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**April 2021**

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№09 - MAY 2021

# SPOTLIGHT DEKALB:

As filming booms in DeKalb County, local communities are ready for their close-up





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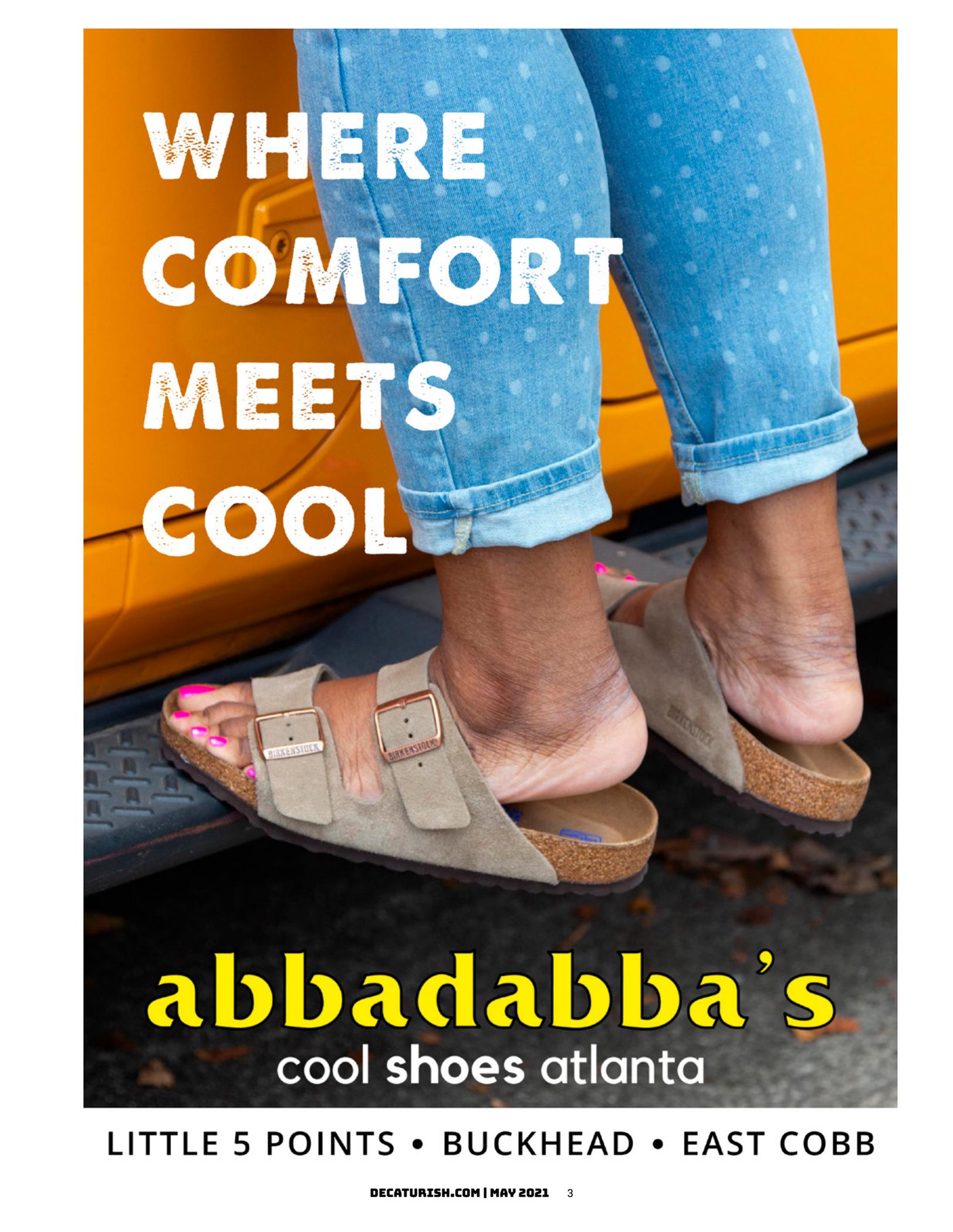
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On the cover: Scenes from the set of the DC Comics show 'Naomi' being filmed for the CW network in the Decatur Square on Wednesday, April 7, 2021. Photo by Dean Hesse.

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 with the 'BIRKENSTOCK' logo. The person is standing on a yellow metal step, likely from a car or truck. The background is a solid yellow color.

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# Superintendent David Dude is gone, but the School Board is still accountable



**Dan Whisenhunt**  
Editor & Publisher

**D**ear valued supporters, A long-running series of investigative stories is something that small local newspapers used to do all the time, if they were worth a damn. Holding elected officials' feet to the fire requires more than publishing a story or two and hoping elected officials will simply do the right thing. It requires vigilance, tenacity and commitment.

As papers have cut back, this type of reporting has become rarer. It's resource intensive and shrinking newsrooms don't always have the time to delve deeper when they're struggling to keep their heads above the water. But some stories are worth the trouble.

In April, our long-running investigation of Superintendent David Dude yielded results: Dude is out as superintendent after nearly six years. The School Board hired an independent firm to investigate allegations that Dude took more vacation than his contract allowed and then earned \$100,000 by cashing out the days he claimed he did not use.

This is not a boast, but a statement of facts. Without our coverage of this issue, it's very likely that an investigation that preceded Dude's departure wouldn't have occurred. Here's another fact: without continued coverage of this issue, the investigation will be shelved and the truth about what occurred will never be known.

That simply can't happen. The real accountability comes when we have a full picture of how we got here.

Who was monitoring when Dude was taking time off? Who was responsible for the lopsided contract that made it harder and more expensive to fire Dude? Which board members were the architects and enablers of this situation?

Some board members are more responsible than others, simply because they've been on the board longer and should know all the facts. But the board has acted in lockstep throughout this whole ordeal, keeping their disagreements behind closed doors and keeping the public largely in the dark about what's happening.

The secrecy surrounding this situation needs to end. The School Board has had plenty of time to get its act together and get its story straight. Five lawsuits notwithstanding, the School Board should be able to answer basic questions like whether Dude was fired for cause or whether the School Board gave him any money on his way out the door.

And those are just the questions du jour. I've been asking about this since January, ques-

tions the board has either ignored or said it would answer but ultimately never did.

At this point, I can either accept that the answers are never coming and move on or I can continue to put pressure on the School Board until they tell the public the truth about what's happening. The former is not an option because the latter is a professional obligation.

And that means we're going to be talking about this more in the weeks and months ahead, even when people are tired of it and have moved on, as some of our readers already have. It's not my desire to bore or alienate you, but if your local news outlet isn't demanding these answers and holding elected officials accountable for their actions, who will?

Minding the public's business is the business I have chosen. It doesn't always make people happy, especially when people are spending thousands of dollars to live in a privileged school district like Decatur. Hell, it doesn't always make me happy. But without accountability and transparency, something like this could happen again.

Decatur deserves better. Its students, their parents and teachers, are owed an explanation. And the only people who can provide it are members of the School Board.

I've made my case to the board chair. I've told her the questions will continue. The stories won't stop. The only thing we're discussing here is whether it's going to be a whole summer's worth of stories or two or three more to resolve these various plot threads.

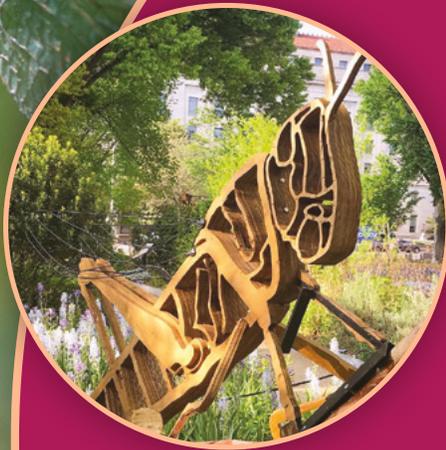
If you see another story about this situation and it annoys you, don't blame me. Take it up with the School Board. They have an obligation to be transparent and candid with the public. They have neglected that obligation.

Until that changes, we have to do what we have to do. It's our job. Thank you for understanding.

On an unrelated note, I want to again congratulate our new reporter, Zoe Seiler, our first full time hire. I've already heaped praise on her, but it's worth doing so again. She's smart, professional and hardworking. This job is her passion and telling your stories is her mission. She's going to be great and you can feel good knowing your money is helping us grow our company and fulfill our mission of telling the truth without fear or favor.

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

—Dano



## NEW OUTDOOR EXHIBIT

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# 'Booming:' Film and TV production levels up in DeKalb

By Patrick Saunders, contributor

**Decatur, Ga.** -- The dogwoods and azaleas are in bloom across DeKalb County, but there's a black and yellow variant on seemingly every corner these days as well. It's the signs with the codes for film and television productions in the area, and they are ubiquitous.

DeKalb is seeing triple the amount of active productions right now compared to this time last year, and the numbers even dwarf those of pre-pandemic times. If it's not a Byrde family member tempting fate with drug lords in "Ozark" somewhere in DeKalb, it's the kids from "Stranger Things" battling monsters here for Season 4 of the smash hit Netflix show.

"Television filming and production are booming in DeKalb County, and DeKalb Entertainment Commission couldn't be more thrilled," DEC Director Shelbia Jackson told Decaturish.

The DEC processed 11 filming applications and saw nine active productions across the county last March. This March, those numbers skyrocketed to 39 applications and 28 active productions.

"The permitting process has been very consistent this first quarter of the year, which is drastically different from this time last year," Jackson said.

And all 13 soundstages in DeKalb are booked through the end of the year, according to the DEC.

DeKalb has been helped in part by following COVID-19 guidelines for film and television productions.

"The goal was always to get DeKalb County residents back to work in the safest manner possible, and I am confident the extra level of precaution we mandated is why things are looking much brighter," she said.

## Decatur shines on Netflix, HBO, ABC, Disney+

Decatur in particular has been awash in film and TV productions lately. The city had 13 filming applications and 11 active productions between January and mid-April of last year. This year, it had 29 applications and 28 active productions during the same time period.

Studios are more and more attracted to Decatur because of the clarity of the process, according to Downtown Program Manager Shirley Baylis.

"For larger projects, we will meet the crew onsite for initial scouting and talk



Scenes from the set of the DC Comics show 'Naomi' being filmed for the CW network in the Decatur Square on April 7. Photo by Dean Hesse.

about the impact on residents and businesses," she said. "We also discuss what the needs will be for road closures, safety, staffing such as police and fire."

"We really try to make this something that works for everyone involved," she added.

And filming can provide long-term residual income because people like to see where their favorite movie or TV show was set. Baylis cited the blue lights in Decatur Square, which featured prominently in HBO's hit 2020 show "Watchmen."

"I was on the Square a couple of weeks ago and heard a woman telling her friend all about the lights and their appearing in 'Watchmen,' and I have witnessed people wanting to get their photo in front of those lights," she said.

Productions filmed so far this year in Decatur include the CW's DC Comics' shows "Black Lightning" and "Naomi," the Disney+ series "Just Beyond," the Starz series "Black Mafia Family," the film "The Conjuring 3," ABC's "The Wonder Years" reboot and the Netflix series "Raising Dion," "Sweet Magnolias" and "Ozark."

Disney+'s high-profile Marvel series "Falcon and the Winter Soldier" also filmed in Decatur last year.

## Stone Mountain, Avondale, Tucker, Doraville line up projects

Nearby Stone Mountain has hosted productions recently including a Fox series reimagining "The Goonies," the CBS series "MacGyver" and "Raising Dion." And the "Stranger Things" cast and crew is coming to film in the area in the next few weeks, according to Tourism Manager Kim Cumbie.

"Filming is good for our community and we strive to be a film-friendly destination," she said. "Along with the recognition of, and for, our community, film companies have been an economic boost to our local businesses, homeowners and churches."

Filming in Avondale Estate has gotten a little busier lately too. The film "Forgotten" shot scenes on Stratford Road last September. This month saw two productions in the area: a SCAD student thesis film on Franklin Street and the film "Long Slow Exhale" on Dartmouth Avenue.

The city does not have its own established initiative to attract film and television productions, according to Permitting Concierge Coordinator Ken Morris.

"Avondale Estates does however participate in a communicating network of cities within DeKalb County related to location referrals and requests," he said.

Tucker has also gotten in on the Hollywood action. "Black Mafia Family," "Sweet Magnolias" and "Ozark" have filmed there this year.

And Doraville in north DeKalb got some huge filming news last month. Atlanta media company Gray Television is in the final stages of purchasing 128 acres of land there to construct 10 film studios, according to the AJC. That would make it one of the largest film production sites in the state.

But what about deciphering those sometimes-misleading production codes on the signs posted around DeKalb?

The popular Filming in Georgia group on Facebook tracks all the productions going on in the Peach State. The group also posts a monthly cheat sheet to help unmask the production codes. April's list of productions in DeKalb include EYE or EYE5 for "MacGyver," FAM for "Black Mafia Family," RD for "Raising Dion," KRAZO for "Ozark," JB for "Just Beyond," and WEYLAND, MCFLY, M247 or MULE for "Stranger Things."

Happy hunting, and happy viewing.

