

The Effects of the Federal Government Shutdown

Maggie Walton
Staff Writer

On Saturday, October 1, 2025, at 12 AM ET, the government formally shut down due to a dispute between Democrats and Republicans on funding within the government. As of the time of publication, the days of the shutdown have entered the forties, and the Senate has failed to pass a bill that has already been passed by the House of Representatives over ten times.

Over the past few weeks, the Senate has held multiple rounds of voting in an attempt to pass a bill that funds the government past October 1st. "What's happened here is that way back in January, February, there was an attempt to pass a budget, and they were not able to," said AP Government teacher Mr. Fabian.

The type of bill that is attempting to be passed is why the Senate is struggling to agree: "What they have been passing when they pass a budget is what's called an omnibus bill, where they take all of those things and they put them all together into one big, giant budget bill," Fabian said. "There are a lot of members who don't like that, because there are things in the omnibus bill that they like and there are things that they don't like."

From the BBC, "Democrats want the bill to include an extension of expiring tax credits that make health insurance cheaper for millions of Americans and a reversal of Trump's cuts to Medicaid." Meanwhile, Republicans are seeking to deal with the health subsidies issues separately, "and only pass what they call a 'clean resolution.'"

For government employees or those working at organizations that are close partners of the government, the shutdown has resulted in a lack of work, or for some, a lack of payment. Employees paid via direct deposit missed their first paycheck on October 24, 2025. Should this shutdown continue, they will miss their second on November 7, 2025.

An organization that is seeing potential budget cuts is NASA. The proposed 2026 budget is set to be the lowest since 1961. This will result in a lack of funding or complete elimination in certain areas. "The 2026 White House budget for NASA proposes draconian cuts to every program activity, even eliminating STEM education and outreach entirely."

This change for NASA will directly affect the DSF Robotics Team. "In order to compete, our team needs to register ourselves as a team every single season," said junior and member of the DSF Robotics Team Jomana Morkous. "Typically, we pay for our registration using a NASA grant that we applied for in our first year."

The team registers through FIRST, an international organization promoting youth involvement in STEM. To register and build their robot, the team needs the \$6,000 grant. "A NASA grant is made viable in order for teams to be able to start and finance themselves," Jomana said. "Not having to worry about another \$6,000 to bring up from nothing."

As the time of registration approaches, DSF Robotics is concerned about funding. "If our team is not able to get that money by

the time of registration, we will have to drain out our account and only be left with \$200 to compete for the season," she said.

The \$6,000 pays for two regional events, and depending on their performance, they may be able to compete further. However, NASA funding is a significant portion of their money. "One fifth of our money comes from federal funding," Jomana said.

The state of Virginia, in particular, is feeling the effects of the shutdown. "You have a lot of government offices in Virginia, especially in Northern Virginia; you have a lot of military in Virginia," said Fabian. A large portion of the state is concerned about being paid during this time. "Most of those military members are kind of worried about whether or not their paychecks are go-

ing to come through or not," he said. "You have a tremendous number of government employees who work for various agencies that have offices in Northern Virginia and whose workers work in Northern Virginia," he said. "Several of them are furloughed right now, which means that they have been sent home without pay."

Money insecurity will become a more pressing issue as the shutdown continues. "If you're living on a budget, you know you're trying to pay your mortgage, pay your car payment, pay your insurance, you know, things like that. That's a tough thing," Fabian said.

"People who are normally going out to eat, buying groceries, getting gas, buying furniture, buying clothing, whatever. They're not doing that now," he said. The absence of shoppers will, over time,

affect businesses. "And so what you're going to see is this multiplier effect that's going to spread out over the country as spending drops...[this] affects all of the businesses that normally depend on these people to have money."

The end of this shutdown is uncertain. "It will [continue] until one side decides that they no longer politically benefit from it. And then they're going to give and they're going to come to the table and talk," Fabian said. "If I had to guess, I would say it's highly unlikely to me that you see this go past or even up to Thanksgiving."

"The more pain that ordinary people start going through, the more pressure they're going to put on their representatives to reopen the government," Fabian said. As the shutdown's effect becomes more widespread, more people will push for a resolution.



PHOTO: PLANETARY SOCIETY

Bill Nye speaks about NASA budget cuts.

Behind the scenes of the Parham Healthcare Rehabilitation center: what's really going on?

Colleen Conway
Staff Writer

Parham Rehabilitation Center, a retirement home located on Parham Road, was recently exposed for its abuse of residents and multiple infections. This happened when inspectors employed by the Virginia Department of Health decided to inspect the facility. "Inspectors were met with a dead cockroach upon entrance, a strong smell of urine just beyond the lobby, and flies and gnats throughout the building," said CBS News Reporter, Tyler Layne. Inspectors would then go on to encounter multiple reports of residents claiming they had been abused by their fellow residents living there. "VDH inspectors also cited five instances of residents being allegedly assaulted by another resident who had a history of mental health issues, incarceration, and homelessness," said Tyler Layne.

In fact, once these reports came to light, the facility took little ac-

tion to prevent them. A person could be abused by a resident, and a few days later, be abused once again. "[An] alleged abuser was arrested at the facility on unrelated charges and incarcerated for about a week, said Layne. He was brought back to the facility, and nine days later, he assaulted his new roommate, who had just been admitted that day," Layne said.

Digging deeper, inspectors found more proof of how unsanitary the facility's conditions were. "What they found was appalling!" said senior Addie Morton.

It turns out that there was a woman who had been lying in her own waste for over four hours, and no one had come to help her. "Inspectors would then find a woman in bed who had been 'soaked in a brown halo of partially dried old urine' for several hours while surrounded by an odor of urine and feces that 'permeated the room and the entire unit,'" Layne said.

Another example of patient mistreatment includes the situ-

ation resident Maurice White endured. After an injury, it was revealed that his wound had become infested with maggots over the summer. White had a strong opinion about this and ultimately came to a conclusion concerning the facility. "It's not fit for man or animal," said White.

Most retirement homes have never garnered this type of opinion or these types of problems. "I've been working at retirement communities for four years," said Taylor Hudson. "I'd be so grossed out. I've never witnessed that before."

These issues, combined with the official health and safety inspection violations, led the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to deny payments for new Medicare and Medicaid admissions the facility needed. "They imposed a one-time \$93,000 [fine], and then a continuing fine of \$650 for every day the facility remained out of compliance," Layne said.

Furthermore, these issues pose an original risk that the Parham Rehabilitation Center will be

closed for good. In fact, it had a concrete closing date in place as a precaution. "Parham's termination date was slated for October 28, 2025," said Layne. This, however, did not end up happening because the VDH accepted the center's plan of correction and deemed the facility back in compliance on October 6, 2025.

Despite their issues coming to light, the facility itself remains silent about what is truly happening. The only statement publicly made has been a positive one. "Parham Healthcare and Rehabilitation Center is proud of the progress we have achieved and continues to remain committed to providing quality care in the community," said facility spokesperson Mindie Barnett. Their reasoning for covering up the concerns could be for a multitude of reasons. "I think they covered it up to keep it running and protect the upper management," said Taylor.

However, different perspectives are also offered. "This business is still paying people to work there... if all this stuff were to get to the media, it would [cause] backlash, so people [would not] get paid, said Addie. "And at the end of the day, everyone only cares about money."

Nevertheless, nursing and retirement homes are imperative to our society as they aid and care for our older generations. "Having a safe atmosphere where there are people we trust and people that are capable of helping us is very important," said Addie. You never know what elderly citizens are going through, and what special care must be taken to ensure their comfort and safety. "As individuals get older, they deteriorate mentally and physically. They've gone through a lot," she said.

This is especially true when

dealing with patients with varying degrees of ability. This can include special care when helping residents with varying levels of mental capacity, such as dementia. "With dementia or anything [similar], your mental capacity slips down to that of a toddler, so you need to safeguard the same way you would with a toddler," said Taylor. "For example, the doors have to be locked. Where I work, there's a code to every door."

Additionally, having numerous attentive staff members is a vital component to make a retirement home run safely and seamlessly. "There are so many different types of jobs that go into the community, into the home," said Addie. "It's just very important to have certain people filling those spots to make the community run safer and better."

After all, most of the issues at the Parham Rehabilitation center were a result of the lack of staff. The woman who was left to lie in her waste is an example. "There was not enough staff to take care of residents. This situation happens to me often," said the woman. The abuse mentioned earlier was due to this as well. "Facility staff failed to prevent repeated willful abuse at the hands of residents and staff members," said Layne.

Overall, it's sometimes easy to forget how much nursing homes matter and how important the care at them is. "Nursing homes are more susceptible to mistreatment of residents because there's less supervision, and you can kind of get away with more," said Taylor.

However, this shouldn't mean society should stop trying to be as attentive as possible. "The nursing facilities should simply operate as a safe, friendly home," said Sunrise Villa resident, Mary Crawford.



PHOTO: GOOGLE MAPS

The street view of the Parham Rehabilitation center.



María Corina Machado: Nobel Peace Prize Winner 2025

Elizabeth Broocks
Staff Writer

On October 10, 2025, the Nobel Peace Prize Committee awarded María Corina Machado the 2025 prize for her fight to bring peace and democracy to Venezuela. The Prize Committee deemed her as “one of the most extraordinary examples of civilian courage in Latin America in recent times.” The Committee’s statement reflected the growing concern over the global decline of democratic values. Machado’s work symbolizes hope amid a rising trend of totalitarianism. “We live in a world where democracy is in retreat, where more and more authoritarian regimes are challenging norms and resorting to violence,” said the Prize Committee.

Venezuela is currently experiencing an economic and humanitarian crisis under President Nicolás Maduro, marked by hyperinflation, shortages of basic necessities, high poverty, and a large number of its population fleeing the country. Machado’s party, Vente Venezuela, has emerged as a united force opposing President Maduro’s United Socialist Party, whose 12-year rule is viewed by many as illegitimate after he “[held] an inauguration after a sham election,” said CNN News.

On January 26, 2024, the Venezuelan Supreme Court, loyal to President Maduro, disqualified Machado from seeking can-

didacy. AP News said he saw her as a political rival after she won the primary election with “93%” of the votes in her favor. The court based its decision to ban her from running any further on a ruling from 2021 in which Machado was found “guilty of embezzlement,” according to CNN.

In 2014, the Maduro regime removed Machado from the National Assembly and prohibited her from leaving the country. This past January, Maduro’s long crusade against Machado only intensified when his regime kidnapped her “under violent conditions” at a protest for free and just elections and only released her after facing international backlash, said CBS News.

The Constitution of Venezuela does not have a limit for presidential terms. Freshman Eva Rosen said, “[Machado’s political situation in Venezuela] really opened my eyes to how unfair some of these developing countries’ presidential and voting systems are.”

Politically and economically liberal, Vente Venezuela’s vision is to reduce the size of the state as a provider of public policies, support entrepreneurship, and promote the free market as a means of creating wealth and jobs in a devastated economy. According to Vente Venezuela’s website, they aim to “move from a welfare state to a truly free and democratic society.” Their core values are “freedom, prosperity, dignity, property, and true solidarity,” which they constantly keep in mind during their fight for “immediate political action.”

When asked about her opinion of Machado’s ideals, Eva said “[She] shows us that having strong morals and doing the right thing can lead to the greater good... She went with what she believed was right and ended up not only changing her country for the good, but also getting her ideas shared.”

While the Prize Committee selected Machado as the 2025 laureate, there is controversy about whether the honor should have gone to U.S. President Trump. The White House has accused the Prize Committee of allowing political considerations or biases to influence their choice of winner, rather than solely focusing on achievements related to the basis of the prize. “The Nobel Committee proved they place politics over peace,” said Steven Cheung, one of Trump’s aides and the White House’s Director of Communications. He implied that Trump’s efforts in peace-making deals were overlooked due to political reasons.

Meanwhile, Machado has openly supported Trump’s efforts to apply pressure against Maduro’s authoritarian government. Following Trump’s 2024 election win, Machado worked to convince Trump’s allies that he would be able to successfully remove Maduro. After her Nobel Prize win, Machado went on X and said, “I dedicate this prize to...President Trump, for his decisive support of our cause.”

Regarding the effect of Machado and Trump’s political relationship on Venezuela’s future, junior Sahasra Kancher-



María Corina Machado holding up the flag of Venezuela

la said, “I feel like recently every country is leaning towards a kind of extremist, conservative role, so I suppose Venezuela is headed in the same direction.”

Similarly, according to BBC News, there has been a “boom in voter support for right-wing and populist parties.” Many countries are finding the solution to economic and social decline through conservative policies.

Machado also founded the Atenea Foundation, an organization that benefits the street children in Caracas. Eva said, “That shows her willingness and openness for peace and helping everyone. Not only is it really good for the children of Venezuela, but I believe it showcases the Nobel Prize ideologies.”

Learning about political leaders across the world, such as Machado, can model a way for younger generations to listen to all opinions and work together to form beneficial conclusions. “Learning about these leaders who have different political minds and ideas, and how they pursue it, whether peacefully or not, lets you see what is and what is not effective in our world and how to shape it in a better way,” said Eva.

María Corina Machado’s story can impact the way future generations think about their ability to make a difference. Sahasra said, “It’s not pointless to be working in activism and to rally behind causes, because what you do can have real effects.”

What’s New With the FIFA World Cup?

Charlotte White
Staff Writer

Many changes are being made in 2026 concerning the FIFA World Cup, an international soccer tournament that is held every four years. This tournament decides the ultimate soccer world champion. Teams from all over the world compete in this tournament, making it one of “the most popular sporting [events] in the world,” said Britannica.

In 2026, FIFA will be hosting its 23rd World Cup. Since 2023, each team has been competing in games to earn its spot in the World Cup. The world is divided into six continental zones, marking the qualifications.

Once a team has qualified for the tournament, it will compete in a series of games divided into stages. These stages consist of the group stage and the knockout stage. In the group stage, each team will play three games. Their success will be determined with a

point system. The top two teams from each group plus the eight best third-place teams will move on to the knockout stage, where they will compete in single-elimination, narrowing down to the final.

This format of the World Cup is something that has stayed consistent throughout the many years this tournament has been held. However, many things are changing this year that have caused controversy throughout the country.

“I think it’s not a good idea for the World Cup itself, and it’s not a good idea for our qualifiers as well,” said The Guardian regarding the many changes being made.

One of the major changes that is gaining controversy is the fact that many of the final games will take place in the United States. This is the first time the World Cup has ever done something like this, and it is receiving lots of feedback. “I don’t think that the US is

ready to hold the World Cup, as we tried to host a tournament with all the Americas, and it didn’t go well,” says junior Henry Marshall.

This conflict has grown very public as President Trump has considered not allowing the World Cup to be held in the United States. He is concerned about the preparation and overall capability that the US lacks. “If I think it’s not safe, we’re going to move it out of that city,” Trump said.

However, many positive comments have also been made about this change. “I think it’s a good idea. I don’t see a problem with it,” says junior Antonio Tripodi. The positive comments support the idea of moving the tournaments to the US and are the reason it is still taking place here.

Another big change that is being implemented this year is the number of teams able to qualify for the World Cup. In prior years, only 32 teams were able to qualify. This year, the number has increased to 48 teams, allowing 16 more teams to compete for the World Cup title.

