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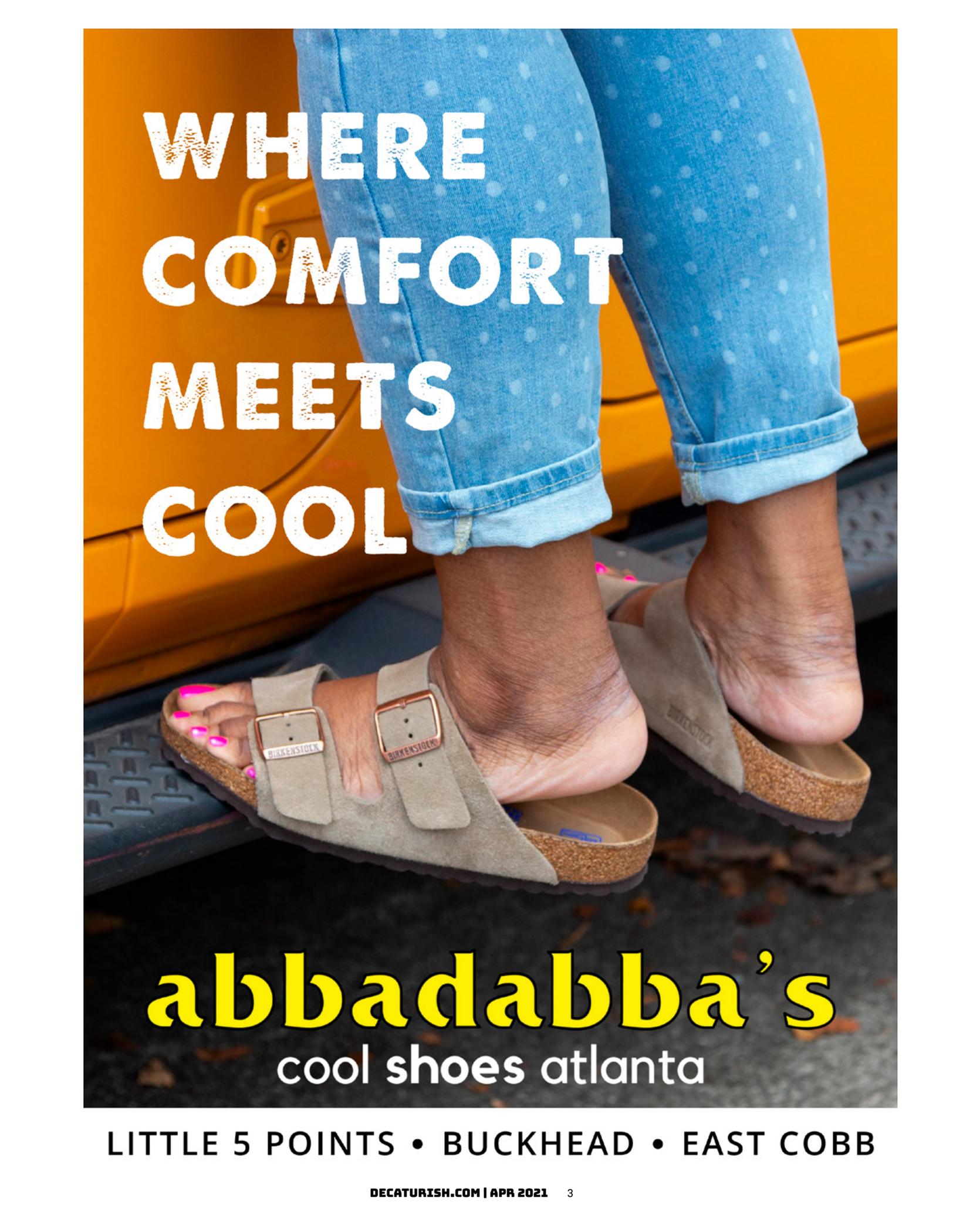
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On the cover: Protestors fill N. McDonough St. as they march through downtown Decatur during a peaceful demonstration sponsored by the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights on June 7, 2020. Photo by Dean Hesse.

A close-up photograph of a person's lower legs and feet. They are wearing light blue denim jeans with the hems rolled up. On their feet are tan suede Birkenstock sandals with two straps across the foot, each featuring a gold-colored buckle. The sandals have a cork footbed and a dark sole. The person is standing on a yellow surface, likely the side of a vehicle, with a metal grate visible below. The background is a solid yellow color.

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# Pay attention: Decatur Schools situation is serious



Dan Whisenhunt  
Editor & Publisher

**D**ear valued supporters,

I don't like to editorialize on local news matters unless it's really setting my hair on fire. The current drama with Superintendent David Dude has turned my head into an active volcano.

For those of you who haven't followed this too closely, I'll try to simplify it. (For the longer version, check out my stories [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).)

In December 2019, City Schools of Decatur [announced the resignations of Finance Director Susan Hurst and Human Resources Director David Adams](#). At the time, School Board member Tasha White called the simultaneous announcements a coincidence. Later, Superintendent Dude – in a one-on-one interview with me – said prior to David Adams' departure, the school district had investigated complaints about Adams. I [wrote a story](#), based on that interview.

Fast forward to January 2021, and a quite different story emerges when Adams [files a lawsuit in federal court](#). Adams says that Dude's remarks during our interview violated the non-disparagement clause of his severance agreement with the district. After our story ran, Adams lawsuit alleges, the job opportunities for him dried up.

But that's not all. Adams further alleges that Dude retaliated against him and Hurst after they raised questions about his use of vacation time. The lawsuit alleges Dude was underreporting time off and then accepting payments for the days he says he didn't use.

I know we have a cultural apathy toward civil lawsuits – anyone can sue anyone, after all – but the breadth of the assertions being made here were shocking to me. I wondered, could any of this be true? So, I decided to pull that thread.

As it turns out, the facts support Adams' claims. Superintendent Dude's calendar shows gaps in his schedule and two employees of CSD told us -- anonymously out of fear for their jobs -- that Dude is often gone during the summer, which supports another claim in Adams' suit.

The School Board would later say that Dude can be off during periods like Spring Break and that those off-days do not count against his vacation days. The School Board has yet to weigh on how many days Dude is expected to work in a calendar year and whether he gets summers off. For context, most superintendents are expected to work year-round, including the summer.

And the number of days he's supposed to work is important, because of another allegation in the lawsuit: that Dude got paid by cashing out unused vacation time.

He definitely did, earning \$100,000 for days he says he did not use. In response to our findings about the vacation payments, the Decatur School Board fell on the sword for Dude.

"The vacation days, and the option to cash out a portion of unused vacation days, was part of Dr. Dude's agreed-upon compensation package in both his original contract and his current contract," the School Board said. "This practice is an alternative to paying a straight, often much higher, salary."

So, to translate that for you: Dude's base salary, the one advertised to the public when his contract is approved, is not what the School Board intends to pay him. That's just what they want the public to think that's what the board is paying him.

And yes, I know Dude gets performance bonuses and whatnot. Frankly, those are expected in superintendent contracts these days. But the arrangement the School Board and Dude made on vacation days is something the public was not generally aware of. Until I wrote about it, that its.

If some goober reporter with a funny last name

like me can find evidence to support David Adams' claims, attorneys working for the law firm suing the school district are going to have a field day.

But the board, it seems, is willing to publicly embarrass itself on Dude's behalf for reasons that are a mystery to me. They're apparently also willing to continue working with him.

My reporting uncovered that Dude's most recent contract renewal, which the board has rescinded, [made it harder and more expensive for the school district to fire Dude](#). When I spoke to one board member, they were not aware of these changes to the contract until I brought them to their attention. The board has rescinded and plans to renegotiate Dude's contract even as it [has pledged to independently investigate the things we've uncovered](#). In fact, the School Board has not committed to waiting for that investigation to conclude before renewing Dude's contract.

The School Board is signaling that it intends to let this story die a quiet death and that it has no interest in transparency or accountability.

Since I began reporting this story, the school district has become what I could charitably call weird with my records requests. Records I know are there, because I've laid eyes on them elsewhere, somehow aren't turning up when I request them from the district. The School Board knows this and board members have done ... absolutely nothing about it. I've filed a complaint with the Attorney General's Office. I have good reason to believe the school district intentionally withheld records from me. We'll see where that complaint goes.

But where this entire story goes ultimately depends on you. I can cover this stuff until I alienate everyone around me, but it's not going to make any difference unless you – and I'm speaking specifically to city of Decatur residents here – start getting engaged with this story. It's time to start [contacting your School Board members](#) and start speaking out during their meetings. Because we all deserve answers about what's going on.

As much as I would sincerely love to not cover this drama so I could focus on running my business, I am covering it. I can't blame you for not wanting to expend mental energy on this. It's been a trying year for everyone.

But I'm here to tell you, things have gone sideways in City Schools of Decatur. And you really need to pay attention to it.

Time and money spent defending lawsuits against the superintendent is time and money that's not being spent educating your kids. When a school district becomes this toxic, good people start looking for an exit. That's already happening as the School Board has signaled it only plans to pay lip service to accountability. If there's no accountability for the superintendent, then there is no protection for employees who identify problems in the school district.

I would like to be proven wrong about everything I've written to date. I'd like for the board to provide a coherent explanation, in an interview, for what has occurred. I'd like for them to forcefully rebut any conclusions I've drawn.

Unfortunately for the School Board, there's no explanation that wraps things up with a neat little bow.

A government that hides from the truth and gets away with it will only feel emboldened to do it again. Only the next time it could be about something far more serious than whether David Dude took too much vacation.

Until next month, I remain your grateful editor and community reporter.

—Dano

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# Local leaders respond to 2020: A year of obstacles, unrest

By Logan C. Ritchie and Zoe Seiler,  
contributors

One year ago, March 2020, saw the beginning of a new era. Data reports were grim, and often confusing to readers and journalists. Without a plan, schools, offices and government operations began closing. Optimistic parents started creating nooks for schooling at home, while stores ran low on toilet paper and hand sanitizer, and masks became an expression of fashion and politics.

Families were seen taking long walks. People made sourdough bread from scratch. Trees bloomed and birds sang. But there was no denying the uncertainty, fear and illness that lingered as we remained stuck at home.

In the midst of the crisis, social unrest erupted over the killing of Black people by law enforcement officers.

A few of the lives we wept for include Ahmaud Arbery in Brunswick, Ga. on Feb. 23, Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Ky. on March 13, George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25 and Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta on June 12.

Social and racial justice would no longer take a back seat under the nation's crumbling leadership. People took to the streets, marching and carrying signs to demonstrate their heartbreak, distress and rage.

In Decatur Square, a Confederate memorial was removed at midnight on a Thursday in June -- the day before Juneteenth, a national holiday to mark the freedom of enslaved Black people in the U.S.

At the helm, elected officials and community leaders delivered messages to the people of DeKalb County. Some believed in resiliency from the start, others floundered right alongside us.

Decaturish asked them to reflect on the past year, and what stands out the most.

## Avondale Estates Mayor Jonathan Elmore

March 16 comes to mind for Avondale Estates Mayor Jonathan Elmore as the day he and his family realized COVID-19 was a serious issue. They watched the news and saw the global nature of the virus, but weren't too alarmed yet.

The realization came when schools shut down and his three children were suddenly learning virtually from home. City Commission meetings moved to Zoom as City Hall closed. The outbreak in Albany, Ga., after two funerals, showed the seriousness and lethality of the virus, Elmore said.

Elmore felt the biggest challenge his city faced was how the state handled the pandemic. Orders from the governor could have coordinated better with the cities, he said. But it was difficult for local officials to create and enforce resolutions like mask mandates.

"I never understood that. Like why would you not engage law enforcement that willingly wants to help in your efforts to protect people in the state," Elmore asked. "If there ever was a time where you needed to work together that was it. I felt like we got completely pushed aside."

## Carol Calvert and Lisa Cottrell, Avondale Alliance for Racial Justice

In spite of the pandemic, residents of Avondale Estates got together to advocate for racial justice and establish a new local organization. Carol Calvert and Lisa Cottrell felt called to respond to the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd and take protests to the street, while following COVID-19 safety guidelines.

"Avondale Alliance for Racial Justice was created in June with the mission to show up and do anti-racism work in our own community and beyond through activism, education and community building," Calvert said. "Creating a grassroots organization

during a pandemic has definitely had challenges, especially around community building, but we are proud of the work we have been able to do so far."

Hundreds of people lined North Avondale Road for a protest in June 2020. The AARJ has held monthly protests and events ever since to ask the City Commission to implement the 21st century policing guidelines and review the city's police policies and procedures, Cottrell said.

