

## Eventful 2025 was a year to remember

### JANUARY

•A parade in Centerville kicked off 2025 which promised to be an eventful year. The parade, the only New Year's parade in the county, is also the only one that runs two directions, giving spectators a chance to see what they missed the first time.

•In the first edition of the year, Dr. Rhonda Schuhler, superintendent of schools, presented Blueprint 2030 to readers of *The Franklin Times*. She explained that the Blueprint was still in development but was being developed to guide the district through 2030. The plan was to be presented to the Board of Education in late spring and implementation would begin later in the year.

•Youngsville again, received a clean bill of wealth from auditors, continuing a trend of growing fiscal strength and no financial issues.

"This will be short and sweet," Lee Grissom, an auditor with S. Preston Douglass and Associates told town officials, noting that the town's audit process didn't bring up any hiccups.

"... I am happy to report there were no finding this year and we also issued an unmodified opinion, which used to be referred to as a clean opinion ..."

•Franklinton received its second straight "clean" audit, representing a continuing strong financial position and move away from State Department of Treasury oversight.

•The Franklin County Board of Commissioners agreed to spend more than \$4 million to buy two pieces of property — one for a senior center/EMS station, and the other remains a mystery.

Commissioners agreed to purchase the Wal-

greens building at Franklinton Square Shopping Center on U.S. 1 for \$2.61 million, for the senior center/EMS station.

And, they agreed to buy 127.88 acres along U.S. 401 — north of Louisburg — from Edwards and Foster Properties for \$1.54 million. By the end of the year, commissioners still hadn't revealed what the county intends to do with the 127-acre tract.

•The guiding force behind the Miracle League of Franklin County stepped down from her leadership post but Donna Wade continues to be a force for the organization designed to provide recreational and other opportunities for the physically and mentally disabled.

Tom Flaherty, who's been with Miracle League for a decade, was selected as the organization's new executive director.

•An interim police chief, Capt. Travis Lincoln, was named by the town of Louisburg to replace retiring Chief Jason Abbott whose last day was Jan. 31.

•Franklin County's Special Olympians' coach was honored for her dedication — earning the Special Olympics North Carolina's Volunteer of the Year award, a statewide award. Danielle Dietz has been a coach with Franklin County Special Olympics for more than a decade — coaching scores of athletes to achievement on and off the field.

"We are beyond proud of one of our own ...," said Franklin County Special Olympics Coach Mary Mendoza.

•The Franklin County Chamber of Commerce handed out awards during its annual banquet. Chamber Executive Director Richard Veverka presented the Citizen of the Year Award to Rex Foster. Foster and other Northeast Franklin Revitalization members, including Melissa Hodges, have worked to bolster that part of the county. George Horton, Jacob Horton and Greg Laymen secured the Chamber's Small Business of the Year Award for Old School Detail, their professional detailing operation. Rustic Roots received the Chamber's Chairman's Award of Excellence, given to Jacqueline Boykin, Margaret Vollmer, Russ Vollmer and Nancy and Omar Cruz.

### FEBRUARY

•A "State of the District" presentation offered an overview of the complex operations of Franklin County Schools as well as highlights of some of the district's "product," talented Franklin County young people showing the skills they have learned.

The presentation, held at Franklinton High School, was hosted by Superintendent Rhonda Schuhler, who in 60 minutes, offered a look at school programs, finances, plans for the future and, of course, presentations by various age groups of local students.

The event was planned to bring county commissioners up to speed on the district but two county commissioners, Michael Schriver and Harry Foy did not attend.

Tackling an overview of the complex, 16-school system which has more than 1,000 employees in a wide range of jobs and touches the lives of more than 8,000 students daily, Dr. Schuhler opened by saying, "It is my hope that you will leave this evening with a better sense of the opportunities that we provide each day to our students, the progress that we continue to make and the work that is taking place to chart our future as a school system."

•Franklin County commissioners approved the terms of an agreement that cleared the way for a judicial complex downtown.