This change is not as contro-

versial as the other changes, having received mostly positive feedback. “I like it because it gives other players a chance to be seen by big clubs, and then they can make it out of their teams to bigger clubs, and that is good for their communities,” said Spanish teacher and Soccer Coach at Freeman, Señor Villalobos.

The ticketing process this coming year is also something that has changed compared to how it has run in previous years. The process consists of a lottery that randomly selects applicants for available tickets. This does not guarantee a ticket, as it only gives you the opportunity to purchase a ticket. This process has also caused much controversy to arise, as many people believe that it is unfair and is increasingly expensive compared to past years.

All of the changes received different types of feedback and pushback from fans, players, and other viewers. The outcome of all of the new adjustments will be determined as the World Cup begins on June 11, 2026.

WHICH TEAMS ARE QUALIFIED FOR THE 2026 WORLD CUP?

AUTOMATICALLY QUALIFIED AS HOSTS:	QUALIFIED THROUGH COMPETITION:	
United States	Japan	Brazil
Canada	South Korea	Iran
Mexico	Argentina	France
	New England	New Zealand

GRAPHIC: TYLERSON TWEARDY

The Future of Higher Education

Nikki Rajan
Editor-in-Chief

Within the past few months of the current administration, there have been multiple changes to the education system, from the dismantling of the Department of Education to the increased influence of the government in America’s universities. Recently, some of the most reputable universities have been asked to make agreements with the Trump Administration regarding how their admissions policies and diversity requirements should look.

According to the Associated Press (AP), in early March, the administration first cut over \$400 million in federal funding to Columbia University. Their reasoning had to do with Columbia’s failure to protect Jewish students from antisemitism, as cited by the American Council of Education (ACE). Due to increased student protests and activism on the campus, explained on NPR, Columbia’s act-

ing president, Claire Shipman, made statements honoring “to make improvements to the campus climate, including addressing antisemitism.” While this was occurring mid-summer, Columbia University also decided to reshape its policies regarding protests, and consequently, large numbers of students have been disciplined. In efforts to regain funding, other leaders in education had spoken up about the cause, including the ACE President Ted Mitchell. “We stand against antisemitism. Period. But the Trump administration’s decision last week to arbitrarily cancel some \$400 million in federal grants and contracts to Columbia University is not the right way to fight hatred,” he said. A bipartisan survey on the importance of scientific research and technological innovation agrees, finding that over 50% of both Republicans and Democrats find it necessary to attend a higher institution, according to AP News.

Others have seen real value in the funding cuts. Dr. Kent Ingle, a university president himself, af-

firms the compact. It enforces “a principle that should never have been controversial: that institutions receiving federal dollars should reflect the foundational values of academic freedom, open inquiry and the pursuit of truth,” he said. Eventually, Columbia agreed to pay a fine of \$200 million to the government and \$21 million to employees who experienced antisemitism, and include stronger policies, mainly focused on strengthening campus safety. In exchange, their funds were unfrozen in July, allowing them to regain multiple federal grants.

This is not the only university that has been affected by the new policies of the Trump Administration. On October 1st, 2025, the Education Secretary Linda McMahon introduced the Compact for Academic Excellence. As written in the compact, its main purpose is to hold institutions accountable for Equality in Admissions, Institutional Neutrality, Student Learning, and Enforcement, among other objectives. Also written in the document is the availability of

additional funding for universities that choose to accept this deal with the government. Among some of the top universities it was offered to was one that many Freeman students have ties to: The University of Virginia (UVA). Senior Addie Knitter said that “a lot of people are talking about applying to UVA this year at Freeman.”

While UVA rejected the compact on October 17th, they arrived at a separate agreement focused on ending federal investigations into admissions practices and civil rights. In this, President Mahoney will provide the Department of Justice with quarterly reports demonstrating their compliance. In its rejection, interim UVA President Paul Mahoney said, “We believe that the best path toward real and durable progress lies in an open and collaborative conversation.” Since these negotiations and the recent resignation of UVA President Jim Ryan, some students have been worried about the school’s future as they consider applying.

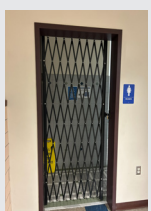
Other universities that have been involved in the compact in-

clude Harvard University, University of Pennsylvania, Brown University, MIT, University of California Los Angeles, and others, according to CNN. Most of these schools have rejected the compact as MIT President Sally Kornbluth said during a hearing, it “would restrict freedom of expression and our independence as an institution.” This argument is consistent with the rest of the universities as well. Along with the push for the removal of DEI departments, the government has begun Civil Rights investigations into the admissions process for many of these schools.



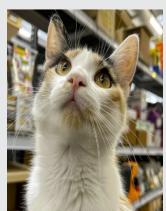
PHOTO: THE JERUSALEM POST
The president of MIT

New Bathroom Gates



Page 4

Return of the Lowe’s Cat



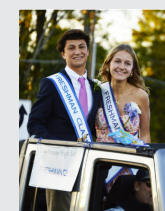
Page 5

Freeman’s Cheer Team



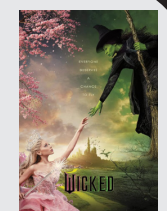
Page 9

Hoco Parade Festivities



Page 8

New Wicked Movie



Page 11

Turning Point Restaurant Review

Maryam Vohra
Editor-in-Chief
Copy Editor

Turning Point, a breakfast and brunch franchise, has just recently opened a location in Glen Allen, Virginia. Originally, the Turning Point restaurant opened up in Little Silver, New Jersey, in 1998 and has since then expanded across the country. Turning Point serves a variety of breakfast and brunch items, including coffee, different styles of eggs, waffles, pancakes, toast, and more. This Turning Point location is the first to open in Virginia, with other locations in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Florida. A location in Stafford, Virginia, is set to open in Spring 2025. After hearing about Turning Point's new location, I decided to visit with a friend and give it a try.

I would like to preface this review by revealing the criteria on which I rate a new restaurant: variety of menu options, the taste of the food, restaurant ambience, and quality of service.

When we first entered Turning Point, the atmosphere was calm and inviting; natural light poured in, and the space did not feel cramped at all. We were seated almost immediately, right next to a window, and promptly

brought a pitcher of cold water. We had ample time to weigh our options and take a thorough scan through the menu. The menu offered many different beverage options, and there was a great balance between savory and sweet options. In addition, the menu provided many gluten-free and vegan options, great for those who have dietary restrictions.

I ended up choosing the Smoked Salmon Benedict, which consisted of an English muffin, smoked salmon, plum tomatoes, pickled onions, poached eggs, and hollandaise sauce. It also came with a side of potatoes, which I selected over mixed greens. My friend ordered the Berry Chocolate pancakes, topped with chocolate sauce, fresh strawberries, and served with a strawberry reduction. I ended up opting for just water with my meal; however, there were many coffee options, cold-pressed juices, hot chocolate, and smoothies available to order.

The wait for our food was slightly longer than expected, but once it arrived, it was warm, and the portions were generous. Before this experience, I had never tried Eggs Benedict, so I was walking in blind. However, it was delicious, and I would definitely recommend it to anyone who loves



PHOTO: MARYAM VOHRA

Inside look at Turning Point's raised table top.

flavorful eggs. Additionally, after trying the Berry Chocolate pancakes, I really enjoyed the flavor combination: berries and chocolate are a classic. The pancakes themselves were a little dense, and the strawberries were not as fresh as they could be, but nevertheless, it was a pleasant experience.

Price-wise, it was slightly more expensive, but still relatively affordable. For the given portion, the price seemed reasonable as almost everything averaged \$10-\$20 per person.

Turning Point was located in a plaza in the Short Pump-Glen Allen area, near Twin Hickory. It was tucked next to a hair salon and a Sedona Taphouse. The plaza was spacious, did not feel overcrowded, and while busy, there was still plenty of parking available.

Similar to many brunch spots, Turning Point closes relatively early. It remains open, seven days a week from 7:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.. They pride themselves on provid-

ing 100% customer satisfaction and enjoy giving their employees generous hours, living by the motto "Work to live, don't live to work."

Based on my criteria, if I were to rate Turning Point on a scale of 1-5 stars, I would give it 5/5 stars. Here is an in-depth review of Turning Point's performance in each category:

Variety of options: There is nothing worse than reading a menu and not wanting to order anything. However, Turning Point offered several options to choose from, almost to the point where I had trouble deciding what to get.

Taste of food: This is arguably the most important criterion. The food was delicious, and for my first time tasting Eggs Benedict, I was pleasantly surprised and would definitely order the dish again.

Restaurant ambience: Turning Point's ambience was perfect and very fitting for a mid-day meal spot. It was welcoming and had a great balance of chat-

ter level and music. Also, there was a variety of seating, with tables, booths, and barstools.

Quality of service: The service was timely, and our server was very sweet and communicative; she was able to help us decide what to order and answer any questions that arose. Additionally, our server was delighted to hear that we were writing an article for our school newspaper!

As someone who is not a big brunch fan and has not visited many breakfast spots in RVA, with favorites like First Watch, Lulu's, and Can Can Brasserie, I will definitely be adding Turning Point to my list!

Turning Point was a quaint little brunch spot that I would recommend to anyone looking for unique breakfast options. It is the perfect place for people who have recently moved to the area or who are looking to crank out some work, and is a great spot to catch up with friends. Give Turning Point a try! You won't regret it!



PHOTO: MARYAM VOHRA

The Berry Chocolate Pancakes and the Smoked Salmon Benedict.

Almost Friday: Fun or Harmful?

Olive Schreher
Features Editor

Every Thursday, internet users head to Instagram. People scroll through millions of memes and send them around, all with one caption: Almost Friday. But a question arises: is this fun or harmful?

It started as a helpful tool to survive the midweek slump but has now become increasingly popular. "Almost Friday" accounts attract millions of followers across TikTok and Instagram. Their content is funny, and relatable: hence its allure. They bring up topics like school and work, making it to the weekend, and the overall difficulty of life.

The Almost Friday idea has brought people back to the idea of living for the weekend. With this, Thursday becomes a mini-holiday in preparation for Friday to come.

Now, with their popularity, Almost Friday accounts have made it to schools across Henrico County, including Freeman. At Freeman, one of the most-followed student-run pages is an Almost Friday account, a local spin-off of the Almost-Friday meme trend. The page posts student-submitted photos and videos intended to entertain classmates, usually light-hearted and funny moments. While Almost Friday fosters school spirit and humor, it also reveals deeper tensions within teenagers' digital culture.

Most students agree that the page is funny, but behind this humor there is a different reality. For some, appearing on the page is not funny at all; it's embarrassing and intrusive. The posts are submitted anonymously and many of the photos are taken or sent in without people knowing. While seemingly harmless, they can cross people's boundaries, showing students in vulnerable, embarrassing, or private moments they did not want to share.

Screenshots of private Snapchats, photos from group chats, or pictures taken without permission are often used as content. And once an image is posted, it spreads so quickly that even taking it down doesn't make a difference. It has already been seen, screenshotted, and shared.

A lesser-discussed effect is the social pressure to "laugh it off." Reaching out to the page to ask them to take it down or expressing discomfort can feel socially risky. To many teens, objecting makes you seem like you "can't take a joke."

Psychologists call this forced participation humor culture. This is when laughing is expected, even when the joke is at your expense. When being online-famous and talked about, even for a short amount of time, becomes more important than privacy, it becomes dangerous. Psychologically, teens feel they should be grateful for attention, even when it's harmful attention.

With our generation being raised on social media, it is hard to know when the line is crossed. But the page is not run by villains. It is run by students, peers who likely never intended harm. But this intention does not change the impact it can have. Even innocent-seeming posts can turn into real consequences: anxiety, social discomfort, damaged reputations, and ruined friendships.

Almost Friday pages remind us how badly we need cheerfulness, especially in high school. Humans crave community, humor, and shared identity. But in the excitement of getting funny pictures and videos to share, it's easy to forget that there are real people behind the screen, classmates who are dealing with real emotions.

The real question isn't deciding whether Almost Friday is fun

or harmful, but instead deciding what kind of school culture we want to build. At the end of the day, laughing with each other rather than at each other fosters a better school environment.

The "Almost Friday" trend says less about just the internet itself and more about us. It shows how much we desire community, even when there's a downside. Everyone wants to feel included, noticed, and part of the joke. But when the expense is someone else's embarrassment, it's not worth it. This shows how easy it is to brush feelings aside when the line between funny and mean is hard to decipher.

Though, it's important to remember that it's not all negative. The laughter, the inside jokes, and the sense of belonging these accounts bring show how strong the community can be. The real lesson to take away isn't to delete these accounts or stop posting, but rather to be more thoughtful about it, putting yourself in the shoes of the person being posted. This idea will build empathy and bring everyone closer, not tear anyone down.

"Almost Friday" shows both the fun side but also the pressure of being a teenager in today's world. It shows how we deal with the stress of school, how we connect with others, and how we sometimes make mistakes without realizing. The advantage to this is that mistakes are learning opportunities. Moving forward, it is essential to choose empathy over entertainment.



PHOTO: INSTAGRAM

Commentator Staff

Editors-in-Chief:
Maryam Vohra
Nikki Rajan

Online Editors-in-Chief:
Nina Henley
Vrusha Promad

A&E Editor:
Ava Harrison
Tylerston Tweardy

Centerspread Editor:
Nina Henley
Vrusha Promad

Copy Editors:
Maryam Vohra
Emerson Post

Features Editor:
Olive Schreher

Graphics Editor:
Ava Harrison
Tylerston Tweardy

News Editors:
Saarvi Gourishetty

Opinions Editor:
Maria McGuill

Sports Editor:
Emerson Post

Staff Writers:

Juliette Lawrence, Sophia Tluchak, Ingrid Jones, Colleen Conway, Caitlyn Kennedy, Kaylee Bendheim, Annie Ainsworth, Rowan Kelley, Ellie Brooks, Annalise Minkler, Charlotte White, Sophia Bove, Maggie Walton

Staff Advisor:

Mr. Pruett
AP Lit & DE English Instructor
jbpruett@henrico.k12.va.us

Freeman Bathroom Gates: An Overview

Nina Henley

Online Editor-in-Chief
Centerspread Editor

As the 2025-2026 school year is underway, Douglas Freeman High School introduced a new way of handling skipping, vandalism, and other misconducts that take place in the bathrooms during the school day. Every bathroom now has black gates that stay locked during the first and last ten minutes of class, during transition periods, and other specific points during the day. The conversations about the positives and negatives of this new addition have been controversial, and the students, teachers, and administrators all have their own opinions about it. During prior years, Freeman has dealt with many issues with the bathrooms. "We experienced a lot of vandalism with the bathrooms, [for instance] things being put into the toilets, but also, students being in there, vaping or skipping," Vice Principal Kirsten Morvan said. While other implementations, like Securly passes, helped with some of these issues, they couldn't cover everything. "One thing that [Securly passes] didn't help with is students can still say, 'I'm going to the Green Acres bathroom on Securly pass,' but that doesn't necessarily stop them from going to other bathrooms in the building," Ms. Morvan said.