"While we had protested in years past, the blatant overuse of force in the George Floyd murder was more than we could continue to witness without acting and demanding immediate change," Cottrell said.

## Clarkston Mayor Beverly Burks

The state started to shut down in early March 2020 as Clarkston Mayor Beverly Burks went into surgery during her final set of breast cancer treatments, while also in the middle of a mayoral campaign.

"It was an awakening, but I tried to see the benefits and the beauty of the situation and tried to make the best of the situation," Burks said. "It was going to be rough anyway but then what can we do and how can we make the most of this time that we have?"

Clarkston residents were displaced as a result of COVID-19 and couldn't do certain jobs. The city provided \$900,000 in rent and mortgage assistance and this brought the importance of workforce development to Burks' attention.

Clarkston is often referred to as the most diverse square mile in the U.S. Racial justice is an ongoing issue in the community. Burks is complimentary of the police department but also recognizes there is always room for improvement.

"So that's one of the reasons why I came up with the police task force, so that we can look at what we're doing, see how we can improve our training so that our officers are better in terms of how they engage with the community," Burks said.

## Decatur Mayor Pro Tem Tony Powers

For Mayor Pro Tem Tony Powers, daily reports of COVID-19 crippling Europe in early February were the early indicators that 2020 would be very different. While he admitted it is difficult to summarize all the events that have transpired during the COVID-19 pandemic, he said he is "grateful to our community for the resilience shown while navigating this crisis."

Powers noted Decatur already had a pandemic plan in place when COVID-19 hit. He named voter turnout, mask mandates, social distancing, social justice and equity as standout issues.

"There were many challenges that faced all of Decatur. We grappled with some of our most vulnerable school aged children learning in a virtual environment. I recognize that not every household had the same resources to equip children to learn in a digital world. There were a number of peaceful protests in and around the square for several weeks," he said, adding the Decatur Police Department did a remarkable job of keeping protestors and spectators safe.

Other challenges in the city were homelessness and funding for small businesses. Decatur received three rounds of funding from the CARES Act that was awarded to local businesses and nonprofits.

"I would be remiss in also mentioning the record voter turnout during this pandemic. We must now be equally vigilant to ensure that access to voting is not taken away. We will continue to get into 'good trouble,'" Powers said.



Signage on the front of Raging Burrito in Downtown Decatur on May 2, 2020. Photo by Dean Hesse.

**CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE**

**Dr. S. Elizabeth Ford, DeKalb County  
Board of Health**

Dr. S. Elizabeth Ford, DeKalb County's director of health, appeared regularly at meetings to detail COVID-19 numbers, testing sites and vaccination distribution. DeKalb County is currently reporting 900 COVID-related deaths and more than 53,000 positive cases. Among all persons diagnosed with COVID-19 in DeKalb County, 7.9% needed hospitalization and 1.6% died. Forty three percent of people who had COVID-19 in DeKalb County are Black.

Ford oversaw a county hit hard by physical health, food insecurity and job loss.

On her greatest challenge during 2020, Ford said, "Clearly, countless challenges have presented themselves in the midst of the pandemic. One of the greatest was the toll the pandemic took on my own team, my own workforce. Everything that happened in the world — illness, hospitalizations, death — also happened to my staff. Yet, there was an expectation that we could test everyone, vaccinate everyone, and perform contact tracing — with a workforce reduced dramatically due to medical fragility or childcare issues related to school closures. We were expected to do three times the work with one third of the staff."

**Tucker Mayor Frank Auman**

Tucker Mayor Frank Auman recalled the announcement he made in a video to Tucker on March 13, 2020.

"It was like walking into a dark room," he said. "We didn't know anything except that there was danger. We don't know where it was, or how big it was, or how to defend ourselves from it, and certainly not how to beat it in the end. [I am] super proud of how Tucker's responded."

He added, "We've had a lot of obstacles to get over in the last year, but ever since then it's been like the lights have been coming on bit by bit, and we're finding our way. I think we're very close to the end now."

Tucker was awarded \$4.1 million in CARES Act funds by DeKalb County, some of which was distributed to residents in need of food, rent, mortgage and utility assistance.

**Emory Morsberger, Tucker Summit CID**

As executive director of the Tucker Summit Community Impact District (CID), Emory Morsberger says he is looking to the future. He reflected the ways in which 2020 is moving Tucker into a place of progress.

"The way we live, work and play is about to drastically change. There will be a major movement to the suburbs from Atlanta, both from offices and residential units. A lot of people who don't want to drive to a meeting and face traffic will not have to do that anymore. Not when they can log into a meeting from where they live. It's going to change how and where people live and work," Morsberger said.

**State Sen. Kim Jackson (D-41)**

State Sen. Kim Jackson realized that the pandemic wasn't going to last for just a little while as colleges cancelled graduation ceremonies. She took the pandemic seriously, especially as her brother-in-law in New York City got COVID-19 and was on a ventilator.

The cancelled graduations also seemed to be the trigger for people to cancel summer weddings that Jackson was set to officiate. She is a priest at Church of the Common Ground.

She remembers being fearful for the homeless



community she serves if they got sick. She couldn't find people. The day before shutting down her church she handed out cards and asked people to provide contact information for family so she could find relatives if they died.

Jackson, a 15-year resident of Stone Mountain, has never seen so much public hunger. She described a long line of cars at the local YMCA on food distribution day. It was challenging to connect people to food banks and pantries.

"It's one thing to grieve all of the different family gatherings that we didn't get to have," Jackson said. "It's another thing to think about families and children being hungry."

The summer of 2020 was the first time that social justice advocates had to consider whether they should take to the streets to protest as the Black Lives Matter movement was re-energized in the middle of a pandemic.

"Suddenly protesting had a real, life threatening manner to it and yet the issue of racism is clearly life threatening too," Jackson said. "I think those tensions were clear and highlighted and amplified in ways that made that protest, I think, all the more powerful and me all the more grateful for the people who made the calculations and decided that the risk was worth it."

**U.S. Sen. Raphael Warnock**

Toward the end of 2020, Georgia saw contentious general and runoff elections as both Senate



Georgia Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate, Rev. Raphael Warnock speaks during a drive-in rally at the Clarkston First Baptist Church on Dec. 16, 2020. Photo by Dean Hesse.



TOP: Protestors make their way down N. McDonough Street in downtown Decatur during a peaceful Black Lives Matter demonstration on June 3, 2020.

BOTTOM: Two children carry boxes of fresh meat and produce home from a food distribution event put on by DeKalb County at James R. Hallford Stadium in Clarkston on Dec. 19, 2020. Photos by Dean Hesse.

seats were up for grabs. In a historic vote, Georgia sent two Democrats to the U.S. Senate including Sen. Raphael Warnock at the beginning of 2021.

Warnock is thankful to voters for choosing him to represent them and their families.

"And following this once-in-a-century public health crisis and economic downturn that has threatened businesses, disrupted education for our state's students and claimed the lives of countless loved ones, I'm glad Georgia made it possible for Congress to pass expansive COVID relief," Warnock said in a statement.

The pandemic has illuminated and exacerbated longstanding disparities in the community and Warnock is glad Congress passed legislation to send direct payments to individuals, strengthen funding for COVID-19 vaccine distribution, support small businesses and local governments, and more.

"It is the honor of my life to serve the people of Georgia and bring our issues to the forefront of legislation in Washington D.C.," Warnock said. "This past year has been dark, but together, with unwavering faith and perseverance, better days are coming."

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# Three candidates jump into Atlanta City Council District 5 race

By Patrick Saunders, contributor

**Atlanta, Ga.** — A sustainability expert, a civic activist and a community organizer have all launched campaigns to replace Natalyn Archibong on the Atlanta City Council.

Mandy Mahoney, the former director of sustainability for the city of Atlanta, is joined in the race by Kirkwood Neighbors Organization President Katie Kissel and Liliana Bakhtiari, who came within some 250 votes of beating Archibong in the District 5 race in 2017. Archibong is leaving the seat to run for Atlanta City Council President. District 5 includes East Atlanta, East Lake, Edgewood and Kirkwood.

Bakhtiari is strategic director for the Blue Neighbors Project, a political action committee that supports progressive candidates for the Georgia Legislature. She told Decaturish she's spent the past four years building relationships with residents, councilmembers, people within Atlanta Public Schools and state officials.

"Because having a functioning democracy means having relationships across the board and solid communication," she said.

Bakhtiari wants to address public safety, income inequality and infrastructure.

"Our city has the single largest income gap in the country and that is something I absolutely want to fight to narrow or bridge that gap," she said. "And our streets, sidewalks and water infrastructure are all crumbling and we have a \$1.5 billion infrastructure backlog that we absolutely have to be fighting to tackle because it affects everybody's quality of life."

But Bakhtiari called affordable housing "one of the single greatest issues our city faces." She said it's going to take raising philanthropic dollars to properly address the issue.

"We're also building at a massive deficit and there's not enough supply to meet demand, causing rents to skyrocket and pushing seniors out of homes," she said. "We have to find the balance between single family housing and multi-family housing."

The city's ongoing crime issues are due in part to officer retention issues at the Atlanta Police Department and recidivism.

"We have 300 people that are responsible for nearly half of the crime that's committed in Atlanta," she said. "That's one aspect, but we have to look at root causes of why these issues exist in the first place. That goes to working with our kids and building stronger partnerships."

"We have one of the largest opportunity gaps between white and Black kids in Atlanta and that's one of the things we have to tackle to cut into the school-to-prison pipeline," she added.

Mahoney has been president of the Southeast Energy Efficiency Alliance since 2013. She's long considered a political run, but it coalesced in 2020.

"I was walking my son to school every day and realized how bad the sidewalks and streets were and I realized now is the time to run," she said.

Affordable housing will be one of Mahoney's major campaign issues.

"We also have to look at the level of quality," she said. "We have substandard housing in Atlanta because of 100 years of policy that has not allowed Black



Katie Kissel, left, Mandy Mahoney, center, and Liliana Bakhtiari, right, are vying to fill Natalyn Archibong's seat on the Atlanta City Council.

and brown people access to adequate housing."

Mahoney said public safety needs to be examined on a neighborhood-to-neighborhood scale.

"The issue of the increased homicide rate in Buckhead and is not the same one as the increased rate in East Lake or Brookhaven," she said. "The amount of manpower needs to be appropriate to the location."

She would also expand the city's pre-arrest diversion program.

Mahoney touted her work as the city's first sustainability director under former Mayors Shirley Franklin and Kasim Reed.

"I was able to put in place a climate and energy plan that is still in place today," she said. "That's still saving money on utility bills."

She's continued similar work at the Southeast Energy Efficiency Alliance.

Kissel launched her campaign on Wednesday. She's been president of the Kirkwood Neighbors Organization since January 2020 and is outreach specialist for a marketing agency that connects companies and brands with non-profits.

"As president of KNO as well as my experience working on different non-profit boards, I have seen the nuts and bolts of what makes our cities run and I see where there's potential for improvement and I think I have the experience and the community connections to help make that happen," she said.

Kissel's main campaign issues are income inequality, affordable housing and accessibility, which she said are intertwined.

"The wealth gap that we face leads directly to exasperating the issue of poverty and our housing shortage," she said.

The demand for housing far outweighs the supply in Atlanta, Kissel said.

"Which means getting creative and making tough choices that might not always please everybody, but will in the long run benefit all citizens of the city by making us a more equitable and accessible city," she said.

Kissel highlighted her experience with local city government, neighborhood government and community connections.

"People know who I am and they trust me. I think a big issue that we find in government, especially in this city, is the lack of trust people have in their government," she said. "People know me because I'm the person they see dropping my kids off in the school line, at community events, passing flyers out for different organizations."

Qualifying for the District 5 race takes place in August. The election is in November.

# Decatur joins UNICEF USA's child-friendly cities initiative

By Dan Whisenhunt, editor

**Decatur, Ga.** — On Wednesday the city of Decatur announced it will join the UNICEF Child Friendly City Initiative. Through the Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI), Decatur, in addition to 4 pilot cities and 1 county, will implement an ambitious, two-year process toward recognition as a UNICEF Child Friendly City, a press release from the city says.

"We are truly excited to enter this partnership and initiative with UNICEF USA," Decatur Mayor Pro Tem Tony Powers said. "Our children and youth need our support more than ever as we attempt to return to normalcy after a year that left us sheltered and, in many cases, separated from friends and family. The Child Friendly Initiative will put our most vulnerable population at the table where we can be sure to prioritize their needs through a lens of equity and inclusion and social justice."