Franklin County hired Oakley Collier Architects in the spring of 2019 to assess county government buildings. By April 2024, commissioners agreed to renovate the existing



**CENTER OF ATTENTION.** Henry Nelms, center, received the OSFM Lifetime Achievement Award in March. He's pictured with, from left, Darrell Chalk, Tony Bailey, Larry Peoples, Steward Goswick and L.S. Ward

Hamilton Hobgood Courthouse Annex and build a three-story, 55,000-square-foot building immediately behind it — at a then-estimated cost of \$30 million.

•Mother Nature again proved how fickle the weather can be with a snowfall that gave everyone a chance to play outside — even as daffodils were beginning to bloom, proving the old saying that if you don't like North Carolina weather, just wait a bit and it'll change — from snowflakes to flowers!

•Franklinton commissioners adopted another piece to their Comprehensive Transportation Plan. Engineers with Kittelson & Associates presented commissioners with a bike and pedestrian plan.

In January, the town adopted a Comprehensive Transportation Plan, a concept that outlines future bypasses, pedestrian paths, local roadway connectors and other routes in the town's short-, medium- and long-range plans. The goal of the Bike and Pedestrian is to support the rebirth of downtown and improve multiple modes of access to the central business/entertainment district, and surrounding areas.

### MARCH

•Bunn and surrounding communities were to get an emergency response team closer to home after Franklin County commissioners, management and first responders broke ground on a new EMS station that will house staff to serve Bunn and the surrounding community.

In March 2022, consultants presented county commissioners with the results of an EMS study that revealed, among other things, the need for better EMS facilities — including a new station to serve Bunn, one in Louisburg and one in Franklinton.

•District attorney Michael Waters ruled that a Franklin County sheriff's deputy acted lawfully when the officer fatally shot a man in December 2023. Samuel Joseph Tripp III, 59, died in the confrontation inside his Cheves Road home.

•The Louisburg Town Council hired Epsom resident Russell Fuller as its new fire chief, filling a position that had been vacant since late 2024. Fuller, a veteran fireman with the Cary Fire Department, began his duties immediately. The council also named Jennifer Morgan as the town's finance officer.

•Rescue and recovery crews continued to look for a missing youngster, feared to have drowned in the Tar River near Franklinton.

Emergency crews responded to a call that a seven-year-old was missing around the Tar River near Hodges Road — a farmland area that backs up to the river about half a mile to a mile away.

The boy was believed to have been out playing with friends when he fell into the river.

Days later a rescue team pulled the body of the child from the Tar River — concluding a more than week-long search that gripped Franklin County and beyond.



Monroe Richman didn't mind doing the dirty work, providing some landscaping work at St. Matthias Episcopal Church in Louisburg as part of the Global Youth Day of Service in April. The service day was organized by the Franklin County Interfaith Council and featured activities around the county and area.

### APRIL

•The Miracle League of Franklin County's plans for an all-inclusive playground cleared a hurdle.

The Franklin County's Parks and Recreation Advisory Board recommended using more than half a million dollars of rec in lieu funds to build the playground — completing Phase 3 of the Miracle League's development at Long Mill Elementary School.

Miracle League, which provides baseball and other activities for kids and adults with physical, developmental and behavioral disabilities, built an accessible ball field at the Youngsville school in 2013 as part of Phase 1.

By 2019, they had completed Phase 2 which included a field house, equipped with a concession stand, public restrooms and a family room — a space where families can seek relief from the heat or cold — and is equipped with a private restroom and shower facility.

That left Phase 3, the all-inclusive playground — which would feature all the things "regular" kids love, plus the features that welcome children with special needs.

"It's all inclusive, with sensory equipment, wheelchair accessible equipment so that people who don't need the equipment can safely play with kids who need the equipment in an inclusive environment," said Donna Wade, a Miracle League board member.

Continued on the next page

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•The Louisburg Town Council became the first governing body in the county to publicly endorse a public swimming pool — and then pledged to help the county finance such an endeavor.

The action came in the form of a non-binding resolution proposed by council member Dr. Phillip Stover who noted “there is a strong desire by the overwhelming majority of county residents, including most of the residents of Louisburg, to have access to a community pool.”

•The Franklin County Board of Education agreed to ask county commissioners for \$34,715,855 to operate the schools from July 1, 2025 to June 30, 2026.