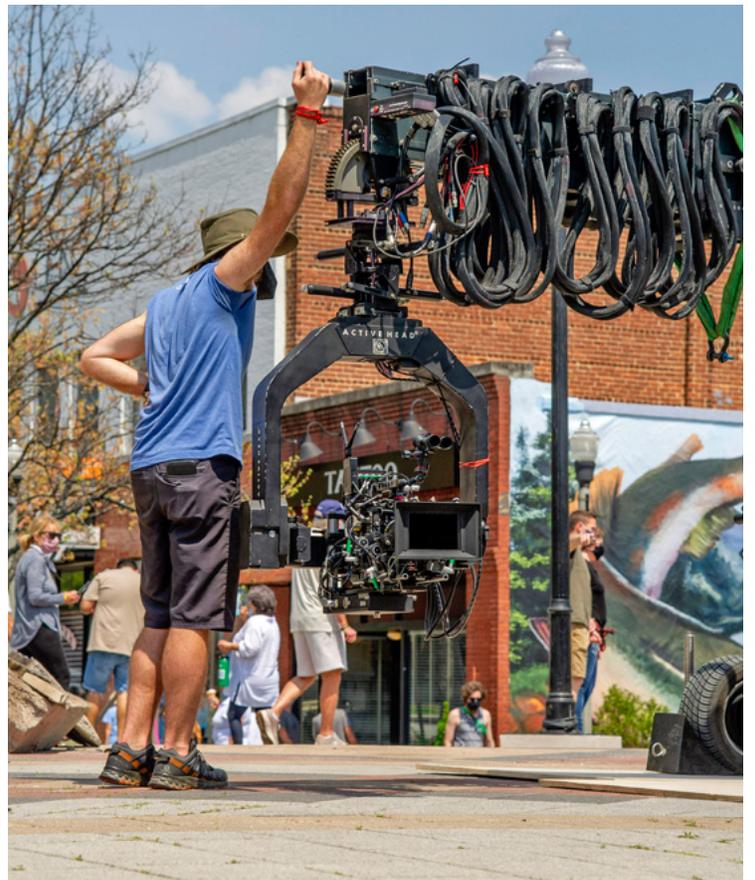
For more photos, visit the [article online here](#).



Photo by Dean Hesse.



Downtown businesses are transformed on the set of the DC Comics show 'Naomi' being filmed for the CW network in the Decatur Square on Wednesday, April 7. Photos by Dean Hesse.



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WOODWARD NORTH  
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# Superintendent David Dude leaving City Schools of Decatur

By Dan Whisenhunt, editor

**Decatur, Ga.** — The Decatur School Board has announced it is parting ways with Superintendent David Dude.

The board's decision comes after months of investigative stories by Decaturish.com that examined allegations raised by the school district's former human resources director.

"The City Schools of Decatur Board of Education and Dr. David Dude feel it is in the best interest of the school community and our stakeholders that we start anew as we begin our recovery from this terrible pandemic," the School Board announced. "We mutually agree to amicably part ways, and both parties are looking forward to the future. The board thanks Dr. Dude for his nearly six years of service to the City Schools of Decatur and the greater City of Decatur community. Dr. Dude thanks current and past board members for their support through the years and is excited for opportunities to come."

Assistant Superintendent Dr. Maggie Fehrman, who has been acting superintendent since Dude was placed on administrative leave earlier this month, will replace Dude, the School Board announced.

"The City Schools of Decatur Board of Education is proud to announce that Dr. Maggie Fehrman has been named the finalist for Superintendent of Schools," the School Board's announcement says. "The Board anticipates a vote on this decision at its May 11 regular meeting. If approved, a one-year contract will be approved for Dr. Fehrman."

Dude has been under fire for weeks over allegations that he took more vacation than he was allowed under his contract. The claims were first raised in the lawsuit filed by the district's former human resources director. Subsequent reporting by Decaturish revealed evidence to support the claims made in that lawsuit and also revealed that Dude's most recent contract renewal made it harder and more expensive for the School Board to fire him. The board has since rescinded that contract and had planned to renegotiate it.

There have been five lawsuits filed against City Schools of Decatur on Dude's watch, including the one filed by the former human resources director.

The School Board on April 15 unanimously voted to place Dude on administrative leave pending the outcome of an investigation into Dude. That investigation is being conducted by the McGuire Woods firm. It's unclear whether that investigation will be completed now that Dude is leaving the district.

David Adams, the district's former human resources director, alleges in a lawsuit that Dude pushed him and former finance Director Susan Hurst out of the district 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 Georgia Professional Standards Commission, which certifies educators, on April 8 voted to remand complaint filed against Dude to the Decatur School Board. Public records show that since he became superintendent in 2015, Dude received \$100,000 in additional compensation for cashing out the vacation days he said he didn't use. While the nature of the PSC complaint is not clear, it likely stems from the allegations regarding his use of vacation time.

In addition, Decaturish discovered that when the board in September 2020 approved the now-rescinded contract, Dude's PSC certification had lapsed because it had expired in June. Dude didn't renew

it until October. Dude's contract makes it clear that maintaining this certification is a condition of Dude's employment with the district.

A City Schools of Decatur spokesperson said the COVID-19 pandemic was the reason Dude's certification lapsed. However, PSC did not cancel any reporting periods due to COVID-19.

Records provided by the district show that Dude was notified via email in April 2020 that his certification was about to expire.

Some CSD employees have alleged that he is often unreachable during the summer months. Evidence shows that during the summer of 2019, Dude was out of the office from June 11 through July 16, 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.

His predecessor, Phyllis Edwards, said she was expected to work during the summer. She was expected to use her vacation days if she took time off during those breaks.

Dude has been responsible for documenting his own vacation since he was hired in 2015, but he input those vacation days into the district's payroll system on Jan. 27 of this year in response to a records request from Decaturish.

Prior to joining CSD in 2015, Dude chief operating officer for the Iowa City Community School District.

Here is the full announcement from City Schools of Decatur:

*City Schools of Decatur is announcing a leadership transition.*

*Here is a statement from the Board and Dr. Dude:*

*"The City Schools of Decatur Board of Education and Dr. David Dude feel it is in the best interest of the school community and our stakeholders that we start anew as we begin our recovery from this terrible pandemic. We mutually agree to amicably part ways, and both parties are looking forward to the future. The Board thanks Dr. Dude for his nearly six years of service to the City Schools of Decatur and the greater City of Decatur community. Dr. Dude thanks current and past Board members for their support through the years and is excited for opportunities to come."*

Here is the statement from the Board regarding the transition:

*The City Schools of Decatur Board of Education is proud to announce that Dr. Maggie Fehrman has been named the finalist for Superintendent of Schools. The Board anticipates a vote on this decision at its May 11 regular meeting. If approved, a one-year contract will be approved for Dr. Fehrman.*

*"We are fortunate to have in Dr. Fehrman the leader City Schools of Decatur needs to ensure a continued focus on our students," said Board Chair Tasha White. "We will not miss a beat as we finish this school year strong, focus this summer on remediation, and return to the classroom this fall with great confidence."*

*Fehrman started her career in 2001, teaching 7th-grade social studies at Summerour Middle School in Gwinnett County. In 2005, she was promoted to assistant principal at Summerour. In 2009, she opened the new North Gwinnett Middle School as an assistant principal. In 2014, she became the principal of Bay Creek Middle school in Grayson before joining the City Schools of Decatur in 2018.*

*"I am humbled and honored to serve the students, staff, and community of Decatur," said Dr. Fehrman. "I look forward to engaging with all stakeholder groups to ensure that our classrooms are a place where all students love learning and are challenged to meet the highest levels of success."*



FILE PHOTO USED FOR ILLUSTRATION PURPOSES: A long time street corner vendor in unincorporated DeKalb County shifted his focus from selling t-shirts to masks, gloves and sanitizer during the pandemic. Photo by Dean Hesse.

## Decatur City Commission extends mask and open container ordinances

By Cathi Harris, contributor

**Decatur, Ga.** — The Decatur City Commission voted Monday night to extend its ordinance requiring masks in public as well as the ordinance allowing some off-premises consumption of alcoholic beverages in the city's commercial districts.

The first ordinance is still needed because public health officials are continuing to recommend social distancing, hand-washing and the wearing of masks to reduce the risk of transmission of the novel coronavirus and local rates of virus transmission are still high, City Manager Andrea Arnold said.

"I understand there is an eagerness in our society to reopen and to push ahead with business as usual. In terms of city decision-making, we are continuing to look at numbers," she told commissioners. "In some ways, the reopening activities in surrounding areas are not really matching up to what we are seeing. DeKalb is in the highest category for community transmission."

In addition, the county lags behind local and national rates of vaccination against COVID-19.

DeKalb County's vaccination rate is currently at 17 percent versus a rate of 26 percent nationwide, Arnold said.

The commission voted unanimously to extend the mask ordinance for another month, until May 17, 2021, when it will again come up for consideration.

Mayor Patti Garrett said that she felt it was appropriate for the city to consider the measure on a month-by-month basis. "By doing this once a month, we remind everyone that it is important and also that we are looking at it regularly."

Commissioner Kelly Walsh said that with the nation still seeing around 69,000 new cases each day, she felt it important that Decatur continue to model appropriate public health measures.

"I have not heard businesses here asking us to lift the ordinance," she added. "What we are doing here is important and I am happy to continue it in the near term."

Commissioners also voted unanimously to continue the temporary exceptions to the city's open-container laws which prohibit off-premises consumption of alcoholic beverages.

As a means of helping Decatur restaurants cope with loss of business due to COVID-19, the city voted in April to allow off-premises consumption in commercial districts on Fridays from 4 p.m. to 1 a.m. and Saturdays from 3 p.m. to 1 a.m. Those exceptions are now extended until Sept. 7, 2021, with the city exploring whether they could be made permanent.

# Matthew Zadok Williams' gunshot wounds were survivable if police provided medical attention, doctor says

By Alex Brown, contributor

**Decatur, Ga.** — On April 20, the Davis-Bozeman Law Firm in Decatur held a press conference to discuss the killing of Matthew Zadok Williams, 35. Williams was shot and killed by DeKalb County Police officers on April 12 in his own home. The press conference was held at the law firm's Decatur office and was streamed on Instagram Live.

Speakers included Attorney Mawuli Davis, State Representative Renita Shannon, pathologist Dr. Jackson Gates, representatives from the Georgia NAACP, Justice for Georgia, and Matthew Zadok Williams' mother and five sisters.

Attorney Mawuli Davis of the Davis-Bozeman law firm, who is representing the Williams family, repeated Matthew Zadok Williams' full name several times consecutively in his introduction.

"We are grateful that there are still some elected officials who will stand tall with those who oppose excessive force, police brutality, and the continued taking of Black lives with little or no repercussions," said Davis.

At the press conference, State Rep. Renita Shannon said, "Matthew Zadok Williams should be alive today, but he's not. He had a bad mental health day and DeKalb County Police killed him over it. My heart breaks for this family."

NAACP State Conference president Rev. James "Major" Woodall said, "It is completely unfathomable that Black skin continues to be under attack. Before the police even got there, there was a white woman who was not living at that residence who called the cops on yet another Black man, which ended in his life tragically being taken away." According to a GBI press release, DeKalb County police officers were responding to a 911 call complaining of a man who was wielding a knife.

The press conference was held at 1 p.m., hours before former Minneapolis Police Department officer Derek Chauvin was declared guilty on all counts of the May 2020 murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minn.

According to The Washington Post, 274 people in the U.S. have been fatally shot by police so far in 2021; 55 of those people were Black.

Johnny Ross and Hannah Joy, representatives from local organization Justice for Georgia, stood behind the microphone holding Justice for Zadok signs.

"Georgia has a horrible police brutality problem," said Britt Jones-Chukura of Justice for Georgia. "How many more families in Georgia are going to continue to have to meet with people like us, and the NAACP, and other organizations?"

Jones-Chukura emphasized that "police are supposed to detain, not kill."

Former Georgia State Senate candidate Devin Barrington-Ward said, "It's time now not to reform this system but to re-imagine this system. ... If we had defunded the police and put money towards mental health services, someone would have called 311 instead and two mental health professionals would have come out to the scene and not two officers with a gun and a badge."

Dr. Jackson Gates was hired by Williams' next-of-kin to perform an autopsy independent of the DeKalb County report.

Attorney Davis asked Dr. Gates if this kind of wound would have been survivable if Williams had been provided medical aid. "I do believe it would have been possible," said Dr. Gates. Dr. Gates cited his prior experience doing autopsies on other victims of police-involved shootings. He described the damage to Williams' body as "a slow hemorrhage" as opposed to other shootings where the victim bled out more quickly.

"There was a white woman who indicated [to police] that this wasn't his house or this was a vacant house. It was a deadly error for her to communicate that this was not his home, because the officers approached him as if he was trespassing," said Davis.

"The family has said that they express compassion for the officer who was in fear for his life. They said they had never seen [Williams] be violent and that it shocked them as family members, said Davis. "When the officer fired that one shot outside, she was acting based on what she observed in defense of another officer. However, the analysis can't stop there, and it's important that the public not stop there either."

Davis clarified that Matthew Williams was the owner of the home, he had lived there for 15 years, and the house was even paid off.

"Once he gains entry into his own home, they don't call for mental health experts, they don't call for negotiators, they don't call his mother who lives fifteen minutes away ... instead, they make a decision, without being a SWAT team, to kick the door and repeatedly kick down the door until it crashes in," Davis said.

Davis said that when officers entered, Williams was crouching in fear behind



Left to right: Rev. James Woodall, Rep. Renita Shannon, Devin Barrington-Ward, Attorney Mawuli Davis, Attorney Francys Johnson at the press conference on Tuesday, April 20, 2021. Screenshot from Instagram Live.

an ottoman. According to Davis, the officers fired a taser and then a gun, then backed away from the porch, which he said was "illogical."

"This case requires complete and transparent continuing investigation," said Davis. "The analysis cannot stop at that door."

One of Williams' sisters, Dr. Buelah Williams, said, "What's keeping me up at night is that my brother should be alive, he should be recovering from his wounds at the hospital. I don't understand why he's not here."