Here's more information, provided by the city of Decatur:

Through the CFCI Framework for Action, Decatur, along with community partners City Schools of Decatur, Decatur Education Foundation, and Decatur Housing Authority, will identify objectives under five goal areas focusing on supporting children and young people, including: safety and inclusion, children's participation, equitable social services, safe living environments and play and leisure.

"We are thrilled to be part of a coalition of agencies working with City of Decatur on the UNICEF Child Friendly City Initiative," said Decatur Education Foundation Executive Director Gail Rothman. "DEF's mission has always put Decatur's kids at the center of our work, and we share UNICEF USA's vision of a more equitable world for every child. Decatur is well-positioned to really embrace this effort, and we look forward to working with the city and community partners on this exciting endeavor."

Originally created in 1996, UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities Initiative uses a child rights-based framework to build a roadmap for establishing safer, more just, equitable, inclusive and child-responsive cities and communities around the world. Since its inception, CFCI has been adopted in over 3,000 municipalities in 56 countries. UNICEF USA applauds Decatur for its commitment to using this framework to build a better community for children.

"As a resident of Decatur, I am proud of our city's commitment toward recognition as a UNICEF Child Friendly City," said Jeremy Cole, Managing Director, Southeast Region at UNICEF USA. "In partnership with the City of Decatur, we are dedicated to ensuring that every child has the right to grow up in a safe and secure environment where their voices are heard."

In its pursuit of recognition as a Child Friendly City, government officials and community leaders in Decatur along with pilot cohort cities Houston, Minneapolis, San Francisco,

Johnson City, and Prince George's County will conduct a situational analysis of child well-being in each city. Based on these findings, the communities will implement an action plan that prioritizes the best interests of children and youth within their local policies. CFCI will empower leaders to address the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and systemic racism on children, work to combat discrimination and elevate their voices in local governance and decision-making.

For more information or to share any ideas you may have, email [childfriendlydecatur@gmail.com](mailto:childfriendlydecatur@gmail.com). For more information about Child Friendly Cities Initiative in the United States, visit [www.unicefusa.org/mission/usa/childfriendlycities](http://www.unicefusa.org/mission/usa/childfriendlycities).

# Decatur City Commission approves more grants for businesses and nonprofits affected by COVID

By Cathi Harris, contributor

**Decatur, Ga.** — The Decatur City Commission voted unanimously Monday night to provide an additional \$225,000 in assistance to small businesses affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as \$193,670 for local nonprofits.

The funding comes from the city's portion of federal CARES Act money originally allocated to cover personnel and technology costs related to the city's pandemic response.

"We did not incur the level of expenses in these areas that we had anticipated and that has freed up funding for businesses and nonprofits that did not receive grants," Deputy City Manager Hugh Saxon said Monday night.

City staff proposed an ordinance that would reallocate some money to the city's nonprofit grant program and recommended an amendment to its memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Decatur Development Authority (DDA) to add additional funds to the small business grant program.

The new grants will allow 13 eligible small businesses and eight nonprofits who met all eligibility criteria but were not chosen to get help after all.

In other business, the City Commission approved an update to the city's stormwater utility fee system. Under the new system, city property owners will pay a proportional fee based on the amount of impervious surface on their property.

Under the existing system, all single-family dwellings pay a stormwater fee of \$100 and all other property owners are assessed at a rate of \$100 per 2,900 square feet of impervious surface, Assistant City Manager David Junger said.

That system was established in 1999. Since then, the average impervious area of single-family homes has increased substantially, yet newer and larger homes were paying the same amount in stormwater utilities fees of older and smaller dwellings.

Stormwater utility fees are used to fund and maintain the city infrastructure that drains stormwater away from buildings, land and roads. Over the past 20 years, the city has put a lot of effort into improving its stormwater drainage in the downtown area, but residential neighborhoods mostly have outdated stormwater infrastructure or none at all.

The city's new Stormwater Master Plan, passed by the City Commission in December 2020, prioritizes \$38 million in high-priority infrastructure projects that need to be completed by 2040. The new utility fees will ensure that the city

has funds to keep its drainage system updated and functional. But because the new fees will mean a significant increase for some property owners, the new structure will be phased in over the next two years.

Under a related measure also passed on Monday, senior citizens who have the S2 homestead exemption will have both their stormwater utility and residential waste collection fees offset by the city and will not pay the fees. The S2 Homestead Exemption is for seniors who are 80 years of age and above and earn less than \$40,000 a year in income.

In addition, residents who undertake specific mitigation efforts to detain or treat stormwater on their properties are eligible to apply for credits to reduce or eliminate the fees.

You can use this tool to look up your new stormwater utility fee. Information about applying for stormwater mitigation credits can be found in the Appendices to the Stormwater Master Plan, page 353.

The commission also approved a contract in the amount of \$34,970 with engineering and environmental consulting firm Burns and McDonnell to conduct a Waste Characterization Study.

"We have worked with the Environmental Sustainability Board this year looking at our single-family recycling program," Assistant City Manager David Junger said. Our biggest challenge continues to be dealing with plastics – primarily # 3 through #7."

Information from some small audits they have done with the recycling processor indicate about 20 percent of the material collected in the city's curbside recycling is either incinerated or buried in landfills due to lack of market demand or to contamination.

The study performed by Burns and McDonnell will evaluate the waste discarded by all 6,100 Decatur households to determine what amount of material placed in recycling bins is either non-recyclable or contains contamination that makes it unable to be recycled. The consultants will also help the city evaluate the feasibility of establishing a curbside composting program by determining how much of the waste discarded in the city's pay-as-you-throw (PAYT) bags might be suitable for composting instead.

Separate to the consultants' work, the Department of Public Works will undertake efforts to educate residents about what items they can recycle how to ensure the recyclables are not contaminated, Junger said.

## AWARD ESTABLISHED IN HONOR OF MILES JENNESS

By Dan Whisenhunt, editor

**Decatur, Ga.** — Miles Jenness' life was cut short in 2018 following a car crash.

He was 5-years-old. He would've been eight years old today, March 1. In honor of his birthday, the Decatur Education Foundation is announcing its inaugural "Miles Above Award" in honor of early elementary school teachers.

The inaugural award will be presented to his kindergarten teacher, Laura Pitts.

Here's the full announcement from the Decatur Education Foundation:

Today is the day that Miles Jon Jenness would be celebrating his 8th birthday, but Miles' life was tragically cut short in 2018 when he was killed in a fatal car accident. Miles' parents, Sam and Leah Jenness have established the Miles Above Award in loving memory of Miles and inspired by his kindergarten teacher Laura Pitts, who acted with extraordinary kindness and bravery in the face of tragedy.

The annual award will be given to a classroom teacher, paraprofessional, or support staff working in PreK-3rd grade who has gone "miles above" to show extraordinary compassion in caring for young children in challenging circumstances, in or out

of the classroom. The award will include a plaque and a cash award of \$500 and listing on a permanent plaque. Nominations for the award will be accepted from City Schools of Decatur employees, parents and community members, and gifts made in memory of Miles' will fund the award.

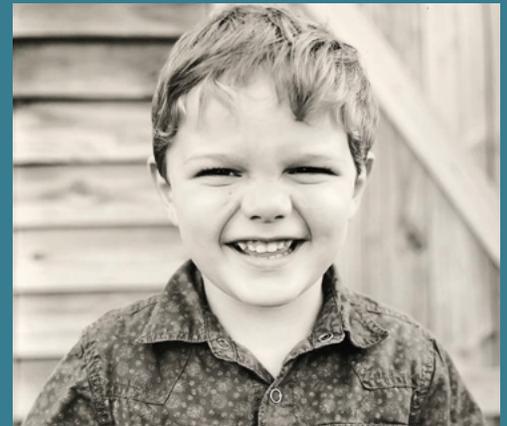
The inaugural 2021 award will be presented to Winnona Park kindergarten teacher Laura Pitts.

Miles' mother Leah shared, "Miles was so excited to be entering kindergarten and joining his neighborhood friends at Winnona Park. Ms. Pitts made his time in class truly magical, which is award-worthy enough. But when Miles was killed two months later, Ms. Pitts showed up above and beyond—for us, her students, and her community—in the immediate aftermath and in the days, weeks, months, and now years after. Her compassion and bravery in and outside of the classroom highlight the unique role teachers have in caring for our young students.

Miles is missing from every second of our lives. He should be turning 8 today. We are so grateful to Gail Rothman and the Decatur Education Foundation for helping us honor Miles, Laura, and the PreK-3rd grade faculty today. And we are forever thankful to everyone who made donations in Miles's memory for helping us remember him. Miles, we

love you."

In future years, nominations for the award will be accepted from CSD employees, parents and community members, and funds raised in Miles' memory will be used. If you would like to make a donation towards this award in Miles' memory, please visit [www.decatureducationfoundation.org/donate](http://www.decatureducationfoundation.org/donate) and indicate Miles Above in the comments.



Miles Jenness. Photo provided to Decaturish



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PHOTOS BY DEAN HESSE

# ONE YEAR LATER

## PANDEMIC SLOWS AND LIFE IS SLOWLY RETURNING TO NORMAL

By Dean Hesse, contributor

**Decatur, Ga.** — It's been a year since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. We're a few weeks shy of the anniversary of Decatur Mayor Patti Garrett's March 25, 2020 Emergency Stay at Home Order. As vaccinations increase, there are signs the pandemic is slowing and people are starting to catch glimpses

of the way things used to be. While the usual spring festivals won't be happening this year, local schools have reopened and local governments have begun contemplating a return to in-person meetings.

A near perfect blue sky day on Sunday, March 7 provided an opportunity for people to get out and enjoy the warm sun and cool breeze and bring a bit of normality to their lives.





**OPPOSITE PAGE, clockwise from top:** Children posing on their hoverboards came to the Decatur Square with their parents to take advantage of the beautiful weather on March 7.

Angela Starkey enjoys a Jeni's ice cream cone with her sons Sam, 8, on left and Maxwell, who turns 10 on March 15. "We've been lucky," Angela said. "At some point everybody is getting a little stir-crazy. None of us thought it would be like this. Everyone here took it super seriously."

Liyah Lee and Phillip Bradshaw hang out in the Square. "We ate at Sweet Melissa's. We're going to walk around and enjoy the weather. We might get some Jeni's (Ice cream)," said Bradshaw, who lost his job with the airline

industry due to the pandemic and was out of work for 5 months. He said he is in the third month of a new career. Lee said her insurance job was not affected.

**THIS PAGE, clockwise from top:** Friends and self-described ice cream enthusiasts share a laugh and some Jeni's in downtown Decatur.

Selma Lee, 5, offers a snack to the Wylde Center chickens.

Ben and Samantha look for plants for their garden at the Wylde Center plant sale. "We've done a lot of gardening," said Samantha. Photos by Dean Hesse.



# Avondale garden clubs team up to improve Avondale Elementary

By Zoe Seiler, contributor

**Avondale Estates, Ga.** — The two garden clubs in Avondale Estates are teaming up to help improve the Avondale Elementary School.

Avon and Avondale Estates Garden Clubs have been working together throughout the years on a number of smaller projects at the school such as landscaping and a butterfly garden.

Several years ago, Avon Garden Club sponsored a program to update the landscaping on the side of the school facing Covington Highway that made some difference, said Bruce Johnston, a member of both garden clubs.

"I mean it did help the appearance of the school, and then it just sort of grew from there to wanting to beautify other areas of school ground and hope to have a place that can be used as an outdoor classroom on the grounds," Johnston said. "So, that's sort of how [the project] came about."

The Avon and Avondale Estates Garden Clubs are working on landscaping improvements at Avondale Elementary School. The project also includes totem poles that will be topped with birdhouses and are being built and painted by members of the community. Photo submitted by Bruce Johnston.

Now they are working together to improve the landscaping at the front entrance to make it more attractive, Johnston said.

"The front lawn had overgrown plants and needed attention," said Carolyn Chandler, youth committee chair for Avon Garden Club. "During the pandemic people were bored and it seemed a good time to see if they would like to help with the various parts of the renovation."

In the last two years both youth committee chairs have contributed to the Avondale Elementary School garden club, said Joan Lass, youth committee chair for the Avondale Estates Garden Club.

The Avondale Estates Garden Club was awarded a \$1,000 grant from the National Garden Club of Georgia for the project.

"The landscaping is the biggest part financially

and we are working with Plants Landscaping to have them do the heavy lifting of removing the overgrown plants, amending the soil, pruning and putting in new shrubs," Chandler said.

As the landscaping is completed some artistic elements will be added including three 7-foot totems built and painted by community members. The totems will depict illustrations of students, birds, bugs, life cycles of frogs and flowers, Chandler said.