The previous year, as the schools were lobbying for money to continue their longevity bonuses to retain staff, school officials made a deal that they would not increase their current expense request this year — and the proposed budget reaches that goal.

However, the Cap-X budget does show an increase, both for building maintenance and several new maintenance projects that have been in the planning stages for some time.

This year the current expense request will be for \$30,541,812 — but 28 percent of that request or \$8,689,706 will be “funneled” directly to several charter schools.

The county district’s Cap-X request is for \$4,174,043 up from the \$1,890,611 it received from the county last year. In 2024 the schools asked for just over \$2.6 million for capital expenses but that request was cut by commissioners.

•A majority of Franklin County commissioners threw cold water on the prospects of a public pool. Residents have engaged in a social media, letter writing and public campaign, calling for Franklin County officials to provide a public pool — following through on what a public survey revealed that a majority of respondents desired.

Commissioner Mark Speed suggested the county should seek federal funds to build a recreation center and olympic-sized pool.

Commissioner Stuart May supported his call, but Commission Chair David Bunn, Commission Vice Chair Michael Schriver and Commissioners Harry Foy and Roxanne Bragg voted against the measure. None provided an immediate, public reason for their vote.

•Franklin County commissioners agreed to negotiate with a bidder that’s proposed tearing down the old Louisburg Theater property for \$1.3 million. Franklin County bought the 109 W. Nash Street property in August 2022 for \$202,112 — with plans to destroy the building and make way for a new judicial complex.

## MAY

•A Youngsville businessman was sentenced to at least 20 years in prison after agreeing that there was enough evidence to convict him of murdering his girlfriend.

Authorities arrested Bradley Morris Hines in June 2021, alleging he shot and killed Heather Guild.

Authorities found the 30-year-old wrapped in a bed sheet inside a refrigerator at a Gilcrest Farm Road cabin rented by Hines. Hines entered a plea in Franklin County Superior Court where he maintained his innocence, but acknowledged that there was enough evidence to convict him.

•Franklin County’s Relay for Life event at Bunn High School was the 40th annual event held here to raise money to battle cancer. This year, the event was striving to raise \$80,000 — and exceeded that goal through an effort spearheaded by a number of churches and volunteer organizations.

•Tempest Cellars isn’t perched on the hills of Tuscany, but if you’ve got one of Joe Burgess’ wines in hand while watching cows graze in a pasture, or you stroll by a 150-year-old barn — you could probably taste the best of Italy. The

winery and eight other farms were part of the Franklin County Women in Ag’s 4th annual Local Foods & Fiber Farm Tour.

•Youngsville commissioners opted not to take a position on prospects for a U.S. 1 toll road. When efforts to convert the highway into a freeway to relieve congestion from I-540 into Franklin County hit funding snags, the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization wanted to explore options.

In December 2023 and January 2024, Franklinton and Youngsville governing boards joined others along the route in support of studying the feasibility of making the highway a toll road.

•Patricia Adams earned the Governor’s Volunteer Service Gold Medallion for her volunteer work, which includes volunteering with Sewing Seeds, distributing food to folks in need, work as a booster for the Louisburg Magnet High School band, and providing transportation for folks trying to get to medical appointments, among other things.

•Fireworks culminated a Youngsville celebration that was 150 years in the making.

Youngsville was incorporated on March 17, 1875. Their sesquicentennial bash featured an historic parade with all sorts of events during the day, and a grand finale with fireworks.

•Interim County Manager Ryan Preble proposed a budget that kept the tax rate unchanged, increased employees and pay, raises, raised utility rates and proposed to spend \$9.2 million more than the current fiscal year.

•The school system requested a total of \$34.7 million in current and capital expense funding. Preble proposed \$32.5 million — \$30.5 million for current expenses and \$2 million for capital outlay.

•Franklin County commissioners agreed to Louisburg’s price for two pieces of property that are critical to their plans to develop its judicial complex. The \$280,000 appraised value is \$154,000 more than the tax assessed value — a proposition for which Commissioner Harry Foy expressed heartburn.

“We just come through a recent revaluation ... and it went up,” Foy said. The .99 acre property had a tax value of \$63,120 the previous tax year. It was recently assessed at \$99,000.

