

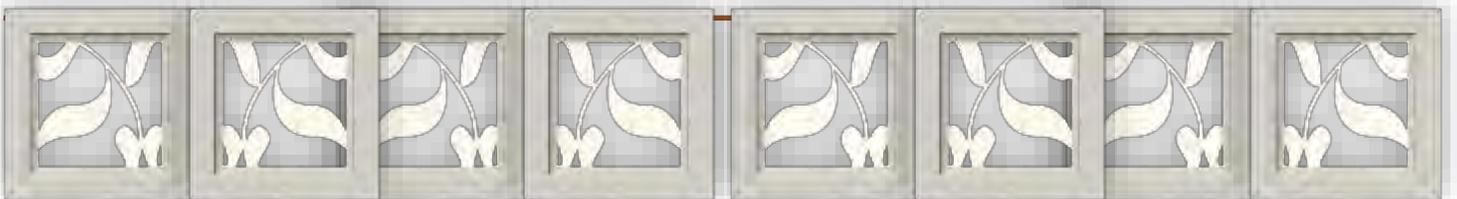
IN THE NEWS

November 2019

Parks & Recreation Programs
Frances Meadows Aquatic and Community Center
Gainesville Civic Center
Lake Lanier Olympic Center
City / County Issues
Miscellaneous



Gainesville Parks and Recreation Agency
830 Green Street
Gainesville, GA 30501



SPORTS

■ Continued from 1A

The complex will be named after Melvin Cooper, the city's longtime parks director who retired in May.

The property is owned by two separate public pension funds in Louisiana, and Louisiana State Treasurer John Schroder helped the city arrange the sale, City Manager Bryan Lackey said.

Officials hope the ability to host larger youth sporting events could drive development in east Gainesville. That side of town has seen other growth in recent years, including the new Lanier Technical College campus off Ga. 365 and several restaurant and shopping options along Jesse Jewell Parkway near Limestone Parkway.

"It's going to be a great amenity to our youth. ... Attendance (at tournaments) is unbelievable, and when they go out of town, they spend money," Mayor Danny Dunagan said.

A baseball tournament held in Gainesville in 2013 was attended by 2,400 people and had an economic impact of about \$350,000 over two and a half days, according to Lackey's presentation Thursday.

Parks Director Kate Mattison said that while the city already has several parks with facilities for youth sports, parks tend to get full quickly.

"We're always maximized on the space, so we need some more space, and it's an opportunity to be able to actually host some outside teams as well," she said. "We don't really have the space to do that, especially for youth."

The timeline has not been finalized yet, and the city will need to finish the park design and do some surveying of the land, Mattison said.

Some \$6.75 million in Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax funding has been set aside for the project.

The complex was first planned for a property off Allen Creek Road near the Allen Creek Soccer Complex, but in 2017, initial drilling hit solid rock at that site, which the city had already owned. Lackey said removing the rock

would have used up about a third of the project budget, so the city decided to look for a new site.

In the parks department's 2018 fiscal year, which ran from July 1, 2017 to June 30, 2018, 2,365 children participated in youth sports. Youth programs include baseball, softball, lacrosse, volleyball, cross country, cheerleading and tennis.

New youth sports facility site chosen

BY MEGAN REED
mreed@gainesvilletimes.com

Gainesville has chosen a site off Old Cornelia Highway for its new youth sports complex, a project years in the making.

The city plans to purchase 89 acres at 2490 Old Cornelia Highway near White Sulphur Elementary School for the facility, which will have fields for baseball, softball, football, soccer and lacrosse, along with playgrounds, a pavilion and trails. The property is just inside city limits, and the agreed purchase price is \$777,875. The Gainesville City Council will vote on the purchase Tuesday, and after a due diligence period, closing on the property is expected in January.



Cooper

■ Please see SPORTS, 5A
11-1-19

Gainesville
Parks & Recreation

J. MELVIN COOPER
YOUTH
SPORTS
COMPLEX

Times file photo

The new J. Melvin Cooper Youth Sports Complex in Gainesville — named after the city's longtime parks director who retired in May — will find its home atop 89 acres at 2490 Old Cornelia Highway near White Sulphur Elementary School.

11-1-19



28th Annual

marketplace

Festive Holiday Shopping!

