



Hill

by **Nathalee Simoneau and Michael Prochaska**

On May 5, Brandon Hill, 29, a teacher in Gwinnett County Public Schools, was charged with simple battery and felony

Former OCS substitute arrested in Gwinnett had inappropriate contact with kids here, parents say

child cruelty after being arrested for inappropriately touching students in his kindergarten classroom, WSB-TV reported this month.

Two Oconee County Schools parents who wish to remain anonymous told The Oconee Enterprise that Hill portrayed similar behavior as a substitute teacher with OCS during the 2019-2020

school year.

In December of 2019, the parents found out that Hill had been rubbing the hair, ears, neck, shoulders and back of girls in High Shoals Elementary classrooms while working as a substitute teacher.

“When this teacher was touching my daughter’s hair/ears he also asked her if

she liked it,” one parent said. “That’s the part that really grossed me out.”

The parent claimed that then-Principal Jennifer Whitaker, who is now the OCS chief academic officer, had not informed her of the situation. The parent instead found out through another parent.

By that time, Whitaker had interviewed the daughter and asked the child

to demonstrate how Hill had touched her head, according to the parent.

The parents were told that the Oconee Sheriff’s Office was not called because what Hill had done was not illegal. Whitaker told them that Hill would not teach again in OCS.

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NOHS Girls Golf win State



The North Oconee High School Girls Golf Team won its fifth consecutive—and seventh overall—state championship on May 20 at Bentwater Golf Club in Acworth. North Oconee posted a 3-shot win over St. Pius X and was paced by top-10 finishers Aubree Hill, Hailey Moffett and Kyler Hammond. From left, Coach Rob Melton, Olivia Weaver, Josey Bufford, Aubree Hill, Hailey Moffett, Kyler Hammond and Assistant Coach James Hedrick. [Photo courtesy Oconee County Schools]

OCAF hires director

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

The Oconee Cultural Arts Foundation has hired Beth Malone as its new executive director.

She is succeeding interim director Paul Clark, an alumnus of Oconee County High School who filled the role in early 2024 following the firing of former director Wendy Cooper in fall 2023.

As founder and former executive director of Dashboard, an award-winning arts organization based in Atlanta, Malone brings 17 years of experience in nonprofit leadership, art curation and production.

“Her background in art programming, strategic planning, and financial management makes Malone uniquely qualified to guide OCAF into its next chapter of growth and service,” according to a press release.

“Beth’s vision and experience are ex-

actly what OCAF needs as we move into the future,” said OCAF Board Chair Brock Toole.

“The organization has meant so much to so many in this community,” said Malone. “I aim to see OCAF become a premier space for arts and culture to the rest of our region.” Patron of OCAF can meet her May 30 from 7-9 p.m. at the Members Exhibition opening reception.

The Enterprise will interview Malone this week about her vision for OCAF with a story to be published in our June 5 issue.

In other news, the Oconee Chamber of Commerce’s annual Summer Fest, a local business expo, is June 12 from 3-5:30 p.m. at the Oconee County Civic Center.

The Downtown Development Authority’s Papalooza is June 14 from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. at Rocket Field. Vendors include Chick-fil-A and Outpost Oconee. There will be music by Leeroy Voodoo from 12-2 p.m. and Diablo Sandwich and the Dr. Peppers from 2:30-4:30 p.m. OCAF will have a craft station for families to make a gift for dad.



Malone

The OE to host Q&A June 5

BY MICHAEL PROCHASKA

The Oconee Enterprise will hold a Community Listening Session at the Oconee County Library June 5 from 6-7 p.m. This is a chance for citizens to ask questions about the newspaper and meet our staff.

This year, The Enterprise has launched a new podcast and a weekly newsletter at theoeonews.substack.com.

On Spotify and other podcast apps, one can listen to The Enterprise’s two podcasts: “Oconee Matters,” a new podcast that features long-form interviews with community leaders; as well as “Main Street Minute,” which is a weekly recap of the news.

For businesses looking to get more traction, The Enterprise offers the opportunity to purchase a 20–30-minute feature interview with spots

available through the end of July for \$200. Individual sponsored ads are also available at \$45 for a 10-15 second ad. For more information, contact Caitlin Farmer at caitlin@oconeeenterprise.com.

Alumni banquet June 14

The Oconee County High Schools Alumni Association alumni banquet is Saturday, June 14 at the Oconee County Civic Center. A social is 5:30-6 p.m., and the program starts at 6 p.m.

The event is hosted by the Class of 1975, but alumni of all years are invited. Cost is \$35 for alumni and \$25 for guests.

RSVP deadline is May 30. For more information, email OCAA.GA.1975@gmail.com. People can also mail a check to OCAA

Banquet, PO Box 1431 Watkinsville. Please include class member’s name and year, along with guest information.

Funds raised from the event will support grant programs for the students in Oconee County Schools.

Superintendent search

“Community Works, Oconee,” a new community service organization started by the Oconee County Democratic Committee, held a public meeting on Wednesday to gather input on the search for a new superintendent of OCS.