•Franklin County selected Spencer Pernelle as its new Solid Waste director, replacing Lee Bodenhamer, who is retiring. Pernelle began his Franklin County career on May 21.

•Louisburg’s former fire chief filed a lawsuit against Louisburg, its mayor and town administrator, arguing he was wrongfully terminated. Raleigh attorney Taylor C. Rosbrook filed a complaint on behalf of Randy Lanham in Franklin County Superior Court alleging, among other things that Lanham’s termination was retaliation for his calling out Mayor Christopher Neal and Town Administrator Sean Medlin for not properly acknowledging the passing of long-time fireman and town supervisor, Ray Patterson;

•A day after decorating the graves of more than 700 veterans, American Legion Post 52 held its annual Memorial Day service, recognizing the service and sacrifice of those who gave all. “We’re here,” Post 52 Commander Chris Smith said while standing in the center of the Franklinton Veterans Memorial Park, “to honor our fallen and remember their sacrifice for our freedom.”

## JUNE

•A roomful of folks told county commissioners to spend more money on school facilities, build an aquatics center and lower utility rates for its most modest users.

At the conclusion of the public hearing on the 2025-26 proposed budget, though, county commissioners sat silent.

•A Youngsville man was sentenced to 51 to 63 years in prison after a jury found him guilty of killing his eight-week-old daughter.

Ricky Barlow Weese Jr., will get credit for the 2,813 days he’d already spent in jail await-



Wendy Perry let Rufus stretch his long legs at new dog park in March

ing trial after he was charged in 2017 with second degree murder.

•The Louisburg Economic Development Commission switched direction as members chastised both town and county leadership for not addressing the growing needs of a increasing population.

The meeting got off on the wrong foot when neither the mayor nor any members of the town council attended the meeting despite a specific invitation from the EDC.

EDC members have repeatedly expressed frustration that their recommendations, delivered to town officials in writing and in public meetings, have largely been ignored.

•Folks packed the parking lot of Youngsville’s newest ABC store during a ribbon-cutting and grand opening. The 101 Tarboro Road location is the town’s second store, in addition to the one in the Youngsville Crossing shopping center on U.S. 1.

•The plan that will help guide Franklin County Schools for the next five years was formally adopted by the Board of Education following months of development. The Strategic Planning Committee was made up of students, parents, teachers, principals and district leaders, community and business leaders, and board members.

Dubbed Blueprint 2030 the plan is built around the existing vision statement: “Building a stronger community one life-long learner at a time.”

•Prosecutors revealed that a 69-year-old woman killed in a drive-by shooting was not the intended target -- her grandson was.

Officials said four suspects were responsible for gunning down Bernice Pender Massenburg inside her Bert Winston Road on April 1 -- killing her when they fired shots in retaliation for a shooting incident that took place in Warren County days before.

•The Franklin County Board of Commissioners approved a \$131 million budget that gave themselves a raise. The decision came two weeks after the board voted to cut their meeting workload in half. Included in the county’s \$131,453,061 budget was an action to increase commissioner pay.

Before the action, the board chair earned \$16,642 and commissioners earned \$15,129. According to the budget ordinance, the board chair will get an additional \$1,513, annually.

The vice chair gets an extra \$500, annually. Commissioners still get \$15,129.

In addition, each commissioner will receive an extra \$1,600 in salary for each year of service beginning at year one through year 12 — meaning a commissioner with 12 years of experience could receive \$19,200 on top of their \$15,129 commissioner pay.

Commissioners also receive 401K contributions at the general employee percentage rate.

•County commissioners selected Ryan Preble as county manager. Preble was hired as an assistant county manager in January 2023, serving in that role until this past November, when the board tabbed him as interim county manager — replacing Kim Denton.

•Louisburg Magnet High School seniors kicked off three-days of graduation festivities in Franklin County on June 11. About 150 students crossed the stage on the school’s football field to receive their diplomas. Their celebration concluded with a tossing of caps. Bunn High students received their diplomas in a ceremony inside the Bunn Dome on June 12. Just more than 200 students made up the school’s class of 2025. More than 260 Franklinton High School students received their diplomas during the June 13 graduation ceremony inside the school’s gymnasium. The class of 2025 marked the school’s 100th graduating class.