Williams' youngest sister, Zipporah Williams, described her brother as a charming food lover and avid reader.

"It's so hard to believe that he's gone, we try to hold each other up and grieve together, but we have a lot to do to fight for justice for our brother too. Our brother was a beautiful person, he had a heart of gold and did not deserve to die like this, no one does," she said.

Williams' mother, Chrys Ann Lewis, said, "He was just a joy, I had 35 awesome years with him. He is number six, I have six children because it took us so long to have a son."

Williams' father passed away in the month of April, and that he wanted "someone to carry on his name." His mother said his middle name, Zadok (pronounced Zah-DOAK), derived from Hebrew, means righteousness and justice.

"That's what was taken from us, their bloodline, that name of his father, Matthew Williams," Lewis said.

Attorney Hahnah Williams, the second eldest sister, said "Matthew Zadok Williams was the baby brother of five sisters, his feet never touched the ground until he was two years old because we passed us between him. What a life to take. We demand justice."

"I don't care if he was 35, he was still a baby brother to me," said Kaia Williams, 45, the eldest sister. "He would call me every Monday and we would discuss certain things. I had a hard day yesterday because I couldn't talk to him," she said, adding Williams was a selfless, non-violent, smart person.

Attorney Francys Johnson, of the Statesboro office of the Davis-Bozeman Law Firm said, "The narrative that is trying to be set, that he had mental health issues and attacked the police, that police had to fire — and they didn't want to do so, as a matter of fact, they've been careful that you hear these words: 'We're Black, and we don't want to kill you.'"

Body camera footage obtained by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution shows an officer shoot at Williams when he runs away outside his home. Williams then ran back inside his home. Officers allegedly kicked down Williams' door and attempted to speak with him.

An officer who was identified as a supervisor asked Williams repeatedly to drop the knife. "Put the knife down, man. We don't want to hurt you, brother. ... You're a Black man, I'm a Black man, you don't have to die today. I don't want you to die today." An officer then fired three shots and all three officers backed away from the house.



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PHOTOS BY DEAN HESSE

# TUCKER HOSTS EASTER EGG HUNT

By Dean Hesse, contributor

**Tucker, GA**– Tucker Parks & Recreation hosted its third annual Easter Egg Hunt at Fitzgerald Field on Saturday, April 3, 2021. Last year's Egg Hunt was changed to a drive-through Egg Giveaway and this year there were temperature checks for all participants and mandatory masks. The children quickly scooped up the 6,000 Easter Eggs scattered across several fields.





**OPPOSITE PAGE, clockwise from top:** Emma Gargent, Annabel Lynch and Zara Khalid, all 10, wear matching bunny ears and masks during the third annual Tucker Parks & Recreation Easter Egg Hunt at Fitzgerald Field on Saturday, April 3.

Carlotta Casey brought daughter Aubrey, 1, for her first Egg Hunt during the third annual Tucker Parks & Recreation Easter Egg Hunt.

Recreation Center Manager Ray Rollins, in bunny suit, directs families at Fitzgerald Field on Saturday, April 3.

**THIS PAGE, clockwise from top:** Children scramble for eggs during the third annual Tucker Parks & Recreation Easter Egg Hunt at Fitzgerald Field.

T T Olatunji and Mora Guerrero, both 5, show some of their eggs during the hunt.

Riley Pepitone, 16 mo., poses with her basket of eggs during the egg hunt. Photos by Dean Hesse.

For more photos, visit [The Tucker Observer article here](#).



# Georgia executives come out against new voting law, legislators target tax break

By Emma Hurt, WABE

**Atlanta, Ga.** — Hours after Delta Air Lines CEO Ed Bastian called the state's new Republican-led voting law "unacceptable" and "based on a lie," Republican state lawmakers nearly scrapped a jet fuel tax exemption the Atlanta-based airline had lobbied for years ago.

In a last-minute amendment in the final hour of the state's General Assembly session Wednesday night, the state house passed a bill that would begin collecting fuel taxes in the state, but the state senate did not approve the measure before adjourning.

"[This bill] is purely retaliation for the business community speaking out against a bill that everyone knows is Jim Crow 2.0," said Democratic State Representative David Wilkerson as the house voted on the change.

After Delta released a statement late last week arguing the legislation "improved considerably" during the legislative process, Bastian took a much stronger tone in a Wednesday memo to employees.

"I need to make it crystal clear that the final bill is unacceptable and does not match Delta's values," Bastian said.

"After having time to now fully understand all that is in the bill, coupled with discussions with leaders and employees in the Black community, it's evident that the bill includes provisions that will make it harder for many underrepresented voters, particularly Black voters, to exercise their constitutional right to elect their representatives. That is wrong."

"Delta had been at the table in discussions on the bill. They they were a part of a dialogue that we had actually going on for several weeks," said Republican House Speaker David Ralston about the attempt to undermine the fuel tax break. "And so the statement today kind of came out of the came out of the blue, blue sky. And it was very disappointing."

"They like our public policy when we're doing things that benefit them," he said. "And so they reap the reward of that benefit, and then turn around and do this...you don't feed a dog that bites your hand." Coca-Cola CEO James Quincey joined Bastian on Wednesday in his disapproval of the legislation, calling it "a step backwards. And it does not promote principles we have stood for

in Georgia around broad access to voting, around voter convenience, about ensuring election integrity." He spoke on CNBC Wednesday.

"We have always opposed this legislation, and we have a long track record of working in Georgia, with alliances on our own account with legislators, with stakeholders to improve legislation," Quincey said.

"The reality is many things are improved and done and achieved in private without having to take a public stand. But in this case, it does not work clearly. And so we're being more forceful in our public position, even more than we were earlier this week and will continue to advocate for change in Georgia."

These comments come after calls for boycotts of the companies and public pressure have persisted, even after the bill was signed into law.

Dozens of Black American business leaders also banded together to oppose voting bills like Georgia's, led by Merck CEO Kenneth Frazier and former American Express Chief Executive Kenneth Chenault. Microsoft, which recently announced a new Atlanta hub, also announced its concerns about the new law, saying that some provisions "needlessly and unfairly make it more difficult for people to vote."

"Throughout the legislative process, we spoke directly with Delta representatives numerous times," Gov. Brian Kemp responded after Bastian's statement.

"We worked alongside legislative leadership to expand voting opportunities for Georgians, while also taking steps to further secure the ballot box. At no point did Delta share any opposition to expanding early voting, strengthening voter ID measures, increasing the use of secure drop boxes statewide, and making it easier for local election officials to administer elections — which is exactly what this bill does."

"Today's statement by Delta CEO Ed Bastian stands in stark contrast to our conversations with the company, ignores the content of the new law, and unfortunately continues to spread the same false attacks being repeated by partisan activists," Kemp said.

"Delta's statement finally tells the truth — even if it's late," said Nsé Ufot, chief executive of the Georgia-based New Georgia Project Action Fund.

"Delta claimed its leaders engaged with lawmakers drafting these bills for weeks, ensuring that the company's voice was well-represented in the process. Now, you claim to fully understand the legislation and the damage it will do after conversations with leaders in the Black and Brown community. This is where the problem lies. Conversations with Black and Brown leaders must happen at all stages and all areas of decision-making, not after the damage is done."

In an interview with WABE on Tuesday, Kemp said conversations with the business community were happening at least daily about the legislation.

"It's unfortunate. And it's not fair to be boycotting businesses because of a so-called voter suppression bill that is not in Georgia," Kemp said.

"This is all part of an agenda to drive a narrative and to pad people's pocketbooks."

"As major Georgia businesses and employers, it is imperative that companies like Coca-Cola and Delta speak out against any policy that infringes on the rights of citizens in this state," said state Rep. Nikema Williams, chair of the Democratic Party of Georgia. "We are glad that they have publicly committed today to being vocal advocates in the ongoing fight to secure and strengthen voting rights — and we know Georgians will hold them accountable."

Williams and Ufot called on the executives to now turn their focus to lobbying for passage of federal voting rights legislation, including H.R. 1 and H.R. 4.

*This story was provided by WABE.*



Atlanta NAACP President Richard Rose, with bull horn, speaks during a voting rights protest at Liberty Plaza across from the Georgia State Capitol on Thursday March 25, 2021. "We are not going back to Jim Crow." Said Rose. "We must raise our voices because silence is consent. We will not be silenced. We are not going back." Photo by Dean Hesse.

# Legislature doesn't pass Tucker annexation legislation, charter changes

By Dan Whisenhunt, editor

**Tucker, Ga.** — Two city of Tucker legislative priorities went nowhere in the recent legislative session that concluded on March 31.

Mayor Frank Auman and City Council members can be reelected indefinitely if a resolution passed at the Feb. 22 council meeting had been approved by the legislature. Eliminating term limits was a recommendation made by Tucker's Charter Commission, a board of nine appointed residents who reviewed the city's charter in 2018. Council members also unanimously passed a resolution to annex a segment of unincorporated DeKalb County near Northlake Mall which wou-

ld've required legislative approval.

City spokesperson Matt Holmes confirmed that the Legislature did not pass these measures, though he was unsure of the reason why.

"I don't know what happened," Holmes said.

On March 31, the DeKalb County Municipal Association released a statement about annexation that was prompted, in part, but the Legislature's failure to pass legislation for Tucker.

Bill Floyd with the DeKalb Municipal Association said the statement was, "Not specifically but Tucker has an annexation bill they could not get any consideration for."

The statement makes recommendations regarding

annexations going forward.

"It is important to acknowledge that although there have been several new cities created in DeKalb in recent years, we have reached a point where, in several instances, remaining unincorporated areas proposed to be incorporated into new cities would be better served by nearby existing cities," the statement from DMA says. "Additionally, incorporating new cities in a way that creates large or small pockets of unincorporated territory separated by one or more cities will only make the task of serving those areas more difficult for the county and service delivery to those areas will suffer as a result."

Read the [full statement from the DMA online here](#).

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**Chamberlain**  
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Letters  
to the  
editor

Dear  
Decaturish

**Dear Decaturish,**

In a recent post for The New Yorker, Bill McKibben writes about parts of the Biden Administration’s infrastructure plan directed at fighting climate change.

“The question of whether it’s ‘enough’ is, of course, the right one—and the answer is no. Summer sea-ice coverage in the Arctic has declined by fifty per cent since the nineteen-eighties, and there were a record thirty named tropical storms last year, with one of them, off the New England coast, nudging up against smoke coming from the wildfires on the other side of the country, in California. We should be investing every penny we can in green projects, and even then we would still face an ongoing rise in temperature. That’s why movements need to keep pushing hard to build support for climate action.”

One national group of volunteers that agrees completely is the Citizens’ Climate Lobby, which has 15 chapters all over the state of Georgia. CCL believes that the climate crisis requires us to act boldly and quickly. Practical solutions must include both a price on carbon and protections for lower income households that would be hurt by the change. This is the reason we strongly support HR 2307, The Energy Innovation and Carbon Dividend Act. As voters in the 4th Congressional District, we are thrilled that our own Congressman, Hank Johnson, has again co-sponsored this bill.

Hank Johnson is showing true leadership in co-sponsoring this bill. He recognizes that monumental problems require bold solutions, and that effective solutions can have bipartisan appeal. The Atlanta chapter of Citizens’ Climate Lobby has met with Rep. Johnson’s office over 20 times in the last 10 years. He has had phone calls and constituent letters about climate change and the need for bipartisan solutions. Rep. Johnson has responded by demonstrating his deep commitment to the future of our planet.

The Energy innovation and Carbon Dividend Act ([energyinnovationact.org](http://energyinnovationact.org)):

- Gets America to Net Zero carbon by 2050. By putting a well-defined fee on extracted fossil fuels that increases year-by-year, the Energy Innovation Act uses market forces to incentivize the best alternatives to greenhouse gas emitters, while providing business with predictable conditions. As it does so, it will also improve health and save lives by reducing the pollution that Americans breathe.
- Puts money in your pockets. All net funds raised will be returned through a monthly dividend, boosting the economy with millions of jobs.
- Provides abundant, affordable clean energy. Under this policy fossil fuels become more expensive to reflect the true cost of using them. Businesses compete to provide clean energy

solutions, resulting in an expected pollution reduction of 30% in the first five years.

- Acts fairly. Since the dividend is returned on a per capita basis, households with a lower than average carbon footprint (typical of lower income households) will actually come out ahead.

Since its introduction, the Energy Innovation Act has garnered supportive reactions from economic think tanks, advocacy groups, faith groups and citizens. Here are statements from the Environmental Defense Fund, World Resources Institute, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Alliance for Market Solutions, and more. Local governments like the DeKalb County Commission and the City of Pine Lake have also endorsed the Carbon Fee and Dividend strategy.

We’re ready for Congress to work together and take action. We deeply appreciate Rep. Johnson for responding to our concerns and cosponsoring The Energy Innovation and Carbon Dividend Act again. (He cosponsored the similar bill, H.R. 763, in the 116th Congress.) We urge other Georgia Members of Congress to join Rep. Johnson as cosponsors of this bill.

— Paul Friederich,  
4th District Liaison, CCL  
— Henry Slack,  
Georgia State Coordinator, CCL

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[editor@decatrish.com](mailto:editor@decatrish.com)

# Stonecrest Stumbles

BY GEORGE CHIDI, CONTRIBUTOR

*Editor's note: George Chidi now publishes a Substack newsletter called "The Atlanta Objective." If you want to support him directly, sign up for a paying subscription to his newsletter by [clicking here](#).*



**Stonecrest, Ga.** — It's a minute past midnight and a cop is watching Jazzmin Cobble's house. Stonecrest's city council cleaned house at city hall and one of the people who got canned threatened her on the way out of the door.