"These totems will be topped with birdhouses built by a local craftsman and painted by artists in the community," she added.

A little library will be on display as well and is going to be filled with nature-oriented books related to gardening, birds, bugs, ecology, recycling, and environment topics.

Members of the community can purchase engraved bricks to honor teachers, students or share an inspirational quote.

"Some were ordered from the Virgin Islands and one was a former refugee from Cuba who was sponsored by the First Baptist Church of Avondale Estates," Chandler said. "She and her brother learned English, attended AES and AHS. She went on to Georgia State and now lives in Oregon."

An additional area around the flag plaza will also have engraved bricks to honor principals and teachers of the year who have served at the elementary school.

Johnston said the garden clubs chose to work on this project largely because they felt the school needed the improvement the most.

"Even though there is a lot of community participation, it just needed more and there was less attention to the school than to some other areas within the community and kids are always good to work for," Johnston said.

The goal of the updates is to create a learning environment for students to become more aware of native plants and the importance of pollinators, birds and insects, Lass said.

The garden clubs have been great partners to the school and the Avondale Elementary School Education Foundation, AESEF Chairman Stephen



The Avon and Avondale Estates Garden Clubs are working on landscaping improvements at Avondale Elementary School. The project also includes totem poles that are being built and painted by members of the community.

Photo submitted by Bruce Johnston.

Smith said.

"From the Foundation's perspective, any aesthetic improvements to the school's exterior and landscaping is extremely appreciated and welcomed as it makes the school more welcoming to staff, students, and the community — making the exterior better reflect the warmth and vibrancy going on in the inside of the school," Smith said.

There are various ways to get involved in this project.

- Commemorative bricks can be ordered online.

- Funds are being provided by each garden club and the Plant America Grant; however, financial donations are always welcome.

- Volunteers are needed to sandblast and power wash the iron benches in the front of the school.

- Gently used and new books related to nature can be donated for the little library.

- The garden clubs will also eventually need help laying the engraved bricks.

- In April, they will also need help printing and mailing invitations to the "open garden" celebration.

If you can provide any of the above needs, please email [aesprojectvolunteer@gmail.com](mailto:aesprojectvolunteer@gmail.com).

## 2021 spring festivals sparse due to COVID-19

By Logan C. Ritchie, contributor

**Atlanta, Ga.** — Temperatures are rising, trees are blooming and eyes are watering across metro Atlanta. The season is changing, but don't dust off your picnic blanket just yet. Springtime festivals are in limbo for one more year. According to a city of Decatur official, no permits are being issued for events this spring.

Shirley A. Baylis, downtown program manager for city of Decatur, said the city's special events coordinator is reaching out to other cities within the perimeter to see how they're handling events.

"The [COVID-19] numbers are going down, but we are not quite sure if they have going down enough or if having an event will spike them again," Baylis said. "Of course, looking at Atlanta's situation this past weekend, they don't know what's going to be the outcome of that. At this point, we are not sure when there will be large events or festivals."

Baylis is referring to the NBA All-Star Game that reportedly brought a rash of crime to metro Atlanta, including a triple shooting in Brookhaven on March 6. The City of Atlanta also saw a spike in violent crime, as U.S. Senator Jon Ossoff noted at the end of February.

If an event is on private property in city of Decatur, said Baylis, Gov. Brian Kemp's executive order must be followed. The current restrictions are viable through March 15, and allow gatherings of up to 50 people maintaining a six-foot distance.

Block parties are managed by Decatur Police Department because they erect a barricade to block traffic to the area. Finally, events held in city parks are managed

by Active Living Department in city of Decatur. The department could not immediately be reached for comment.

The city of Atlanta is following suit by not permitting special events. Innovative residents in Candler Park (DeKalb County) and Inman Park (Fulton County) have worked around restrictions by holding alternate, outdoor events.

An artist in Candler Park, Brittany Schwartzwald, joined with other neighborhood artists to host Yardy Art sale. A small gathering of artists, including photographers, painters and jewelry makers, lined up on a wide boulevard, Iverson Street, one Saturday in November. A few streets over in December, Lake Claire Walking Festival took the place of the annual holiday arts and crafts fair held at Frazer Center.

Inman Park Festival, traditionally held the last weekend of April, is planning a slimmed down version of the usual weekend blowout with a walking tour of gardens, porch music, art sales and food trucks.

According to Katy Stedina, Inman Park Festival committee members, limited ticket sales are only applicable to specific days. "No parties, no booths, no alcohol, and we're not closing streets, so we don't need a permit," she said.

Avondale Estates will play host to Frühlingsfest 2021 from March 20 to April 4. According to the event announcement, "From March 20th to April 4th, Frühlingsfest vendors will be offering a variety of foods, artworks, and more — all inspired by German culture! Throughout Avondale Estates, Frühlingsfest artists and restaurants can be identified with a German flag inside their shop." For more information, click here. Kirkwood Spring Fling, Oakhurst Jazz Nights and Sweetwater 420 are all canceled. In other areas, events are still pending. Tucker Chili Cookoff, held every March, was the first of many events canceled in 2021, which included Taste of Tucker and Tucker Day.

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Letters  
to the  
editor

# Dear Decaturish

**Dear Decaturish,**

This letter is specifically addressed to the DeKalb County Commission.

We write as an assembled group of historians who live or work in DeKalb County, study the American South and Indigenous History, or have expertise in the presentation of history to the public, to voice our support for the removal of the 1836 “Indian War” cannon from Decatur Square.

The forced removal of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation was one of the darkest chapters in the long history of white supremacy and settler colonialism that imbues every aspect of American history. In Georgia, state and local governments, often acting through militias such as the one formed in DeKalb County, willfully stripped sovereign indigenous people of rights that were guaranteed them by legally signed treaties and decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court. In violation of these rights, native peoples were forcibly dispossessed of their ancestral homelands, while the Georgia legislature seized the ground from under their feet to offer in lotteries for white Georgians. These shameful actions took place across Georgia, including on the very land on which the cannon in question now sits.

By 1836, the Muscogee (Creek) Nation had been largely displaced from Georgia. Yet in that year, the cannon that now resides at Decatur Square was dragged from Decatur to the Georgia/Alabama border for use against Muscogee

people attempting to protect the last few acres of land they controlled in Alabama. Following their failed engagement with Muscogee fighters, the DeKalb Cavalry returned home with the cannon, which then became a popular marker of celebration for white locals, fired off at weddings and the Fourth of July. In 1906, the United Daughters of the Confederacy mounted the cannon onto a stone, creating the monument now sitting in front of the historic DeKalb County Courthouse.

Monuments are not simple representations of history, nor is this cannon a historic artifact devoid of meaning. This is a symbol of oppression sitting in the heart of our community, celebrating the ethnic cleansing of a sovereign people to allow white people to take control of their land. It is a piece of propaganda meant to support a version of history in which white people led the nation towards a “more civilized” future, purposely denigrating the value of those who already inhabited and cared for this land. That the United Daughters of the Confederacy were involved in such propaganda is not unusual, as they led similar campaigns across DeKalb County and elsewhere to support their white supremacist agenda.

Allowing this monument to sit in the heart of our community continues to show support for white supremacy, reveling in the harms at the very core of our history.

It is not representative of the diverse community we have in DeKalb County, and should be removed.

Signed,

- **Dr. Sara Patenaude, DeKalb County Resident**
- **Dr. Joseph Bagley, Assistant Professor of History, GSU Perimeter College, DeKalb County Resident**
- **Dr. Jody Noll, Lecturer of History, GSU Perimeter College, DeKalb County Resident**
- **Alex McCreedy, Georgia State University, DeKalb County Resident**
- **Dr. Megan Piorko, Science History Institute, former DeKalb County resident**
- **Dr. Dylan Ruediger, former DeKalb County Resident**
- **Ness A. Creighton, former DeKalb County resident**
- **Dr. Kenja McCray, Associate Professor of History, Atlanta Metropolitan State College**
- **Dr. Lauren McIvor Thompson, Lecturer of History, GSU Perimeter College**
- **Dr. Suzanne Litrel**
- **Juan P. Valenzuela, Instructor of History, Kennesaw State University**
- **Charles Boyd, Instructor of History, GSU Perimeter College**
- **Christopher Staaf, History Faculty, Georgia Gwinnett College**
- **Brittany Cathell**
- **Javier Garcia**
- **Kailey McAlpin**

Letters to the editor are opinions of the authors of the letter, not Decaturish.com.

Everyone has an equal opportunity to submit a letter to the editor. So if you read something here and don't like it, don't jump on our case. Write a letter of your own. All letters must be signed. We reserve the right to edit letters for length and content.

To send your letter to the editor, email it to  
**[editor@decatrish.com](mailto:editor@decatrish.com)**

# Arresting Park Cannon

BY GEORGE CHIDI, CONTRIBUTOR

Right around 9 p.m. last night I found myself looking around at the spectacle as I waited for the inevitable release of State Rep. Park Cannon, wondering why I was the only news reporter at the Fulton County Jail.



I mean, really. Was there something else going in Georgia on a Thursday night that merited more attention than the arrest of a sitting state representative in the capitol, on felony charges, for banging on a door?!

This arrest is a big deal. There is a plain provision in the Georgia constitution prohibiting the arrest of a legislator while the session is on for anything short of treason, breach of the peace or a felony. (Breach of the peace is not actually enforceable anymore – it's foul language.)

So, the cops had to find two felonies in the act of knocking on a door after a cop tells you to stop. Both appear ridiculous once you see the video. Obstruction of a law enforcement officer can only occur after an arrest is initiated. It's like arresting someone for resisting arrest – what's the other charge that necessitated an arrest? Well, that appears to be O.C.G.A. 16-11-34.1, "Preventing or disrupting General Assembly sessions or other meetings of members."

Read the code. A first offense under the code is a misdemeanor. And yet, Cannon catches a felony charge.

One assumes the Fulton County D.A., Fani Willis, will throw these charges out like yesterday's guacamole. But again: priorities. People are openly comparing the bill Kemp signed into law to the era of literacy tests and poll taxes. And now state police appear to be ready to violate the state constitution, to arrest Black women in office, and have no fear of being fired for doing so.

Cannon was coming from a protest of Delta at the airport. I sense her arrest may have been intended to send a message: don't screw with business over this.

When North Carolina voted for its "bathroom bills" attacking transgender residents, the country disposed of the state for a while. It lost NCAA tournaments, concerts, conventions and more. State governments forbade travel to North Carolina by their employees. The bill wiped \$400 million out of the state's economy. It was also bad politics: it helped cost the Republican governor his job.

When similarly-toxic legislation emerged in Georgia, the business community saw the example of North Carolina and twisted arms. I saw some of that arm twisting up close while working for Central Atlanta Progress. We knew what it would cost the hotels downtown if the country decided Atlanta wasn't interesting anymore.

So what changed? Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff, with Stacey Abrams in the wings holding a warhammer and a grudge, that's what.

Republicans might cry "fraud!" about the 2020 election, but in the quiet places in their heart, they're not that stupid. If they were, they wouldn't have been able to win an election themselves. This math isn't hard.

Demographic change in Georgia is driven by mi-

gration from the rest of America and immigration from Asia and Central America. A net 50,000 people move to Georgia every year. Perhaps three-quarters of them vote for Democrats. Abrams lost to Kemp by about 50,000 votes two-and-a-half years ago. By 2022, all else being equal, she can be presumed to have about a 50,000-vote advantage on whoever survives the Republican's game of knives in the dark.

Republicans need to find 50,000 votes, or about 1.25 percent of expected turnout, to squeak out another victory. Their caucus is in disarray, which makes a strictly ideological appeal chancy. It's easier to whittle down voters here and there, strategically.

Say, by taking over the Fulton and DeKalb County elections boards on sham charges of "malfeasance," then closing precincts. Get the lines to vote a little longer than people would normally expect ... and make it a felony to bring anyone food or water, right? They only need one out of 50 or so to fall out.

Make it impossible to hand deliver an absentee ballot to a drop box after hours, to force swing-shift workers to get in those lines or trust iffy postal service. Make it double-super-illegal to give your ballot to someone else to drop off. Put the drop boxes inside, where there are cameras, just to be sure.

A few thousand here, a few thousand there.

Set aside that much of the law is hot garbage constitutionally, designed to bleed the ACLU of money in court. I saw Gerald Griggs, a civil rights attorney, outside the jail last night as he worked Cannon's case. He lives in court. At this point, they have office furniture with his name on it.