•Traffic, again, dominated another session of the Youngsville board of commissioners. However, the focus this time was on a project that seems to be dead in its tracks.

In late 2023 and early 2024, Franklinton and Youngsville officials both supported the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization’s decision to study whether to toll some, all or create new construction for Capital Boulevard — from I-540 to the Franklin County line.

Transportation planners considered tolling the road because improvements to the congested roadway had been delayed because of funding.

The majority of CAMPO’s executive board still favored a tolling option, voting at its May meeting to support tolling the section of roadway. During Youngsville’s June 12 meeting, Mayor Pro Tem and CAMPO Executive Board member Scott Brame voted against the option.

Continued on the next page

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## JULY

• Louisburg officials and residents learned that the General Assembly adopted House Bill 183 in June, which changed the way Louisburg voters elect their mayor.

Gone was the one-time, highest vote-getter wins.

It was replaced by a process that required candidates in a three or more candidate race to secure more than 50 percent of the vote to win.

Failing that, a runoff election between the two highest vote getters would be necessary to declare a victor.

It wasn't a change that Louisburg leaders or residents asked for. It was attached to an unrelated bill introduced Down East.

And, it apparently had no father as no member of the General Assembly took credit for the legislation.

In the end, Mayor Christopher Neal earned more than 50 percent of the vote during the first go around in October, and no mayor runoff during the November election was necessary.

But, the Franklin County Board of Elections sent Louisburg a nearly \$19,000 bill for hosting the October election it didn't ask for.

In January 2026, the Louisburg Town Council agreed to send that bill to Rep. Matthew Winslow and the General Assembly for payment.

That bill remains outstanding.

• The Louisburg Town Council expanded a zoning district in a June 27 meeting that made Franklin County's judicial complex project possible.

The town council extended its Planned Development zoning district to include W. Johnson Street and a .99-acre parcel between Johnson Street and Riverbend Park that the town agreed to sell to the county.

That lot is critical for parking and the utility work necessary to accommodate the project.

It was a unanimous decision by the board.

• It was revealed that another former Louisburg firefighter, Jeremy Henthorn, filed a lawsuit against and its town administrator, alleging they were guilty of wrongful termination.

The June 26 lawsuit alleges Louisburg and Town Administrator Sean Medlin were guilty of wrongfully terminating Henthorn in retaliation for his complaints against the department, opposition to workplace misconduct and his continued association with former chief, Randy Lanham. The case remains pending.

• Louisburg officials swore in Travis Lincoln, officially making him the chief of police. Jason Abbott retired as chief at the end of

January and the town tabbed Lincoln as interim, until he was officially sworn in in July.

• The District Attorney's Office petitioned Franklin County Schools to turn over all internal investigation records that led the school system to part ways with former Franklinton High School Principal Russell Holloman.

Assistant District Attorney Jamie Lamancusa argued that those files would help Franklin County sheriff's deputies with their investigation into allegations of a sexual assault involving members of Franklinton High's baseball team -- the handling of which led Superintendent Rhonda Schuhler to recommend Holloman's termination.

Prosecutors have asked for all incoming, outgoing, and deleted emails associated with the Holloman's school email account, from March 4 through the present.

The petition remains pending.

• Franklin County formerly opened Phase 2 of its Triangle North Franklin Business Park.

A new road and newly laid water and sewer lines open up 2,500 feet of road and dozens of acres on seven lots for business and industrial development.

There are seven lots available in Phase 2.

• Franklinton and Louisburg both received grants, \$500,000 and \$100,000, respectively, that they plan to use to bolster recreational opportunities.

Franklinton is using the money to develop a nature preserve on a 134-acre tract at West River and Ballard Pruitt Road -- commonly referred to as the Annie Edwards property.

With aid from Franklin County, the nature preserve would be the first in Franklin County.

Louisburg is using the funds to test the viability of connecting Depot Hill and Joyner Park via a trail.

## AUGUST

• Louisburg officials agreed to name its baseball field after Eugene Yarborough, a long-time coach and mentor.

Yarborough died in December 2024.