There's probably more of that coming.

Sure, people get pissy when they get fired, but a sheriff was assassinated for winning the wrong election here in DeKalb County 20 years ago. Derwin Brown's ghost demands vigilance.

Stonecrest's mayor Jason Lary circled the wagons Monday, calling a meeting with faith leaders this afternoon for a COVID-19 relief roundtable. A few hours later, Stonecrest's city council authorized the release report about how the city doled out \$6.2 million in CARES Act relief.

State Sen. Emanuel Jones said he expects subpoenas to follow. "This is more than just this CARES Act money," he said. "There's p-cards, there's the (convention and visitors bureau). It's unfortunate."

Jones has also asked Gov. Brian Kemp to remove Lary from office.

The city council is explicitly waiving attorney-client privilege for the related documents. The

former city attorneys from Coleman Talley might have been part of the problem. The city handed off responsibility for distributing the money to Municipal Resource Partners, a nonprofit formed by the former city attorney — who worked at the same firm as the then-current city attorney — just before the money landed.

First, this brand-new firm headed by Byron King, a retired teacher with local political connections, took a \$510,000 fee off the top.

Companies receiving money were then asked to give some of it back for "marketing expenses" by writing a check to one of a set of suggested nonprofits.

For example, the venerable newspaper On Common Ground received \$100,000. It cut a check for \$25,000 to Visit Us, a recently formed nonprofit. The request appeared to be part of the application, said the editor Valerie Morgan.

"We filled out an application and applied for a grant. The application asks all applicants if they would be willing to put money toward marketing their business," she said. "After we received the grant, we asked how the marketing would work. We were told the marketing would include billboards, social media, radio."

Stonecrest's city council have been trying to parse how all this worked for months now, and have been at war with the mayor in the process.

"Truth comes out in due time," Cobble said. "I've been in government operations for 12 years so I knew time would reveal what I've been yelling about."

The council gained the high ground two weeks ago, when the state Legislature stripped the mayor of much of his authority to set agendas or control the city government. It would have been done soo-

ner, but for the delayed vote to replace State Rep. Pam Stephenson ... and Vernon Jones.

Jones' district clipped a piece of Stonecrest, and legislative rules require all the elected officials covering a city to agree to local legislation for it to emerge from committee, said State Sen. Emanuel Jones. "He knew he was protected by Vernon Jones. Vernon said there's no chance of it passing. He said I'm not signing it," said State Sen. Jones. (The two are not related.)

Jason Lary, who is recovering from cancer, very politely refrained from comment Sunday night, calling me back from a phone at an attorney's office.

Gov. Kemp dragged his feet calling a special election to replace Stephenson, eventually setting the date for February, with a runoff in March. The runoff came down to Stan Watson — a political ally of Jason Lary — and Angela Moore. Senator Jones backed Moore, who edged out the former DeKalb commissioner in a thinly-attended special election vote.

Technically, the newly-empowered council hasn't fired anyone. The city subcontracts its administration through Jacobs Engineering instead of employing people directly. Friday, the council accepted the replacements of its acting city manager, deputy city manager, city clerk, communications director and planning director, one of whom apparently got mouthy at Cobble.

It's a mess.

Dave Marcus, a civic activist in Stonecrest, calls this moment the end of Act II in the story of the city's birth.

"Act 1 was a city getting started with a lot of corners being cut, deliberately or not, I don't know," he said. "But a lot of things were done that were not in conformance with policies and sometimes not in conformance with the law. ... Act 2 opened with the passage of that bill, seemingly out of the blue, and the newly empowered council cleaning house, and insisting that Jacobs give them staff that weren't beholden to the mayor or in his circle, and were deeply qualified. A phoenix rising from the ashes."

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

## Enter the Grift

*Editor's note: George Chidi now publishes a Substack newsletter called "The Atlanta Objective." If you want to support him directly, sign up for a paying subscription to his newsletter by [clicking here](#).*

**Decatur, Ga.** — Vernon Jones announced Friday that he's running for governor.

As one of the two or three journalists in Georgia who has followed his antics closely for years, I am now obligated to remind everyone — again — that Jones is a political grifter who will laugh all the way to the bank, wrapping himself in faux outrage and performative racial grievance.

Jones' candidacy is a minstrel show in the same vein as Candace Owens' idiom, allowing the words of white supremacists to be presented in blackface with the goal not to win Black voters but to irritate them for the amusement of racists.

He is not stupid. He simply presumes other people are stupid enough to give him money to try.

And in this, he is quite correct.

A sane, sober analysis of Republican politics would leave no rationale for Jones' candidacy. Virtually all of Republican voters fall into one of three categories. Roughly half of white voters without a college degree and a third with a degree score high on measures of racial resentment. That's 28 percent of the electorate and about 50 percent of Republican primary voters.

About 20 percent of Americans believe abortion should be illegal under all circumstances, according to Gallup polling. When accounting for overlap with the first group, that's another 10 percent of the electorate and a fifth of Republican primary voters. Roughly half of high-income voters cast votes for Trump simply to protect their financial interests, which reflects another 10 percent of the Republican electorate.

Vernon Jones is a Black politician, with a pro-choice voting record as recently

as 2019, who drove Republicans in north DeKalb to incorporate cities as a financial defense from his reign as county CEO.

As Stonecrest digs out of CARES Act financial mismanagement that left its mayor stripped of power and awaiting subpoenas, it's worth noting that the legislation to protect Stonecrest from this end was stalled by one man: Vernon Jones. Local legislation requires all of the legislators representing a city to agree to it to get out of committee. Jones objected to the changes in the charter which ultimately passed this year, leading to the revelations of mismanagement. After years of fighting against ethics legislation for DeKalb, Jones' final gift to voters was to block anticorruption measures in Stonecrest.

Literally any other Trumpist seemingly has a better argument to make for their candidacy.

Jones has something others don't, however. He has a history of pissing off Black Democrats. Jones has become a social media celebrity on the right. He has about 300,000 followers on Twitter. For Republican voters who have essentially abandoned the ballot as a strategy, a troll candidate sends a message about their contempt for elections. It's Caligula sending his horse Incitatus to the senate as consul, the Monster Raving Loony Party from Britain, Vernon Jones as Vermin Supreme.

A campaign for governor might be also be lucrative. While campaigning, Jones can write off a lot of personal expenses as campaign expenses. Travel, meals, hotel rooms. He can pay people he likes for campaign marketing or "consulting" using other people's money. This, assuming he reports his campaign finances honestly, which given his history with his U.S. Senate run might be an open question.

So much of what we see on the right today can be explained as a cash grab. Trump's fundraising abuses only serve as the capstone for a pattern of ideological machines designed to surgically separate outrage-programmed voters from their money.

The grift begins.

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

# FLICKS WITH NICKI: CHAOS VERSUS MONSTERS

I like chaos. I affectionately call my house Chaos Town. We almost rented a private theater to watch “Chaos Walking” because it seemed like my kind of movie. I love a dystopian future with aliens on strange planets. But we decided to view it at home. My kids watched it first, and I was excited to hear their review.



**Nicki Salcedo**

“It was interesting,” my oldest said.

“So, it was bad?” I asked.

“No,” my second added slowly. That wasn’t a good sign. She was being polite. I’ve trained them to be appreciative when I pay \$19.99 for a movie rental.

“What happened?” I needed to know.

“It didn’t make any sense. They killed a horse. They killed the dog!”

“So, it was really bad.”

“Actually, it was okay. We got to see Tom Holland’s butt.”

“Chaos Walking” is a space western set on a planet where men’s thoughts can be heard by each other, and there are no women. Todd Hewitt (Tom Holland) is a typical down on his luck kid who wants a chance to prove himself. His chance arrives when Viola (Daisy Ridley) crashes onto his planet. He’s never seen a girl. She’s never heard a man’s thoughts before. That’s the “noise” and for some reason women don’t make it.

Viola must get to her spaceship to warn the others not to come to the planet. The men from Todd’s village, Prentisstown, want to kill her. They are misogynistic space extremists. The planet has an indigenous

species of ineffectual jet-black aliens called Spackle. Black aliens who pose no threat to the humans on the planet. This is not okay. Please thank me for finishing this movie so you don’t have to.

There is a neighboring town that just gave up on technology. And the twist is that the Prentisstown men killed the women. A group of men on a deserted planet not having sex or babies is important to the survival of the human race. Not believable. We never find out why the noise impacts only men. Let’s be brutally honest. No man was ever upset broadcasting his mansplaining thoughts to the whole world.

I was too distracted by the nonsensical nature of the movie to hate it. To my dismay, my kids were wrong. In the story, a dog and two horses were killed. By the end, I just wanted all the noise to stop. **Grade D+.** That plus sign is for Tom Holland’s cute little pixie butt.

## Love and Monsters

Several months ago, my same teenagers asked me to rent “Love and Monsters.” I did not want to pay to watch this ridiculous movie just because they had a crush on the main actor. As it turns out, I now have a crush on this actor.

Similar setup as “Chaos Walking” but 100% improvement on the execution. Joel (Dylan O’Brien) is a typical down on his luck kid who wants a chance to prove himself. His chance arrives when he makes radio contact with his pre-apocalypse girlfriend Aimee (Jessica Henwick), and he decides to take a long trek across a monster filled world to find her. The problem is that Joel has no skill beside sketching, and he leaves his bunker colony behind in search of true love. Along the way he meets a dog named Boy, a man named Clyde (Michael Rooker), and a girl named Minnow (Ariana Greenblatt). Boy may be the best actor in any movie I’ve seen in the past 12 months. And

if you aren’t in love with these characters by the first half of the movie, you have no soul. By the second half of the movie, a robot name Mav1s makes us cry. Finding Aimee makes Joel question his journey, the meaning of love and family, and we realize that not all monsters are bad.

I was a weeping mess of happy sadness by the time the credits rolled. “Love and Monsters” is one of my top three movies of the year. **Grade B+**

Me before “Chaos Walking:” I can’t wait to see this movie! It’s going to be amazing. I love space. I love Tom Holland and Daisy Ridley!

Me after “Chaos Walking:” Black aliens. Like pitch black? Men make noise? Not in the mood for a half-baked coming of age story. Awful. Bad. Dumb. Insulting. **Grade D+.**

Me before “Love and Monsters” I can’t believe these teenagers are going to make me pay to watch this ridiculous movie. I don’t care what kind of crush they have on this actor.

Me after “Love and Monsters:” OMGOSH this movie was the cutest monster apocalypse story. Fun, exciting, adorable. I watched it twice. I found it to be so enjoyable. I loved it! **Grade B+**

This is why I recommend that you watch all the movies. I never know what I will love. I never know what will irritate me. Always keep an open mind. If I don’t like a movie, I still want you to see that movie (same with books). You might love it. Then we can chat. My reviews are just exploratory conversations. I’m not trying to persuade you either way. Except for “Love and Monsters.” I hope I have persuaded you to check it out. The dog has a backstory, and he survives! Y’all, it’s almost an **A-**.

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

## DHS students and Georgia Historical Society unveil marker honoring MLK

By Alex Brown, contributor

**Decatur, Ga.** — On April 25, the result of more than a year of dedicated research and hard work by Decatur High School students and Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights was brought to fruition.

A new historical marker — commemorating an injustice faced by Dr. Martin Luther King in Decatur — was unveiled by the Georgia Historical Society.

The unveiling was attended by Decatur Mayor Patti Garrett and Mayor Pro Tem Tony Powers; Dr. W. Todd Groce, President and CEO of the Georgia Historical Society; Beacon Hill Black Alliance Co-Chairs Fonta High and Mawuli Davis; journalist Michael Warren, who helped DHS students with their research; DHS students Genesis Reddicks and Daxton Pettus; Katrina Walker, a 12th-grade literature teacher at DHS who sponsored the students; Charles Black, co-founder of the Atlanta Student Movement; and Decatur Mayor emerita Elizabeth Wilson.

The new historical marker is located on the corner of McDonough Street and West Trinity Place, across the street from the DeKalb County courthouse and Decatur City Hall.

The marker reads:

*Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was sentenced here, at the site of the former DeKalb Building, on October 25, 1960, to four months of hard labor for protesting segregation with the Atlanta Student Movement at a Rich’s Department Store dining room. His arrest violated parole conditions set by Judge J. Oscar Mitchell, who had convicted*

*King of driving without a Georgia license, even though he carried a valid Alabama license. Mitchell’s harsh sentencing of King’s parole violation energized Civil Rights activists and amplified demands to end racist laws and policies. King’s mistreatment focused national attention on the Civil Rights Movement when John and Robert Kennedy intervened to free King from prison. As a result, many Black voters switched parties to help elect John F. Kennedy president, setting the stage for major Civil Rights legislation.*

*Erected by the Georgia Historical Society, Students of Decatur High school, the Beacon Hill Black Alliance for Human Rights, and the City of Decatur*

DHS seniors Genesis Reddicks and Daxton Pettus talked to Decaturish about what the completion of the marker meant to them, and what their plans are next.

Reddicks plans to attend Temple University in Philadelphia, where she hopes to major in international relations and journalism.

“I’m just really, really happy to know that we were able to make this happen,” Reddicks said. “To know that we got to meet so many prominent leaders within our own community, who were contributing factors to what we know today, is so motivating, but we also know as Black students and Black young people ourselves, that it’s now our turn to really take the ropes and be able to make some changes.”

Daxton Pettus said he is deciding between majoring in communications and political science, and he hopes to attend Morehouse. Pettus said it felt great to see the historical marker completed.