Last year's school-wide Climate survey brought up the bathrooms. Many students reported being upset that they wanted to go to the bathroom but they didn't feel comfortable because students were in there vaping or skipping. The administration tried different ways to limit movement in bathrooms, but the issues were met with more and more issues. "We originally had the boards up on the bathroom, and that just became a safety concern, because students or staff could move it," Kirsten said. "Somebody could go in there [and] we wouldn't know if anybody was in there." Overall, the main reason for the new gates was due to parent and student concerns about how to keep bathrooms safe and open. The new system itself has done a good job at limiting misconduct in the bathroom so far, but has also created contrasting opinions on fairness. "It's still iffy. I could understand where students would be frustrated if they have been doing the right thing, and now the gates are up, but our hope as an administration is that over time, it'll make it better for all students, so that nobody's being punished by having bathrooms fully shut down and it will fix some of the problems that we've been seeing," Ms. Morvan said.

While the administrators of Freeman have their reasons for this new system, students who have

been at Freeman for a while have found this new introduction to bathrooms rather annoying. "We already have Securly passes, and Securly is pretty secure so I feel like at this point, they're just overdoing it, and students are just gonna get mad about it," junior Dwani Suresh said. The specific times that all bathrooms are closed have also affected students. "They lock the bathrooms during the morning and transitions, and that's the only time a lot of people are comfortable using the bathrooms," said Dwani. There is also a worry about how the new gates may impact classrooms. "I feel like teachers are also gonna get annoyed because [they] already don't like having to sign every single person out and sign them back in, so if they have to go and open bathrooms for people when they're teaching, that's gonna annoy them," Dwani said. She also points out that "If a student has to walk further away from class to get to a bathroom, it might disrupt their learning." Dwani finds this ironic because "the whole point of securly is that students don't skip and don't spend too much time out to the class, but if they have to, walk all the way to the other side of the school that's more time for distractions and more time out of class," she said. Other students understand why they were implemented, but are still confident that there are some discrepancies. "I can see the rea-



PHOTO: NINA HENLEY

New gate in the womens bathroom on the second floor.

soning behind it, but I feel like it's kind of annoying because there are kids who don't do any of that stuff, and they lost the privilege," said Senior Electra Cimino. The times of bathroom openings are also debated among the student body. Some bathrooms, you just have to guess which ones are locked, because it feels like they always change per day or even hourly, and I don't want to be gone from class for 10 minutes just trying to find a bathroom," Electra said. Another student pointed out other Freeman Activities that take place before school that have been affected by the new gates. "I personally don't usually go to the bathroom during school, but the times when I do need to, especially after I get here at six o'clock for marching band practice in the morning, every single bathroom is locked, and I'm not able to go to the bathroom [because gates are locked] until after my early bird class," Senior Chloe Morris said. Around Freeman, students believe that the new gates are unfair and that, despite knowing where the administration's point of view came from, it ultimately takes away privileges that they never lost. "There's 1000 students

at Freeman, and only 20 students who vandalize or vape in the bathrooms. They might deserve punishment, but what about everyone else who actually needs to go to the bathroom?" Dwani said. The administration knows about the student's dislike and while they understand their feelings, they believe that in order to grow as a school, the changes to the bathrooms needed to happen. "I think it allows a safer way for us to shut down bathrooms if we need to, but also give us the opportunity to clear out bathrooms while still being able to have a viewpoint into the bathroom, like we can see if people are in there, but also kind of sets the tone that you know we're not going to let you mess with our bathrooms," Ms. Morvan said. Freeman and its community have experienced all kinds of changes throughout the years. From the metal detectors to the Securly passes, the student body has witnessed it all, and the changes have slowly been adapted. While the controversies of whether the new gates are fair and if they are permanent remain, only time will tell how Freeman will digest this new implementation.



PHOTO: SEMINOLE TIMES

Never Too Old

Vrusha Promad

Online Editor-in-Chief
Centerspread Editor

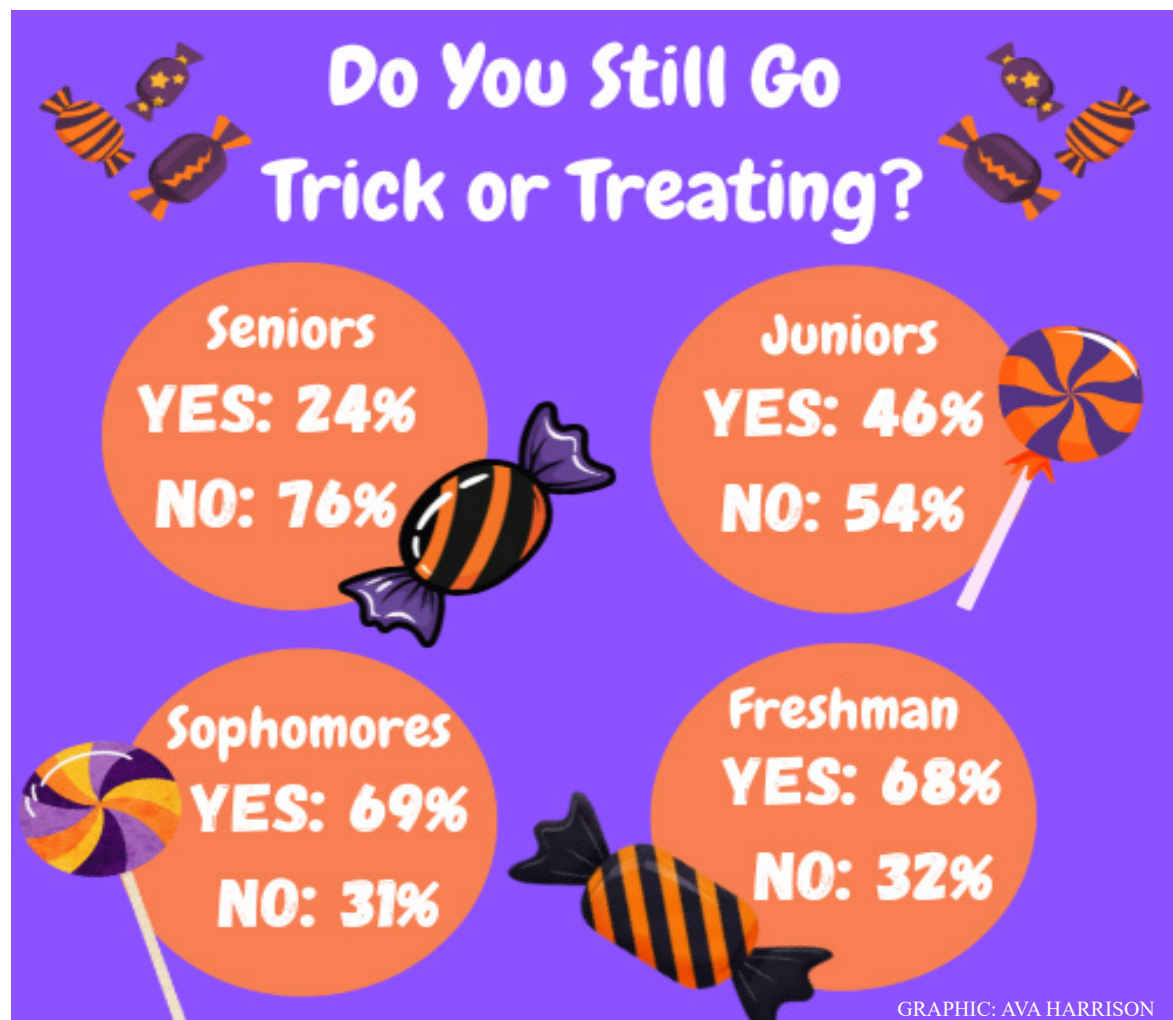
The month of October brings pumpkins, fall drinks, scary movies, and chilly weather; however, the last day of October is arguably the most special part. October 31st: the day of one of the most popular American holidays, Halloween, takes place. While Halloween is a beloved holiday for many reasons, getting to trick-or-treat is a large part of what makes it so enjoyable, especially for younger children. For the majority of kids, trick-or-treating is the highlight of their Halloween night, but it seems as they get older, their joy of trick-or-treating is dimmed down by the notion that it is a "kids" thing. So the question remains: how old is too old to trick-or-treat? The age that is considered "too old" is often disputed by many adults; they believe that kids should stop once they reach their teens. But others believe it's okay to continue until they graduate high school. I believe that trick-or-treating is an activity for anyone, regardless of their age. Halloween is meant to be a holiday of fun, and kids should be allowed to enjoy themselves safely, however they want. How people choose to spend their Halloween shouldn't be determined by their age. In fact, unlike other states, Virginia itself does not place any restrictions on trick-or-treating age; however, there are laws from surrounding states that require trick-or-treaters to be more

careful. These laws aren't all bad, as they are put in place to protect younger kids who are trick-or-treating, but they typically have little to no impact, as they are rarely enforced or followed. But why exactly has trick-or-treating become such a serious matter? Supporters of these restrictions argue that Halloween is meant to preserve a sense of childhood innocence. The presence of teenagers in these spaces could not only intimidate little kids but also threaten to ruin the sense of joy and excitement they carry on that night. There's also another idea of trick-or-treating not being seen as "cool" or invigorating due to its childish nature. This mindset has proven to influence why many of us teens choose to stop trick-or-treating at a certain age. "I went trick or treating up until freshman year; I had always loved participating, but after that, I felt insecure since I saw everyone else my age partying," said an anonymous student. "It got embarrassing to be out going door to door with the little kids because apparently you have to party on Halloween if you're a teen." People who might not want to trick-or-treat but still want a way to keep the fun alive on Halloween without it being weird or awkward can try chaperoning their siblings, hosting Halloween parties, or even attending those at colleges and universities. For instance, some colleges and universities offer on-campus trick-or-treating open to college-level and high school students, allowing them to dress up and celebrate with their friends. Students can also make Hallow-

een playlists to set a haunting vibe. The best songs are ones that balance spooky and fun, mixing timeless tracks like "Thriller" and "Ghostbusters" with newer hits or even a few unexpected throwbacks. A good playlist builds energy throughout the night, giving you a great chance to match music to your crowd-younger kids might want silly, upbeat Hallow-

een tunes, while teens and adults usually love a mix of pop, rock, and a little horror-movie flair. Recently, people have concluded that Halloween and trick-or-treating participation have reduced significantly since the COVID-19 shutdown. Streets aren't as crowded, fewer houses are decorated or leave porch lights on, and in a time where more things are going digital, fewer people are putting in effort to dress up and go door to door. It's for that very reason that not restricting celebrating such events counts even more nowadays. Traditions like Halloween live only as long as we keep them alive. If families stop sending their children out to collect candy and neighbors quit handing out candy, younger kids will grow up without those memories of costumes, candy trades, and

running up to strangers' porches with their friends. Some people have moved to trunk-or-treats, indoor events, or just home to watch movies, which is fun but doesn't replace a whole community out on the sidewalks together. Keeping trick-or-treating alive means choosing to participate, to turn on porch lights, buy candy, dress up, and remind each other that some traditions, even after COVID, are simply worth the extra effort. So rather than wait for Halloween to disappear completely and become a faint memory in our minds, why not be part of the reason it stays strong for future generations? Get dressed up, knock on those doors, smile, and say trick-or-treat! Even if it's only for one night. The future is always uncertain, so let's allow everyone to celebrate it while it lasts!



GRAPHIC: AVA HARRISON

The Return of The Lowe's Cat

Ava Harrison
A&E Editor
Graphics Editor

Francine, the Lowe's cat, has returned to the store after an accidental trip to a Lowe's distribution center in Garysburg, North Carolina. After a 16-day search, Francine was found on Oct. 6, 2025. The Lowe's short-haired Calico cat went missing from the store on West Broad Street in Richmond, Virginia, in the middle of Sept. 2025. They soon realized that Francine had jumped onto a truck that was headed to the Lowe's Distribution Center in Garysburg, North Carolina. Some employees believe that when they were bringing in Christmas items to the store, Francine ventured to a new spot of the store to find comfort, and she ended up in the back of a truck by mistake. They were not aware that she had gotten into the truck, so they shut the door and drove away. Varying efforts were made by the teams at Lowe's West Board Street in Richmond, the Lowe's Regional Distribution Center in Garysburg, and many leaders across the Lowe's corporate of-



Lowe's Sign.

Francine home. They searched for her using thermal drones, professional trackers, and video surveillance. Humane traps were set, and signs and flyers with Francine's picture were put up all over the distribution center. On the night of Oct. 5, Francine triggered a trap in the distribution center. At four a.m. on Oct. 6, 2025, Mike Sida, the manager of the store where Francine lives, and Wayne Schneider, an employee at the same store, got in the car and drove 90 minutes to pick Francine up from Garysburg. Francine is back to her routine of visiting customers and wandering around the store, but there is one difference: she is now equipped with a harness that has an AirTag and identifying information on it. Wayne Schneider shared their reaction to finding Francine with corporate Lowe's. "When I received the text that we got her and she was safe, I just couldn't stop smiling," said Schneider. "We were so excited the whole ride. It didn't matter how early it was. We were going to bring her home." They also shared their views about Francine with the Associated Press. Schneider believes that "Francine is one of us. She is amazing," they said. "What she means here to the store and the employees, you really can't imagine the outpouring that the employees and also the customers give her daily." Mike Sida shared their reaction to finding Francine with Corporate Lowe's as well. "I can't describe the feeling when we realized it was her. We all just lit up," said Sida. "We care for Francine so much, and we are so thankful for

everyone who helped. She is more than our store cat. She is a part of our family." The Lowe's team "knew we'd do whatever it took to bring Francine home," said Sida. Many organizations and people in the Richmond community helped find Francine. Some honorable mentions that were listed on the Lowe's corporate website include North Hampton County Animal Shelter, Thermal Bird, Carman Brother Professional Pet Trainers, Richmond SPCA, Richmond Animal Care and Control (RACC), and SOS Cats RVA and Best Friends. Community members Elise Gilmore and Chas Nabi created an Instagram account dedicated to finding Francine. The account is called 'Where's Francine.' It gained over 32,000 followers and more than 9 million views in just one week. This page strived to bring awareness to the missing cat, and it provided daily updates on her whereabouts. Elise Gilmore spoke to Richmond's local NBC news affiliate, 12 On Your Side, after Francine was found. "We're super excited that [the account] led to Francine coming home," she said. "It's all been worth it." An event called "Francine Fest" was held on Oct. 8, 2025, at Mainline Brewery from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. to celebrate Francine's return home. A portion of the money obtained from this event went to Richmond SPCA, and there were donation drives during the event for other shelters in the area. Before Francine became the Lowe's cat, she was a stray. According to Mike Sida, Francine "just showed up," they said. "We had a bit of a mice problem. So, of course, I [liked] the cat a lot be-



Francine posing for the camera.

cause [she was] helping me." After that, Francine earned her name and home at Lowe's. She has been living there for eight years. The staff, as well as the community, care for her. Nick Myers, an employee at Lowe's, is Francine's caretaker. They take her for her shots and checkups, and make sure she always has a full food and water bowl set up in the store. According to Myers, people from the community help to pay for Francine's vet visits. Francine is friendly and calm when customers approach her. Junior Ella Cronin has paid Francine a visit. "I love Francine," she said. "When I met her, she was sleeping in the garden section, but [she] loved the attention. [I am] so glad she's home." Junior Kanita Hodzic hasn't seen

Francine in person, but she thinks "Francine is quite an icon," she said. "I am hoping to see her over the weekend." She heard about the Lowe's cat while scrolling on Instagram. "I fell in love and followed her story," she said. Kanita believes that Francine's story has brought so much attention to the issue of pets without homes. "I think it's so cool that so many different small businesses have created Francine-based items and have donated to the SPCA." Francine has brought so many people together to work for a common cause. Nick Myers describes her as a "beacon of the community." According to corporate Lowe's, bringing Francine home was "more than a feel-good moment. It was an example of what community and love look like in action," they said.