• Louisburg residents Raymond Evans, 55, and 24-year-old Lottie Alston were killed when their minivan was swept off the side of the road into a ravine in the 600 block of N.C. 581 in Spring Hope.

The tragic incident happened during a flash flood in the area.

• Plans to demolish the old Louisburg theater began in earnest, with crews beginning work to knock down the building to make way for the county's new judicial complex -- a combination of renovations and new construction.

• The Cooperative Extension, again, held its Franklin County Fun 4-H Livestock Show



**IT BEGAN.** Demolition crews began tearing down the old Louisburg theater. The building and surrounding structure were brought down, making way for the expansion of a judicial complex.

at Wildwynn Stables in Youngsville, giving youngsters an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and animal care skills in a fun environment.

• Dr. Rhonda Schuhler made public her intention to retire at the end of the year.

Schuhler's career in public education spanned 32 years, from working in the classroom to serving as Franklin County Schools' superintendent.

Schuhler began her career in education in 1993 as an elementary classroom teacher and then went on to serve as an assistant principal and principal.

At the district level she has held multiple leadership positions, including director of personnel development, director of professional development and innovation, executive director of K-12 curriculum and instruction and assistant and associate superintendent.

She joined Franklin County schools in 2014, first as an assistant superintendent then as associate superintendent, providing district-level leadership before becoming superintendent in 2017.

She served in that role until Jan. 1, 2026.

• Louisburg's Todd Richardson Rogers was found guilty of shooting a family of three in a neighbor dispute and was sentenced to more than 12 years in prison.

The 63-year-old Rogers was convicted of shooting Sharon Gourley, Jason Gourley and Jacob Gourley during the morning hours of April 5, 2022.

Evidence revealed that Rogers shot Jacob Gourley in the face, Jason Gourley in the arm and grazed Sharon Gourley in the chest with a .45-caliber pistol.

• Bunn officials and residents celebrated Carolyn Ransdell, who retired as the town's utilities clerk.

• Louisburg police arrested a Clayton man, Gregory Lamont Pettidord, accusing him of using a false identity to get a teaching job at Crosscreek Charter School.

Investigators allege Pettiford used other people's identification numbers in his quest to be hired at Crosscreek.

Pettiford had been hired in early July as an 8th grade teacher, "but never had contact with any students before his departure from the school," said Louisburg Police Chief Travis Lincoln. The case against Pettiford remains pending in Franklin County District Court.

## SEPTEMBER

• Jesse Nathan Metcalf, of Raleigh, was sentenced to between 10 and 25 years in jail after a jury found him guilty of making repeated threats to "blow the brains out" of a Wake County assistant district attorney.

Metcalf was serving time in the Franklin Correctional Center in Bunn in the fall of 2023 when prosecutors argued he made repeated threats to kill assistant Wake County Assistant District attorney C.J. Koscianski -- the prosecutor in a gun and domestic violence case that

resulted in Metcalf's 16 month to two and a half year sentence on charges of discharging a firearm to incite fear, communicating threats and resisting an officer.

• Youngsville and its first responding community held its National Night Out festivities, an opportunity to strengthen relationships between first responders and the communities they serve.

• Franklin County commissioners approved a more than 1,000-acre solar farm along Trinity Church, Pete Smith and Sutton roads.

Earlier in the year, the project was controversial to those in the community who did not know much about it.

However, following community sessions, those concerns were apparently alleviated enough to mitigate opposition and garner county approval.

• Youngsville Town Manager Nathan Page announced he was stepping down from his post at the end of the year, ending about four years of service.

Assistant Town Manager William "Will" Doerfer stepped into the top post on an interim basis.

Following a nationwide search, Doerfer was hired as the town manager by the end of the year.

• Franklinton officials bestowed a commendation upon Police Officer Phyllis Johnson for going above and beyond the call of duty.

Johnson, helped deliver a baby boy on the side of U.S. 1 the afternoon of Sept. 8.

She helped a fellow officer respond to a vehicle stop that swiftly became a medical emergency.

"When I got there, I gave a look and the head was crowning," Johnson said.

The mother, Johnson recalled, said she couldn't wait.

"It happened that fast," Johnson said.