Students and mentors stand by the newly-unveiled historical marker on McDonough Street. L-R: Michael Warren, Mawuli Davis, Daxton Pettus, Fonta High, Katrina Walker, Genesis Reddicks, Mayor emerita Elizabeth Wilson, Charles Black, Mayor Pro Tem Tony Powers, and W. Todd Groce. Photo by Alex Brown.

“This has truly been an educational experience learning about the history and learning about what it takes to put something up in your own city,” Pettus said. “I’m thankful for Mr. Warren, Mr. Mawuli, Ms. Fonta, and all the other mentors that have given me the necessities to make changes wherever I want to go.”

Decatur Mayor Patti Garrett said the city plans to hold a larger recognition ceremony at the end of October, when it will hopefully be safer for more people to attend.

“This is an intergenerational effort, from the young people to the activists who originally were a part of this effort, to the current activists — we’ve got three generations here, and I think that’s very significant,” said Beacon Hill co-chair Davis. It’s a long time coming, but it was urged by the young people and supported by the community, and I think that’s important. That doesn’t happen everywhere.”



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# Decaturish.com hires first full time reporter

By Dan Whisenhunt, editor

**Decatur, Ga.** — Decaturish.com, a local news website serving Decatur, Ga. and its surrounding communities, has hired its first full time reporter.

Zoe Seiler, who has been a freelance contributor since 2019, will join the Decaturish staff in May. She will cover Decatur, Avondale Estates, Kirkwood and East Lake. Her duties will include covering local meetings, writing about local schools and profiling our local businesses.

“Since joining Decaturish as a freelancer in 2019, Zoe has proved herself worthy of this opportunity time and time again,” Editor and Publisher Dan Whisenhunt said. “She’s smart, hardworking and professional. She’s a great ambassador for our brand, someone who has made herself indispensable by always going above and beyond what is asked of her.”

This new hire, the first full time employee hired by Decaturish.com, was made possible by the 1,500 paying supporters who contribute money every month to ensure that the local news is free to everyone and isn’t hidden behind a pay wall.

“People signing up to support us every month has made a difference,” Whisenhunt said. “Without them, we couldn’t provide our readers with this essential coverage every single day. As we gain more supporters, I fully intend to hire more journalists to cover our community. It’s important to support your local news.”

Seiler grew up in Des Moines, Iowa and moved to the Atlanta area in 2019. She attended Simpson College, a small liberal arts school in Indianola, Iowa where she majored in multimedia journalism and political science and minored in Spanish.

“I moved to the Atlanta area in August 2019,” she said. “A couple of weeks after I moved I began networking as I was job searching. I met Greg Bluestein with the AJC and he suggested I freelance and recommended looking into Decaturish. I began writing for Decaturish about one month after I moved.”



Zoe Seiler

She decided to become a journalist after taking an introduction to journalism class as a high school freshman. She “fell in love with the field.”

“I love interviewing people and hearing their stories,” Seiler said. “I think everyone has a story to share and I strive to uncover and share them.”

I also eventually had a growing interest in covering politics and local government. While those meetings may be long sometimes, I like to see the process of how local legislation is made and I want to help keep my community informed about issues that will impact them in some way.”

Seiler has worked at small journalism companies in the past. Her first journalism job was an internship with a start-up called the Indianola Independent Advocate.

“My favorite part about being a reporter is meeting new people and hearing their stories,” she said. “I love all the connections I’ve made in the Decatur area, especially those related to topics and cities that I’ve covered consistently.”

Outside of work, her hobbies include crocheting,

which helped her pass the time during the pandemic. She enjoys spending time outdoors, hanging out with friends, reading, watching Netflix and is a budding gardener.

“Hopefully I can keep my plants alive,” she said.

Seiler shared her vision for covering the local news.

“I strive to continue telling the stories of our communities, to share information that is important to our readers and to do it well,” she said. “I also hope to continue the good work Decaturish has been doing and keep holding our elected officials accountable.”

She said Decaturish is filling an important niche.

“I have such an appreciation for local news organizations and the level of coverage they provide for a community,” she said. “Not everyone takes the time to attend hours long city council meetings or community events. But local publications often do and Decaturish does. I wanted to come work for Decaturish because I want to be able to dig into local issues and meet the community. I’ve loved every minute of being out in the field in Avondale Estates, Clarkston and Decatur.”

Seiler said it’s critical for people to support their local news outlets.

“We are able to provide coverage on city council and school board meetings, as well as other community events like local protests and elections because of our paying supporters,” she said. “Paying supporters help provide us with the resources to cover important topics and expand the company. People should pay to support their local news if they want to see us continue to cover local meetings, events and issues that are important to them. We greatly appreciate everyone who supports Decaturish.”

## AVONDALE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL RECEIVES STEM CERTIFICATION

By Zoe Seiler, contributor

**Avondale Estates, Ga.** — Avondale Elementary School is now a Cognia STEM certified school. The school has implemented science, technology, engineering and math courses and programs for several years in preparation for the certification.

The Cognia evaluators look at four domains — STEM community, learning culture, experiences and outcomes — and the school is measured against 16 standards.

“We have to sort of paint the picture of our journey, right. Where we started from, where we’re at presently and where we want to be,” Avondale Elementary School Principal Dontae Andrews said.

Within the evaluation process, interviews are conducted with students, parents, teachers, the school leadership and business partners. Using the interviews and other documentation and data, the Cognia evaluators rate the school using the four domains. The school exceeded all the domains and standards, Andrews said.

Once that process is finished, the evaluators present their findings to the school to show the results of the interviews, other artifacts and videos.

Andrews remembered the third slide of the presentation said “congratulations, you’re now a STEM certified school” and he stopped the presenter before moving to the fourth slide. The leadership team took a moment to celebrate and started jumping and shouting in excitement, prompting the secretary to check to see if everything was alright.

“That was exciting and then of course we settled down and got through the rest of the findings but as soon as we were done with that ... the next thing I went to was the over-the-school mic to announce that we’re STEM certified and so it was exciting,” Andrews said.

The certification validates the school and the STEM programs it has in place, Andrews said.

“We’re already an IB school and so our school is already based on inquiry-based learning and real world experiences and so with STEM we’re able to build on that, because with STEM it’s the same thing — inquiry based learning, bringing those real world experiences, solving problems, right, as relates to real world situations,” he added.

Andrews has been at Avondale Elementary School for about seven years and when he came to the school they were seeking the STEM certification, but the staff had to implement a few things first.

“We have a Mac lab for our students and also a PC lab so students are able to be

versed in both of those worlds when it comes to technology and just exposing the kids to coding, robotics, things of that nature,” Andrews said.

About two years ago, the school implemented a STEM lab so students can have hands-on experiences and learning. The school also has a STEM garden and the Avondale Elementary School Education Foundation will soon establish an outdoor STEM classroom.

Many students come from low socioeconomic settings so the school gives them the opportunity to be exposed to STEM and work with computers, drones or 3D printers, and experiment with robots and coding.

The older students get excited about STEM and a STEM learning environment is normal for Avondale Elementary, Andrews said. Once a month, the school has days called “engineering for a day” when everything is hands-on, project based learning and students get to collaborate with each other.

“I think, overall, it’s just normal life to them,” Andrews said. “They come to school, they all experiment, get to participate in our STEM lab, they all get to participate in the computer lab and the experiences in the classroom and so I think to them it’s normal being that we’re a STEM certified school.”

“We call it the Avondale way,” he added.

The teachers are also exposed to professional development, through the STEM certification, that allows them to strengthen the teaching and learning in their classrooms.

“We now have a STEM teacher, and our STEM teacher has been very instrumental, Ms. Brenda Walker, in helping to pull all of this stuff together, to package it up in a way that we can become a STEM certified school,” Andrews said.

Andrews added that what helped in the process was the teachers and staff, and that they supported the vision without giving up even in the middle of a pandemic.

“During this time, during the pandemic, we obtained our IB recertification and also a STEM certification so it’s been quite a journey but a rewarding one,” Andrews said.

The goal now is to keep the momentum going, build on the program and sustain the program, Andrews said, so that regardless of the school leadership and teachers, the STEM program will be sustainable.

“We’re just excited so it was a good way to go out on spring break being a STEM certified school,” Andrews said. “I think we are the 30th STEM certified school in DeKalb County and so we’re happy to be part of the Cognia community, and also just being part of the STEM community for DeKalb County Schools.”



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# Tucker holds first Earth Day celebration, launches youth recreational baseball league

PHOTOS BY DEAN HESSE



Griffin Wilson, 5, poses for a photo on Opening Day of the Tucker Baseball League at Fitzgerald Field on April 17.



Chris and Tara Sears help their son Luke, 5, adjust his hat on Opening Day of the Tucker Baseball League at Fitzgerald Field on April 17.

By Dean Hesse, contributor

**Tucker, Ga.** — April 17 was a day of firsts in Tucker as the city held its inaugural Earth Day Celebration and launched its new youth recreational baseball league at Fitzgerald Field.

Earth Day events included free paper shredding at Tucker City Hall and volunteers stationed at four city parks gave away 200 red maple tree saplings, 600 honeybee mix flower seed packets and 1,000 copies of an educational children's book titled "David and the Trees" that was written and illustrated by Tucker city staff members.

Parks & Recreation Director Rip Robertson said his team spent six months getting the baseball fields in shape for opening day.

For more photos, visit [The Tucker Observer article here](#).



At Johns Homestead Park, Cara Schroeder, a volunteer with Friends of Tucker Parks and co-chair of Friends of Henderson Park, holds one of the 200 red maple tree saplings given away during the city of Tucker's first ever Earth Day Celebration on April 17.



**Top:** At Johns Homestead Park, Intern Harris Jamal shows some of the 600 honeybee mix flower seed packets the city of Tucker gave away during its first Earth Day Celebration on April 17.

**Bottom left:** Graylin Mitchell takes advantage of the free Earth Day Celebration paper shredding event at Tucker City Hall. Mitchell said it was exciting

to get rid of all the paper she accumulated after being locked down due to COVID for the past year.

**Bottom right:** Hayes Basit, 8, gets a fist bump from his father Jamal Basit before hitting the field on Opening Day of the Tucker Baseball League at Fitzgerald Field on April 17. Photos by Dean Hesse.



# Decatur will get \$8.1 million in COVID-19 relief

BY ZOE SEILER, CONTRIBUTOR

**DeKalb County, Ga.** — Cities and counties across the state will receive millions of dollars from the federal government soon through the American Rescue Plan, the Biden administration's COVID-19 relief plan.

Rep. Hank Johnson (GA-4) held a virtual event on Wednesday, April 7, with local, state and federal experts to discuss the recent COVID-19 relief and how the American Rescue Plan will affect individuals, families and small businesses.

"As many of you know the American rescue plan is a \$1.9 trillion economic stimulus bill that includes an extension of jobless benefits, another round of direct payments to individuals and households, and money for state and local governments, and an expansion of vaccinations and virus testing programs," Johnson said.

The direct payments this time around are \$1,400 to individuals, including all dependents claimed on a tax return. This round of stimulus checks is not limited to dependents under the age of 17, said Linda Berkman, a Congressional district liaison at the Department of Treasury – Internal Revenue Service.

"Eligible families will get a payment based on all qualifying dependents claimed on the return, including older relatives like college students, adults with disabilities, parents and grandparents," Berkman said.

The IRS will use available information to determine if someone is eligible to receive the stimulus check. They will use the 2020 tax return if filed, or the 2019 tax return if a 2020 tax return has not been submitted or processed.

Federal beneficiaries, like those who receive Social Security benefits and benefits through the Veterans Administration, will automatically get a stimulus check if they are not required to file a tax return, Berkman said.

The good news, Berkman said, is that Social Security beneficiaries who don't file tax returns should have received the stimulus payment through direct deposit on Wednesday, April 7, and those checks will be mailed later this week.

Those who get benefits through the VA will also receive their stimulus payment by direct deposit next week, she added.

In order to get the stimulus check, individuals must file a tax return. If someone didn't receive the previous stimulus payments or felt they receive the incorrect amount, they must file a 2020 tax return to claim the recovery rebate credit, Berkman said.

## Funding for cities and counties

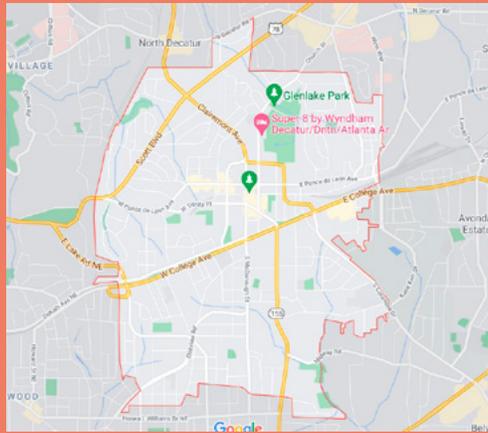
Counties and cities will receive direct payments under the American Rescue Plan. Within Georgia's fourth Congressional district, counties will receive \$258 million. DeKalb County will receive \$147.36 million, Gwinnett County will get \$181.6 million, Rockdale is set to receive \$17.6 million and Newton County will get \$21.7 million, Johnson said.

Additionally, Fulton County has been allocated \$206.34 million and the city of Atlanta will receive \$178.39 million.

In DeKalb County, cities in the Decaturish.com / Tucker Observer coverage area will receive the following amounts through the American Rescue Plan:

- Avondale Estates, \$990,000
- Clarkston, \$3.98 million
- Decatur, \$8.1 million
- Stone Mountain, \$1.98 million
- Tucker, \$11.47 million

The cities haven't received their allocations yet and are waiting for direction on how the money can



The boundaries of the city of Decatur. Source: Google Maps

be spent but local leaders are looking forward to the aid. This is the first time cities are directly receiving stimulus money.