Suicide Prevention Month: Alex Slusher's Story

Maria McGill
Opinions Editor

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 39.7% of high school students experience sadness and hopelessness, 20.4% of students seriously consider suicide, and 9.5% of students attempt suicide. September marks the time of Suicide Prevention Month. During this month, national organizations focus on spreading awareness, sharing hope, and providing help to those affected by mental health illnesses. Mental health, relationships, money, trauma, etc. are all major factors that play a role in the stress of people's lives. The aftermath of COVID-19 isolation, the emerging LGBTQ+ uprising, and national economic factors have played roles in the rise of

mental health and suicide rates.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) recognizes the month of September to take action. NAMI said, "Our goal is to ensure that individuals, friends, and families have access to the tools, resources, and support they need to talk openly about suicide prevention, recognize warning signs, and seek help." They point out that starting a conversation is the first and easiest way to show someone they are not alone. A coping strategy they suggest is to recognize the hard times in life and process them, in order to grow and move forward.

Another organization is the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). They work to treat those with mental health issues, provide tools to prevent substance abuse and addiction, and provide treat-

ments and tools to those who are in recovery. They explain the involvement in this mental illness. "Suicide is complex and determined by multiple combinations of factors, such as mental illness, substance misuse, chronic illness, trauma, painful losses, exposure to violence, and social isolation," said SAMHSA. When speculating if someone has symptoms of suicide, look for excessive distress, expression of hopelessness for the future, withdrawing from social interaction or activities someone once enjoyed, irritability, isolation, financial loss, and relationship breakups. These are a few of the many warning signs that may give you insight into how someone is doing mentally.

The Freeman community is also involved in bringing awareness to this topic. Alex Slusher, mother of Stuart Slusher, who was a student

at Freeman, has started a non-profit for awareness and to ease the financial burden of continuing education. Sixteen years ago, Alex and her family created an idea for a scholarship as a result of the stock market dropping and the uncertainty many students faced when considering college affordability. They started the Stuart Slusher Memorial Scholarship Fund in response to their son's passing by suicide in May 2009. They found it surprising that suicide wasn't talked about as much, especially because it has a big impact on people's lives. In Alex's speech, she explains the reason for the scholarship: "In the aftermath, we were shocked to find that suicide is the second largest killer of teenagers and young adults, yet nobody was talking about it," she said.

Stuart was an athlete and a friend to many. "Stuart was handsome, smart, funny, athletic, and popular. He had a big heart and loved to help others," said Alex. He was involved in many class activities, including co-captain of varsity basketball and wrestling, in the Honor Society, a member of the Church, and an Eagle Scout. Stuart was overcome with the pressures and stress he felt. "Overwhelmed by circumstances, including peer pressure, bullying, and a breakup with a girlfriend, he un-

fortunately found a permanent solution to temporary problems and took his own life," said Alex in the 2020 scholarship Award Speech. Alex believed that her son's story could be an inspiration and a call to action regarding the hardships that follow a suicide.

With the stressors of everyday life and the future, Alex gives high school students a piece of advice: "Develop relationships and maintain a support system made up of family, friends, neighbors, church members, mentors, or classmates who support your making good choices," she said. "Enter at least 10 people into your phone. When you are feeling down, anxious, lonely, or depressed, call someone on your list." To prevent suicide, you must act on your intuition. "If you have any concerns at all, get help. Get them to a professional counselor, call 911, text 988, encourage them to eat, sleep, and get outside, have them put [electronics], and maintain that connection," Alex said.

Alex emphasizes the importance of a person's outlook on life: "If you see change and the unexpected as problems, you will have an uphill, unpleasant future. If you view change as an opportunity, expect you will find solutions while you are growing in wisdom, maturity, and the way you think," said Alex.



New West End Thrift Store Opens: Big Savings, Bigger Impact

Annie Ainsworth
Staff Writer

A new St. Vincent de Paul (SVdP) thrift store opened on Broad Street in the West End and officially welcomed the public on Oct. 4, 2025. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul has operated another thrift store in Bon Air for the past few years, raising almost \$1 million. According to Kim Domingo, the Director of Stores for the Society of SVdP, the thrift stores support "neighbors in need" by raising funds for St. Vincent de Paul, which in turn is given back to the community. The SVdP was introduced to the United States in 1845 and has since grown to serve communities nationwide, driven by its Catholic faith to support those in need. Due to increased demand from the public for their help, SVdP chose to open a new location in Westland. In an interview with NBC 12, SVdP's director Dan Kearns said "The need for our services continues to increase...we decided a second thrift store would be perfect to expand our services and to have more things to sell." Bishop Barry Knestout, the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Richmond, who also blessed the building before its opening on Sep. 24,

2025, said to NBC 12, "This space allows for that opportunity in very tangible ways ... to assist those in the practical needs that they have." Money raised by the thrift stores is donated to help those in the surrounding area, which is their main purpose. Domingo said, "[I] funds our financial assistance programs, which help our neighbors in need in our community." Their positive impacts go beyond funding programs to "prevent homelessness" and aid people in their community, but also help the environment by "keeping goods out of landfills," said Domingo. SVdP's thrift stores benefit their local economy as well by "providing low-cost essentials," which in turn helps people and families with smaller budgets and incomes.

To fulfill its mission, the SVdP thrift stores operate in the same way as other thrift stores, selling goods such as houseware, clothes, home decor, and entertainment items like books, but differ somewhat. These include their faith and selling religious items such as rosaries. Kim Domingo said, "We always keep Christ as the center of all that we do, which is what makes our thrift store different from others." She also said that the Society of SVdP is "com-

pelled by [their] Catholic Christian faith" to serve those who need it and are suffering, especially in local areas where the Society's efforts can have the greatest impact. The goal of this new thrift store is to bring in "over \$1,000,000 dollars in sales in the first year," said Domingo, since such a large sum of money would enable them to help a large audience. A challenge SVdP has faced is not raising a sufficient amount of money to help people, but they also receive support via donations from churches, such as Saint Michael the Archangel Catholic Church and Our Lady of Good Counsel Catholic Church.

The proceeds SVdP receives go to multiple assistance programs, including Motel 2 Home, which helps with deposit and move-in costs for people struggling to afford housing, and the Rest Easy Program, which provides new mattresses for those who need them. The Society of SVdP also supports veterans by providing them with Thanksgiving meals through Operation Turkey. SVdP also funds the Christmas Toy Shop, which benefits families by helping parents afford gifts for their children during Christmastime.

These stores are run by employees, but also rely on volunteers to

assist with multiple tasks, including cashiering, organizing, shelving products, and receiving donations. Anyone can get involved by signing up on their website. Volunteers assist by running the stores and helping out with certain jobs, and opportunities to do so are open to high school students. "We've had many high school shoppers and volunteers in our stores," said Domingo, and she also welcomed more to help.

One such volunteer is senior Apphia Cui at Glen Allen High School. Apphia has volunteered at an SVdP thrift store previously, and is also the president of Young Vincentians at Saint Michael the Archangel Catholic Church. Young Vincentians, or "Mini Vinnies," are a smaller group of the Society of SVdP, which is run with and by high school students, who "work hand in hand [with SVdP] for half of our community projects," said Apphia. Their goal is also to support their local community, as well as get high school students involved with their church and mission. It is also a good way to get involved with the Society of SVdP. Apphia said, "If you are in high school or in university, Young Vincentians is a great way to ease yourself into SVdP!"

Her time volunteering for the SVdP thrift store was overall

positive and an easy process to follow. The stores are welcoming to everyone who can help and show their support. "The [volunteering] process is pretty straightforward, the welcoming group is enthusiastic, and most, if not all, of the workers are volunteers, meaning they signed up and want to be there," said Apphia. "Conversations at the SVdP thrift store come naturally because of the welcoming atmosphere." This store is also open to high school students for shopping, just like all other discounted or thrift stores. Domingo said, "Our stores are open to all people of all ages and backgrounds!" She said high school students should be interested in checking it out, like sophomore Alanna Gagen from Freeman. "I like to get a lot of jackets, jeans, or shirts that I can sew to fit me if I like the pattern, and I also [buy] fabric so that I can sew and make my own clothes," she said. Although she had not heard about the new store beforehand, Alanna would be interested in going since it sounded appealing to her. The new thrift store is open to all, including high school students like Alanna. Anyone can check it out from 10 a.m. - 6 p.m. every day except Sundays.

Creepin' up Traditions

Vrusha Pramod
Online Editor-in-Chief
Centerspread Editor

Finally, the day has arrived when you get to dress up however you want on the spookiest night of the year. But have you ever wondered why we have come to celebrate Halloween the way we do?

It is thought that Halloween dates back 2,000 years to the Celts who lived in what is now Northwestern Europe. The Celts had a festival of Samhain where they celebrated the beginning of a new year on November 1. The night before the new year was the time when the gaps between the worlds of the living and the dead became blurred, and ghosts returned to earth. Christianity is thought to also have an influence

on what we call Halloween. Around 609 AD, the church established All Hallows' Day (also known as All Saints Day) on November 1 and All Souls Day on November 2. The celebration the night before, which honored the saints and recently departed souls, began to be called All Hallows Eve and, eventually, Halloween. The practice of trick-or-treating most likely dates back to the days of celebrating All Souls Day in England. The poor would beg for food from families, and in return, they would pray for the family's dead relatives. As new Irish and English immigrants found their way to America, it is believed that they brought these customs with them.



PHOTO CREDIT: VRUSHA PRAMOD



PHOTO CREDIT: VRUSHA PRAMOD



PHOTO CREDIT: AMAL HAMMAD



PHOTO CREDIT: VRUSHA PRAMOD



PHOTO CREDIT: VRUSHA PRAMOD



CELTIC WORLD
c. 400 BCE

PHOTO CREDIT: SAURIE KELLON

November 2nd

PHOTO CREDIT: STOCK IMAGES

ALL SOULS DAY

Fun Fall Fanatics

Nina Henley
Online Editor-in-Chief
Centerspread Editor



PHOTO CREDIT: STOCK IMAGES

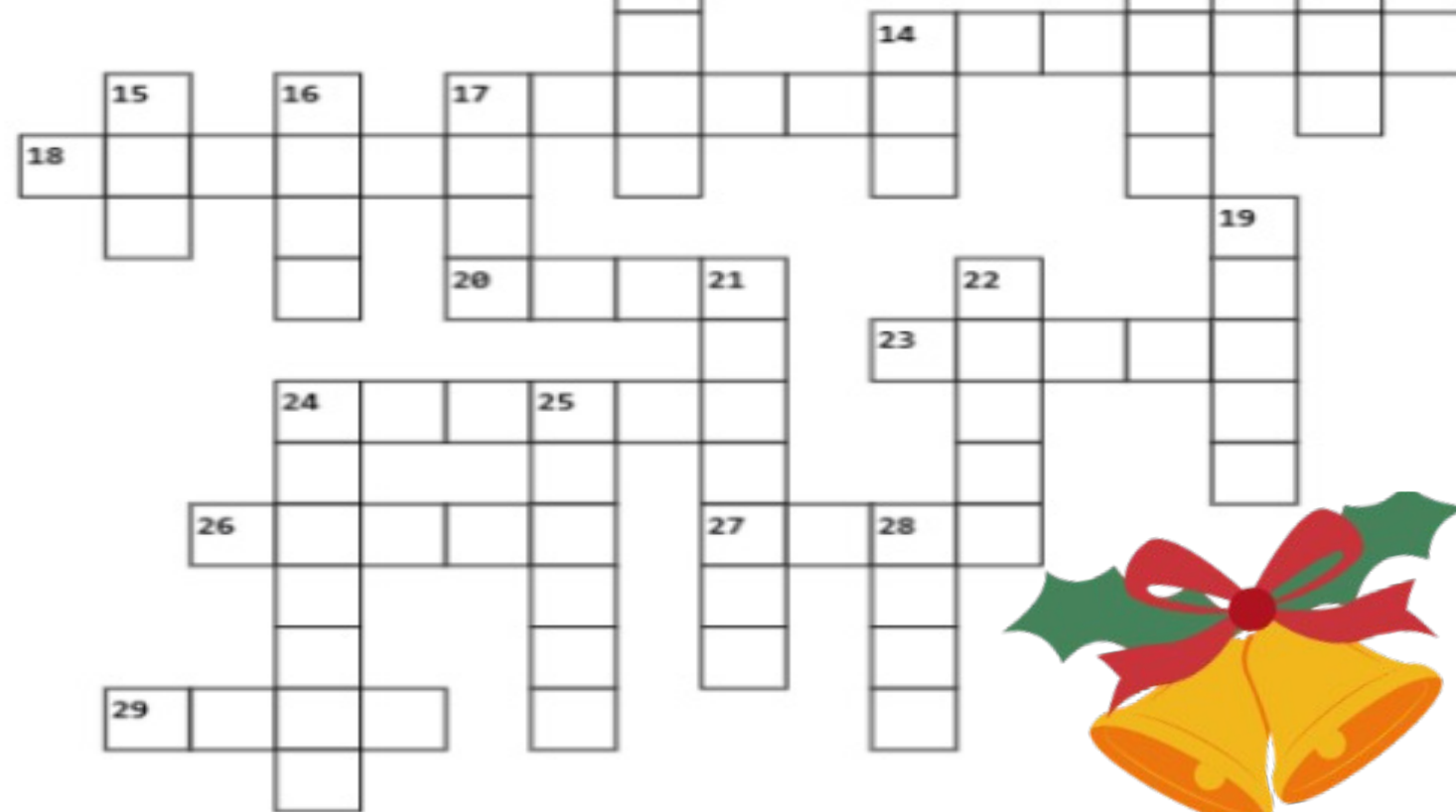
Every year in August, when school officially begins, Summer days slow down, beach and pool days end, and just as everyone waves the warm sunny days goodbye, autumn begins. Football season, apple and pumpkin picking, Halloween, and, of course, Thanksgiving. Fall events take up the minds of many, and with the colorful leaves that come with it, the end of summer is a little bit better. The beginning of fall means a spooky season. With Halloween as the main event that many look forward to, scary movies and haunted houses are the most entertaining things to do. Ashland Berry Farms, Kings Dominion, and Busch Gardens all specialize in making the fall season extra scary by

having several events, haunted houses, and other spooky activities to jumpstart your fall. If you instead enjoy the comfort of your own home, slasher films, psychological thrillers, and straight up terrifying movies can suffice. If you are someone who, in turn, hates all things scary, apple picking and pumpkin carving may be more enjoyable for you. Carter's Mountain Orchard is about an hour away from Freeman near Charlottesville, and it is an experience that screams fall. With all the different types of apples that you can pick, apple cider, donuts, and muffins that you can nibble on, it can be a fun experience for anyone who likes apples. Pumpkin picking is a little easier to find with pumpkin patches all over Richmond. When you