Nov. 7 – 9

Gainesville Civic Center
benefiting Safe Kids Northeast Georgia
nghs.com/marketplace

Presented by Premier Sponsors:



The Medical Center Auxiliary

WILLIS INVESTMENT COUNSEL

Principled Investing

11-3-19

Over 750 attend Job Fair

The Fall Job Fair hosted over 750 job seekers. Some 70 employers and hiring managers were on hand recruiting for open positions, including **Mars Wrigley Confectionery** that recently announced plans to invest \$60 million for structural upgrades and new



technology to their facilities in Flowery Branch. Mars will hire an additional 126 employees as part of the expansion. (L-R) **Madison Carlson, Mike Gilliam, Darren Crowe and Damien Parker.** The Chamber will host a **Job Fair on Wednesday, March 18, 2020 at the Gainesville Civic Center.** Amanda Lewis, Project Manager, 770-532-6206 x 111 or alewis@ghcc.com

11-2019

City approves land purchase for youth sports complex

Gainesville has plans for a new youth sports complex off Old Cornelia Highway, and on Tuesday, the Gainesville City Council voted to purchase 89 acres for the project.

The facility will be located at 2490 Old Cornelia Highway near White Sulphur Elementary and will have fields for baseball, softball, football, soccer and lacrosse, along with playgrounds, a pavilion and trails.

The city has agreed to purchase the land, owned by two separate public pen-

sion funds in Louisiana, for \$777,875.

The complex was first planned for another property off of Allen Creek Road, but initial drilling hit solid rock at that site, which the city had already owned.

The complex will be named after Melvin Cooper, the city's retired parks director who worked for Gainesville for 48 years.

Councilwoman Ruth Bruner was absent Tuesday, and all other council members approved the request.

Megan Reed

11-6-19



28th Annual Marketplace

Festive Holiday Shopping!

PREVIEW PARTY TONIGHT! NOVEMBER 7

Gainesville Civic Center
benefiting Safe Kids Northeast Georgia

Presented by Premier Sponsors:

 The Medical Center Auxiliary &  WILLIS INVESTMENT COUNSEL
Principled Investing

PREVIEW PARTY TONIGHT! 6:30 - 9:30 P.M. (\$50 Tickets)

General Admission (Tickets \$5):

Nov. 8, 9:30 a.m. - 6:00 p.m. • Nov. 9, 9:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Shop more than 85 merchants from six states to benefit Safe Kids. To purchase tickets or for more information, [visit nghs.com/marketplace](http://visitnghs.com/marketplace), or call 770-219-1830.

Marketplace Tri-Chairs: Katie Crumley, Jenny Floyd, Morgan Wood

Gold Sponsors:



Silver Sponsors:





Times file photos

Attendees and vendors mingle during the Marketplace Preview Party at the Gainesville Civic Center in Gainesville, on Nov. 2, 2017.

Check off your Christmas list, do some good

Yearly Marketplace featuring more than 80 vendors

This week, you can lock in the rest of your Christmas shopping — and do some good at the same time — at Marketplace.

Now in its 28th year, the bazaar featuring more than 80 vendors selling handmade and curated items is set to open to the public Friday, Nov. 8, and run through Saturday at the Gainesville Civic Center.

The proceeds from the event benefit Safe Kids Northeast Georgia, the regional branch of an international group working to prevent accidental injuries and deaths of children.

Safe Kids tracks accident rates through emergency rooms and other emergency services from around the country. Locally, the nonprofit relies on Northeast Georgia Medical Center for data. The Northeast Georgia Health System is also a prime sponsor of Marketplace.

In Northeast Georgia, Safe Kids focuses on preventing accidents in vehicles, in sport vehicles and around the home, water and around fire.

And beginning Friday, area residents can help Safe Kids by knocking out some Christmas shopping at Mar-

ketplace. According to NGHS, vendors at the event are selling:

- Home interiors & vintage items
- Ladies' clothing
- Gourmet food items
- Jewelry & accessories
- Unique children's clothing
- Men's custom clothing
- Holiday items
- Garden items
- Organic skin care
- English & French country antiques
- Handcrafted lighting
- Entry to the bazaar costs \$5.