The real question is whether Georgia will face a massive boycott over this stuff while it works its way through the courts. Some legislators in contestable seats might get nervous. Next session, they may try to repeal some of it to avoid having AT&T and Google baste their opponents in filthy corporate lucre.

If that boycott is coming, Cannon will fire the first shot. She's the leader on that.

Color me unsurprised that they have her marked.

– George Chidi is a political columnist and public policy advocate. He also writes for *The Intercept*.

## EDITORIAL

# Decatur school taxes are going up and so are central office costs

By Hans Utz, contributor

*Editor's note: Hans Utz formerly served as the Deputy COO of the City of Atlanta. He writes about local and national politics. He also served on the City Schools of Decatur's Senior Homestead Exemption committee. He and his family currently reside in Decatur.*

*Prior to the publication of this column, Decaturish forwarded it to City Schools of Decatur's superintendent and School Board for comment. They did not respond.*

*Several afters after the column was published, a spokesperson for the district said it would provide a response at a later date.*

*This column has been updated.*

City Schools of Decatur is proposing a 2-point millage increase on your property taxes next year. Furthermore, they are anticipating that the digest will grow 7.3% in aggregate, which means your tax bill from the schools will be about 15% higher than last year.

That is a very large increase, and furthermore it appears that CSD is projecting that the tax increase will be required for at least three years to get the finances back in order. How did we end up in this position?

From 2017 to the 2020 budgets, overhead and administrative costs at CSD grew around 7.0% per year. Overhead costs should scale, meaning you should not have to increase these costs with enrollment the same way you would instructional costs. After all, you only need one principal per school, or one superintendent per district. 7.0% growth is awfully high, and it is concerning these costs don't appear to

have been well managed.

But particularly interesting is the cost growth in central office, which grew nearly 30% per year over that time. It has more than doubled since 2017, going from \$1.0 million to \$2.3 million in 2020.

At the same time, instructional cost per student only grew at 5.3% per year. Foreign language instruction was cut.

This is jarring. We are being asked to support a significant tax increase for a school system that has substantially increased administrative costs, and especially increased costs related to the superintendent's office itself, while not investing in teachers or instruction at the same rate and actually cutting key language programs?

And all the while the superintendent faces allegations that he took multiple days off without recording them as vacation and then still cashed out vacation days, earning \$100,000 in additional compensation?

It is frustrating, to say the least.

Before we dive in deeper, here are a few critical points: this is a look at City Schools of Decatur finances, not the city of Decatur's. People tend to badger their city commissioners on any issue related to their taxes, but it is important to understand that none of what we are discussing here is within the authority or purview of the commissioners or the mayor.

Which brings up a second related point: for the average homeowner, by far the largest portion of the tax bill is for the schools. On my most recent bill, roughly 63% of my payment went to the schools, and unless you qualify for senior exemptions your bill will break down very similarly to mine.

So, given that this tax increase on an already-large tax bill is an issue of schools, and for years the operational costs of the schools have grown apparently unchecked, you will want to contact your school board representative or the superintendent about your concerns, not your city commissioner.

Let's get into the details. You currently pay 20.25 mills to CSD, so your tax bill for the schools on the average \$600,000 home would be \$6,075.

Let's say your home grows in value by 5%, a reasonable estimate based on both prior years and next year's expected growth. If the millage is increased to 22.25 as the City Schools of Decatur proposes, your new tax bill will be \$7,009 – nearly 15% higher.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18

# FLICKS WITH NICKI: WANDA VISION

I am a fan of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). I want to live in a world where people can be superheroes. I used to think there were clear lines between good and evil and between love and grief, but now I wonder. I've spent a year wandering between the reality of a global pandemic and the imaginary world I created in my home to keep my family going. I like my imagination. I'm not good at reality, so I entered the world of Wanda Maximoff (Elizabeth Olsen) and Vision (Paul Bettany) to see what happens when superheroes get domestic.



Nicki Salcedo

In "WandaVision," suburban America is as frightening as it is comforting. The show begins with a catchy theme song and a drive into Westview, New Jersey. It is the 1950's picture perfect town. The house is clean, the outfits are crisp, and the neighbor (Kathryn Hahn) is nosy. However, the laugh track makes us uneasy. The problem isn't that Wanda is a telepath, and Vision is an android. Something is wrong. Vision and Wanda don't know how they've come to be in Westview. They don't remember anything about their lives other than the fact that they love each other.

Even though the world is black and white, the first commercial in "WandaVision" shows us a toaster with one bit of color. A red light flashes, and we hear an ominous beeping sound. It is like a jack-in-the-box waiting to surprise us. Or a bomb about to explode. Who is controlling that bomb? Is it Tony Stark or Wanda Maximoff?

The beautiful mystery of "WandaVision" is that we know too much. We think. We think we know Wanda Maximoff. We've known the various iterations of Vision since the first "Iron Man" movie, where he was the voice behind Tony Stark's artificial intelligence personal assistant J.A.R.V.I.S. But we don't know enough. Each episode reveals another decade and another homage to classic TV shows. We don't know why.

We start with "The Dick Van Dyke Show" and "I Love Lucy." We move to "Bewitched" and a hint of "Mary Tyler Moore." Eventually, we evolve from "The Brady Bunch" to "Family Ties" and "Full House." Near the end we get "Malcolm in the Middle," "Modern Family," and "The Office."

Somewhere along the way, the laugh track disappears. The town fills with color and the actors look directly at us. Something is still wrong. We discover that there is a world beyond the world of Wanda and Vision. I wonder how first-time viewers reacted to the twists and turns. In my house, we felt excitement upon seeing Monica Rambeau (Teyonah Parris) from "Captain Marvel," Jimmy Woo (Randall Park) from "Ant-Man," and Darcy Lewis (Kat Dennings) from "Thor."

"WandaVision" might be setup as an inside joke for Marvel fans, but its hook is in the social commentary on domestic life. We have entered "The Twilight Zone." Rod Serling used to welcome us into that world with these words:

"There is a fifth dimension, beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of man's fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area which we call The Twilight Zone."

The black and white becomes gray. Gray becomes color. We realize the laughter is as insidious as a witch's cackle. When the laughter fades Elizabeth Olsen looks at us through the camera. "Everything is meaningless." Girl, same. We know the feeling.

By the time I watched the final episode of "WandaVision," I'd lived 365 days of COVID-19. Some days, our house felt like an underground bunker. Other days, we were in a happy sitcom. My mother-in-law died just before Christmas, and I put my pain away for another time and wore a smile. Maybe suppressing my grief was wrong, but I didn't know what else to do. I was afraid that the eruption of my sadness would be too much to bear.

Yes, "WandaVision" is about grief. Monica feels it. Wanda feels it. So does Vision. He is more than a synthetic lifeform. He is life. He is love. Grief comes with love. The other theme of the show is about who is good and who is evil. The crisp perfection of the 1950's household is evil. The laughter is evil. Wanda is good and evil. She wants love. She wants to fit in with the people in town. She is like me. She is equally capable of creating life and destruction.

I suggest that you watch "WandaVision" for campy American life, superhero fight scenes, and a mystery to unfold. The nine episodes felt like a therapy session. I like the commentary on community, motherhood, and rage. At some point, Elizabeth Olsen and Kathryn Hahn are dressed in Halloween costumes while delivering great performances. The story arc is unlike anything we've seen on American television. Top quality script, directing, cinematography. It is a strange and somber adventure. It is also funny and exciting. For deeper analysis, we pondered why Wanda is the perfect doppelganger for Thanos. And she is. What is life, but a journey to death. What is good without the collateral damage of evil. Vision asks, "What is grief, if not love persevering?" Same, Vis. Same. We know the feeling.

Found on Disney+, all season one episodes are now available. We've held in our pain and grief too long. It might be time to drop to our knees, shout at the sky, let the energy burst from inside us, and see what might spring to life. **Grade A-**

Nicki Salcedo is a Decatur resident and Atlanta native. She is a novelist, blogger, and a working mom.

## CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17

Don't the schools have a reserve fund, one they can tap in emergency years like a pandemic, to avoid sudden huge tax increases on the populace?

Turns out, the CSD has been aggressively dipping into their general fund reserve for years, and so in the one year when a pandemic struck and they needed the reserve for emergency purposes, it was insufficient to meet their needs.

It is poor financial practice to take 9% of the entire budget from reserve, as CSD did in 2018, or 11% of the budget from reserve, as they did in 2019. These were large, deep draws during what ought to have been routine years.

Furthermore, CSD just raised the millage rate in 2020, from 18.66 mills to 20.25, and then still drew approximately \$9 million from reserve in the 2021 budget. This is an alarming trend, and it shakes my confidence that CSD will be able to manage their finances sufficiently well to be able to reduce the tax burden in a few years' time. What is going on?

CSD will certainly say the recurrent deep reserve draws were driven by the unanticipated senior homestead exemption costs. Let's fact check that.

In 2019, the year that CSD spent \$8 million from their reserve, the homestead exemption cost just under \$2 million in unexpected cost. That means, at best, CSD budgeted \$6 million out of a reserve on routine costs that should have been anticipated. So, while the homestead exemption was an issue, is certainly wasn't the only or even the primary issue. This holds true for every year the schools heavily tapped the reserve.

In full disclosure I was a part of the committee recently tasked with correcting the senior exemp-

tion, without unduly burdening the most vulnerable seniors and preserving as much of the exemption as possible within the original expected limits. The corrected exemption will be put in front of voters this autumn. Alas, for our purposes, even if the legislation is approved the funding will not arrive in time to help this budget.

CSD would also say that enrollment has grown, and the schools have consistently provided teachers with cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) and step increases. While this is technically true, the rate of enrollment growth has slowed in recent years, and the teachers have received between 1% and 2% salary adjustments each year - not exactly huge, barely in pace with basic inflation, and in any case both scenarios are quite stable and highly predictable and should not have caught any budget by surprise.

Lastly, CSD would also claim that there were a lot of unanticipated expenses from the pandemic. While this is indisputably true for this year, it certainly doesn't explain the reserve spend from prior years, nor does it justify runaway overhead costs.

The pandemic has put holes in government finance across the board. Specific to the schools, the state provides a large percentage of CSD funding, and the state has signaled that this number will decrease for next year. School districts are working to fill that hole.

There has been chatter that this decrease is exaggerated, and there is some evidence that the state finances held up better through the pandemic than expected. Neither of that helps a school system that has to build a balanced budget right now. It is an appropriate precaution to assume state support will decrease until the state clearly signals otherwise, and for that reason CSD is forced to assemble a budget that solves for that decrease.

But other districts seem able to rely on their reserve in a way Decatur cannot, because we have weakened our reserve at exactly the point we needed it the most.

Managing a complex school system is hard. Putting together a multi-million dollar public budget is hard. This is why the superintendent's salary and benefits are generous.

But you have to do the work. And doing the work means first and foremost showing up, controlling your own costs, and ensuring that additional dollars primarily go to the benefit of the students themselves and not to central office.

School Board, for the sake of our kids, you need to knuckle down here. I don't see a quick fix that will avoid a big tax increase, but how about building in some incentive for Dr. Dude to control his overhead going forward? Like, for example, no bonus or salary increase for him until such a time as these purportedly scalable costs are better managed and the increases go to the kids and teachers rather than central office?

We cut languages, for heaven's sake. How was that less important the amount of vacation days Dr. Dude gets to cash out? Absolutely infuriating.

Voters, please pay attention this year to the School Board member elections. We can only get the school leadership that we demand.

*Correction: In the original column, the author calculated that tax-funded support for nutrition had been cut, and the implication was that this was a CSD policy decision. That is incorrect. Nutrition was cut from the general fund because federal funding for nutrition had increased. On a per-student basis, the total nutrition funding has kept pace with inflation, which is appropriate. The author regrets the error.*



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# PSC complaint filed against Decatur superintendent

By Dan Whisenhunt, editor

**Decatur, Ga.** — The Decatur School Board on March 23 held a closed-door executive session to discuss legal and personnel issues.

The board didn't make any announcements about what occurred in that session. They likely discussed allegations that Superintendent David Dude was frequently absent but did not record his absences as vacations. The School Board plans to hire an independent investigator to look into those allegations. The board also has rescinded Dude's contract and plans to renegotiate it.

The independent investigator has not been announced and it's not clear if the investigator's report will be made public, something that the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights and the Black Parent Alliance have requested. The School Board has also not responded to questions about whether Dude will be placed on administrative leave pending the outcome of the investigation and whether the board will wait for the investigation to conclude before granting Dude a new contract.

The contract that the board rescinded, which would've gone into effect July 1, appeared to make firing Dude for cause more difficult and made it more expensive to fire him for the board's convenience.