The funding provides a tremendous opportunity to invest in communities as they emerge from the pandemic, Decatur City Manager Andrea Arnold said in an email.

Tucker is still weighing what the influx of money will mean for the city.

"We are still gathering information on what the American Rescue Plan will mean for the city of Tucker," Tucker Mayor Frank Auman told the Tucker Observer. "At this point, our staff is developing priorities and this will certainly be a part of our budget discussions for FY '22. Our staff did an excellent job in allocating funds from the CARES Act last year and they will be ready to do the same with the American Rescue Plan."

Cities and counties will be able to spend the American Rescue Plan money over two years which will provide an opportunity to align city, county and school board priorities in a way that ensures equity for the county, County Commissioner Ted Terry said.

"We must address the emergency needs of food and housing assistance, while also shoring up government services that have been impacted by the pandemic, and launch new programs that will fully support our students, teachers and parents as they transition back to the classroom," Terry said.

Senators Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock, along with Johnson, advocated for the passage of the American Rescue Plan. Ossoff and Warnock worked to include direct funding for cities and counties.

"For the first time, this aid will flow directly to localities with populations under half a million," Ossoff said. "In the CARES Act, the aid went to the state, the Governor's office, and mostly to the city of Atlanta; smaller localities did not get direct aid. We banded together to fix that to ensure that, not just the smaller cities like Decatur, and Tucker, and Clarkston, but also counties and smaller towns will get this direct support."

## Funding for schools

The school districts will benefit from the relief plan as well. Atlanta Public Schools will receive \$193 million, City Schools of Decatur will get \$2.5 million and DeKalb County Schools has been allocated \$320.6 million.

DeKalb County schools were reluctant to return to in-person learning at first but some students joined their teachers face to face on March 9 in a hybrid learning model, said Vickie Turner, chair of the DeKalb County Board of Education, during the panel discussion.

The district was able to use the previous CARES Act funding to provide personal protective equipment, to ensure all students had the necessary technology for online learning, and to address food insecurity.

DeKalb County schools recently did a study and discovered there is learning loss as a result of the virtual learning space, Turner said.

"As a result of the realization of the learning loss we have, we've put in a MOSAIC learning initiative for the summer, so this money would be so beneficial for us to have to get those children up," Turner said. "So we are going to remediate and accelerate those children that we need to in hopes of reestablishing a more favorable outcome for our children."

The district is also going to address some inadequacies in its HVAC system with the stimulus money to make sure staff and students feel safe in the schools.

## Funding for health care centers and vaccinations

Community health centers are also set to receive funding to expand access to COVID-19 vaccines. MedCura Health, formerly Oakhurst Medical Centers, of Stone Mountain will get about \$5.5 million and Recovery Consultants, Inc. of Decatur will receive about \$977,000.

"This American rescue plan has enabled us to put up and continue our vaccine program as well as COVID testing in the community right now," said Jeff Taylor, CEO of MedCura Health, during the panel discussion. "We are providing those services at South DeKalb Mall."

The medical center hopes to vaccinate as many people as possible, which Taylor said is a large undertaking. MedCura Health is in the planning stages of opening up multiple vaccination sites.

The federal assistance has also helped MedCura Health remain open and operating.

"Many businesses have closed down and one like ours certainly is vulnerable during this time but we are still available to provide primary care services to the community," Taylor said.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is also operating a vaccination site at Mercedes Benz Stadium in partnership with the state, Fulton County and the city of Atlanta.

"We're committed to the equitable distribution of the vaccine," said Terry Quarles, recovery division director for FEMA. "Our top priority is to ensure that everyone who wants a vaccination can get one. Expanding this vaccination center allows Atlanta to help make this happen."

At the stadium 42,000 doses are administered each week, Quarles said.

Emory Healthcare also has a vaccination center at Northlake Mall and two weeks ago reached the milestone of delivering 100,000 doses by providing vaccines to the healthcare community and patients.

While local officials highlighted the vaccination effort, Christy Norman, vice president of pharmacy services at Emory Healthcare, said only about 26% of the eligible population in the state has received one dose and 13.4% has received both doses of the two dose series, which is about 4.3 million people.

"If you look at those numbers compared to the national percentages, the US is at 32.6% of the population receiving one dose and 19% being fully vaccinated," Norman said. "So Georgia is somewhat, actually second from last currently in the number of individuals being vaccinated per our 100,000 population of eligible individuals."

Early on in the vaccine rollout there were some delays in reporting vaccine data which impacted the vaccine allocations the state received but those issues have been reconciled, Norman said.

# Clarkston dissolves the Clarkston Development Authority

By Zoe Seiler, contributor

**Clarkston, Ga.** — The Clarkston Development Authority has been dissolved. The City Council made the decision in a 4-1 vote during the March 2 regular meeting and the measure passed the Georgia General Assembly on March 31.

The plan is for the city to activate a standard downtown development authority.

In 2017, the City Council established the Clarkston Development Authority which had seven members, three of which were council members. The CDA was enacted by the state legislature as it was different from a standard development authority that all cities in the state have the automatic right to create. The standard version only allows one city council member to serve on the board.

The City Council, at the time, wanted to make sure it had other voices on the CDA versus just having one member serve on the CDA, Mayor Beverly Burks told the Tucker Observer.

“But having three, the number three is not such a good idea, especially since then if it’s brought to the council all they need is one [more] vote for anything to pass,” Burks said. “So that’s, in terms of when you think about engaging the council, having those discussions, that’s not a good way to have it either.”

The CDA was meant to focus on the downtown area, but the final version of the document approved by the General Assembly included boundaries that covered the entire city and the council members don’t know how that change occurred.

“I’ll put it to you very bluntly since I sponsored it, that’s not what I sponsored,” Burks said at the Feb. 12 staff retreat. “Let’s just be clear, that is not what was originally sent out and if you go and look at all of the information in terms of where the authority would have dominion, that wasn’t in that. I don’t know when or how it got changed, I don’t know, or who changed it.”

The Clarkston Development Authority has not been activated yet. All members have been appointed, but bylaws have not been written, officers have not been selected and the board hasn’t held any meetings.

The City Council decided the CDA wasn’t serving the city in the way they intended and council members raised concerns about having three council members on the CDA and about the jurisdiction being over the entire city.

A lot of trust has been violated, Councilmember Laura Hopkins said at the staff retreat, adding that she

feels she may have been given an inordinate amount of power over the city.

“But I feel like the public, the residents are very leery at this point of a few people on the council having too much control and having the authority over every square foot of the city,” Hopkins said. “So that is my concern and if we could change just that portion without having to go to the state legislature, I would be comfortable with that, but I don’t think we can.”



**Beverly Burks**

Councilwoman Debra Johnson is on the Clarkston Development Authority and she brought the issue to the council after attending DDA training.

“The primary concern that I had was the makeup of the CDA,” Johnson told the Tucker Observer. “I went to DDA training as one of the council members on the [CDA] and they kept referring to Clarkston as being unique, basically telling me that what I was learning in DDA training was not what we had.”

Her concern with the makeup of the CDA revolved around having three council members on the board and was not related to specific board members.

The CDA is made up of seven members and the City Council has six members so about half of each entity was City Council members.

“So having three people on our CDA with full reign of the entire city of Clarkston is dangerous because by the time it comes to council, we have to approve everything on council, three of the council members are already persuaded because it’s either their idea or they’re along with the idea from the previous members of the CDA,” Johnson said.

She added that if a vote on the City Council comes to a tie then Burks would break the tie and Johnson didn’t want to put that pressure on the mayor.

Residents raised concerns at the Feb. 23 work session that this action was meant to get rid of one CDA member in particular as Vice Mayor Awet Eyasu said at the staff retreat that he felt the CDA got convoluted with the previous appointments.

But Johnson said that was not the case or an issue. Eyasu also said at the Feb. 23 work session that the action is not being taken due to specific CDA members and the main reason was that the CDA had been changed throughout the approval process.

“The nominations that are in place can stay in place as far as I’m concerned,” Johnson told the Tucker Observer.

Johnson explained that former Mayor Ted Terry was allowed to nominate three people to the CDA. For his third selection, he nominated his girlfriend at midnight on the day he stepped down from being mayor.

“A lot of people didn’t like it, but it was still his nomination to make and it was still in the proper time frame so no one had an issue with it,” Johnson said. “I didn’t think no one had an issue with it until I heard the comment.”

The legislative process was also a concern raised throughout City Council meetings because the city would have to ask the Georgia General Assembly for approval any time they would want to modify the CDA. Concerns were also mentioned about the being able to pass the dissolution in the General Assembly so close to the end of the legislative session.

“So now we got to go ask them to limit the number of council members, limit the locations, so at this point, instead of making all of those modifications we felt, since nothing has actually been enforced with our CDA right now, we felt it would be better to not create anything and then use what we already have in place [from the Georgia Municipal Association],” Johnson said.

Councilman Jamie Carroll cast the dissenting vote and said it doesn’t make sense to tear down the CDA and start over when all members have been selected and most have gone through training.

“I voted no because one, I think it’s better to have a CDA that covers all of Clarkston, as opposed to just the downtown area, because that allows for more efficient planning, especially since Clarkston is such a small geographic area,” Carroll said in an email.

He added that he doesn’t think concerns about a runaway CDA are valid as projects would have to be approved by the City Council for funding and the CDA members have staggered terms so “a council majority would have to win multiple elections to control both the CDA and the council,” Carroll said.

The City Council plans to create a standard downtown development authority and two seats will have to be filled, if the members of the CDA serve on the downtown development authority. The council will also have to decide if a council member or the mayor will serve on the DDA.

“I am for us moving forward with developing our community and I support our council,” Burks said. “Again, we’re excited to do whatever we can to look towards new development in Clarkston.”

## City of Decatur to begin Church Street cycle track project

By Dan Whisenhunt, editor

**Decatur, Ga.** — This summer the city of Decatur will begin work on a two-year project to install a cycle track on both sides of Church Street, reducing the road from four lanes to two.

The project will begin at Commerce Drive and will connect to the cycle track there, Assistant City Manager David Junger said.

“It should be quite a nice improvement,” Junger said.

Junger did not have any information about the total cost of the project. Deputy City Manager Hugh Saxon is overseeing it and he’s off this week.

In a previous email, Saxon said, “Bids were received for this project in March and a construction contract should be awarded by early May. Construction should commence in late June/early July and last 20-24 months.”

The Church Street improvements have been under consideration since at least 2012, and years ago the city implemented a temporary road diet on Church Street near Glenlake Park. When it’s completed, there will be cycle tracks on Church Street from Commerce to Forkner Drive, about one mile of road.

The project also include work on Commerce Drive and Clairmont Avenue.

For a summary of all the work planned for these roads, [click here to read the article online.](#)

“General objectives of this project are to provide safer gateways for pedestrians and bicyclists to and from downtown Decatur and better facilities for pedestrians and bicyclists along the Church Street corridor,” the city’s summary of the project says. “Goals include reducing road widths at intersections to shorten the time needed to cross the street and providing wider sidewalks, bicycle paths and multi-use trails on Church Street to create a safe and pleasant experience for bicyclists of all ages and abilities, from the family-oriented, recreational bicyclist to the serious cyclist.”

The cycle track on Commerce Drive proved to be controversial with some residents and visitors to Decatur. City commissioners listened to more than an hour of public comments for and against the cycle track during a meeting in 2017, but declined to reconsider it. People said the plans for Commerce Drive caught them by surprise. But numerous cyclists also showed up in support of the project.

The city completed the Commerce Drive cycle track in 2020.

To see the plans for the Church Street cycle track, [click here.](#)

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# DeKalb Health Director Elizabeth Ford taking job with Biden administration

BY DAN WHISENHUNT, EDITOR

**Decatur, Ga.** — Dr. S Elizabeth Ford, district health director with the DeKalb Board of Health, is leaving her post to take a job in President Biden's administration.

DeKalb County Commissioner Mereda Davis Johnson made the announcement in a Facebook post.

Johnson said, "We'll miss Dr. Ford in @ItsIn-DeKalb! She's done a great job at @HealthyDeKalb & worked on behalf of our communities. Now she's headed to the @WhiteHouse to work for communities across this nation! Join us in wishing Dr. Ford well as she joins the Biden Administration!"

A spokesperson for the Board of Health said, "I can confirm that Dr. Ford accepted a position in the Biden Administration as the Special Assistant to the President for Public Health and Science in the Domestic Policy Council. Her last day with the DeKalb County Board of Health will be April 23. Dr. Sandra Valenciano will be our interim district health director. She currently serves as the medical director of the Board of Health's Community Health & Prevention Services (CHAPS) division."

Ford has held her post in DeKalb County since 2005.

According to the National Association of County and City Health Officials, "A board-certified pediatrician, Dr. Ford has served as the District Health Director and Chief Executive Officer of the DeKalb County Board of Health since February 2005. She manages a diverse array of public health programs that serve over 730,000 people who live in the county, with is part of the metro Atlanta area."