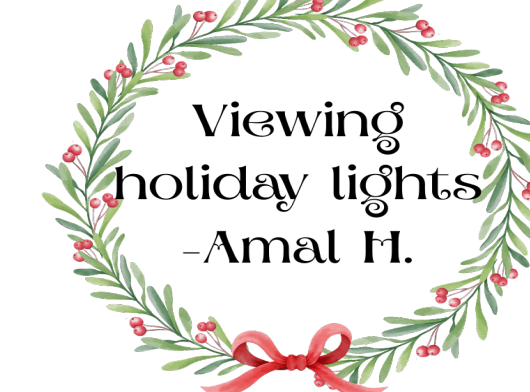
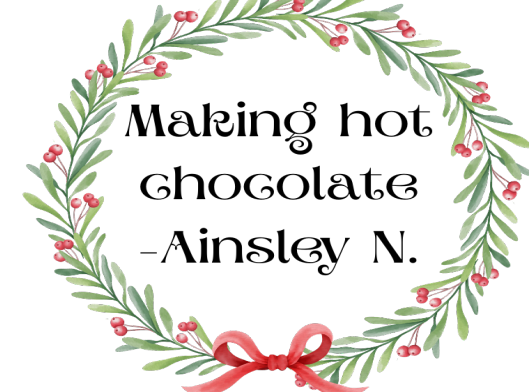
find the right pumpkin, let your creative side take control and start carving! Sometimes, the best Fall activities can take place right in your own kitchen. Baking can fulfill all your fall fantasies with desserts like pumpkin spice recipes, apple pies, cinnamon rolls, and ginger cookies. All of these can be made with your friends, siblings, parents, or just by yourself. These delicious treats will fill your kitchen with the smells of fall. Either way, it's a great way to get into the fall spirit and leaves you with a delicious treat. While leaving summer can be a sad time for students, fall activities can make up for the stress of school. From scary movies to apple picking, the activities are endless and will keep you busy during the fall season.

We Wish You A Merry Cross-mas!

Can you find this elf that is hidden somewhere on the page?



Our MAVS Favorite Holiday Activities



Crossword Questions

Across

- 3. Wrapped Christmas gift
- 5. Christmas ballet: "The ____"
- 7. Santa's ride
- 10. "Jingle ____"
- 12. Turkey carving tool
- 14. "____ Around the Christmas Tree"
- 17. "The ____ Days of Christmas"
- 18. Santa's famous laugh
- 20. Christmas tree topper
- 23. Cranberry ____
- 24. ____ cranberry sauce
- 26. "Silent ____"
- 27. Holiday light string
- 29. Thanksgiving grace word

Down

- 1. Cornucopia contents
- 2. "We Wish You a Merry ____"
- 4. Holiday mail from Santa
- 6. Reindeer count, minus Rudolph
- 8. Mistletoe kiss spot
- 9. Pumpkin or pecan, 1e.g.
- 10. Thanksgiving feast
- 11. Thanksgiving bird that's often stuffed
- 13. Christmas wreath material
- 14. Santa's suit color
- 15. Holiday cheer
- 16. Yule log fuel
- 17. Contents within Santa's sack
- 19. Elf on the
- 21. Red-nosed reindeer
- 22. "Deck the ____"
- 24. Santa's entry point
- 25. Holiday eggnog spice
- 28. " ____ the halls with boughs of holly"

Carter Mountain Orchard Review

Vrusha Pramod
Online Editor-in-Chief
Centerspread Editor

The one and only Carter Mountain Orchard, located in Charlottesville, Virginia, is well known by Virginia residents as one of the best places for apple picking. It's the perfect activity to do with family, friends, and even by yourself! It is highly recommended to go earlier in the fall season, so you'll get more apples to choose from, and of course, better pictures too! Whether you visit Carter Mountain Orchard or any other fruit orchard, you will be doing plenty of walking, so wearing comfortable shoes is necessary for apple picking. It is also recommended to wear long, breathable, sleeved tops. Sometimes, to get the best apple, you'll have to reach pretty far into the tree, and you wouldn't want

branches and leaves to scratch your arms. Also, don't wear anything you are not comfortable getting a little dirty. It can be muddy, sandy, or slick depending on the weather. There is also a major difference between visiting the orchard on a weekday versus on a weekend. If you can go on a weekday, you'd be able to avoid peak crowds and long lines. Staff at Carter Mountain Orchard are highly knowledgeable and helpful. Finally, after an exhausting, but fun day of apple picking, the Country Store and Bakery at the Carter Mountain Orchard is a must visit! Mountain say if you're planning on a weekend visit, early mornings are best for apple picking. Carter Mountain Orchard is open from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m., so I would plan on arriving right at the

orchard at 9 a.m. sharp. Like most orchards, you will pay for what you pick, so don't pluck a perfect apple from the branch unless you want it. And definitely don't forget something to put your apples in! When you first arrive, you'll go through a mini-orientation. They'll explain how to best pick your apples and show you where the different kinds of apples are. The store sells mainly apple-based items such as apple butter, jams, and ice creams; however, they are most known for their delicious apple cider and their fan-favorite fresh apple cider doughnuts. If apple picking is something you're planning on taking up sometime, then I definitely recommend checking out Carter Mountain Orchard!



PHOTO CREDIT: CHILES FAMILY ORCHARD



PHOTO CREDIT: CHILES FAMILY ORCHARD

Crowns, Candy, and Community: Freeman's Homecoming Parade

Anne Minkler
Staff Writer

Generations of alumni, students, and children alike lined the sidewalks to watch Freeman's annual Homecoming Parade on October 17, 2025: a show of Freeman's clubs, organizations, and community spirit. Different groups within Freeman had the option to create a float of their own design that represented their missions and drove it in the parade. Organizations such as the Art Honors Society, Asian Student Alliance, SCA, and Homecoming Courts were able to participate in this event. Their floats ranged from large paper dragons to minion costumes, in a display of Maverick spirit. The day of the parade, preparation began at 5 p.m. in the Tuckahoe Middle School parking lot, just down the street from Freeman. Representatives arrived, put on their sashes, and put finishing touches on their vehicles. Ellie Czyszczon, the junior class representative, said she "got [her] sash, the banner that hangs off of the side of the car, and took

photos before leaving for the parade." Ellie, along with the other class representatives, was chosen through a Google form voting system. "There's a nomination round first, and that's when [the voter] has to pick names from a class list," said Ellie. Then, it moves to a final voting round where the voter gets to choose four names from a shortlist, from which the winner is decided.

Once selected, the class representatives from each grade coordinate themes and outfits with Freeman's Student Council Association for their float. Mr. Densley, the Student Council advisor and main parade planner, said, "After voting ends, the winners are announced on Schoology and then [the representatives] have to walk at the pep rally, find a car for the float, and pick what [the representatives] are going to wear." After final preparations, the floats depart the Tuckahoe Middle School parking lot. To accommodate this, the Henrico Police temporarily shut down the street for the parade to come through safely. This shutdown took months to plan, Mr. Densley said. "First,

starting in May, once the date of Homecoming was decided, I had to submit an application to the Henrico Police Department. [Also,] I had to ask for the county's help to close Three Chopt Road off for a certain time." Although tedious, the school values keeping this tradition alive. "Once the application was approved, cops would barricade the road until the parade had made it to Freeman. It's definitely an inconvenience, but it's worth it for the parade, [Freeman] is one of the only schools that still does it," he said.

At Freeman, a diverse array of clubs and organizations participated in the parade. Magdalena Jones, a parade viewer, said that "[her] favorite part of the homecoming parade is seeing all of the different groups that make floats for the parade." All clubs at Freeman were given the option to make their own floats, and the participants ranged from the arts departments to class officers. At the end of the parade, the best-decorated float wins an award. Magdalena said, "Clubs choose whether to do a float. This year, the Art National Honors Society [float] won, which was definitely my favorite."

To create these floats, the organizations work on them for weeks, starting with a theme and draft design. Each group is required to have its own car to drive its float, follow certain safety regulations, and receive final approval from Mr. Densley. "There are a lot of safety rules we have to follow, especially when we're driving on main roads. The road is definitely safer, but having kids on top of cars is still dangerous. We have to make sure nothing is dragging, hanging off, and every-



Freshman Class Representatives.



Senior Class Representatives.

one is secure," said Mr. Densley.

After parading, winners were announced based on design and creativity. This year's winners were the Class of 2027's float and the National Art Honors Society's float. Both groups worked within a team all month before school, during class, and after school to complete their designs.

Another big part of the parade is Freeman's neighbors and alumni who come to support their community and participate in the festivities. As the floats drive, students are responsible for throwing out candy to bystanders. Makenna Desper, the freshman homecoming court nominee, said, "My favorite part of the parade is seeing all the little kids that come cheer and getting to throw candy for them from the float."

Families that live in the Freeman area, alumni, and children also frequently attend the parade. The floats and candy are a big draw for young children, and there's a tailgate for anyone to attend in the Freeman parking lot. Mr. Densley said, "The tailgate is open to everyone, and families in the neighborhood love to come, bring food, and hang out. Alumni like to come back to relive their Freeman days with their children as well."

Freeman's homecoming parade is a spirited, family-friendly event that demonstrates Maverick pride through floats and festivities that represents all things Freeman. Makenna said, "[I] think the parade is definitely important for school spirit and helps everyone see the diversity and different communities at Freeman."

A Rise in Bands at Freeman

Saanvi Gourishetty
Head of News

It starts with a riff in someone's basement. A drumbeat in a garage. A few friends tossing around strange band names after school. At Freeman High School, something new is happening. Not just through guitar amps, but across the student body, more and more students are forming bands.

This trend isn't driven by curriculum but is rather a student-led movement, sparked by passion and sustained by friendship and teamwork. Across grade levels, Freeman students are turning casual jam sessions into actual rehearsals, writing original songs, and performing live. Some of these bands are just for fun, others are chasing real goals, but all of them are creating something new.

Among this wave of student musicians, one band in particular has been gaining traction: Horse Intercom, a trio made up of seniors Jackson Mayfield, Thomas Krutetzer, and William Luginbill. As stated by the band members, their sound is difficult to define and their name is not easily explained, but their influence on Freeman's music scene is noticeable. Horse Intercom was started naturally. "Thomas and I have always played music and would play to-

gether every once in a while, so it sort of sparked for us last year when we started to get together more often to specifically jam, and then we just thought of starting Horse Intercom," Jackson said.

As for the name, Jackson made it clear there was no deep meaning behind it. "There is absolutely no inspiration. The name comes from Argent's [friend] way back sophomore year, when he was thinking of silly names. We were actually going to be called 'Pond Smelt,' but Horse Intercom had always hung around and made no sense, so we ran with it," he said.

The music they create is layered with various genres. "I'd describe it as space rock. We love melodic, hardcore, and spacey sounds from genres like kosmische musik, punk, and emotional hardcore music, which coalesce to form a heavily atmospheric and poignant sound that we try to make," Jackson said.

The band is a trio, and their collaboration is rooted in their friendship and ability to work together. Jackson plays the drums, Thomas plays the guitar, and William plays bass. "We all get along really well, having known each other for years, so we give each other the liberty to play as we like and develop a song to fit each other and how we play our music," Jackson said.

Creating a song is a collaborative process that starts with an idea. This

is shown as Jackson states, "For our upcoming EP [extended play], the recording process typically starts with Thomas thinking of a cool riff, and William and I follow through. We record in my basement, mic'ing up Thomas's amp, my drums, and William's bass to record the tracks." Horse Intercom finds inspiration from bands such as Title Fight, HUM, Calm, Fugazi, and Wilco. Jackson said, "Between all three of us, we listen to lots of music and a large variety of genres, so it's hard not to also draw inspiration from every corner of the musical spectrum."

Being Freeman students has also helped shape the band's identity and operations. "All three of us being Freeman guys makes it easy to say at the end of the day, 'Let's rehearse real quick, meet at Jackson's,'" said Jackson. "Also, the Freeman family has certainly helped us grow and make Horse Intercom real." Former Freeman students Blaine and Carter helped the band with providing equipment for their first show, providing connections, and supporting their music.

Balancing school and music is a challenge, but they find a way. "When we all have free time, it's band time, and otherwise we are working our jobs or working on schoolwork," Jackson said. The rise of student bands at Freeman shows that passion nowadays doesn't have to be about what's

trending online; it can start more locally, a sentiment expressed by junior Dwani Suresh states, "It's refreshing to see that music and passion are not only coming from social media and popular trends,

but rather being sourced locally instead." Dwani hopes that more students start sharing what they love through different art forms, making passion and creativity an even bigger part of life at Freeman.

Join Freeman's Technology Student Association (TSA)!

Want to design, build, and innovate?

Compete, lead, and explore your future!

Contact Aarush Vallapureddy or Sachin Vijay Ganesan for more information

GRAPHIC: AVA HARRISON

Data Centers: The Big Business Concentrated in Northern Virginia

Tylerson Twardy
A&E Editor
Graphics Editor

If you think of the internet as something floating in the cloud, the reality looks much different. Most of it sits inside large, windowless buildings filled with servers, cooling systems, and long rows of wiring. In the past few years, Virginia, especially Northern Virginia, has become one of the central locations for these facilities. Loudoun County now holds a very large share of the world's data storage, which has turned once quiet areas into major tech corridors.

State officials and company representatives often describe this growth as proof that Virginia is preparing for the future. They point to technological leadership, innovation, and digital infrastructure as benefits. However, many residents and environmental groups have begun raising concerns about what this rapid development means for the communities that live near these centers.

One major issue is water usage. Data centers rely on large amounts of water to keep their servers cool. According to SiliconANGLE, wa-

ter use in Virginia data centers has increased by nearly two thirds in the past five years. Some of the new buildings are being placed in regions that already struggle with limited water resources. This creates pressure on local supplies, especially during drought periods when residents are told to cut back on their own water use.

Environmental groups also point to broader impacts. Cardinal News reported that data centers can influence air quality, noise levels, nighttime lighting, and wildlife. The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality has said that data centers are not disproportionately affecting the environment. Organizations like the Piedmont Environmental Council disagree and argue that the massive size of these buildings makes environmental changes very likely.

The economic impact is another point of debate. While construction brings in a large number of temporary jobs, the long term employment numbers are far lower. Once a center opens, it usually operates with around 50 to 100 full time employees. For such large and expensive buildings, the number of permanent jobs is relatively small. Some residents question whether the promised



One of many data centers around Virginia.

economic benefits match reality.

Many people have also noticed changes in the look and sound of their communities. Places that once had open fields, older homes, or wooded scenery now have large industrial buildings, new fencing, and heavy power lines. The constant low humming from cooling equipment has become part of the background noise. At night, the lighting from these facilities changes the way the sky looks. Residents

who have lived in these areas for a long time say the character of their towns is starting to disappear.