A few minutes later, paramedics responded and Johnson helped direct them to provide suction for the baby and take over the medical situation.

The mother and her son were transported and doing well, authorities said.

• Thomas Lee Hicks Jr. pled guilty to second degree murder and was sentenced to as much as nearly 30 years in prison for killing 40-year-old Ricky Shipman outside a corner store in Louisburg in November 2022.

Hicks's plea was part of an agreement that allowed him to plea to the lesser included offense, not the first degree charge -- which carries a penalty, including life in prison and up to the death penalty. According to investigators, Shipman was leaving what used to be the In & Out No. 2 convenience store at the corner of S. Main Street and Bunn Road at about 11 p.m. when a black car pulled up.

Hicks said he shot Shipman because he alleged Shipman had been stealing from him. He was sentenced to between 288 months and 358 months.



**OFFICIAL.** Mayor Christopher Neal, right, swore in Travis Lincoln as the town's new police chief in July. Lincoln is with his wife, Desiree, and son, Nolan.

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## OCTOBER

• Louisburg Mayor Christopher Neal won re-election, winning a three-candidate race between Boyd Sturges and William Goedert.

The October election was a result in a change to the election process that affected only the Louisburg mayor's race.

• Former county manager Kim Denton filed a lawsuit against Sheriff Kevin White, accusing him of defamation that led Franklin County commissioners to fire her.

Denton's lawsuit seeks damages from White in his individual capacity, arguing that the social media campaign he waged against her was outside his scope and official duties as sheriff.

Franklin County commissioners fired Denton in November 2024 — ending her nearly four-year tenure about a month after White called for her resignation after alleging she added red tape and roadblocks to his efforts to provide assistance to western North Carolina following Hurricane Helene, which hit in September, 2024.

White filed a motion to dismiss the case in December.

The case remains pending in Franklin County Civil Superior Court.

• Embattled former clerk of superior court Patricia Chastain won back her right to seek office, again.

Superior Court Judge Thomas Lock's decision ended a more than five year legal battle that began when a Louisburg attorney Jeffrey Scott Thompson asserted in the summer of 2020 that Patricia Chastain was unfit to serve as clerk of superior court.

Chastain filed for and ran for the clerk of court post in 2022 — while her legal status remained pending — but lost by just more than 400 votes.

Lock heard new arguments in the matter during a hearing in September and, at its conclusion, made his decision known in October.

It cleared the way for Chastain to run and hold the office, if she desires.

Chastain, though, did not file for a party nomination during the December filing period.

• Operators of Bunn Tavern closed their doors following an State Alcohol Law

Enforcement, Bunn Police and Franklin County Sheriff's Office investigation that revealed gambling, alcohol and drug offenses by staff.

A plea agreement has been reached in one case and charges were dropped in another.

Charges remain pending against three defendants.

• After being delayed for years, Louisburg officials received the audit report for their fiscal year 2023 finances — and the prognosis was good, auditors said.

The audit, performed by PBMares of New Bern, revealed no fraud, illegal acts, abuse, or unethical financial practices.

• Franklin County officials and its emergency response staff ceremonially opened a new, nearly \$3 million EMS station to serve the Bunn area.

The station sits next to Bunn Middle School and is part of the county's plan to expand its emergency services options, providing more resources in communities that need them.

That included a station near the county airport, as well as plans for a new EMS station inside the old Walgreens building on U.S. 1 in Franklinton.

## NOVEMBER

• Franklin County management elevated Jerry Jones to permanent Animal Services Director.

The county brought Jones in on an interim basis in September 2024, filling the post after the county fired the previous director.

Long-time county planning staffer Jason Rogers was also elevated to Planning and Inspections Director — replacing Scott Hammerbacher who was tabbed as a county assistant manager.

• Municipal races saw stalwarts return and new faces ascend to public service.

In Bunn, Mayor Marsha Strawbridge retained her seat, beating back a strong push by a political newcomer. Political newcomer Ebony Hartsfield Thorne secured a seat on the board, earning the most votes of any winning commissioner. Incumbents Don Mitchell and Ally Leggett retained their seats.