Nick Bowman

Marketplace

What: An annual Christmas bazaar

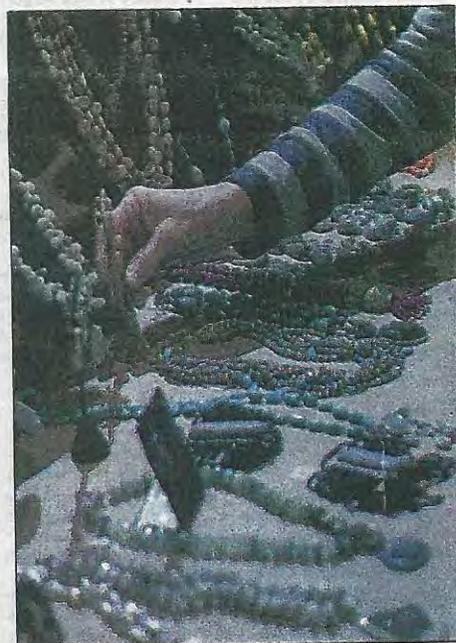
When: Preview party, 6:30-9:30 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 7. General admission, 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Friday, Nov. 8, and 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 9.

Where: Gainesville Civic Center, 830 Green St. NE, Gainesville

More info: www.nghs.com/marketplace

How much: Preview tickets \$50, general admission \$5

Caitie Cook, a Gainesville High School musical theater student, packs a car after singing Christmas carols during the Marketplace Preview Party at the Gainesville Civic Center in Gainesville, on Nov. 2, 2017.



Joyce Hornor, from Gainesville, picks up a pair of earrings during the Marketplace Preview Party at the Gainesville Civic Center in Gainesville, on Nov. 2, 2017.



28th Annual

Marketplace

Festive Holiday Shopping!

STARTS TODAY November 8 - 9

Gainesville Civic Center
benefiting Safe Kids Northeast Georgia

Presented by Premier Sponsors:



The Medical Center Auxiliary &



WILLIS INVESTMENT COUNSEL
Principled Investing

General Admission (Tickets \$5):

Nov. 8, 9:30 a.m. – 6:00 p.m. • Nov. 9, 9:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Shop more than 85 merchants from six states to benefit Safe Kids. To purchase tickets or for more information, [visit nghs.com/marketplace](http://visitnghs.com/marketplace), or call 770-219-1830.

Marketplace Tri-Chairs: Katie Crumley, Jenny Floyd, Morgan Wood

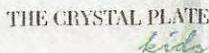
Gold Sponsors:



Morgan & Trey
Wood



Silver Sponsors:



Maggie & David Griffin



28th Annual

Marketplace



Festive Holiday Shopping!



LAST DAY TO SHOP! November 9

Gainesville Civic Center
benefiting Safe Kids Northeast Georgia

Presented by Premier Sponsors:



The Medical Center Auxiliary &



WILLIS INVESTMENT COUNSEL

Principled Investing

General Admission (Tickets \$5):

Nov. 9, 9:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Shop more than 85 merchants from six states to benefit Safe Kids. To purchase tickets or for more information, [visit nghs.com/marketplace](http://visitnghs.com/marketplace), or call 770-219-1830.

Marketplace Tri-Chairs: Katie Crumley, Jenny Floyd, Morgan Wood

Gold Sponsors:



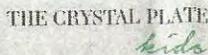
Morgan & Trey Wood



Walters Management



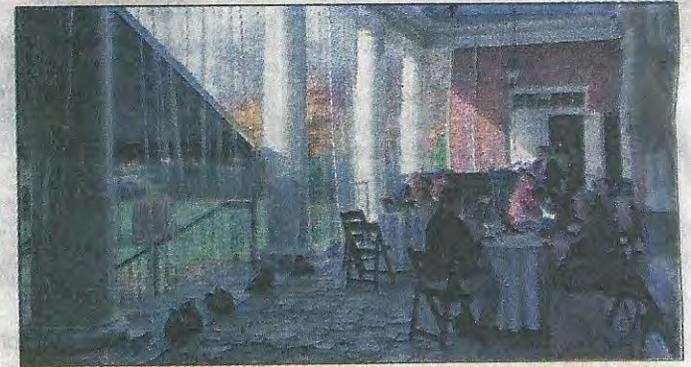
Silver Sponsors:



Maggie & David Griffin

11-9-19

28TH ANNUAL MARKETPLACE



Visitors browse vendors Friday, Nov. 8, that are set up in a tent outside the Gainesville Civic Center at the 28th annual Marketplace shopping event hosted by the Northeast Georgia Health System's Medical Center Auxiliary. The event, which raises funds for Safe Kids Northeast Georgia, ended Saturday. **Top right:** Shoppers fill the Gainesville Civic Center during the event. **Middle right:** Visitors enjoy refreshment on the porch. **Bottom right:** Wool & Flax owner Jennifer Gayton straightens a rack of sweaters during the event.