The conversation is not about rejecting technology. Most people understand that digital infrastructure is necessary. The concern is about the speed of development and the limited involvement of local communities. Some groups want residents to have more influence on zoning decisions, environmental planning,

and limits on how many centers can be built in one location.

Reliable internet is important, but so are clean waterways, quiet neighborhoods, and landscapes that people recognize. As Virginia continues to attract more data center projects, communities are being asked to consider what they are gaining and what they might be losing. The decisions made today will shape how these regions look and feel in the years ahead.

Back to Back: Girls' Field Hockey Makes Regionals

Juliette Lawrence
Staff Writer

Back to Back: Girls' field hockey Makes It to Regionals Pow! The ball goes in the goal with a powerful whack from Aubrie Jordan in the last 50 seconds of the girls' field hockey quarter-final against Albemarle. With the season winding down, the pressure for the girls' field hockey team has been piling, as the team approaches its final regionals game. As of October 28, 2025, the girls' field hockey team is set to play in their final regional game against Prince George High School. "We have our [regional] game versus Prince George tomorrow, which we could win; we have the skill set to win," said Millie McCabe, a senior captain on the girls' field hockey team.

This will be the team's second consecutive year going to regionals. This lays on the pressure to win. To deal with the pressure of big games, the team has tactics to combat the stress. "Whenever we're playing in big games, we try to keep it upbeat. Listening to music so that nobody's super anxious about it beforehand. We also keep each other locked in," said Ellie Paul, a junior, who's been on the varsity team for three years.

Keeping a positive attitude and a close team dynamic is a goal for the team. "This whole season, our team has gotten really close," said Neveah Wagler, a junior who has been playing field hockey since seventh grade. "We have become a huge friend group."

Working through challenges on and off the field helps make relationships stronger than just teammates, but also friends. "For me, I am always playing with [Vivien Broughton and Ellie], and knowing that one of them is either beside me or behind me on the field, and they know what I'm doing wrong or right [is reassuring]," said Neveah. These friendships strive to create the regional work ethic that the team aims to compete with.

Getting to this point wasn't easy, though. "Last year, we definitely scored a lot more. We are at least 50 goals behind where we were at this point in the season last year," said Millie. Losing valuable seniors has caused rifts in the team's scoring capability.

"[We lost] Riley Parker; she was our number one scorer last year." The loss of last year's seniors has also created a dry spell of leadership. This year's seniors needed to step in. "As a captain, I had to take on a leadership role. We always really heavily relied on Sarah [Chilton] as our leader; that was a big shoe to fill," said Millie. Leadership in the team is a key ingredient to their success. With leadership lost, it was also regained through the experienced seniors that the team was given this year. "I've played with [Vivien] almost the entire time I've been playing field hockey, for six years, and I'm always learning from her," said Ellie. Whether it's hitting, team bonding, or playing in a big game, the seniors provide learning opportunities. "I love hitting with her, because there's always so much to learn." Regionals commands the need for the team to really step up and work together. "[Our goal is to] play with purpose, spread out on the field, and keep the fundamentals in our mind," said Ellie. Playing like no one is watching and succeeding even in harsh conditions is another goal for the team. "Our goal is not to let the weather affect us, because it's going to be freezing and rain-

doing a bunch of extra conditioning, we have [been doing] what we call overtime legs, [so we are] confident that we can beat [any team] in overtime," said Neveah. With some new freshmen on the team, there are different opportunities for the team, whether that's teaching or encouraging. "I think I've grown because I didn't even know the rules of the game or how to do anything [at the beginning of the season]," said Lola. Though this can be stressful, Lola has found the fun within it. "Also learning a new sport, because I've only been playing two other sports my whole life, [has] been fun." As their final game quickly approaches, the girls have reflected on the obstacles and challenges they faced in last year's regional game. "Last year we lost our regional championship," said Ellie. "The other team scored against us in the first quarter, and we couldn't get it back after that." The growth of the team has correlated with Coach Perez's enforcement of players trying new positions. "I've always played sweep," said Millie. "That's what I've played all of my career." Changing positions has given seniors a new view of the game. "She's put me on forward a little bit this season, so that's been really new. But it has



Vivi Broughton (12) goes to pass the ball

ing, so we're the team that will come out on top," said Neveah. Coach Wagler and Coach Perez have also been fundamental to the team's success. Ellie said, "[Coach P] really encourages us to be a family and connected, love each other, and support each other so we can play well on the field together." Not only do the coaches encourage players, but they also support them in the individual growth of their skills. "[Coach Wagler has been]

been a fun challenge," said Millie. "I think it was a good example to the younger kids that you're never set in your way, [and] you can always be better at something new."

Looking back on these moments has taught the team that it is important to keep persevering in games no matter what. "I think that [this] taught us to give it our all and keep pushing no matter what," said Ellie. "Just because [they score] one goal doesn't mean you [will] lose. You have to get it back."

Recent Commits



Hank Beach
US Naval Academy
Committed for football



Karina Blanco
University of Maine
Committed for Swimming



Paige Suter
Sewanee University
Committed for tennis



Caleb Fischer
Hampden-Sydney College
Committed for football



Hagan Robinson
Hampden-Sydney College
Committed for football



Harrison Smith
Washington and Lee University
Committed for football

GRAPHIC: AVA HARRISON

Penn State Football

Sophie Tluchak
Staff Writer

The Penn State football team is heading in a different direction after suffering three consecutive losses to teams they were expected to win against, including Northwestern University, the University of Iowa, and the University of Oregon. After these losses, the team decided to fire the head coach, James Franklin.

This decision has divided the Penn State community by receiving backlash from some fans and support from others. But overall, the Penn State supporters are wishing for a positive outcome. "Hopefully the new guy can change the system so [we] can start winning big games," said junior Riyaan Gopalakrishnan.

Fans spoke about certain characteristics that Franklin held and compared them to the necessary aspects of a coach for a team with as big a legacy as Penn State. "I think Coach Franklin did a good job of bringing the team together. But you have to be versatile, able to switch things up and just be strong even when things aren't going your way," said Riyaan.

Franklin was also praised for his recruiting efforts as a coach. Unfortunately, this was not enough for him to be successful in crucial games. "Recruiting is important, but if you can't win the big games, then nobody in the Big 10 is going to take you seriously. So from an admin and coaching standpoint, he has to win the big game as well as be a good leader," said Mr. Lovering.

Positive and negative outcomes have both occurred since the firing of Franklin. "better for the coach, bad for the mid-major programs," he said. Jack Dunn mentioned how the team will be affected because

"they got recruited by him" and they "were able to connect with him." A new coach will not have that same relationship Franklin shared with the team.

Not only did the fans recognize the possibility of him getting fired, but also Franklin himself. "The administration had too much pressure from the people who donated the money to the school," he said. If you are expected to win a national championship and lose three games in a year, you don't have a choice but to fire your coach."

James Franklin also left with considerable benefits after being fired. "Franklin continues to get paid no matter what. He has a buy-out contract that's \$50 million, so he cannot coach and still make \$50 million," said Mr. Lovering. During the three losses that led to his firing, the starting quarterback of the team was injured due to a hurt ankle injury. Some believe a skilled coach should be capable of adapting to specific setbacks.

The replacement for the head coach has not yet been decided, but Matt Rhule from Nebraska has been mentioned as a potential candidate. He is known to have previously played as a linebacker for Penn State. Players on the Nebraska team have made comments after learning about the possibility of their coach leaving. Quarterback for the Cornhuskers, Dylan Raiola, along with other teammates, has expressed that Rhule will stick it out with their team instead of taking the place of Franklin. "He ain't going nowhere," he said. "For the next coach, they should be more consistent in their decisions and ready to fight in big games," said Riyaan. Whoever is chosen as a replacement will have a talented roster, but also pressure to deliver better results. The decision on the replacement will not yet be finalized until after the 2025 season ends.

Freeman Cheer Team Tumbles Into New Season

Caitlyn Kennedy
Staff Writer

Freeman's Competition Cheer Team Tumbles Into Season Freeman's competition cheer team has kicked off their season. The team has placed first at two competitions, one being for their division and the other overall. The team also placed in the top three at a competition in Northern Virginia and will go to Regionals on Saturday, Nov. 1, 2025, at Prince George High School. The VHSL State Championship is the following weekend, on Saturday, Nov. 8, 2025.

At cheer competitions, teams get scored based on different categories and how they are executed. The judge's scoring is based on multiple factors, including tumbling, cheering, difficulty, technique, and overall impression. The term "hitting zero" is used when a team does its routine perfectly and with no deductions. "We've done it before, and that's such a great feeling," said junior Reed Hart, a three-year member of the competition team.

At one of their past competitions, in which they placed first, the team "hit zero." Reed shares that they were able to do this because they were "putting 110% on the mat and smiling," and "exuding confidence to the audience," she said.

At another competition they competed in, Freeman placed third, after performing against other teams that included people who were also on world and national teams. Despite these competitors, they still did very well. "In the program's history, that's the high-

est we've ever scored," said Reed.

The team has confidence in themselves from their performances so far, and also in how they will perform in the future. "We really want to get first, and I think we can," said Reed. Other team members share this thought. "I think the team has always been climbing up," said junior Raina Moreno, a tumbler and base on the competition team. "I think it'll only go up from where we are."

This has been shown through all of the work they have put in. "We have been practicing every day since August 1st, and we haven't skipped any weekdays," said Raina. "We just practice a lot and for a long time."

Senior captain Kaleeah Massey, a side base, also shared how the team has "put in countless amounts of hours and work." She noted how part of the team's success has come from the changes they have made at their practices, using full outs as an example. "Last year, we would do one or two a week, maybe, and [now] we do at least three a day," she said.

Reed shared that the coaches have encouraged the team's hard work. "Our coaches are hard on us because they know that we can do well and place really well." Additionally, the whole team is very motivated. "The morale is definitely [up more]," said Raina. "Everyone cares so much about the team and its outcomes."

This work ethic has helped the team reach its full capability, especially through a drill called pressure reps. The team goes through certain parts of their routine, working to complete them with no deductions,

five times in a row. If there is a mistake, the team starts back at zero. "I think those pressure reps are [really] helpful," said Reed.

Freeman's competition cheer team is also a very tight-knit group. "Everyone's friends with everyone, and it's like one big family," said Raina. This relationship allows them to work together more efficiently.

Having trust in your teammates is an important part of competing, especially when doing stunts. Each person's part is important for the routine to go well, and each member has to focus on themselves and their teammates. "When you're stunting, there are three people under one

person," said Reed. "That person in the air is also as important."

Every detail leading up to performing counts. The team uses this time to encourage each other, but also takes time to mentally prepare with techniques like deep breathing, as a way to be calm and ready. "I try to just be as relaxed as possible before we go out," said Kaleeah.

After performing, the team reflects on their execution by having a "little powwow." Then, they spend the rest of their time supporting others. "After we compete, we cheer on the other teams," said Raina.

Besides the good technique and

skill the team has, they support and motivate each other. "Everyone just uplifts each other, and it's really powerful," said Raina.

This encouragement remains no matter how the performance goes. "You always hug your teammates at the end of every routine, no matter how it goes," said Reed. "We win together, we lose together, this is a team."

Freeman's cheer team has shown what dedication and teamwork can achieve. Their bond as a team makes them stronger with every practice and competition. They remain focused on improving and giving their best at Regionals and State. No matter the outcome, they know they succeed together.



Competition Cheer Team after placing first at competition

PHOTO: DSF CHEER INSTAGRAM

Bad Bunny: The Half-Time Show Controversy

Kaylee Bendheim
Staff Writer

As Super Bowl LX is approaching, expectations are high for the halftime show. The National Football League (NFL) made history in late September 2025 when announcing Bad Bunny as the halftime headliner for the Super Bowl. He is the first Latin American male to headline the halftime show and is expected to sing and rap primarily in Spanish. This is not Bad Bunny's first attribution to making history. His album "El Último Tour Del Mundo" was the first all-Spanish album to hit No. 1 on the Billboard, along with his other album "Un Verano Sin Ti," the most-

streamed album on Spotify ever.

Bad Bunny makes a cultural impact on society as he serves as a symbol of Puerto Rican identity and Latin pride. He uses his music as a platform to advocate for social and political issues such as Puerto Rican independence, LG-BTQ+ rights, and gender rights.

Bad Bunny reaches a global audience spanning generations, including a significant Latinx base. His audience is drawn to the traditional Puerto Rican rhythms and modern sounds he uses while also addressing social and political issues.

While many celebrate this as a cultural movement, some NFL fans are not happy with this upcoming performance. Bad Bunny's presence in political stances is a contributing factor to the con-

troversy of the show, as he has previously criticized President Donald Trump. The artist has imitated Trump's immigration policies and handling of Puerto Rico, including a mock apology from Trump in his song "Nuevayol."

People are speculating that Bad Bunny will include a political message in his performance. Critics have raised concerns about the fact that his performance will primarily be in Spanish. U.S. Congressman Mike Johnson referred to Bad Bunny's upcoming performance as "it sounds like he's not someone who appeals to a broader audience."

They have also argued that the lack of English songs is inaccessible and not representative of American culture, a misconception about the meaning and purpose of his show.

Immigration concerns are also on the rise as the actions of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) have been a reason he has been hesitant to tour in the U.S. Shortly after the Super Bowl announcement, former Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem publicly stated ICE will be attending the event.

Aside from all these complications, the NFL is set on their decision with Bad Bunny performing. Roger Goodell, the Commissioner of the NFL, confirmed they aren't going to reconsider their choice with the artist. Goodell said the decision was "carefully thought

through" despite the backlash. "We are confident that this is going to be a good show," he said.

Some of the community here at Freeman can agree with Goodell. They are eager to see what Bad Bunny brings to the halftime show. "If I hear a good song from Bad Bunny, I'm gonna listen to more Bad Bunny," said freshman Harper Keiper. She doesn't understand the problem with him performing a full-Spanish set. "[Some people say], 'I'm not gonna know Spanish,' but at the same time, are you really going to be listening? We have subtitles," she said.

Sophomore Ezra Pardue is also excited to watch Bad Bunny perform. "I think it's really good he's performing, because it gives an opportunity to have someone else of a different race to perform, [and it] foster[s] inclusion," he said.

Following Bad Bunny's advocacy for Puerto Rico, Ezra hopes for this performance to bring greater awareness to Puerto-Americans and their experiences. "I think this performance is good for Puerto Rico because it shows Puerto Ricans that you can perform. You can rise and grow," he said.

Señor Flores, assistant principal at Freeman and a proud native Spanish speaker, views Bad Bunny's halftime performance as a powerful way to spread awareness about Spanish culture. "I support what he has done, [and] the culture that he has shared from

the Spanish-speaking countries. I think that it's something that brings attention to the multicultural country we live in," he said.

Señor Flores reflects on how Bad Bunny's presence allows Puerto Rican and broader Spanish culture to take pride in their influence on mainstream entertainment. "The halftime show is the biggest event, and I think it's open to participation from many ethnic groups that make up a country," he said.

