helicopter on Monday evening, it was likely the GSP Helicopter, who helped spot the canoeer from the air.

"Today was a great show of emergency response! There was a lady canoeing on the Alapaha River with two others that hadn't been seen for an hour when E911 was called.

The Lanier County Sheriff's Office, and the Lanier County EMA were deployed in response to the call. The Lakeland-Lanier Fire Department, Georgia DNR, and



Georgia State Patrol helicopter were called for additional resources. After not being seen for at least 4 hours, the woman was located safe," said Sheriff Norton. "I would like to thank everyone involved for their hard work."

## Probationer Garrick Griffin Arrested for Ambulance Theft and Property Damage

By Carol A. Gasser Moore

COFFEE COUNTY, Georgia – Garrick Griffin (39) was again arrested by CCSO on Saturday, March 23<sup>rd</sup> for theft and property damage. This time, Griffin, recently released from jail, stole a Coffee County ambulance while it was parked at the Coffee Regional Medical Center (CRMC). The driver fled from law enforcement, who were in pursuit. The chase ended when Griffin crashed into a gate.

According to records from the Douglas Police Department (DPD), law enforcement as well as other first responders were present at CRMC, because of a triple shooting in Douglas. They observed a man at the hospital, later identified as Griffin, also at the location. An ambulance arrived at CRMC from the triple shooting crime scene. The ambulance had been used to transport a victim from the crime scene. The ambulance is said to have pulled up to the hospital and unloaded the injured victim. The ambulance driver entered the CRMC building seeking medical treatment for the victim.

DPD records document that virtually as the ambulance driver entered CRMC, Griffin ran out of the building. Griffin was seen jumping into the ambulance and driving it out of the parking lot. Griffin was clearly fleeing from the area and the CCSO deputies began following the stolen ambulance close behind. The report indicates that Griffin wound up crashing the ambulance into a gate on Shirley Avenue, Douglas.

Law enforcement reports document that Griffin continued to flee on foot after he left the ambulance. Regardless, law enforcement officers were able to capture Griffin within in a few minutes.

Public records indicate that Garrick Griffin was released on bond about two weeks prior to the March 23<sup>rd</sup> incident. Documents state that Griffin had been arrested in November 2023. At that time, Griffin was charged with Criminal damage to property (2<sup>nd</sup> degree), theft by taking, battery (misdemeanor), and cruelty to children (3<sup>rd</sup> degree).

In the 2023 incident, Griffin was accused of battery (punching a woman in the face), theft (stole her \$1,700 Samsung Galaxy phone), property damage (using liquor bottle to damage vehicle), and battery in front of a child under age 18.

Griffin was convicted on the November 2023 charges and received a 5 year sentence. Records also indicate that Griffin was also on probation in 2023 for a 2019 incident in which he is described as interfering with government property.

At the time of this writing, the Coffee County Jail roster lists Griffin as being in custody on a 48-hours hold. He is charged with theft by taking, driving while license suspended or revoked, and distracted driving. Records indicate that these will become official charges when the CCSO obtains warrants.

## Historic Brooks County Gym Arson Attempt Leads to Quick Renovation

By Carol A. Gasser Moore

BROOKS COUNTY, Georgia - Quitman Fire Fighters quickly responded to an arson attempt on Monday, March 26. Someone attempted to burn Quitman's historic Washington Street Gym. As a declared arson attempt, the Quitman Fire Fighters are seeking public help in locating the person or persons responsible for the fire.

In response to the arson attempt, the Brooks County Board of Commissioners (BCBOC) speedily stirred themselves to immediately pursue their plans to renovate the old gym building.

Brooks County Commissioner James Maxwell as acknowledge that he was asked to expedite the BCBOC effort to save the gym. He has indicated that there would be an effort to speed up the process and start the construction on the inside of the building.

According to Quitman Fire Chief Floyd Demps, responding firefighters found that someone lit a fire outside the doors of the gym. It was fortunate that fire that did not spread to the inside. The arson attempt did cause some damage on the building's outside. Demps has also revealed that the State Fire Marshall has ruled the fire as arson.

For years the preservation of the Washington Street



Gym is said to have been a passionate project for Commissioner Maxwell. Maxwell hopes to remain on the Board of Commissioners and increase the preservation budget. Maxwell's long term goal is to ensure the gym

will again be open again for community use.

Increasingly public about his goal, Commissioner Maxwell hopes to have \$100,000 set aside for the preservation of the Washington Street Gym building. He would like the community's active support for the project.

At this time, the Brooks County Board of Commissioners is said to have \$50,000 in their budget for the renovation. They want support and fundraising from Washington Street Gym Alumni. The commission would like the whole community's support with the motivation to see the gym remain standing and renovations which will support the effort to reopen it.

Fire Chief Demps has stated the the building is a historic building. He affirms appreciation for the Brooks County Commissioners and administrators to date, and values the BOC for working hard to find a way to get this building renovated and open.

The Georgia Arson Control Hotline would like to hear from anyone with information leading to the arrest and conviction of those responsible for the Washington Street Gym in Quitman. Informants are eligible for a \$10,000 reward by calling the Georgia Arson Control Hotline at 1-800-282-5804.