Photos by **SCOTT ROGERS** | The Times

11-10-19

Waiting game ahead for SPLOST VIII

Government leaders lay out priorities but must wait until sales tax revenues start rolling in

BY JEFF GILL

jgill@gainesvilletimes.com

Not that it will go off the radar, but the just-approved SPLOST VIII might be put on ice a bit until revenues start flowing in late next year.

"From a financial standpoint, there's probably not any immediate things that we'll have to do," Hall County Administrator Jock Connell said last week, after voters overwhelmingly approved Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax VIII.

The county may order Fire Services equipment because "it'll take a year to build them," he said.

Also, the SPLOST Citizen Review Committee will be revisited.

"It'll still be nine members but will be constituted a little differently, because the cities felt like they needed better

representation," Connell said.

The group meets quarterly to hear about upcoming and current SPLOST projects.

Other local governments also are looking ahead to how they'll proceed with the program, which is projected to bring in about \$217 million between July 1, 2020, and June 30, 2026.

SPLOST, which became a potential taxing method for governments through a state law passed in 1985, is a 1% sales tax, or a penny on the dollar, with proceeds divided between the county and its cities. The money can only be used for capital projects, not for funding operations.

The county and cities have released a list of their projects, which include improvements for roads, parks, public safety, trails and greenspace.

Much of what's on the projects list "is needed ... and if SPLOST hadn't passed, then we would have had to go back to the drawing board and see what's available in the general fund," City Manager Bryan Lackey said.

Looking ahead, "we know our (\$37 million) allocation, so as we start our budget process in January, we'll build in (new SPLOST projects) to our capital (improvements) program," Lackey said. "We can't spend any money until it starts coming in as part of (2020-21) budget, and those items in the budget won't see any expenditures until later in the year."

Flowery Branch City Manager Bill Andrew said the South Hall city is looking ahead with its six-year paving program, having its on-call civil engineering firm

evaluating roads.

Likewise, Oakwood "will be programming" its six-year road paving project, City Manager Stan Brown said.

"Other SPLOST-funded projects will be in a planning/design phase over the next few months, until collections start in July 2020," he said.

An early project for Gainesville could be renovations to the Gainesville Civic Center at 830 Green St., Lackey said.

"We don't know exactly what will go into that," he said. "I know there's a huge need for audio-visual upgrades, to try to modernize (the center) a little bit. I don't think it'll ever compete with the (Ramsey Conference Center) ... but we need to update the Civic Center in a lot of ways."

One of Hall County's biggest

efforts in SPLOST VIII will be road improvements — a \$73.6 million expense.

They include the Sardis connector running from West Hall to North Hall and widening of Spout Springs Road in South Hall.

A contract for right of way acquisition services along the Sardis Connector, which would run from Dawsonville Highway/Ga. 53 in West Hall to Thompson Bridge Road/Ga. 60 in North Hall, is set to be presented to the Hall County Board of Commissioners this week.

Also included in the roads allocation is \$26.8 million for right of way acquisition and other preliminary work in Spout Springs' second phase of widening from Union Circle to Thompson Mill Road.

■ Please see SPLOST, 2B

11-10-19

SPLOST

■ Continued from 1B

SPLOST VIII

These are the top-ticket items for each municipality:

Hall County: \$126 million

\$73.6M: Road improvements including the Sardis connector running from West Hall to North Hall, along with widening of Spout Springs Road in South Hall

\$7M: Fire services

\$7M: Trails and greenspace

\$6M: Parks

\$6M: Public safety, including the Hall County Sheriff's Office

An additional \$35,871,920 is set aside for Tier II countywide projects, which include an expansion of the fire training center, a new library in East Hall and a new cell at the landfill

Gainesville: \$37 million

\$15M: Roads, streets, bridges and sidewalks

\$9.16M: Parks

\$8.5M: Public safety

\$4M: Downtown parking deck near the Gainesville branch of the Hall County Library System

City Manager Bryan Lackey said other project ideas include a new police training building, most likely near the police department's firing range, and renovations at the Gainesville Civic Center, including a new audiovisual system.