Similar to Harper, Señor Flores isn't affected by language barriers when it comes to music. "Music is universal, regardless of the language it's conveyed in. I enjoy music from many other countries, and I do not always understand the language, but the rhythm and the instruments used are a testament to what music is," he said.

Whether Bad Bunny's halftime show is praised or controversial, his performance will serve as a representation and global influence of broader Spanish cultures. Bad Bunny will use the stage as an opportunity to express how artists can interpret culture and community through their work.

Bad Bunny's performance can challenge the dominance of English-language performances and celebrate the diversity within the Latino community. The performance will likely contribute to ongoing discussions about diversity and inclusion in the entertainment industry.



Bad Bunny performing at a concert

Diane Keaton's Impact on the Industry

Sophia Bove
Staff Writer

Diane Keaton, a world-famous actress and singer, tragically passed away on Oct. 11, 2025, at age 79. Many people throughout the world mourned the loss of this well-known star through tributes on social media and heartfelt messages. Many other celebrities shared some valuable memories, highlighting her life and contributions. "She kept us roaring with laughter," said American actress and director Olivia Wilde.

Bette Midler, an American actress and comedian, was quick to compliment her friend. "She was brilliant, beautiful, and extraordinary," she said.

American actor Al Pacino was also heartbroken and shaken to hear the loss of his coworker. "My partner, my friend, someone who brought me happiness," he said.

Born in 1946, Keaton lived in Los Angeles and began her interest in acting in high school. Before she moved to New York to pursue her acting dream, she studied drama at Santa Ana College, then attended the Neighborhood Playhouse School of Theatre. Keaton then began her acting career in 1968, being featured in the Broadway production of "Hair." Following that, she starred in her first major film, "The Godfather," alongside stars like Al Pacino and James Caan, which caused her career to take off. She then went on to star in "Play It Again, Sam," "Annie

Hall," and "Looking for Mr. Goodbar," all of which were successful.

Later on, Keaton won an Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role, a Golden Globe for Best Actress, and a BAFTA award for Best Actress. All three awards were won for her stellar performance in "Annie Hall." Among her many awards, the most memorable was her Oscar nomination and win for "Annie Hall," which she received in 1978 at the 50th Academy Awards.

As time went on, Keaton's career didn't slow down. She took

on roles like Sybil Stone in "The Family Stone," Diane in "Book Club," and Sister Mary in "The Young Pope." Although she did not win any major awards for any of these roles, she received several memorable nominations.

Although Keaton is most well known for her acting performances, she also specialized in other niches, including directing and fashion. She directed multiple films, including "Heaven," "Unstrung Heroes," and "Hanging Up." She also directed episodes for multiple series, as well as direct-

ing music videos for other artists.

Alongside her impact on the industry by inspiring many, Keaton also had a strong influence on activism and standing up for rights. She continuously advocated for animal rights and showed a large interest in historic preservation in Los Angeles. She was very dedicated to the Century Plaza Hotel, as well as the Ennis House. Her efforts were very successful, with her avid fundraising and continuous speaking up, she ultimately made an extremely positive impact on the city of Los Angeles.

Despite Keaton's incredibly successful career, there are still many who are not aware of her work. Among students and faculty at Freeman High School, there was mixed feedback. Most faculty members were aware of Keaton's work and were disappointed to hear of her passing. Others, such as Freeman junior Merit Lavelle, had never heard of her or her work. "I didn't know who Diane was until I saw something about her death online," she said. "I've seen some of the movies she's in, but I never knew her name."

When asked about how she viewed the public's response to the death, Merit expressed how she'd only seen good things about Keaton. "I saw a post about her on Instagram and all the comments seemed super supportive," she said. "I know I'll be reading about it, especially now that I know more about her and her work."

Freshman Peyton Edwards was asked about her familiarity with Keaton's work. "I know of her

from some movies I've watched with my parents," she said. "I didn't even hear about her dying, but I always thought she was a really good actress. Peyton expressed how she hopes to be as successful as Keaton in the future. "I know I don't want to do anything acting related, but it would definitely be nice to have that many people caring so much about my death," she said.

When talking to faculty members around Freeman, it was very clear that Keaton was more popular with the older generation, rather than the younger population. Most of her hit movies were popular in the late 1900s to early 2000s, so many high school students are not aware of her work.

Among the massive amount of tributes received by the public, Keaton was also honored recently at Vogue World 2025, where she was featured as a fashion tribute, specifically for her role in "Annie Hall." Goldie Hawn also shared a tribute on Instagram, referring to Keaton as "fearless" and "unique." Known director Nancy Meyers said Keaton was "born to be a movie star." Meyers had collaborated with Keaton many times before her recent passing, and the two were good friends.

Diane Keaton had a large impact on the industry, by starring in hit films to even producing some, she paved the way for many future actors and actresses. Diane Keaton's death has been recognized by many, as has her legacy, which will continue to live long after her passing.



Diane Keaton accepting an award

Redesigning the Runway: Victoria's Secret Fashion Show 2025

Ingrid Jones
Staff Writer

The 2025 Victoria's Secret Fashion Show took place on Wednesday, Oct. 15. This tradition began in 1995 and has occurred annually until 2018. After a period without the show, it returned in 2024 and again in 2025.

After facing backlash over incorporating slicked-back hairstyles into the models' looks in 2024, Victoria's Secret returned to its traditional runway model look. Some speculate that the incorporation of the slick-backs may be related to the online "clean girl aesthetic" trend. "They're trying to get with the trends, but everybody seems to want to bring back the old Victoria's Secret," said junior Judy Gushman.

The "old" Victoria's Secret look features blown-out hair, glam, and elaborate wings. "When people think of Victoria's Secret, they're not looking for the clean girl that was trending back then; they're looking for the big blowouts," said junior Lillian Watkins.

One of the reasons there was backlash over these slick-backs and toned down looks from the 2024 show was because they

showcased a more understated style. "They all had slicked back ponytails, and it was just not as colorful and fun as everybody wants. I didn't love it," said Judy.

Others who watched last year's show were unhappy with it because the understated looks made it more boring. "I did see some clips from last year, and I just thought it was kind of boring," said junior Beatrix Sharrar.

To the viewers, the slick-backs didn't feel like something that belonged in a Victoria's Secret show, like the blowouts do. "I don't like the slick-backs. I like the blowouts because I feel like it's very Victoria's Secret," said freshman Ana Case.

Viewers were excited that the show went back to their traditional look because it makes it more unique, exciting, and allows for people to see looks they wouldn't normally see. "I think the blowouts and the wings make it something different that we don't get to see. It looks like runway models instead of just everyday people walking down the street, which is exciting," said Beatrix.

As the show switched back to its roots in big blowouts and wings, they also brought back some of their original models, including Adriana Lima,

Alessandra Ambrosio, and Candice Swanepoel, which was "iconic," said Ana Case.

Viewers were also happy with the selection of performers for this year's show. "I really liked watching all the performers. I think they chose [ones that are] relevant right now. It was so fun to watch," said Beatrix. Artists who performed in the show this year included Missy Elliott, CAROL G, Madison Beer, and TWICE.

As the looks have changed over the past years, the models themselves have changed as well. In earlier Victoria's Secret shows, the models have been known to be very lean and skinny. As the show and beauty standards have evolved, the "skinny" model standard has evolved as well. "You can see more body types now," said Beatrix. "I feel like Victoria's Secret has done a good job in applying so many body types that any person anywhere on the street could look at the runway and be like, 'that's what I look like.'"

By changing the norm for models' body types, Victoria's Secret raises more awareness for things like mental health and eating disorders. "They're speaking more about mental health," said Lillian Watkins. "They're also speaking more about what



Victoria's Secret models celebrating

they're eating, and not letting society tell them that they have to be skinny and a certain way."

The show has also included athletes, including Olympic gymnast Suni Lee and Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) player Angel Reese. By having these athletes participate in the show, it shows society and women that athletes can be both athletic and feminine. Lillian Watkins likes the idea of athletes being both athletic and feminine. "It shows that women can be strong and also beautiful," she said.

Not only has the show this year set a new connotation around female athletes and femininity, but it has also set a positive tone for the transgender community and modeling. One transgender mod-

el who walked in the show this year is social media influencer and model, Alex Consani. "It really shows people that they can do anything," said Ana Case.

This year's show showcased a lot of diversity in its models, which set a new example for the modeling industry. "I like that there were a lot of different models," said Lillian. Overall, the show demonstrates that anyone can be a part of it and accomplish their model dreams. "It shows that when you work hard, you can get where you want to be, eventually," said Beatrix.

As the show listened to the previous backlash, Freeman viewers were happy to see the return to the traditional VS look, and greater diversity on the runway.

Richmond Ballet's 'Moving Art 2' Brings Energy to the Stage

Emerson Post
Sports/Copy Editor

The Richmond Ballet recently performed the new "Moving Art 2," a collection of new ballets selected by Artistic Director Ma Cong. The performance took place in the Leslie Cheek Theater at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and featured three pieces chosen for their personal meaning and artistic value. The program gave the audiences both world and Virginia premieres, showing how ballet continues to spread globally. The "Moving Art" series has become a regular part of the Richmond Ballet's season, allowing audiences to see both established and new works. This year's "Moving Art 2" featured *Slice to Sharp*, *Last Touch*, and *French Twist*. These are three ballets that brought something different to the stage. The combination of the modern movements, storytelling, and energy created a performance that differs from past programs. The show opened with "Slice to Sharp," a dance choreographed by Jorma Elo, with music by

Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber and Antonio Vivaldi. The piece was staged by Nancy Euverink, with costumes by Holly Hynes and lighting design by Nathan W. Scheuer. "Slice to Sharp" is based on the original design by Mark Stanley. It was originally created for the New York City Ballet and has remained one of Ma Cong's personal favorites, as he performed it during his professional career as a dancer. "I wanted [to] show the balance between strength, feeling, and creativity that makes dance come alive," he said. The ballet is fast-paced and modern, filled with many transitions and very detailed technique. The Richmond Ballet dancers had to stay exact and keep their energy consistent throughout the entire performance. "It was amazing to see how fast they moved but still stayed in perfect sync," said audience member Rachel Turner. "You could really tell how much training and focus it takes." The piece marked its Virginia premiere during "Moving Art 2," which allowed local audiences to see this work performed live. The second ballet, "Last

Touch," brought a softer, more emotional tone to the night. This world premiere was choreographed by Andrea Schermoly and featured music by Gustav Mahler and Arvo Pärt. Costumes were constructed by Christi Owen, with lighting design by Nathan W. Scheuer. Schermoly had first presented a shorter version of "Last Touch" during the Richmond Ballet's 2024 New Works Festival, where it stood out for its emotional and thoughtful choreography. For "Moving Art 2," she brought the piece into a full-length work. The title "Last Touch" comes from a personal childhood memory of Schermoly's. As her young self left her grandfather's house in her car, he would walk up to it before she drove away and say "last touch," like they were playing a small game of tag. It became a loving ritual that symbolized the connection that was felt between them. Through this ballet, Schermoly transformed that memory into a story about how people hold onto moments with those they love. This story was told through all of the details in the choreography, like the detailed

footwork, hand movements, and artistic connection between each ballerina and danseur. "This piece really hit me," said audience member Jordan Lewis. "You could feel the connection between the dancers, and knowing the story behind it made it even more meaningful." The program closed with "French Twist," choreographed and thought of by Ma Cong, with music by Hugues Le Bars. The ballet was staged by Lauren Fagone, with lighting design by Nathan W. Scheuer. This Virginia premiere ended the night on a bright and playful note, with more upbeat and modern dances, along with a music choice that was very different from the previous two dances. French Twist mixed humour with precision and elegance, which showed Cong's creative style and his focus on making dance challenging and also enjoyable. The choreography was stylish, and it highlighted the dancers' ability to combine their techniques with their personalities. The three ballets in "Moving Art 2" demonstrated a balance between old traditions and new ones that define the Richmond Ballet today. Each choreographer brought

a different artistic voice: Jorma Elo with sharp, modern classical music, Andrea Schermoly with emotional storytelling inspired by her childhood memories, and Ma Cong with creative choreography filled with character. This combination made the program both entertaining and meaningful, offering value to the audience. By presenting both Virginia and World Premieres, the Richmond Ballet continues its mission to bring new and original work to the community. Ma Cong said he hopes "Moving Art 2" inspired people to see ballet as more than just a simple, classical performance. "Dance is a language," he said. "It can express things that words can't." Through "Moving Art 2," the Richmond Ballet reinforced its role as one of Virginia's strongest artistic groups. The program blended new ideas with heartfelt performances, reminding audiences that dance grows while holding onto the human emotions, which make it special. Audience members left the theater talking about the variety and emotions of the night's performances.

What Is This Feeling? Excitement for Wicked: For Good

Rowan Kelley
Staff Writer

The fan-favorite musical, book, and now movie phenomenon "Wicked" has a sequel on the way. The first film adaptation earned more than \$750 million at the box office and is now the highest-grossing movie adaptation of a Broadway musical. "Wicked" hit theaters on November 22, 2024, and its major success led to a historic debut on the Billboard 200 chart, coming in at number two. The movie soundtrack also reached number one on the Billboard Top Album Sales, becoming only the second movie-musical soundtrack in recent years to reach the top ten. The original story of "Wicked," a book written by Gregory Maguire, follows a similar plot to the musical and the movie, but with more serious themes. It highlights a more solemn perspective of a young green-skinned girl named Elphaba who fights against political oppression, social inequality, and other more mature themes that are not present in the fluffier musical version. The book is not for the faint of heart, and unlike the movie, it was never recommended for children. An article from TODAY titled, 'Wicked' fans are warning about the book: It's very different than the musical,' consisted of multiple interviewers from Booktokers on this very subject. "[The book] ended up being a lot darker than I thought. I would say within the first 10 to 20%, my jaw was on the floor multiple times. I wasn't expecting it to be so graphic," TODAY said when quoting Content creator Sara Ribeiro. Oz in the movie is perceived as a bright, gorgeous city, whereas in the book, it is a more nuanced, corrupt place. While the screen and stage adaptations lean into romance, humor, and musical storytelling, the question we can pull from each version is this: "Are people born wicked or do they have wickedness thrust upon them?" The first movie follows the path

of a young girl named Elphaba, played by Cynthia Erivo, who, being born with green skin, faced discrimination her entire life. Her father, whose aversion to her plagues her every thought, favors Elphaba's sister Nessa. Together, both sisters come to Shiz University, where numerous characters are introduced, including Madame Morrible, whose attention is snagged on Elphaba at first glance for being a naturally gifted student. Glinda, played by Ariana Grande, representing everything Elphaba loathes in a person, finds herself at Shiz and in competition for the very thing Elphaba receives. This creates tension between the two women, which intensifies when they are placed in the same rooming quarters. Elphaba also catches the eye of Prince Fiyero, played by Jonathan Bailey, who remains with Glinda by the end of the movie, much to his regret. However, against all odds, the girls find friendship through hardship, and their bond is forced to experience tribulation when the Wizard learns of Elphaba's knowledge of animal persecution. The animals of Oz, which had been losing their right to speak, both literally and figuratively, were agonizingly being oppressed, an issue which Elphaba theorized could be solved by the Wizard of Oz. Except, the Wizard turns out to be the man behind the curtain, attempting to silence Elphaba himself before she is able to escape, ending the movie with an abrupt stop. The second film, *Wicked: For Good*, is set to release on November 21, 2025, and picks up directly after Elphaba's dashing flight. The film is set to entail the downfall of the moment where Elphaba, or Elphie to Glinda, chose to defy the Wizard instead of being complacent with his controlling ideals. This consequential move sets the stage for her to be given the name of the Wicked Witch of the West, while Glinda receives Glinda the Good. It is said that the second part of the movie will also contain Dorothy's arrival, meaning it will overlap with the timeline of the Wizard of Oz movie.