Here's some more information about Ford, provided by NACCHO:

Under Dr. Ford's leadership, the DeKalb County Board of Health has successfully applied for more than \$15 million in federal funds to address health disparities, including \$5.6 million from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to promote smoke-free environments, physical fitness



DeKalb County Board of Health District Health Director Sandra Elizabeth Ford, M.D., M.B.A., F.A.A.P., speaks before the first frontline workers with the board of health receive the COVID-19 vaccine at the T. O. Vinson Health Center Auditorium on Winn Way in Decatur on Dec. 31, 2020. Photo by Dean Hesse.

and improved nutrition. More recently the agency received a Minority Youth Violence Prevention: Integrating Public Health and Community Policing Approaches grant from DHHS and the U.S. Department of Justice aimed at curbing violence and improving the health and well-being of underserved and distressed communities. The agency also recently received a Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) grant from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Dr. Ford was asked to serve as the Acting Director of the Georgia Department of Community Health's Division of Public Health during the agency's reorganization in 2008, where she helped to develop

statewide policies and legislation and enforce public health laws and regulations. Dr. Ford received a bachelor's degree in Psychology from Stanford University, a medical degree from Howard University's College of Medicine and a master's degree in Business Administration with a concentration in Health Services Administration from Howard University's Graduate School of Business. She is a fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Dr. Ford has been a member of NACCHO since 2006 and has served on the Membership Committee for many years, first as a member and currently as its Chair. In 2017, she was elected as an at-large member of NACCHO's Board of Directors.

## Stone Mountain residents pitch city on parks improvements

By Patrick Saunders, contributor

**Stone Mountain, Ga.** — The results are in for a public survey of Stone Mountain residents on improvements for the city's four parks.

Residents ranked the top five improvements needed at each park.

"It is our goal to have council review what has been submitted and to see if we can get at least the first three items on each list," City Councilmember Gina Cox said at Tuesday's council work session.

At McCurdy Park, residents favored repairing and improving the buildings and restrooms, replacing the children's play area that was destroyed, addressing safety issues involving the creek and children, replacing the wood stairs from the parking lot with concrete stairs and more parking.

At Randolph Medlock Park, they want the parking lot improved, the restrooms improved, children's play equipment added, the picnic shelter repaired and improved, better security and cameras, and the concession stand repaired and improved.

At Leila Mason Park, residents want the bathrooms renovated, a walking trail around the perimeter, seating at the playground, more equipment for children, and the picnic pavilion improved.

At VFW Park, they favored installing a walking track, making the restrooms ADA compliant, adding parking, adding a children's play area and equipment, and adding barbecue grills.

The council needs to come up with a plan with a cost estimate for the full scope of the project next, according to City Manager ChaQuias Miller-Thornton.

In other news from Tuesday's meeting, the council voted unanimously to appoint attorney Kristal Holmes as city solicitor. Holmes replaces Ottanya Clark, who recently resigned.

The council voted unanimously to approve a contract with Atlanta Soundworks to upgrade the city's streaming video system.

The council's 2021 Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee is developing a public portal and survey for residents to weigh in with their priorities. The Georgia Department of Community Affairs requires cities to complete such plans every five years.

A virtual public event about the Comprehensive Plan is in the works for June.

The 2021 season of the city's farmer's market will begin on June 8 and run until Aug. 31. The city has 12 vendors so far, four of whom are new this year.

## Drumz N' Flatz brings baked wings, vegan fare to Stone Mountain

**Stone Mountain, Ga.** — Health-conscious chicken wings have arrived in Stone Mountain with the opening of the new restaurant Drumz N' Flatz.

Local real estate brokers John and Stacey Arthur launched the new spot last month at 5370 Stone Mountain Highway.

"We wanted to make sure that we were providing something healthy and some vegan options as well," Stacey told The Tucker Observer. "Frying is not always the best, so we experimented with the baking and it was pretty successful."

The Arthurs also own Stone Mountain catering business Jerk Fusion Café. It took a while to make Drumz N' Flatz a reality.

"This has been four-and-a-half years in the making," Stacey said. "It just happened that everything aligned and this was the right time."

Picking Stone Mountain as the location was a no-brainer.

"We've been in the Snellville-Stone Mountain area for approximately 15 years," Stacey said. "So we figured if we were going to do something like this, we would start at home and move forward from there."

The Drumz N' Flatz menu includes 12 different wing flavors, sandwiches, bowls, salads and sides. Beer and wine is available, and the Arthurs are applying for their liquor license next.

"Our most popular [wing flavors] are our candy blaze, irie jerk and lemon drop wet," Stacey said. "In addition to that our salmon sliders seem to have been a big hit."

The only hiccup since opening has been finding workers.

"Because of the stimulus, there's not a lot of motivation to go to work right now," Stacey said. "We know that's going to pass but we are hopeful that in due time and with our salary ranges we are paying, we know we'll have workers on a more consistent basis pretty soon."

COVID-19 precautions include hand sanitizer throughout, a mask requirement except when eating or drinking, and increased sanitation.

They've also cut the indoor seating from 80 to 40, plus 12 seats outside.

And the Arthurs have expansion on their minds.

They're eyeing locations in Atlanta and Cumming first, then Alabama, South Carolina and John's hometown of Miami, Fla.

But first the focus is growing business in Stone Mountain.

"It's been wonderful," Stacey said. "People are loving it. We're gaining more and more newbies that are coming in. They're absolutely loving it."

Drumz N' Flatz is just the latest Black-owned business to arrive in Stone Mountain. Candace Walker plans to open the bookstore and wine bar The Vibrant at 970 Main Street in May.

— Patrick Saunders, contributor

## Kirkwood Urban Forest bridge burned; officials seek information

**Atlanta, Ga.** — On Thurs., Apr. 15, the Kirkwood Urban Forest pedestrian bridge was burned; emergency crews responded and put out the fire. The Kirkwood Neighbors Organization (KNO) is seeking information related to this fire and requesting monetary donations to rebuild the bridge, according to a press release from KNO.

Atlanta 911 received two calls reporting a fire at the Rogers Street entrance to Kirkwood Urban Forest, before 5:00 a.m. EDT on Apr. 15. Police and fire crews responded, and Engine 18 put out the fire. The case is now being handled by Lt. Douglas of the Atlanta Fire Investigation Unit. If neighbors have any information that could be beneficial to this case, they should reach out to Lt. Douglas directly at 470-421-5552 and reference case number #21023832.

"I was very disappointed to see countless hours of volunteer labor and thousands of dollars in materials be turned to char, but I am eternally grateful that no one was hurt," said Katie Kissel, KNO President. "Things can be replaced. People cannot."

The pedestrian bridge to access the Kirkwood Urban Forest was built in 2016-2017 by Kirkwood Neighbors Organization (KNO) in partnership with Stryant Construction. It was funded through the neighborhood as well as a matching grant from Park Pride. The project took several years to plan, finance and build and was truly a labor of love which is why seeing it destroyed is so disheartening for all involved.

Donations are welcome to help rebuild the bridge, by donating on the KNO website: <https://www.historickirkwood.org/kirkwood-urban-forest-bridge>. The estimated repair costs are \$25,000+.

— Alex Brown, contributor

## Lush Plant Co. moves to new location in Oakhurst

**Decatur, Ga.** — Lush Plant Co. has moved to a new location in Oakhurst. The address is 317 W. Hill Street, Rear. Decatur, GA 30030 in the Elizabeth Wilson Community House.

"Lush Plant Co. opened its doors last August in a small, light-filled space inside of Scout Oakhurst," the company says. "The plant shop has been offering a hand-picked selection of indoor plants and accessories like ceramic pots, baskets, plant stands, watering cans, soil and plant-themed goods like cards, jewelry, books, and face masks. It wasn't long before the owners of Lush realized they would need more space to meet the needs of their customers."

The new space is easily accessible, the company says.

"There is plenty of parking in front of, and around the new location," the company says. "The store will continue to offer curbside pickup and free delivery within 3 miles of the shop; orders can be placed on the website at [www.lushplantco.com](http://www.lushplantco.com). To ensure our staff and customers' safety and well-being, face masks will be required, and a limit of six customers in the shop at any given time. Lush Plant Co. is a cashless operation and accepts all major credit/debit cards, and Venmo."

— Dan Whisenhunt, editor

## DeKalb Elections Board's Baoky Vu responds to GOP censure

**Decatur, Ga.** — The DeKalb County Republican Party censured a longstanding member on April 17 in a move they call "a simple and unanimous decision." The group denounced Baoky Vu, the vice chair of DeKalb County Elections Board who will complete his term in June, asking him to resign from his position.

Vu signed a letter in February, along with members of the DeKalb County Elections Board, speaking out against Georgia's legislation to suppress voter participation. Fellow Republican and board member Anthony Lewis did not add his name to the letter.

In a letter to DeKalb GOP, Vu identified himself as a "pro-Democracy Republican, a proud Georgian and an American concerned about our Republic." He said secure elections and voting rights should not be a partisan issue.

Marci McCarthy, newly-elected DeKalb GOP chair, gave Decaturish this statement:

"Baoky Vu was censured by the DeKalb GOP as he was the sole Republican who stood with the DeKalb Democrats against SB202, enabling them to call their anti-election integrity proclamation bi-partisan. True Republicans put America First and not themselves. Censuring is not intended as a personal attack or repudiation, but as Georgians prepare for a highly contested election cycle, we deserve to be represented by Republican leaders that reflect the priorities of the Republican voters, and Mr. Vu demonstrated on multiple occasions that he does not. It was a simple and unanimous decision."

McCarthy was a 2020 delegate at the Republican National Convention, and sat on the Voter Review Panel for DeKalb GOP in June, August and November 2020. Before the DeKalb Elections board, McCarthy challenged the legitimacy of 4,113 voters in December 2020.

Speaking for voting rights and election integrity, Vu said he doesn't consider himself a hero. He's just someone who wants to do the right thing.

— Logan C. Ritchie, contributor

## Kirkwood considers bringing back scaled-down Spring Fling

**Atlanta, Ga.** — A recent easing of COVID-19 restrictions on certain events in Atlanta has opened the door for the possible return of the popular Kirkwood Spring Fling.

Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms issued an executive order last month allowing outdoor events with under 2,000 people after May 15. Bottoms banned any public gathering with over 50 people last March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, causing the cancellation of the 2020 Spring Fling.

The Kirkwood Neighbors Organization voted unanimously in support of seeking a festival permit for a scaled-down Spring Fling at its monthly meeting on Saturday.

"We're in a position now where we can consider whether it makes sense to hold some form of a festival this year," said Spring Fling Committee Chair Andrew Feury.

Among the changes proposed, the event would have a reduced footprint, distanced seating and increased sanitation requirements. There would be no kids' area, no Tour of Homes, no BBQ competition and no alcohol sales. And the popular 5K would be limited to less than 600 runners.

The ban on alcohol sales is part of Bottoms' executive order. But KNO officials will consider allowing food trucks to sell alcohol, which they've restricted in past years because it cut into festival profits.

— Patrick Saunders, contributor

## SMALL BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT:

# BANJO COFFEE

BY ZOE SEILER, CONTRIBUTOR

**Avondale Estates, Ga.** — About seven years ago, Billy and Chasidy Atchison moved from Los Angeles to Atlanta and thought of opening a food truck or cart. Both were looking for a change in career, so they started experimenting with cold brew.

“It was kind of like the ‘mason jar on the kitchen table’ kind of thing and it just kept iterating that, and Billy was training for an ultra marathon at the time,” Chasidy said.

Cold brew was Billy’s workout fuel. After a few long runs, he began to think cold brew should be the business idea, which then evolved into Banjo Coffee.

Banjo Coffee has two sides to it. One aspect of the business is production, which involves canning and kegging cold brew, as well as distributing it throughout the Southeast for stores like Whole Foods and other local accounts.

While looking for a new production space that was going to function similarly to a brewery with coffee, the pair learned about a cafe in Avondale that was for sale. The space had been a coffee shop for 13 years, but made a quick turnaround into becoming Banjo Coffee.

“So the coffee shop’s about four years old and I’m not sure that we ever knew exactly what was going to be the long term here, but we love it,” Chasidy said. “We love having a headquarters in the community and we actually live about a mile from the shop, so our whole world is here.”

Banjo Coffee launched cold brew in Atlanta before Starbucks had the beverage and before people really knew what it was, Chasidy said. The pair realized that since they were making cold brew they weren’t going to make it through the winter months.

Banjo Coffee now offers a variety of iced and hot coffee and tea drinks and innovative flavors. The cold brew process takes about 18 to 24 hours.

“As the coffee is brewing, it releases a lot more of the roundness of the flavor profile of it while extracting about 70% less acidity,” Billy said. “So it’s really smooth, really flavorful.”

After the coffee is brewed, it is put in a keg and supercharged with nitrogen. “It produces that really creamy body that gives you even more of a silky smoothness to the drink that really goes along with the low acidity and flavor,” Billy said.

Variations of flavors are offered during the different seasons, like a chai spice with fall season flavors such as cardamom, clove and vanilla bean.

In the spring, Banjo Coffee has a honeysuckle latte which is vanilla and honey in a nitro brew. The shop also gets fresh peaches in the spring and summer and turns them into a peaches and cream latte.

The cold brew and hibiscus tea can also be bought in cans at the coffee shop and other stores. The newest flavor of cold brew has cacao nibs and vanilla bean brewed with the coffee, giving it a rich dark chocolate mocha flavor without adding any sugar.

Before COVID-19 hit, Banjo Coffee had a lunch menu that was more focused on dining in with items like avocado toast. But the Atchisons are working out the lunch menu to provide something more substantial, something similar to comfort food. So they launched their breakfast burrito.

“Recently we launched our gas station biscuits, which if you’ve ever traveled



Billy and Chasidy Atchison opened Banjo Coffee about four years ago along North Avondale Road. The owners served guests outside on March 22 as they experienced a water outage that has since been resolved. Photo by Zoe Seiler.

to any gas station in the South you’ve seen that heat lamp with the gas station biscuits and bologna going on,” Billy said.

But Banjo Coffee’s version of the biscuits is like a farm to table version of the dish, Chasidy said.