Flowery Branch: \$6.8 million

\$5.7M: Roads and infrastructure, including improvements at Exit 12, where the Georgia Department of Transportation is planning an Interstate 985 widening

\$383,384: Public works property and equipment

\$415,000: Parks

\$276,000: Public safety/police

Oakwood: \$3.8 million

\$2.4M: Roads, streets, bridges and sidewalks

\$800,000: Water and sewer improvements

\$600,000: Police vehicles and equipment

One of the traffic safety improvements the city is considering is radius improvements on several Thurmon Tanner Parkway intersections, particularly Chamblee and Plainview roads, City Manager Stan Brown said. The turn radius at the crossings "needs to be increased to better accommodate truck movements," he said.

Lula: \$2.6 million

\$1.3M: Water and sewer improvements.

"We have infrastructure that is over 50 years old. ... A lot of that gives us the opportunity in replacement and upgrades, and of course the opportunity for us to build new wastewater facilities and water facilities," City Manager Dennis Bergin said.

\$1M: Roads and sidewalks; Bergin said Lula spends about \$160,000 each year just on road resurfacing.

\$262,118: Parks facilities, vehicles and equipment

Braselton: \$2.4 million

\$1.2M: Roads, streets, bridges and sidewalks

\$1.2M: Parks and leisure facilities

Buford: \$1.4 million

No specific list was available, but Buford City Manager Bryan Kerlin said projects would be related to transportation.

Clermont: \$864,877

\$432,439: Roads, streets, bridges and sidewalks

\$432,438: Parks facilities and equipment

Gillsville: \$220,746

\$66,746: Downtown projects

\$77,000: Roads

\$77,000: Parks; Turpin said the community building at Gillsville City Park could get an outdoor covered area.

Rest Haven: \$38,210

Compiled by reporters Megan Reed and Jeff Gill

Parks and restoration



SCOTT ROGERS | The Times

Renovations at City Park are beginning to take shape as a new playground and restroom facility have been installed.

Playground, concession stand upgrades nearing completion

BY MEGAN REED
mreed@gainesvilletimes.com

Gainesville's City Park stays busy with events such as youth sports games and Friday nights with the Gainesville High School Red Elephants. Soon, the park will have some upgrades and new features.

Improvements at the playground, concession area and restrooms began over the summer and are set to be finished in December, Parks Director Kate Mattison said.

The restrooms will have three stalls instead of one, and the approximately 50-year-old concession stand will be completely rebuilt, Mattison said.

These upgrades will help the park more comfortably host larger events,

she said.

"It gives us a bit more of an opportunity for people to hit the concession stand and use the restrooms and there aren't going to be long lines," she said.

The park will also be getting a new pavilion and playground upgrades, including a double slide and a walkway bridge.

Adults will be able to get exercise while their children play, with some outdoor fitness equipment, including a rowing machine and an elliptical.

"They're not electric. You don't have a screen like you would at Frances Meadows or a different gym that you would go to," Mattison said. "They're all metal, and it's all done with your own body weight."

City Park, located off Glenwood Drive

by the Gainesville Civic Center, has tennis courts, playgrounds, ball fields and a football stadium used by Gainesville High School and youth teams.

Mattison said the parks department is looking forward to the improvements.

"We think it's going to be a nice upgrade for City Park that was necessary. If you had seen the previous concession building and restroom, it was out-of-date and we needed it," she said. "We're excited to get something new and fresh down there in City Park, because it is a very popular park for our patrons."

The budget is just under \$700,000, and the project is being funded through Gainesville Parks & Recreation's Five Year Capital Improvement Plan, Mattison said.

11-16-19

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL

Time to pass the chains



ADAM LINDSEY | For The Times

Members of the Gainesville High football chain crew pose for a picture.

Crew of 5 stepping down after 20 years working Big Red games

BY NATHAN BERG
nberg@gainesvilletimes.com

It was November of 2002, and the Gainesville football team was hosting Pepperell for a first-round playoff game at City Park Stadium. The players, fans and referees were all ready for kickoff, but one faction of the home stadium wasn't quite as pleased.

Because it was a playoff game, the GHSA supplied a chain crew for the contest, but Gainesville's usual team was still down on the sidelines to give them a hard time.

"We were just ragging on them," chain crew member Scott McGarity said. "You know those are our chains?"

The chains at City Park Stadium have belonged to the same team for 20 years, but McGarity and his fellow crew members have finally decided to pass them on to a younger corps. It was a tough decision for the group which has been composed of some combination of McGarity, Chip Frierson, Ben Mason, Tommy Evans and Melvin Cooper, over the last two decades, but the entire team decided it was time to pass the torch.