Franklinton maintained their status quo as the only governing board that saw each incumbent, LaTasha Wilder, John Allers and



**MAN OF THE HOUR.** Air Force veteran and Franklinton town historian Samuel "Brodie" Green Sr., left, was presented with key to the city during American Legion Post 52's Veterans Day program in November.

Alvin Holden retain their seats.

In Louisburg, stalwart Betty Wright retained her seat. She was joined on the council by political newcomers David Rosby and Sean Kingsley.

In Youngsville, incumbent Commissioner Cat Redd retained her seat. And, she was joined by political newcomers BJ Ayscue and Willi Stolz.

• Franklinton Mayor Art Wright gave veteran, American Legion Post 52 member and town historian Samuel Brodie Green Sr. the key to the city — believed to be the first person in Franklinton to receive the recognition.

It was part of the Post's Veterans Day program at Franklinton Veterans Park.

• A northern Franklin County family lost their home in a fire.

Justice Fire officials said the home in the 2200 block of Seven Paths Road was a total loss from smoke and fire damage.

There was one person at home at the time of the fire, but they were able to get out and no injuries were reported, said Justice Fire Chief Kelly Harris.

The fire gutted the roof of the home, Harris said.

• Benchmark Community Bank celebrated its opening with a ribbon cutting, bringing a brick and mortar financial institution back to Franklinton in more than 10 years.

• Franklin County hosted a ribbon cutting at Epsom Park, unveiling the new recreational facility to the community.

The park at the corner of Eaves Road and N.C. 39 — next to the Epsom Fire Department — features a playground, sand volleyball court, paved walking loops, cornhole boards and a multipurpose field.

It also features a picnic shelter and restroom facilities.

• Organizers in Louisburg hosted the first ever Louisburg Turkey Trot, a 5-k run/walk on Thanksgiving. The goal is to make it an annual event.

• The first domino in a multiple suspect crime spree fell when a federal judge sentenced 22-year-old Achontay Malik Cotten to 11 years in federal prison for multiple armed robberies.

Four other suspects, Scotland Neck's Cotten, Achilles Taylor, 19, of Enfield; Gavin Davis, 19 of Battleboro; and Shamyah Battle, 19 of Rocky Mount, are alleged to have played a role in the armed robberies at local Dollar General stores.

In one of the robberies, suspects are

alleged to have fired several shots at pursuing officers — Deputies T. Johnson and K. Livesay.

Their vehicle was damaged, but they were not struck by gunfire.

Local prosecutors were awaiting the federal results to begin their state cases. Those cases remain pending.

## DECEMBER

• During a special called meeting, the Franklin County Board of Education hired Dr. Nakia Hardy as the school system's newest superintendent.

Hardy has nearly three decades of experience in public education, most recently serving as superintendent of Lexington City Schools — since July 2023.

Before that, she spent eight years as deputy superintendent for Durham Public Schools.

Hardy's experience ranges from chief academic officer, assistant superintendent, principal and began her career teaching AP Chemistry.

She was sworn in as superintendent on Jan. 21.

• Demolition work on the old Louisburg theater — which is making way for the county's new judicial complex — apparently damaged a neighboring building.

The county condemned a building at 107 W. Main Street — Tar River Interiors — after they decided the structure was too dangerous to be used.

• Franklin County sheriff's deputies arrested Jermaine Anthony Branch after they allege he shot at, and tried to kill, Dep. Taylor Lucas.

In comments attributed to Sheriff Kevin White on his Facebook page, Lucas's life was spared because he was wearing his bullet-proof vest.

The charges against Branch remain pending.

• Longtime firefighter Henry Nelms was presented with the Order of the Long Leaf Pine and Ramey Seal was recognized as the Franklin County Firefighter of the Year. Both presentations were made during the Franklin County Firefighter's Association annual banquet.

• Franklinton hosted its first New Year's Eve event, First Night Funkytown.

It featured a ball drop for kids at 9 a.m., as well as a ball drop at midnight.

Both drops were punctuated with fireworks to ring in the new year.



**READY, SET, GO.** Hundreds of runners and walkers lined up at the starting gate for the inaugural Louisburg Turkey Trot on Thanksgiving morning. Organizers want the run to become an annual, family tradition.

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