The biscuits are made in house every morning and Pine Street Market provides fresh meat for the biscuits. Billy and Chasidy hope to bring back their lunch over the summer and bring back sandwiches, salads, healthy grab-and-go options.

The owners also focus on using organic and local products.

“About 80 to 90% just depending on the month is sourced locally from vendors around Atlanta and Georgia and local farmers,” Billy said. “On the coffee side, we partnered with Cafe Campesino, who is Georgia’s only organic fair trade roaster.”

Billy and Chasidy had no experience working in coffee shops before they began operating one and Billy said it has shown.

“But in a way it’s shown that we knew how to be scrappy and be sort of resilient and bounce around and figure out how to land on our feet many times,” Billy said. “That actually helped us last year with COVID because we were so used to pivoting as we developed whatever small business we were developing, that last year was just another year to pivot.”

During a weekend in March 2020, when the state shut down, Chasidy located herself in a room and created their plan to pivot. She created the e-commerce side of the business, as well as delivery and curbside services.

The coffee shop delivers within a five-mile radius of the store. Orders can now be placed online and the orders go directly to the shop’s register.

“Inside, we have all of the precautions,” Chasidy said. “One party at a time [is allowed inside]. Everybody is required to wear masks. We have plexiglass up in front of the register area. There’s no loitering, you have to grab it and go.”

The owners priorities were to make sure that their staff was safe and that they could continue to safely serve the public in the way it needed to be served, Chasidy said.

Banjo Coffee is located at 38 N. Avondale Road and is open from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. every day.

## Black-owned brewery Hoppin’ Hops expanding to East Lake

By Patrick Saunders, contributor

**Atlanta, Ga.** — Georgia’s first Black-owned brick-and-mortar brewery Hoppin’ Hops is expanding from East Atlanta to a second location in East Lake this summer.

The East Lake Neighbors Community Association unanimously approved the business’s liquor license application at its monthly meeting on Monday. Neighborhood Planning Unit O will need to approve the application next at its meeting later this month before final approval with the city of Atlanta.

Hoppin’ Hops new spot will be located at 2380 Hosea Williams Drive across the street from Poor Hendrix. “We’re looking forward to being part of the neighborhood,” owner Donnica Boston said at the ELNCA meeting.

Donnica and her husband Clarence Boston are opening Hoppin’ Hops Brewery & Oyster Bar on Glenwood Avenue in East Atlanta Village later this month once the city of Atlanta approves its liquor license. Then they hope to open the East Lake location by June.

“I don’t know because it all depends on how quickly the paperwork and permits and everything go through,” Donnica said.

The East Lake location is larger than the East Atlanta one, according to Clarence.

“We’ll definitely have a lot more to offer than our East Atlanta Village location,” he said. “In East Lake we want to focus a little more on the food.”

The Bostons aren’t stopping at two Hoppin’ Hops locations either.

“At [the East Lake] location, we want to focus on

cheesesteaks, then open up another Hoppin’ Hops down the road, which would be Hoppin’ Hops Brew & Burger, and then we want to do a taco place,” Clarence said.

The East Lake location will brew beer and distill vodka, gin, whiskey and bourbon, plus moonshine in the winter. The East Lake permitting process should go faster than the East Atlanta one, according to Clarence.

“The good thing about this location is it’s a permitted use and everyone seems to be excited about it,” he said.

The East Lake location of Hoppin’ Hops will have a rough inspection on April 20.

“Everyone’s really looking forward to you joining East Lake at the Hosea and 2nd quadrant,” ELNCA member Lisa Walker told the Bostons.

# Atlanta Breakfast Club buys Le Petit Marche, promises not to change a thing

By Dan Whisenhunt, editor

**Atlanta, Ga.** — The news that Le Petit Marche was closing its doors after 13 years disappointed longtime customers of the Kirkwood breakfast and brunch spot on Hosea L. Williams Drive.

But the owner, Marchet Sparks, told Decaturish on April 12 that the restaurant will live on under new ownership.

“The most amazing thing happened,” she said. “After deciding to close, Le Petit Marche was bought and will be re-opening under new ownership from the team at Atlanta Breakfast Club.”

The Atlanta Breakfast Club, on Ivan Allen Junior Boulevard, is owned by Chef Anthony Sanders and Osiris Ballard.

Sparks also [shared the announcement video](#) with Decaturish:

“Life is full of beautiful surprises and I for one have a surprise for you,” Sparks said. She said she’s known the Atlanta Breakfast Club owners for a long time and she asked if they’d be interested in filling the void her restaurant would leave behind in Kirkwood. They said they weren’t interested in replacing her restaurant with theirs, but said they would like to buy the restaurant and keep everything exactly the way it is.

“They’re going to be taking over operations and keeping the dream alive,” Sparks said. “Your favorites will remain, the plates will still be chipped, the chairs will still be mismatched, the vibe will still be funk and fun and family-filled.”

Ballard said Sparks would be retained as a “brand



Left to right: Chef Anthony Sanders, Marchet Sparks, and Osiris Ballard. Photo provided to Decaturish

ambassador” and she would still be around the restaurant.

“It is a pleasure for us to be in such a beautiful place with such a rich history and our goal will be to keep everything the same,” Ballard said. “Not even the grass on the sidewalk will change. We’re grateful and we’re thankful to be in such a place with so much history. Marchet has done a great job over the last 13

years giving everyone here in Kirkwood such inspiration, something to look forward to, a staple, and it’s our pleasure to keep that staple going, to keep the legend growing. And we’re so thankful she’ll be with us still as a brand ambassador, she will grace us with her presence on an ongoing basis.”

There will be a soft opening in the next few weeks and a grand reopening of Le Petit Marche on June 1.

## Andersson Gardens, other new businesses open in Avondale Estates

By Zoe Seiler, contributor

**Avondale Estates, Ga.** — New businesses are coming to Avondale and several have opened since the beginning of the year, like Andersson Gardens.

Marjorie Andersson and her husband opened Andersson Gardens in March with a goal to support local gardeners in the area and meet their needs. Andersson has received a positive response from the community since opening.

“We’ve sold more than I would have expected,” Andersson said about the first week of business. “The community is just so happy to have a nursery in Avondale because a lot of people will drive 45 minutes outside of Atlanta to go and buy their plants. They’re just so grateful to have a spot right here in town where they can get high quality plants at a reasonable cost.”

The Avondale Estates resident started to do more work in her garden last year, like many others, as the COVID-19 pandemic hit. But Andersson couldn’t find any unusual or interesting plants at stores like Home Depot or Walmart.

I started looking around and I found a lot of really interesting farms and wholesale nurseries but I couldn’t get in because I wasn’t a landscaper,” Andersson said. “I actually decided to get my business license and my live plant license and become a business simply so I could get into these farms and wholesale nurseries and all of that.”

She loaded up on plants at Saul’s Nurseries after she got her business license. On the way home, Andersson thought about selling the plants rather

than planting all of them in her own yard.

“I had a couple of palm trees, so I put them on Facebook marketplace and I got no less than 100 responses,” Andersson said. “I went back the next day. I bought all their palm trees and I sold them out in a day.”

The business started out as a side gig and a hobby but grew into a full time job after Andersson lost her corporate job in September 2020.

Andersson Gardens has a variety of plants available from annuals to azaleas to edibles and perennials. Andersson’s focus is mainly on the perennials that come back year after year.

“I want to make gardening easy but still have high quality, unique plants for people,” Andersson said.

Andersson Gardens is set up in a way to make it easy for people to pick out plants with sections for sun, shade and a combination of sun and shade. So if a customer doesn’t know where to begin but knows they have a lot of sun in their yard, then they can choose plants from the sun section, Andersson said.

Andersson is also available to answer questions and point customers in the right direction.

“The other good thing about being a small, independent nursery is that you do get that individual one-on-one attention when you come here,” Andersson said.

Andersson Gardens is located at 2832 Washington Street and is open Tuesday through Sunday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Parking is available in front of the shop and across the street.

Andersson Gardens can also be found at the Avondale Estates Farmers Market on Sundays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

A variety of other businesses have also opened in the city recently, including:

- 37 Main
- Dependable Tires
- Easter Seals North Georgia
- Eclectic Hair Studio
- Feather Nail Bar
- Gaal Homes
- Globe Studios
- My Fair Sweets
- One Shot Wellness
- Puff Smoke Shop
- Shades of Green Permaculture
- Spectrum Performance
- Taylor’d BBQ
- Travis Gilday, State Farm
- Village Music
- Wechsler Engineering

Additionally, more businesses will be opening in Avondale soon, including:

- Avondale Pharmacy
- Common Root Farmer’s Market
- Daisy Day Florist
- Decatur Yoga & Pilates
- Flippin Pizza
- Little Cottage Brewery
- Shady Grove Landscape
- Simply Admissions

# Decatur resident co-founds 42 West Entertainment Group in Atlanta

By Zoe Seiler, contributor

**Decatur, Ga.** — The film and entertainment industry is making a comeback in Decatur as the city is being used as a filming location and a Decatur resident collaborates on a new event space. 42 West Entertainment Group is set to begin operating in May as a high-end event space, but with a slight twist.

Decatur resident Lauren Pelissier and former Atlanta Hawks player Kevin Willis are teaming up to open the entertainment group, but are also focusing on giving back to their community.

The two crossed paths while working with the same commercial real estate agent. Pelissier was looking for an event location and Willis was looking for a space to use as a retail space for his clothing line.

The real estate agent found a warehouse that was too big for Pelissier and Willis individually, so he introduced them to each other to see if Pelissier wanted to sublet the space from Willis.

"In doing that Kevin and I instantly had a great rapport and because we both come from a philanthropic-minded way of operating our lives, it all kind of fell into place very quickly," Pelissier said. "There were a lot of obviously spoken conversations but our unspoken goals are the same. So we decided to join forces instead of me just being a subletter of his space, it very quickly morphed into us partnering and doing this center together."

Willis added that the venture was a no-brainer for him as it provided an opportunity for him to have an impact on the community.

"When we put this partnership together, again, it was a perfect fit and I think giving back to the community, creating business opportunities for ourselves, building relationships, that's what it's all about and that's what we're doing," Willis said.

Making money is not always the goal, Willis said, adding that it's about giving back and being able to impact young people. Willis runs a nonprofit, Atlanta Children's Foundation, that works with foster kids, so the organization will be able to use the space to give the kids a platform where they can express themselves in front of hundreds of people.

"[The audience] can sit back and listen to our youth communicate what they feel, what they need and what they look to the future and go from there," Willis said. "Money is never the problem to make. It's just about doing the right thing and at the end of the day the money will come."

Both have a philanthropic background so it was important for the business partners to structure the pricing of the venue in a way that attracts high-end clients and also provides opportunities to give back to people or nonprofits that don't have the opportunity to use such a venue or don't have the funds to do so.

Pelissier has worked in the event industry for about 20 years and has seen the large amount of money that goes into events. The thought was that since there are people who will spend money



42West: 42 West Entertainment Group, owned by Decatur resident Lauren Pelissier and former Atlanta Hawks player Kevin Willis, is set to open in May and will be a high-end event space with a focus on giving back to the community. The rendering of the space shows one of the many events the space could be used for. Photo submitted by Mitch Leff.

on an event and who want to do so, Pelissier and Willis could create a space that caters to those clients while having a good mixture of giving back, Pelissier said.

"We've positioned ourselves where it has a high dollar rent number, so that we can, again, leave space for nonprofits to use the money at either no cost or at a very, very reduced cost," Pelissier said. "That is not a model of any event space that I can think of."

42 West also requires that each event has a certain dollar amount built into the invoice that will go to a charity of the clients' choice or they can choose from a list of charities provided by 42 West, Pelissier added.

"The model for this venue is to put a high dollar price on it for rentals and to create a situation where we're not booked every single day of the month with mid to low end type events but we're booked with high end events which leaves us multiple days in a month to give back the venue to people who don't either have the opportunity to use a venue like that or don't have the funds," Pelissier said.

The space will be open to every event like red carpet events, premiers, filming locations, photo shoots, corporate events and weddings. 42 West won't be hosting events so everything will be contracted and the events will be private.

"We are an inclusive venue so all are welcome," Pelissier said. "The only thing that we may steer clear of is probably from political stuff just because our vibe is very inclusive and neutral and everyone is welcome. We don't want to do events that will offend one way or another."

42 West Entertainment Group is set to open in

May and will be located at 1088 Huff Road NW in Atlanta. Pelissier is looking forward to the model she and Willis have set up for their business.

"I'm looking forward to being successful in an industry that I'm very, very passionate about and creating this successful model where at the day we are giving back," Pelissier said. "I think that's the most exciting thing for me, nothing will make me happier than seeing a group in this space that doesn't have to put their funds towards renting venues, and it's gonna bring me an incredible amount of joy to say to a nonprofit, yes, you can use our space. There's no rental fee."

Willis is looking forward to making the space one of the hottest spots in Atlanta.

"We're getting known for doing such an amazing job from the philanthropic side of it, the business side of it," Willis said. "People feel good about the investment, feel good about being part of what we've created here, and expanding into three other areas of the city and then kind of go from there."

The pair hope to expand and open 42 North, 42 South and 42 East so the company will cover all areas of greater Atlanta.

Pelissier said she moved from Los Angeles to Decatur because of the film industry. She has noticed some pushback in the Decatur area about filming in the city as there's chatter about filming on the neighborhood Facebook pages, she said.

"I think this is a really good example of what happens when the film business does come to a state like this," Pelissier said. "It has a ripple effect that is very valuable. At the end of the day Decatur and its nonprofit organizations are going to benefit from this space opening."



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