The board has a list of two dozen questions from Decaturish regarding the allegations and Dude's recently rescinded contract. The board initially said it planned to respond following Tuesday's executive session. Now the board says those answers may not come until late April, after the School Board's regular meeting.

The board's ability to respond is hampered by a federal lawsuit against the district. David Adams, the school district's former human resources officer, alleges in the lawsuit that Dude pushed him and former finance Director Susan Hurst out of the district



David Dude

after they raised questions about his time away from the office. They allege he violated of the Code of Ethics for Government Service. Misuse and misreporting of public funds would be a violation of the Georgia Professional Code of Ethics for Educators, according to the lawsuit. The lawsuit says Dude is required to work 255 days per academic year. However, upon reviewing his contracts, Decaturish was unable to find any language specifying the number of days Dude is required to work or what days he's entitled to take off without recording it as vacation time. When the School Board announced that it was hiring an independent investigator, the board said Dude does not have to use vacation days during times when the district is closed, like Thanksgiving break. However, the board hasn't said whether those breaks include the summer months. Evidence shows that during the summer of 2019, Dude was out of the office from June 11 through July 16, 2019.

An auto-responder email sent from Dude's email account on June 11, 2019 says Dude would return on Tuesday, July 16, 2019. The Temporary Delegation of

Authority documents for the summer of 2019 shows that Dude appointed a temporary superintendent from June 14 to July 6, 2019 and from July 7 through July 15, 2019.

According to central office work calendars provided by the district, central office was open June 11 through June 24, 2019 and July 8 through July 11, 2019. According to the calendar, central offices were closed June 25 through July 5, 2019.

But according to vacation requests he entered into the school district's payroll system, Dude's only vacation days in the summer of 2019 were on July 12 and July 15.

Public records show Dude received \$100,000 in additional compensation for cashing out the vacation days he said he didn't use. He's allowed to cash out 30 of his unused days, according to his current contract. Salary schedules posted on the school district's website show other employees of central office work 225 days a year. The formula for Dude's vacation pay-outs is based on prevailing daily rate for 251 days.

In a potentially related development, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission, the organization that certifies educators, confirmed it has received a complaint against Dude. There was no information about the allegations in the complaint or who filed it. A spokesperson for the PSC said, "No decision has been made regarding whether or not to conduct an investigation." The PSC could discuss whether to move forward with the complaint at its meeting next month.

The Decatur school district currently faces five federal lawsuits, including the one filed by Adams.

## FORMER WOODRUFF, APS LEADERS JUMP INTO ATLANTA COUNCIL PRESIDENT RACE

By Patrick Saunders, contributor

**Atlanta, Ga.** — A growing number of high-profile candidates have emerged to replace Felicia Moore as president of the Atlanta City Council.

Former Atlanta School Board chair Courtney English launched his campaign in February, and former Woodruff Arts Center president and CEO Doug Shipman announced his run last week. They join Atlanta City Councilmember Natalyn Archibong, who launched her bid in February.

Moore launched a run for mayor against Keisha Lance Bottoms in February, sparking the influx of candidates for the position.

English is from Atlanta and lives in the West End. He touted his record helping to lead the turnaround at APS "after the largest cheating scandal in American history," increasing the APS graduate rate and raising teacher pay.

"I was raised by a mom who taught me to leave things better than I found them," he told Decaturish. "I've always carried that spirit with me in anything I've done."

English also cited his work as director of community development for an affordable housing non-profit.

His campaign is focused on education, affordable housing, income inequality and healthcare.

"All of those things are incredibly hard and all of those are areas where the city has an incredible opportunity to lean in on," English said. "From Kirkwood to Cascade, neighborhoods all across the city are feeling left behind and unheard."

But he said public safety is at the top of the list.

"We have to ensure we have a well-paid, well-trained and well-retained police force," he said.

"I have a track record of addressing the biggest challenges that Atlanta faces and

I've spent my entire career doing that work," he added.

Shipman was the founding CEO of the National Center for Civil & Human Rights before his time at the Woodruff Arts Center. The Arkansas native lives in Old Fourth Ward. He's worked on campaigns before, but this is his first run for public office.

"I have a deep affection for the city and I feel it's a really unique time as we emerge from COVID and continue to grapple with issues of race and equality and I felt I had something to offer and contribute to make the city better," he said.

He'll address specific campaign issues in detail when he formally launches his campaign in a few weeks. Recovery from the pandemic, public safety and inequality will be a focus of his platform.

"I've been able to serve in a lot of different ways," he said. "I think that variety of experiences gives me a view to how to bring a large number of people from Atlanta together to work on big things, and how to think about moving impactful projects forward."

The council president leads meetings, cannot introduce legislation and only votes in the event of a tie.

Three candidates are vying to replace Archibong on her seat representing District 5 on the city council.

Qualifying for all municipal races takes place in August.



Natalyn Archibong



Former Atlanta School Board chair Courtney English (left) and former Woodruff Arts Center president and CEO Doug Shipman, (right) (Photos courtesy English and Shipman campaigns)



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# Activists call for removal of 'Indian War' cannon during 'Decolonize Decatur Day' event

PHOTOS BY DEAN HESSE



Fonta High, Co-Chair, Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights and Co-Chair, Decolonize Decatur Committee looks toward the 'Indian War' cannon as she speaks.

By Dean Hesse, contributor

**Decatur, Ga.** — The Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights on Saturday, March 20, continued its call for DeKalb County to remove the 'Indian War' cannon from the Decatur Square during a "Decoloni-

ze Decatur Day' press conference.

The cannon was put in place in 1906 by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Fonta High, Co-Chair, Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights and Co-Chair, Decolonize Decatur Committee spoke along with student organizers from Decatur High

School and local historians and clergy.

"This land that we are standing on, it belonged to the Muskogee (Creek) Nation and we occupy this land unjustly and it's a privilege for us to be on this land. This cannon from 1836 was used to drive off the Muskogee people from this land," High said during the press conference. "Not only did it drive off the Muskogee (Creek) people, but genocide was committed against them. Many died on the Trail of Tears and the country and this county owes the group of people known as the Muskogee (Creek). Many kids can be seen playing on this cannon which seems harmless, but this cannon is a weapon of war and it symbolized white supremacy."

In December, the Decatur City Commission unanimously adopted a resolution presented to them by Decatur High School students calling for the cannon's removal and on Jan. 26 DeKalb County Commissioners unanimously approved a resolution to create a memorial to the late civil rights leader and Congressman John Lewis to replace the Confederate monument on the Decatur Square that came down June 18, 2020.

High said, "Progress has happened. We were able to remove the Lost Cause Confederate monument the eve of Juneteenth last year, but progress needs to continue to move forward. What's problematic for us at Beacon Hill is that this cannon is in direct contradiction to what John Lewis stood for and they both can't stand on the same land in the same proximity of one another. Before that gets erected this cannon needs to go.

"You can't compromise with white supremacy and this idea of us trying to be neutral. I think there's no neutrality. When you remain neutral you don't make a choice. People end up dying. You have to confront white supremacy head on."



Student organizer Koan Roy-Meighoo speaks during the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights "Decolonize Decatur Day" press conference on March 20.



Rev. Karen Bryant Shipp, Minister of Music at Oakhurst Baptist Church, reads a statement presented to the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners by Decatur clergy insisting the cannon commemorating the Indian War of 1836 be removed from the Decatur Square.



**Top:** Student organizers Genesis Reddicks and Koan Roy-Meighoo hold a sign before the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights “Decolonize Decatur Day” press conference.

**Bottom left:** Student organizer Bethani Thomas reads the words of Musk-

ogee elder John Winterhawk during the press conference.

**Bottom right:** The “Indian War” cannon that Beacon Hill Black Alliance is calling for DeKalb County to remove from the Decatur Square. Photos by Dean Hesse.



# Decatur cracks down on illegal street racing

BY CATHI HARRIS, CONTRIBUTOR

**Decatur, Ga.** — People who engage in illegal street racing in the city of Decatur, including drivers, organizers and passengers in the cars, can face fines up to \$1,000, the impound of their cars, as well as six months in jail under a new ordinance passed last night by the Decatur City Commission.

Drag racing on public streets and parking lots has been a problem across the metro area since the pandemic began, Scott Richards, deputy chief of the Decatur Police Department, told commissioners. The races have led to several serious car accidents as well as disputes that have ended in violence.

Just this past weekend, authorities in Clayton County arrested 102 people gathered to drag race in the parking lot of a Sam's Club on Jonesboro Road.

The state legislature is expected to soon pass legislation increasing penalties for the activity, but those measures would likely not take effect until July 1, Richards added.

Since May, the Decatur Police Department has received reports of 41 inci-

dents of illegal street racing centered mostly in its Oakhurst neighborhood.

"Many jurisdictions that experienced this type of activity have had to deal with serious motor vehicle injury crashes, as well as shootings that have occurred because of these incidents," Richards said. "We feel these activities pose an immediate threat to Public Safety and also a nuisance to the communities where this activity takes place."

During discussion of the ordinance, Commissioner Kelly Walsh clarified that people involved in organizing an illegal street race could be charged even if they did not attend the race in person.

"So if a person is cited on social media as an organizer, even though they don't attend in person, you could use that in your investigation?" she asked.

Many of the races are organized via social media and the police department would investigate those posting about it online, Richards confirmed. "If we could trace that person back to an event, this would apply."

The commissioners voted unanimously, with one commissioner absent, to pass the new ordinance, which will take effect immediately.

## CLARKSTON CITY COUNCIL ADOPTS MASK MANDATE ORDINANCE

By Zoe Seiler, contributor

**Clarkston, Ga.** — The Clarkston City Council adopted a mask mandate ordinance at the regular meeting on Tuesday, March 2, by a 4-1 vote.

The city adopted a mask mandate resolution in July 2020 requiring people in public spaces or businesses to wear face coverings and stated that warnings and citations would be issued. The City Council expressed an interest in adopting an ordinance for face masks, City Manager Robin Gomez said.

"An ordinance is perceived by many as more serious, enforceable, and more formal than a resolution," Gomez told the Tucker Observer. "However, both are legally just as equally enforceable. We (Police and Code Compliance) can write a citation from either one."

The mask ordinance is a little stronger and a definite law for all to follow, Gomez added.

Clarkston's mask ordinance requires all customers, employees and other users to wear a mask or face covering that covers the mouth and nose while indoors at restaurants, retail stores, grocery stores and all other public places.

All public places within the city must post a sign at each public entrance to the business stating that masks are required for entrance and the signs will be provided by the city.

Signs posted at restaurants will clarify that masks are required when customers enter, are otherwise not seated at their table, and when they exit.

Face masks are also required outdoors when people who don't live in the same household cannot be at least 6 feet away from one another.

According to the ordinance, reasonable exceptions to wearing a mask are permitted for:

- Children under the age of 10
- Those who can't wear a mask due to a documented medical or behavioral condition
- Those whose religious beliefs prevent them from wearing a face mask
- While eating or drinking
- When complying with the directions of law enforcement or for the purposes of verifying one's identity.

The police department, code compliance and the city manager will enforce the ordinance. Anyone who doesn't comply with the ordinance will first be given a warning and an opportunity to put on a mask or leave the area. The enforcers will also offer masks when providing a warning.

If someone refuses to comply with the ordinance after being given a warning and offered a face mask, they will be issued a citation by either police officers



Gigi Stanor checks his cell phone while passing a sign placed by the Clarkston COVID-19 Task Force, in partnership with the City of Clarkston and DeKalb County on July 25, 2020. The task force distributed thousands of masks, hand sanitizer, and educational material to apartment communities in Clarkston to help mitigate the spread of coronavirus. Photo by Dean Hesse.

or code compliance. Those found to be in violation of the ordinance will be given a \$25 fine by the Municipal Court.

The ordinance will remain in effect until Jan. 1, 2022, unless repealed, modified or extended by the City Council.

Vice Mayor Awet Eyasu opposed the measure due to general concerns about fining residents and visitors.

"I do agree from a public health point of view, the use of masks," Eyasu said. "However, I really wish this was a resolution to educate people and to give them free masks without the threat of citing them or even adding a fine. I'm just am in principle opposed to the idea of fining people."

His biggest concern is Clarkston's immigrant community and the residents who do not speak English and may not understand what's happening when someone tries to give them a mask or if they have to interact with the police.

"I believe this is an overreach by our local government," Eyasu said. "I'm not opposed to [the idea of] encouraging and educating our residents. I'm just opposed in principle to the idea of citing somebody for not wearing a mask."