This particular crew came together right around the turn of the century when the previous group was ready to retire and looking for trustworthy hands to hold the Gainesville chains.

"They kind of came to the end of their term and were looking to pass it on," Frierson said. "They just kind of reached out to us and said, 'Hey, you guys are Gainesville guys. How about you kind of take this thing and run with it?'"

And run with it they did.

Over 20 years of moving the chains for the Red Elephants, the group has seen some quality football. Looking back over the years, they recalled such memorable moments as the time linebacker AJ Johnson, who now starts for the Denver Broncos, went in as wildcat quarterback against North Hall, dragging three or four defenders down the field on multiple plays, or when Cam Newton brought his Westlake team into City Park Stadium,



BILL MURPHY | The Times

The Gainesville High chain crew prepares for the second half against Lanier on Nov. 8 at City Park Stadium.

only for the future first overall NFL draft pick to lose to the Red Elephants.

It was always fun, but it wasn't always easy.

"It's hard to keep up," McGarity said. "When Deshaun is running up and down the field, so are we."

Despite the difficulties, the job is one that every member of the team has always enjoyed.

Most of them are Gainesville graduates, and all are big high school football fans.

"It's a lot of fun," Mason said. "You actually feel like you are part of the game."

In addition to involvement on game days, being present in the lives of the players themselves has always been a draw for every the entire crew. McGarity and Frierson have experience coaching youth football, and everyone on the team has relationships with the kids and parents in the Gainesville community.

Watching the players grow over the years is one of the best perks of the job.

"You teach them some basic stuff, and

then to see them grow up and play high school ball, that's fun to watch them kind of turn," McGarity said. "Instead of being a little sixth grader, they're now a high school senior playing at a competitive level. That, to me, is the most fun."

As the team members move on from their duties, they still remain close friends — as most of them have been since the 80s. The group has grown closer over the years of moving the chains, and takes every opportunity to get together for a round of golf.

And even though they'll no longer be gracing the visitor's sideline with chain and block, you can expect to still see them all at City Park Stadium on Friday nights in the fall. Now they'll just be spectators instead of participants.

"It's been a privilege and an honor to do it," Frierson said. "We're big Gainesville High supporters. It's been a real pleasure for us. We'll continue being supporters, we'll just be on the other side of the field now."

11-17-19



BestOfHallCounty.com

The Times

gainesvilletimes.com

**MONDAY,
NOVEMBER 18**

AT GAINESVILLE CIVIC CENTER

830 GREEN ST NE , GAINESVILLE, GA 30501

4:30PM - 6:30PM

**MEET THESE PARTICIPATING
BEST OF HALL 2020
NOMINEES!**

FREE TO THE PUBLIC!

VENDORS

- | | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| 1 FX Logistics | 18 Hewatt Roofing | 35 Reese Boat Lift & Dock Service, LLC |
| 2 Braselton Urgent Care | 19 Gainesville Mechanical | 36 Conditioned Air |
| 3 Scott's Downtown | 20 North Georgia Party Rentals | 37 Buckalew Realty Group |
| 4 Saigon Deli | 21 James Wheeler Allstate | 38 Signs by tomorrow |
| 5 Transcare medical | 22 Memorial Park | 39 Watkins Total Health |
| 6 Bodyworks | 23 North Georgia Audiology | 40 Top Notch Garage Door |
| 7 Spa on Green | 24 Turf Mark | 41 Keller Williams Lanier Partners |
| 8 North Hall Tire | 25 LDC Management | 42 Dr. Thomas Weyrich |
| 9 Liberty Utilities | 26 Perdue Vision | 43 All Stone Concepts |
| 10 BGW | 27 Elachee Nature Science Center | 44 DUI Midtown |
| 11 NEGA Diagnostics | 28 Lanier Federal Credit Union | 45 Jonathan Stoner
<i>Virtual Properties Realty.Com</i> |
| 12 Gardens of Gainesville | 29 Millie's Drapery | 46 Gainesville Seafood |
| 13 Clermont Iron Works | 30 Syfan logistics | 47 Keep Hall Beautiful |
| 14 Dianne Hicks | 31 Full Circle Reflexology | 48 Medlink |
| 15 Manor Lake | 32 The Joint | 49 Morningside |
| 16 GFUMC | 33 Relay for Life | |

PORCH

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BALLROOM

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DJ

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REGISTRATION LOBBY PHOTO BOOTH

STAIRS & ELEVATOR

**GAINESVILLE
CIVIC CENTER**

830 GREEN ST NE,
GAINESVILLE, GA 30501

*Vendor Booth locations
are Subject to Change.*

ENTERTAINMENT BY JB JAMS

11-17-19

2019 Most Fit Company Awards



Most Fit Company Awards were presented at the HealthSmart Expo on October 16th. As part of the Chamber and VISION 2030 HealthSmart Community Challenge, the awards recognize companies that provide outstanding wellness, nutrition and fitness opportunities for employees. The goal is to encourage employer wellness programs in an effort to improve the overall health of our community.