Richmond Ballet's 'Moving Art' exhibition poster

Most people know from experience that the first half of the movie is known to be more joyful than the second. "I kind of just skip the second half because the first half is happier," said freshman student Harper Keiper, while listening to the musical soundtrack. In terms of the soundtrack and casting, controversy arises from everywhere. "I like the last one, *Defying Gravity*, the best," Harper said. She feels that the movie itself, however, was irrelevant, as there are multiple versions that exist. "I think it [was] pretty good, but I don't think [that] you need to be recreating it. We already have the Wizard of Oz," she said. Harper also made comments about her doubts regarding the casting. Another junior student, Leigh Stuart, agreed with the controversy on casting when she said, "I think I was a little skeptical at first, but then they just blew it out of the park. They did an amazing job." Both Leigh and Harper's favorite character was Glinda. "I like Glinda because I like pink," Harper said. However, she also got sidetracked in explaining her love for the character Fiyero. "I love how Ariana portrayed her and her vocals, and the way she was just fully embodied with that character," said Leigh. With the second part looming over everyone's heads, "I hope it'll leave me with the same awe as when I left the musical; all of the vocals, the sounds, how it all comes together, and that kind of bittersweet ending, which is kind of saddening," said Leigh. She was one of the lucky few



"Wicked: For Good" movie poster

who was able to see *Wicked* in New York theaters, which led her to the conclusion that *No Good Deed* is her favorite song. Harper and Leigh shared another common opinion when they commented on their hope for the costumes to be even more amazing for this part of the movie. "They need to fix their makeup and, you know, maybe fix up that outfit," Harper said. Leigh also commented on her favoritism of the first half of the movie. "I love their message of just always being skeptical of what's told to you, and that those in power oftentimes lie to you. I thought that it was very impactful and also showed the power of friendship," she said. However, some expect the sequel to be less successful than the first. "I think the first part will be slightly more successful because there [was] so much anticipation for the first one, and now I

feel like some people will decide whether or not to see the second one based on the first," Leigh said. Both girls plan to go see the movie with friends, even if they're in agreement that the movie itself was not a necessity. "I think with live action adaptations in general, there's always controversy around it, but I do think they did a great job, and I think that it's cool that they made it into a movie," Leigh said. All in all, it can be concluded that Freeman is ready for the second movie's arrival, even if the current running time is set to be two hours and 17 minutes. While the movie itself granted a gateway to so much media backlash and attention, it has already broken multiple records and is on track to continue to break more with the second portion. Whether it's the musical, movie, or book, consider buying your ticket and going to see what the talk is all about.



PHOEBE LOUCKS

10TH GRADE
SHE/HER

Phoebe Loucks is a 10th-grade student here at Freeman, involved in theatre, choir, and the fine arts. A lot of her inspiration stems from simply scrolling through Pinterest, where many of her color palettes and initial sketches originate.

The Commentator
Issue 3
Artist of the Issue

GRAPHIC: TYLerson TWEARDY

ANSWER KEY

- | | | | |
|-----------|--|------------|-------------------------------|
| TURKEY | Thanksgiving bird that's often stuffed | WOOD | Yule log fuel |
| HOHOHO | Santa's famous laugh | AMEN | Thanksgiving grace word |
| BELLS | "Jingle" | TOYS | Contents within Santa's sack |
| FRUIT | Cornucopia contents | TWELVE | "The ____ Days of Christmas" |
| STAR | Christmas tree topper | NUTMEG | Holiday eggnog spice |
| DECK | "the halls with boughs of holly" | CANNED | ____ cranberry sauce |
| RUDOLPH | Red-nosed reindeer | EIGHT | Reindeer count, minus Rudolph |
| SHELF | Elf on the ____ | NIGHT | "Silent" |
| PRESENT | Wrapped Christmas gift | PINE | Christmas wreath material |
| CHRISTMAS | "We Wish You a Merry" | KNIFE | Turkey carving tool |
| PIE | Pumpkin or pecan, e.g. | LETTER | Holiday mail from Santa |
| CHIMNEY | Santa's entry point | HALLS | "Deck the Hall" |
| LIPS | Mistletoe kiss spot | NUTCRACKER | Christmas ballet: "The ____" |
| ROCKING | "Around the Christmas Tree" | LEDS | Holiday light string |
| SAUCE | Cranberry ____ | RED | Santa's suit color |
| | | BANQUET | Thanksgiving feast |
| | | SLEIGH | Santa's ride |
| | | JOY | Holiday cheer |

Elections



Zohran Mamdani

Zohran Mamdani, 34, is the Ugandan-born Democrat who won New York City's race for mayor on Nov. 4, 2025, beating former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo. Mamdani ran on a platform of fighting for the working class and addressing key issues, including making housing affordable, ensuring safety, reducing the cost of transport and groceries, providing early childhood care and free education, taxing the 1%, as well as promoting other traditionally democratic views, such as climate action. Mamdani will be sworn in as Mayor on Jan. 1, 2026, and will become the youngest Mayor of NYC since 1892.



Mikie Sherrill

Democrat Mikie Sherrill won New Jersey's gubernatorial election on Nov. 4, 2025. With 56.6% of the votes, Sherrill won over her Republican opponent, Jack Ciattarelli, who had 42.8% of the votes. Sherrill ran on proposed tax incentives for building new housing developments, making healthcare more affordable, and stopping high utility rates like electrical bills. Sherrill will be inaugurated on Jan. 20, 2026.



Abigail Spanberger

On Nov. 4, 2025, Democrat Abigail Spanberger, 46, won Virginia's election for Governor and will make history by becoming Virginia's first female Governor when she is sworn in on Jan. 17, 2026. Spanberger is a former congresswoman in Virginia (VA) and a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officer, and beat out her Republican opponent, Winsome Earle-Sears. Spanger's campaign focused on economic issues like affordability and strengthening the economy, as well as bipartisanship, which is the cooperation of opposing political parties.

Content by Annie Ainsworth

Colleen Conway
Staff Writer

The U.S. Department of Justice is currently filing a lawsuit against California over its new congressional maps. California's new redistricting bill is known as "Proposition 50" and was recently approved by a large majority of California voters. "California voters overwhelmingly approved the bill," said BBC news reporter Nardine Saad.

California Governor Gavin Newsom originally proposed the Bill as part of California's Campaign against the political redistricting occurring in Texas. It was meant to "cancel out gains" made by Republicans in Texas who redrew voting districts, said Saad. These plans had been supported by President Donald Trump, as the impact would tip the scales of the 2026 midterm elections in favour of the Republican Party. It would do so by guaranteeing the party's majority control of the US House of Representatives. Proposition 50 would give the Democratic Party an advantage in five new congressional districts, ultimately favoring them. Contro-

Corruption in the Ukrainian Government

Juliette Lawrence
Staff Writer

In July of this year, the Ukrainian President, Zelenskyy, along with the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), initiated an operation against the investigators at the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU). The NABU's goal was to combat corruption in Ukraine without having to defer to traditional law enforcement agencies, since these agencies were often entangled in high-profile investigation cases.

The SBU had suspicions of the NABU collaborating with fugitive pro-Russian politicians. With this, the Ukrainian parliament swiftly ordered to limit the powers of the NABU and the other organizations they have been cooperating. To combat their anxieties, Zelenskyy signed a bill curbing these anti-corruption agencies.

Though with good intent, this was seen as a bad look for President Zelenskyy. Some even suspected he had a desire to exert external control over Ukraine. Limiting the autonomy and independence of these anti-corruption companies caused distress throughout the towns and cities, resulting in protests throughout the streets of Ukraine. Citizens started protests supported by the local mayors, while tensions grew.

A significant amount of the Ukrainian society was unconvinced of the notions of Zelenskyy, and his reputation was amid an extreme blow. The people didn't trust him and thought this was a strategy to



Ukrainian President Zelenskyy

keep the president's inner circle from being investigated as well as keep them in close quarters.

NABU has recently begun to make revelations in attempts to combat the negative accusations received from the government, and to eclipse all previous scandals. Conspiracies of the government circle being fraudulent started to rise. Starting a new investigation, the NABU began to investigate Timur Mindich, a close inner circle friend of Zelenskyy. Mindich has been part of business interests in Russia, and Mindich was also once close to the oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky (who is now in pre-trial detention on charges of fraud

and embezzlement). NBAU's operation began with searches of Mindich's home, along with former energy minister turned Justice Minister German Galushchenko.

According to NABU, a group of individuals, including officials and businessmen close to the government, used the state-owned Energoatom, Ukraine's biggest electricity producer, for their own illegal enrichment. After further investigation and listening to wiretap recordings, they found the criminal scheme's mastermind was supposedly none other than Mindich. After this newfound information, a number of senior officials, including former defense

minister Rustem Umerov, recently appointed Prime Minister Yulia Sviridenko, and Energy Minister Svetlana Grinchuk, have received backlash from the caught criminals.

The corruption scandal is dominating Ukrainian politics, with all people and sources opposing the government, seeking to exploit it. Zelensky is working to distance himself from the situation, claiming "The president of a country at war cannot have any friends.". NABU has received support from European leaders, who have made light of their disappointment and are calling on the Ukrainian leadership to thoroughly investigate all allegations being thrown at them.

The Transparency Act

Maggie Walton
Staff Writer

In a pursuit of justice, the fully transparent release of the Epstein Files has been requested in the form of a bill, formally cited as "The Epstein Files Transparency Act," which was recently passed almost unanimously by the House of Representatives.

Jeffrey Epstein has appeared in the news consistently since the early 2000s. From AP News, "Conspiracy theories and outrage have swirled around Epstein since 2006, when the financier first faced criminal charges related to sexual exploitation of underage girls."

The decades-old sex trafficking case has seen a "push for more disclosure" (pbs.org) since the House returned to Washington, DC, following the re-opening of the government. This bill will force the Justice Department to "release all files and communications related to Epstein, as well as any information about the investigation into his death in federal prison" (pbs.org).

Following the files' release, as the bill states, the Department of Justice will not be allowed to "redact information due to 'embarrassment, reputational harm, or political sensitivity, including to any government official, public figure, or foreign dignity'" (pbs.org).

Survivors of Jeffrey Epstein are advocates for the release of the files outside of the political realm. "It's time that we put the political agendas and party affiliations to the side. This is a human issue, this is about children," said Haley Robson, a survivor (theguardian.com).

Democratic Rep. Rho Khanna spoke to The Guardian about the bravery of Epstein survivors, "This is one of the most horrific and disgusting corruption scandals in our country's history," she said. "Because survivors spoke up, because of their courage, the truth is finally going to come out."

Another comment came from Congresswoman and Republican Marjory Taylor Greene, "These women have fought the most horrific fight that no



A protester holds a sign before a press conference

woman should have to fight, and they did it by banding together and never giving up."

The Bill is expected to pass the House, according to PBS, "but its future in the Senate is a different story" (pbs.org). More encouragement has come from

the President, "Trump wrote on Sunday night that Republicans in the House of Representatives should do so 'because we have nothing to hide'" (bbc.com). He has begun to urge lawmakers in his own party, the Republican Party, to vote in favor of the files' release.

Proposition 50:
U.S. Justice Department
Sues California

California Governor Gavin Newsom

versy then arose regarding the process and motive behind the bill.

A main concern was Gerrymandering. For example, Federal prosecutors accused the California Governor and Secretary of State, Shirley Weber, of violating the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment with this Bill, saying that they were "racially gerrymandering congressional districts." Gerrymandering is defined as the redrawing of congressional districts to give a party an electoral advantage, and the act is legal in the US but unconstitutional if it is based on race," said Saad.

The Justice Department also claimed there was "substantial evidence" of this, explaining how "the California legislature created a new map in which Latino demographics and racial considerations were predominant," Saad said.

Additional concerns were also expressed following this. "Race cannot be used as a proxy

to advance political interests, but that is precisely what the California General Assembly did with Prop 50," said Jesus A Osete, Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights. One of California's top lawyers, Attorney General Rob Bonta, has defended Newsom on the matter. He noted that past legal challenges against Proposition 50 had been unsuccessful and that the bill allowed Californians to speak their mind. "Californians spoke loud and clear... their voices must be honored," said Bonta.

In the end, the Justice Department filed its complaint in a California Federal court, where it aimed to block the new maps. "The Department's motion to intervene in Tangipa et al. v. Newsom is now pending before the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California," said The Office of Public Affairs.

The U.S. Does Not Attend
COP30Ingrid Jones
Staff Writer

This year's United Nations Climate Change Conference was hosted by Brazil in Belem. This year's meeting marked the 30th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC, which refers to an international treaty signed in 1992 that established a framework for global cooperation to combat climate change. To some, the location of this year's conference was symbolic as the city is located right at the edge of the Amazon rainforest. The rainforest is currently on the edge of a climate tipping point, a critical threshold that once crossed can trigger large-scale and often irreversible changes in the Earth's climate system. Christiana Figueres, a Costa Rican diplomat, said, "It is very symbolic, it's very important that it is here, because it reminds us first, that we have these tipping points in front of us [and] that forests and Indigenous rights need to be front and center." This is not the only symbolic aspect of the conference as it is also the first time the U.S. hasn't sent an official delegation to the Cop negotiations. While there may not be an official delegate there, Figueres says it is "maybe likely" that the U.S. could be working through other countries at the conference. Senior democrat and former Speaker of the U.S., Nancy Pelosi, voiced her concern over the

country's absence. "As the world confronts the climate crisis, the United States must lead," she said. While Pelosi voiced concern, Figueres said it was "actually a good thing." This is due to the current state of climate denial the U.S. administration is in. Similarly to not having an official delegate from the U.S. attend the conference, none of the "big four" US broadcasters have either. The "big four" U.S. broadcasters include CBS, NBC, ABC, and FOX, none of which appeared to have teams present at the talks. The most coverage that the conference received from any of these broadcasters from November 6 to 11 was two segments on Fox News. These segments had around five minutes total of coverage, and one of them encouraged "anti-climate narratives," said Media Matters. With the absence of the U.S., there has been a new tactic discussed of placing pressure on the country with a new treaty. A North American woman from North Carolina, named Crystal Cavellier, attended Cop30. "The Fossil Fuel treaty can be a tool, a pressure point that frontline communities can wield when their governments avoid accountability... The U.S. isn't showing up, but the rest of the world can show up for us," she said. There has been a lot of discussion over the absence of the U.S., and as the conference comes to a close, the world is watching to see how the U.S. responds and what its next course of action will be.