Assistant Police Chief Harry Hess raised some concerns about putting an extra burden on the police department, especially with providing a warning first and then issuing a citation.

"With our system that we currently use for e-cita-

tions we do have the ability to track it for if we issued a written warning," Hess said. "My concern with that would be there is a slight delay to upload into the system, usually 24 to 48 hours, to be able to track who we've provided warnings to, and that is if we write a written warning."

He added that it would be virtually impossible to track verbal warnings, which officers provide a lot of the time.

The way the ordinance is written the warning occurs on the spot, City Attorney Stephen Quinn said. The idea is that if an officer stops someone they would inform the individual they are violating the ordinance and give them three options.

"Number one is that you can leave this public place. Number two is you can put on this mask that I'm offering you and then carry about your business. And number three is if you refuse options one and two, then I'm gonna have to issue you a citation. So it all happens during the one encounter," Quinn said.

The intent is not to create a burden on the police department, Councilmember Laura Hopkins said. Her hope is that if residents or visitors are offered a mask they would take it and put it on.

"I know people feel like their rights are being violated but I don't think they realize that by expecting people to wear a mask we are not asking you to protect yourself," Hopkins said. "That's up to you. If you want to risk getting sick that's entirely up to you. We're asking you to protect us."

# Avondale Estates, consultants outline Northwoods project

By Zoe Seiler, contributor

**Avondale Estates, Ga.** — The Northwoods area by Lake Avondale is set to get some needed improvements. Assistant City Manager Shannon Powell along with consultants from Long Engineering and Lord Aeck Sargent on March 16 gave residents an outline of the project.

“This is an area, a wooded area near the lake and the Community Club,” Powell said. “It has the potential to be an amazing pathway and recreational area, but due to rainwater and stormwater runoff [it] has very hazardous conditions right now that are jeopardizing some of the trees within the area.”

The area is not accessible right now and plans have been on the books for a while to address the issues in the Northwoods and the consultants are working on just that.

The team recently completed site and tree surveys of the area and determined where the existing streams and wetlands are located. Since the end of January, they have worked on the schematic design process and understanding how to capture and treat rainwater.

Within the last week, Long Engineering and Lord Aeck Sargent have progressed into the construction documents phases and are refining details.

“We’ll start generating our construction documents that will go out for bid for the contractor award and then progress into construction and permitting later in the process” said Andrew Pankopp of Long Engineering.

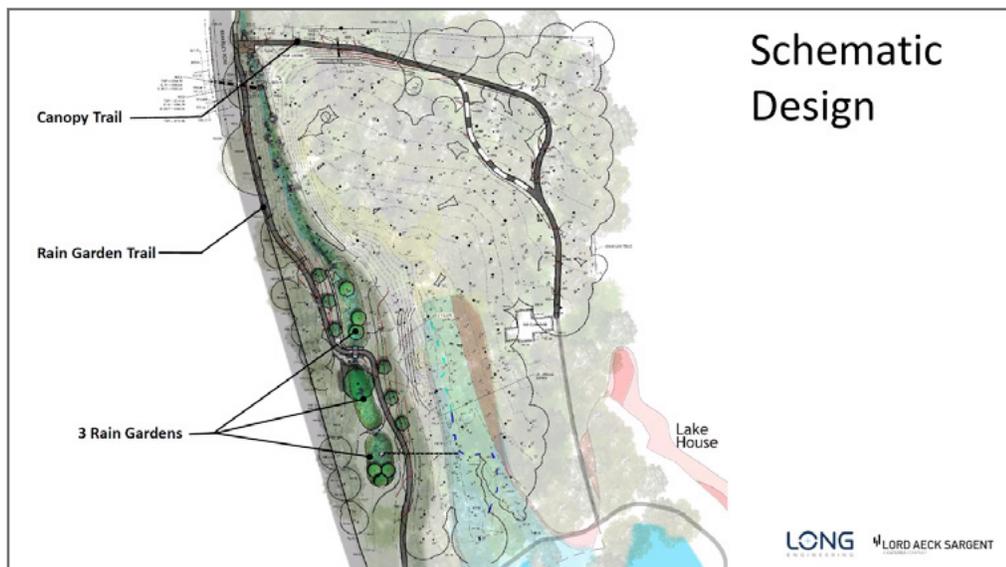
The Northwoods project dates back to 2008 when the city created the Lake Avondale Master Plan which included a subsequent Northwoods rain garden concept plan to mitigate erosion, said Marco Ancheita of Lord Aeck Sargent.

“Effectively what’s occurring right now there’s a wetland stream that goes into the lake, but there’s a whole lot of sediment that’s building up, there’s a whole lot of erosion that’s happening, mainly because of two culverts that are located in this area,” Ancheita said.

The master plan also identified the potential for trails through the Northwoods and there are currently informal trails throughout.

The project aims to build on the master plan, take a green infrastructure approach and create an outdoor recreation area with accessible trails.

Infrastructure goals include improving water quality that’s heading into the wetland area and Lake Avondale. The broader goal is to expand upon the city’s sustainability goals through low impact development and green infrastructure.



During a public meeting on March 16, the city of Avondale Estates and consultants from Long Engineering and Lord Aeck Sargent presented the Northwoods project. Photo is a screenshot of the presentation.

The natural tree canopy catches some water that falls. Most of the area is porous, so water can be filtered. The plants within the wetland area filter and clean some water before it goes to its final place, Ancheita said.

Part of that also lets water seep into the ground in the natural spot where it normally would and also creates natural habitat.

The rain gardens, an example of green infrastructure, will be located near Berkeley Road and will be three cells with each slightly lower than the other so water moves from garden to garden.

Another goal of the Lake Avondale Master Plan was to provide trails and one requirement of the grant is to provide two trails, one of which must be ADA accessible. Ancheita said they believe they can make both trails accessible for all users.

Both paths will start in the northwest corner of the park. One will go along Berkeley Road and peel downhill toward the rain gardens and will eventually connect with the existing path by the lake.

The canopy trail will branch out toward the east and go through an area with more trees, eventually connecting to a path near the Lake House.

“It allows for the potential for new loops,” Ancheita said. “This adds almost a third of a mile of trails so

that you can do a pretty nice, quick loop or a long loop around the park and it just creates that last bit of connectivity needed to really kind of take a walk around the park.”

Near the trailhead there is an existing swale that the consulting team plans to stabilize with more stones and vegetation, so water doesn’t cause as much erosion, and it will bring water to the three rain gardens.

The other piece of the project is to create opportunities for exploration and learning, Ancheita said.

“With the green infrastructure approach and the really great vegetation that’s in the Northwoods, we’re really trying to make sure that they go hand in hand and that these paths are going by locations that there’s a potential for signage in the future or just seeing something that you typically wouldn’t see,” Ancheita said.

The project unfortunately doesn’t solve all the issues in the Northwoods area, but it’s a start to help mitigate some water quality and erosion issues that are happening toward the lake, Ancheita said.

Next, the consulting team will advance into construction documentation, look to further reduce the impact on trees, and keep fine tuning the design and planting details.

## DKPD Shoe Drive provides nearly 300 shoes to those in need

By Dan Whisenhunt, editor

**DeKalb County, Ga.** — After encountering members of the community – youth, adults, children and families – without decent footwear, the DeKalb Police Department Community Policing Unit, along with Chief Ramos saw a need and decided to act, a press release said.

On Dec. 17, 2020, the internal DKPD Shoe Drive began with drop-off boxes distributed at all precincts and headquarters. By January 31, 2020, more than 300 pairs of new or barely worn shoes were collected from members of DKPD. Of the 300 shoes collected, so far at least 250 of those have been given to those in need, free of charge. The new Community Policing Unit was created under Chief Ramos’ tenure. The CPU is deployed throughout DeKalb County within various communities and neighborhoods in an effort to build a positive relationship between the community and police.

For more information, visit the DKPD Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/watch/DeKalbCountyPD/>



Photo provided to the Tucker Observer

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# Stone Mountain to host first-ever Juneteenth celebration

BY PATRICK SAUNDERS, CONTRIBUTOR

**Stone Mountain, Ga.** — Stone Mountain is preparing a large downtown celebration of the Juneteenth holiday in the city known for having the world's largest Confederate memorial.

Fireworks, dancers, drummers, local vendors and more are being considered for the annual holiday that commemorates the end of slavery in the United States. A potential catchphrase for the event is "The New Stone Mountain," according to City Councilmember Jasmine Little.

"We're looking at the new vibe of what we're doing and what we're bringing to the world and not being what we've always seemed like in the past," she said at a council work session on Tuesday.

The council approved Juneteenth as a commemorative holiday last year, but this would be the first time the city hosted an event marking it, according to City Manager ChaQuias Miller-Thornton.

City officials are considering closing portions of four downtown streets for the celebration on June 19. And they hope to shoot off fireworks that the city was unable to use from a Christmas event that got canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We're also looking at honoring [late U.S. Rep.] John Lewis and having some dignitaries speak," Little said.

The council will vote on a budget for the event at its April 6 meeting.

But one event that won't be happening this year is the Color Vibe 5K chalk race. The council approved the June event at its regular meeting earlier this month, but Color Vibe officials pulled out.

"Due to the COVID situation and the fact that they're in Utah and the lead time it takes to advertise, they have pulled their events for the whole nation," Tourism Manager Kim Cumbie said.

It will be the second year in a row that the event is canceled due to the pandemic.

## City expands pandemic relief program by \$165,000

A contentious debate broke out during Tuesday's work session over a proposal to expand a pandemic relief program for commercial businesses, micro-businesses and non-profits. The city launched the program in February, capping the funding for commercial brick-and-mortar businesses at \$150,000.

But business owners flooded the application process, with 50 of them requesting \$7,500 grants for a total of \$375,000 in requested aid. Only 20 of



City of Stone Mountain seal on the historic railroad depot. Photo by Dean Hesse.

the businesses received the grant, so the council was voting Tuesday to extend the \$7,500 grants to 22 more eligible businesses for a total expansion of \$165,000.

But City Councilmember Clint Monroe was unhappy with the vetting process. He expressed concern that some businesses could just be "mail drops" or that some applicants were "double dipping."

"If they're more than a mail drop, what kind of vetting does this do to determine that, other than determining that they have a business license?" Monroe asked.

Miller-Thornton and Mayor Pro Tem Chakira Johnson said that the applicants were properly vetted.

The council voted in favor of the program expansion, with Monroe being the sole vote against it.

Stone Mountain resident Michael Schaaphok railed against the decision during the public comment portion of the work session, calling the \$7,500 amount an "arbitrary number."

"All they had to do was show they had a business license and say they've been affected by

COVID," he said.

In other news from Tuesday's council work session, Police Chief Chancey Troutman presented crime statistics from January and February.

There was one homicide in January and none in February, one aggravated assault in January and none in February, seven simple assault and batteries in January and 10 in February, no burglaries without forced entry in January and one in February, and one car theft in January and one in February. There were also nine larcenies each in January and February.

There have been no rapes, attempted rapes, robberies, burglaries with forced entry or attempted burglaries so far this year.

And a portion of Third Street will close on March 22 for filming of the TV show "MacGyver." The filming will take place at The Village Corner German Restaurant & Bakery, Mike's Body Shop and in the parking lot of Ol'Skool Flava, according to Cumbie. There are also two more potential filming opportunities for April and May.

"We're excited about having another film present with us," she said.

# Kirkwood power grid upgrades to be completed by fall

By Patrick Saunders, contributor

**Atlanta, Ga.** — Kirkwood residents should have fewer and shorter power outages thanks to a project underway to upgrade the neighborhood's grid.

The project, which involves moving some existing power lines underground and installing new transformers, began last June and Georgia Power officials plan to finish by October.

"Reliable power is a necessity, and this project is aimed at increasing reliability," said Shelby Bice, Georgia Power's grid investment communication lead.

Officials from the company briefed the Kirkwood Neighbors Organization about the project at the group's monthly meeting on Wednesday. The upgrades are taking place on DeKalb Avenue, Howard Street, Norwood Avenue, Delano Drive, Kirkwood Road, College Avenue, Ridgedale Road and Rockyford Road.

It's part of the company's \$1.3 billion effort to upgrade the power grid in metro Atlanta and parts of Northwest Georgia. Georgia Power officials briefed an East

Lake neighborhood group about its work in the area on Monday.

Power outages should be limited during the project, and most utility poles will remain in place after it's complete.

In other news from Wednesday's KNO meeting, a new organization has been created to restore, revitalize and protect the Intrenchment Creek watershed in DeKalb County. The Intrenchment Creek Community Stewardship Council was founded late last year.