Outgoing Superintendent Jason Branch will be stepping down at the end of June and the Board of Education has selected retired educational leader Debra Harden as interim superintendent.

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Some Watkinsville homes may see increase in taxes

City manager receives \$2,000 supplement

BY NATHALEE SIMONEAU AND MICHAEL PROCHASKA

The Watkinsville City Council tentatively approved keeping the millage rate at 2.756 mills, the same as last year. Due to increasing property tax revenue, this is considered a property tax increase. It is estimated that the property taxes collected for fiscal year 2026 will generate \$84,144 more than 2025 with the same millage rate.

Due to House Bill 581, the property value of most Watkinsville primary residences will not change this year. The revenue increase is from new developments and improvements to existing properties and commercial properties, according to City Manager Sharyn Dickerson.

“Only way your taxes increase are if you have improved your home,”

explained Mayor Brian Brodrick. “HB 581 has frozen assessments this year...so the new increase is on new construction or improvements essentially.”

Assessments are technically inflation adjusted, rather than frozen.

For those who have made improvement to their residence, a home with a fair market value of \$300,000 will see an increase of \$14.40.

For commercial property with a fair market value of \$500,000, the increase is \$24.40.

“These increases reflect the difference between the proposed rate and the roll-back rate—not a change from the city’s 2024 property tax millage rate,” according to a press release from the city of Watkinsville.

SEE BUDGET PAGE A2

BOC Chair says no tax increase expected

BY STAFF REPORTS

Oconee County commissioners last week decided to postpone a decision on the county’s 2025 millage rate pending further details on the size of the county tax digest.

As a result, the annual assessment notice that goes out from the Oconee County Tax Commissioner, usually in May, will use the current millage rate in estimating property taxes for the county, as it has in the past.

Commission Chair John Daniell said the current budget before the Board—scheduled for adoption on June 3—allows for a full rollback on the millage rate based on the digest information available.

Daniell said he does not foresee a property tax increase to fund county services this year.

The commissioners agreed to postpone setting the millage rate until August.

Millage rate

Property tax revenue at \$19.8 million makes up 43.5% of the revenue in the \$45.7 million proposed Fiscal Year 2026 General Fund Budget.

Computation of the tax digest—or the value of taxable property in the county—has been complicated this

year by the passage of House Bill 581, Daniell said.

That bill sets up a state-wide floating homestead exemption.

It also changes the way the Tax Commissioner prepares the annual assessment notices and tax bills.

Daniell said he had received two slightly different tax digest estimates from Tax Commissioner Jennifer Riddle.

The state has struggled to implement calculation of the floating homestead exemption.

In addition, Daniell said, some appeals of assessments in the county are still not resolved.

Daniell said an “option is just to do nothing, and then they’ll just put the estimated taxes on just like it’s happened in the past.”

The Commissioners accepted that recommendation

Budget hearing

The May 20 meeting began with the second public hearing on the Fiscal Year 2026 budget, which at \$83.7 million, is an increase of 9.2% from the originally approved Fiscal Year 2025 budget.

That total budget includes the \$45.7 million General Fund Budget,

the budgets for the two county enterprise (self-funded) accounts (for the Civic Center and for Water Resources), and the budgets for the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax and the Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax.

The General Fund Budget is up 12.2% from the original Fiscal Year 2025 budget but up only 5.5% from the Amended Fiscal Year 2025 Budget.

The county amends its budget each year to reflect changes in revenues and expenditures.

Oconee County Finance Director Melissa Braswell noted that the General Fund budget was balanced by transferring \$310,000 from the county’s Fund Balance.

The total budget shows usage of \$1.1 million from Fund Balance.

The General Fund Expenditures lists \$1.8 million in Debt Service, down from \$2.3 million in the Amended Fiscal Year 2025 Budget.

In response to a question from Commissioner Chuck Horton, Braswell said during the hearing that she did not have a breakdown on those debt service expenditures.

In an email on May 21, Braswell said this expenditure consists of \$693,700 for payments on the Cater-

pillar bonds and \$1.14 million in payments for the Costco bonds.

Sewer projects

Oconee Water Resources Department Director Adam Layfield presented the Board with proposals from Precision Planning Inc. of Monroe for professional survey, engineering design, and permitting services for two sewer upgrade projects.

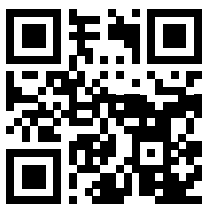
The first project is for replacement of a section of 8-inch gravity sewer line between the Oconee Connector and Parkway Boulevard with a 12-inch line.

That line is fed by 8-inch gravity sewer lines serving Epps Bridge Centre as well as much of the commercial development on both sides of Epps Bridge Parkway.

PPI told the county that the upgrade also can provide sewer services for Celebration Village Athens, a massive senior residential complex planned at the end of the Oconee Connector across from Home Depot.

Layfield said in an email message that Celebration Village Athens will construct a private lift station on its property to reach an existing gravity line near Home Depot.

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This issue was mailed Wednesday, May 28, from Watkinsville and Athens, GA. Please inform your post office if it arrives late.