Watkins Total Healthcare received the Most Fit Company Award in the small employer category (0-50 employees). Dr. Amanda Watson, Watkins Total Healthcare, and Elizabeth Higgins, Vision2030.

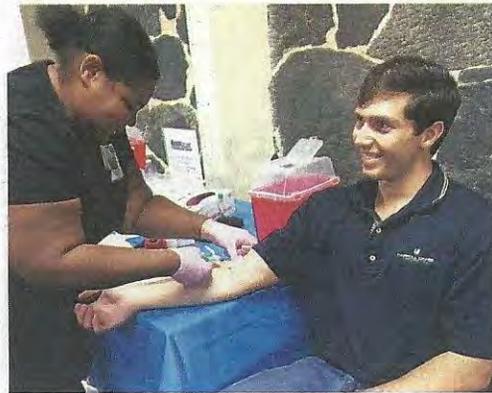


Carroll Daniel Construction received the Most Fit Company Award (51-250 employees). (L-R): Ashley Haynes, Joy Griffin, John Haynes, Sam Hausler, Lindsey Isbell, Angie Kennedy, Cassie Sherman.

Mars Wrigley Confectionery received the Most Fit Company Award in the large employer category (251+ employees): (L-R): Gregory Harper, Laura Wright, Sue Brawner, Linda Jones, Samantha Husted.



Community Health Screenings



The Greater Hall Chamber is committed to community and corporate wellness, some 250 individuals participated in free health screenings at the HealthSmart Expo on October 16th. Thank you CIGNA (title sponsor), Northeast Georgia Health System and Longstreet Clinic (platinum sponsors), BGW Dental and Northeast Georgia Diagnostic Clinic (gold sponsors).



The Chamber's 13th Annual HealthSmart Expo presented by CIGNA was October 16. (L-R): Chamber Chairman Brian Rochester, Rochester & Associates; Lauren Darr, CIGNA (presenting sponsor); Carol Burrell, Northeast Georgia Health System; Guest Speaker Eric Langshur, NY Times best selling author and entrepreneur; Kit Dunlap, Greater Hall Chamber. Over 60 health and wellness exhibitors participated in the event that was free and open to the public.

11-2019

Residents voice health waiver issues

BY MEGAN REED
mreed@gainesvilletimes.com

AND JEFF GILL
jgill@gainesvilletimes.com

Critical care physician Dr. Dhaval Patel pounded the table twice and raised his voice as he spoke about health care in Georgia — and specifically waivers Georgia is seeking at the federal level.

“For God’s sake, your communities are getting destroyed. Georgia is virtually behind every other state in every outcome imaginable I can think of, and you sit there playing Democrat and Republican while people die,”

Patel said, speaking at a public hearing on the requests Monday, Nov. 11, at the Gainesville Civic Center.

“Expand your insurance and cover everybody. At some point, you’re going to wake up and smell the coffee.”

Patel spoke during one of two sessions held by the Georgia Department of Community Health on the waiver requests addressing

How to
provide input

Deadline: Dec. 3

Online: medicaid.
georgia.gov/
patientsfirst

Mail: Lavinia Luca,
c/o the Board of
Community Health,
P.O. Box 1966,
Atlanta, GA 30301

■ Please see **WAIVER, 7A**

11-20-19

WAIVER

■ Continued from 1A

health insurance access and Medicaid changes. The requests were announced earlier this month by Gov. Brian Kemp to fulfill the Patients First Act passed by the legislature this year.

Kemp is proposing that uninsured adults in Georgia who make no more than the federal poverty level would qualify for Medicaid assistance if they spent at least 80 hours a month working, volunteering, training or studying. They would also have to pay monthly premiums.

The federal poverty level is just under \$12,500 for an individual.

Georgia is one of 14 states that have not fully expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. Kemp's office has said full expansion would cost Georgia taxpayers more than \$1.5 billion in the first five years.