"This group is charged with putting structure and process together for this mission," said ICCSC representative Audrey Leous.

The group aims to push for policies that stop flooding and environmental degradation caused by development, make the watershed and the city of Atlanta better prepared for the effects of climate change, and address how stormwater management affects the displacement of vulnerable communities.

The ICCSC holds its next bi-monthly meeting on March 27. The group is currently recruiting volunteers.

## Tucker group focuses on good growth at Heritage Links Golf Course

**Tucker, Ga.** — When Lennar Corporation announced plans to convert Heritage Links Golf Course into hundreds of housing units last year, Tucker residents sprang into action.

Hundreds of people attended a community meeting, virtually and by phone, in August 2020 hosted by Lennar. A non-profit community organization, Good Growth Tucker (GGT), was created by residents concerned about the impact of Lennar Corporation's proposed development of 200 acres of land.

Lennar is currently under contract on the 27-hole golf course near Britt Road and Old Norcross Tucker Road — a property that straddles DeKalb County and Gwinnett County.

On March 23, GGT member Charlton Allen, a Tucker resident and attorney, presented a history of the property and update on Lennar's progress.

In the land use application, Lennar is proposing 334 single-family homes surrounding Burns Lake in Tucker. The plan shows small and medium lots, zoned R-60 and R-75.

Across the street in unincorporated Gwinnett County, the other half of the golf course, the builder is proposing mixed-use development, including 104 townhomes and 11,000 square feet of commercial space. Lennar built a similar property in Forsyth, on a larger scale.

"That's quite a big change of the residential population for this area," said Allen.

Allen noted a lack of communication from Lennar while gaining approval from the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) and Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT). Currently, the proposal is being modified to satisfy requirements of ARC and GDOT.

According to the City of Tucker's planning and zoning webpage, Lennar's application is on hold while changes are being made to the Gwinnett County side of the development. A date has not been set for Lennar to present to Tucker Planning Commission.

GGT now plans to recruit members to attend meetings and talk with city council members about density, health and safety. Roads and traffic are not an issue that legal fall under zoning, and cannot influence a city's decision to stop or alter development.

Allen explained, "Georgia courts have said because the county is responsible for maintaining the roads and dealing with traffic, whether or not a new development goes in, traffic is not a zoning issue. It cannot be used as a reason to deny zoning."

GGT updates can be found on Facebook, and through their email list. GGT member Claire Fuller stressed that the group does not plan to disband after the Lennar deal.

"The purpose is to build a community that we want... I assume you have specific ideas about neighborhoods needs and desires and common goals, and would love to have your voice as part of this," Fuller said.

— Logan C. Ritchie, contributor

## Decatur DDA approves additional grants for small businesses

**Decatur, Ga.** — The remaining applicants for Decatur's emergency small business grant program can expect to receive their funding within the next month, city leaders said Friday.

The Decatur Downtown Development Authority (DDA) voted at its regular meeting to approve an amendment to its memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the city that reallocates \$225,000 in unused CARES Act funding to the 14 businesses that did not receive grants in the city's original lottery process.

"We had 42 businesses that applied for funding in November, requesting a total of \$750,000," Decatur Economic Development Director Angela Threadgill said. "We were only able to fund \$500,000. Of the 42 businesses, 28 were fully funded with one other business receiving partial funding."

The Decatur City Commission voted earlier this month to use some of its unused federal CARES money to support small businesses and nonprofits. Because the small business emergency grant program was a joint effort between the city and the DDA, the change had to be approved by both entities.

Since the remaining businesses were approved through the grant program—but went unfunded during the lottery to distribute the funds—the necessary documentation is already in place to get the money to them, said Kyle Williams, attorney for the DDA board said.

"Since this is not a new application process, we are funding the unfunded grant requests from November, we already knew who the recipients will be," Williams said. "We already have the grant documents prepared, and should be able to distribute the funds within 30 days."

### In other business:

- The DDA board heard a presentation from Duane Sprull, the director of career and technical education for the City Schools of Decatur. Sprull asked that the DDA consider a partnership with the school system to seek state certification for the Decatur Career Academy at the high school. Certification would require the establishment of an ongoing collaboration with the DDA as the local economic development agency and another local business partner, Sprull said.

If the board agrees next year, they would designate a member to take state-mandated training and continue to work with the Decatur Career Academy to improve workplace educational opportunities for students.

- Downtown Program Manager Shirley Baylis said that businesses on Decatur square are preparing for Sidewalk Saturday next Saturday, March 20. Fab Fridays will resume in April, but only on the first Friday of each month.

The downtown area is starting to see signs of recovery from the impact of COVID-19, she said.

The DeKalb History Center is also seeing an uptick in the number of people scheduling events there, with weddings already booked each weekend through next year.

— Cathi Harris, contributor

## Poco Loco to open brick and mortar location on College Avenue

**Decatur, Ga.** — Poco Loco ATL has been operating as a pop-up in the Lake Claire neighborhood for the last year, offering fresh breakfast burritos along with sides and frozen burritos to heat up at home. Owner Nick Melvin has signed a lease for the old Dish Dive location at 2233 College Avenue, near the East Lake MARTA station. He plans to open with an expanded menu next month.

"It'll be a slow opening," said owner Nick Melvin. He said he planned to be open from 7 or 8 in the morning until 2 pm. The restaurant will be take out only, although Melvin said he planned to put a couple of picnic tables outside.

Melvin had been working with Fox Brothers since he left Venkman's in 2017. Like a lot of people, as the pandemic got going Melvin found himself with some time on his hands. He decided that making burritos as a pop-up was the way to balance the urge to feed people with his other job of looking after his sons.

Last week's pop-up menu included a vegetable burrito with macha roasted mushrooms and corn, poblano peppers, sweet potatoes, and eggs with cilantro crema and cheese. The frozen burrito was "Yucatan roasted" pork shoulder, habanero honey black beans, sweet pickled jalapenos, and jasmine rice. The mix of vegetables from the breakfast burrito, pork shoulder, and black beans were all available à la carte, along with salsa and pickled onions. Tortillas are hand made.

If you can't wait until the store is open, Melvin is still selling burritos every week via the Poco Loco ATL Facebook page and Instagram @pocolocoatl. Menus for the week are released at 11 a.m. every Wednesday, and you can order for pickup on the following Saturday morning between 8 a.m. and 9:30 a.m. although...fair warning...they sell out quickly.

— Sara Amis, contributor

## Decatur Starbucks closure is temporary, city says

**Decatur, Ga.** — The Starbucks in downtown Decatur has been closed since December, leading some residents to wonder if this location is closed for good.

The store no longer appears on the company's store locator for Decatur. Decatur Planning & Economic Development Director Angela Threadgill said the city doesn't think the closure is permanent.

"The city is aware that the Downtown Decatur Starbucks location has closed its doors to customers, however based on conversations with the landlord we believe it is temporary," Threadgill said. "With many office tenants still working remotely, Decatur's daytime population has decreased dramatically since the start of COVID-19. Many of Decatur's brick-and-mortar retail businesses rely on both the daytime population and local residents to be successful."

Threadgill added, "We look forward to Starbucks reopening their doors as office tenants return, but meanwhile there are a few other local establishments serving up a great cup of joe."

Local favorites include Dancing Goats, b-side, Waller's Coffee Shop and Radio Roasters Coffee.

— Dan Whisenhunt, editor

SMALL BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT:

# S&N PACKAGE STORE

BY ZOE SEILER, CONTRIBUTOR

**Greater Decatur, Ga.** — S&N Package Store has become a go-to place for those 21 years and older in Decatur. It has been located on Lawrenceville Highway in Decatur since 1994 and everyone seems to know the manager, affectionately known as Rocky.

Ali Noorani and Andy Nayani opened the store 27 years ago and Rocky described it as a little hole in the wall place at the beginning. About six years after opening, they bought the business next door that went out of business and made the entrance on Lawrenceville Highway.

"I love it," Noorani said of meeting people and providing them service. "We wanted to do something different. This used to be an oriental grocery store and they were shutting down."

Rocky, the store manager, has worked at the package store since 1996 and the relationships with his customers inspired him to stick around 25 years later. Some customers who moved away for several years and came back were surprised to still see Rocky working at the store.

"My customers are awesome. They like me, I like them. It's the relationship you build, how you treat your customers, and they come back to you," Rocky said.

Rocky values his customers and aims to cater to their needs. He'll order products for people if they ask and approve the price.

"The whole thing is you keep talking to your customers, number one," Rocky said. "Number two, you ask them what they like and what they dislike and then you keep adding inventory according to what your neighbors need. When I say neighbors I'm just looking at a five mile radius around me."

S&N Package also promotes and sells products from local vendors. They carry most beers that are brewed in Georgia.

"We have some awesome selections of local beers, like all the Decatur breweries, like Wild Heaven, Three Taverns, we have a very very good relationship with them," Rocky said.

He added that it's his job to help other businesses in the community and promote their products.

"[That's the] only that way the community will come up, otherwise no. We have to look out for each other," Rocky said.

The store carries about 100 different cases of seltzer. Of that there are only a couple cases of some brands he keeps on hand because two women like it.

Cider, wine and other liquor can also be found at the store.

"It's still building it day by day, slowly and steadily, bringing in the best other products available in the market, catering to the closest community possible," Rocky said.

He even gets customers from all over the country, as far as Wisconsin, Ohio



(l-r) Business partners Ali Noorani, Rocky and Andy Nayani. Photo by Dean Hesse.

and Maine, who are looking for something specific like a funky bourbon. They ask Rocky to order a certain liquor so they can pick it up when they come into town, Rocky said.

S&N Package Store offers curbside service on request.

"But I found there are so many who are afraid of this coronavirus, we are giving curbside service," Rocky said. "People call, place the order, come in the parking lot, give us the credit card in a plastic ziplock bag, we charge everything, give the receipt and card back in the Ziploc bag, and just put it in their trunk."

Rocky will also help watch a customer's kids while they shop. Sometimes he will stand outside by the car to keep an eye on the child or will bring a product out to the car for customers.

"They come to the door, look at me and say 'Rocky the baby's in the car.' So, I walk out, stand by the car, the customer goes and shops," he said. "Or they just tell me 'can you bring me this? I'm standing by the car,' and they just hand over the credit card to me."

S&N Package Store, fortunately, has not had to shut down during the coronavirus pandemic.

The store requests that customers wear masks and social distance while in the store. The staff also clean regularly.

S&N Package Store is located at 2595 Lawrenceville Highway and is open Monday through Thursday from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 11 p.m. and Sunday from 12:30 p.m. to 8 p.m.

## Georgia Hemp Company opens location at Suburban Plaza

By Dan Whisenhunt, editor

**Greater Decatur, GA** — The Georgia Hemp Company recently opened a store at 1524 Church Street in greater Decatur, Ga.

The store celebrated its opening with free samples and a sale. It offers hemp, CBD and Delta-8 products. According to the New York Times, Delta-8-THC is extracted from hemp. The Delta-8 product produces a high that's similar but chemically different from the high produced in the cannabis that's legal for recreational use in other parts of the country.

"Under federal law, psychoactive Delta 9 is explicitly outlawed," the New York Times reported. "But Delta-8-THC from hemp is not, a loophole that some entrepreneurs say allows them to sell it in many states where hemp possession is legal."

According to Potguide.com, "A good way to think about it generally is something like the 'Weed Light': many of the effects and benefits of delta-9,



Photo provided by the Georgia Hemp Company

though toned down a few steps. It is still euphoric and stimulates appetite. It can energize or relax the consumer depending on the larger terpene and cannabinoid profile, similar to delta-9. And yes, it can induce some of the typical heady, psychoactive experience."

Georgia Hemp Company isn't the only company in the area offering Delta-8 products. The Rose and Hemp in Stone Mountain also offers Delta-8 flower

and gummies. Disclosure. Rose and Hemp is a supporter of Decaturish.com.

The Georgia Hemp Company was co-founded by former 790 the Zone and Moe's Southwest Grill Marketing executive Joe Salome and entrepreneur and water conservation advocate Ryan Dills.

According to a press release "they have nearly two decades of combined experience crafting and delivering high-quality cannabis & hemp products on both a local and national scale. The first location opened in Sandy Springs in 2018. Salome and Dills knew they were ready to give more people the option to experience what CBD can do for their body."

Salome called Decatur an ideal location for its newest store.

"We knew Decatur was the perfect place for our next store due to all the growth and vibe of the city," Salome said in the press release. "We are excited to offer Georgia's finest CBD to the eastside of Atlanta and serve DeKalb County, Stone Mountain, Tucker and McDonough."



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