The state plans to seek a 90% match from the federal government for its more limited expansion. That would make the cost to Georgia \$10 million in the program's first year; otherwise, it would be \$36 million.

Supporters of a full Medicaid expansion have estimated it would cover roughly 500,000 Georgians. The governor's office projects this expansion will cover more than 52,000 people in its fifth year.



JEFF GILL | The Times

Critical care physician Dr. Dhaval Patel speaks Monday, Nov. 11, at a public hearing in Gainesville on Georgia waiver requests concerning Medicaid and health care access.

The health insurance request — referred to as Georgia Access — is for a waiver under the Affordable Care Act, which would allow residents seeking insurance through the ACA marketplace to opt out of the federal portal and instead use brokers or buy directly from insurance providers.

Deb Bailey, executive director of governmental affairs for the Northeast Georgia Health System, said Monday that the system supports the Medicaid proposal.

"We are grateful the state recognizes too many of its working, low-income citizens do not have access to or are unable to afford health care coverage," Bailey said.

NGHS is obligated to provide indigent and charity care and often incurs debt in order to do so, she said.

Jordan Hussey, the executive director of the Gainesville recovery center J's Place, spoke as a representative of the Georgia Council on Substance Abuse.

"This is an important step in the ongoing process to provide effective and affordable coverage to the people of Georgia and demonstrates a commitment of our state leadership to address the complicated issues," Hussey said. "For far too long, too many Georgians have not had access to safe and effective insurance. For far too long, funding has been a barrier for those who need quality access."

Hussey said that "while there is still more to do, we are excited to contribute."

"We look forward to ensuring that job require-

ments, transportation, reporting and other aspects of Georgia Access have zero unintentional consequences which negatively impact the Georgia recovery community," she said.

But Heather Breeden, representing the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, had some concerns about the work requirements excluding some people with MS from benefiting from the plans. The application "includes so many barriers to coverage that we know that only a small fraction of uninsured, low-income individuals living with MS will gain coverage," she said.

Many with MS are not able to work, Breeden said.

"Georgia only seems interested in providing coverage to individuals deemed deserving," Breeden said. "... I would like to remind you that Multiple Sclerosis is not the result of some sort of moral failing or character flaw."

Hall resident Leigh Miller said after her daughter was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes, her family was "thrown into a health care system that did not care about us and was not structured to support us." Full Medicaid expansion is the more morally and fiscally responsible choice, Miller argued, and she said Kemp is in the "unique position" to make the change in Georgia.

"We pay the same federal tax that other states pay, and we refuse to take the bene-

fits from those taxes," Miller said. "This has resulted in a crisis in our state. Rural hospitals are closing, and the ACA marketplace is completely out-of-balance. Premiums are unaffordable for the middle class and self-employed citizens."

Carole Maddux represented the Georgia Interfaith Public Policy Center, and she also said the proposal was inadequate for showing "neither justice nor love."

"This does not adequately cover homeless or mentally ill Georgians, caregivers or seasonal workers," Maddux said. "It actually leaves out a great majority of uninsured Georgians, doing little to alleviate suffering among our indigent neighbors."

Diana Lewis represented Mercy Care, a group of clinics that serves Medicare and Medicaid patients, the uninsured and the homeless population. Lewis said she also saw some gaps in the proposal.

Lewis said that because it includes work requirements, the proposal does not address many of the barriers that prevent people from being healthy, including lack of access to transportation, healthy food and education.

"Patients with significant health, social, housing and life issues are not in a position to work until their health and social issues are addressed," Lewis said.

Brittney Butler, a senior

at Georgia State University, said "health care in the United States continues to be a civil rights issue." She had concerns about how the plan would disproportionately affect minorities — according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, in Fiscal Year 2013, the most recent data available, 40% of the state's Medicaid enrollees were white, while 46% were black.

"Georgians should oppose the (Section) 1115 Medicaid waiver until the governor and state lawmakers find a way to make Medicaid a more expansive program to help the millions of uninsured Georgians that remain without access to health care," Butler said. "... Until we can do away with the discriminatory practices that affect life and death situations in our communities, we do not need to give biased lawmakers more power than they already have."

Monday's meeting was part of a statewide tour by the state to gather public input on the proposal. Gainesville was the fourth city on the tour, and other stops are planned for Rome and Kennesaw this week.

The public comments will be provided to the state's Board of Community Health before the board's Dec. 12 meeting, when the board will vote on any proposed changes.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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