



I-J honors wrestlers after successful season

Sports 1B



Index-Journal

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DAILY \$2

SLED backlog sheds light on timeline in Getchius case

By Renee Ortiz
rortiz@indexjournal.com

Newly released information from the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division (SLED) provides additional context about the timespan for forensic testing on pills found during a Greenwood County traffic stop.

Testing confirmed that pills were a legal prescription medication rather than illegal narcotics.

According to SLED, evidence connected to the arrest of Bryan Joseph Getchius was received by the agency's laboratory roughly three weeks after his arrest by deputies with the Greenwood County Sheriff's Office on May

15, 2024.

In an email, SLED confirmed the case remained in the testing backlog for months. "In this particular case, the submission was received by the SLED Laboratory on 6/5/2024" the email reads.

Then, an investigator with the Eighth Circuit Solicitor's Office requested the analysis be expedited for court purposes.

"SLED received a call from an investigator with the Greenwood County Solicitor's Office on 8/14/2025 asking us to please expedite the testing for court purposes. The case was added to the laboratory priority list. It was assigned to

a SLED analyst on 8/18/2025. Lab analysis started on 09/5/2025. The report was finalized 10/1/2025," the email reads.

The report's findings note the pills seized during the May 2024 traffic stop contained Dicyclomine, a prescription medication used to treat gastrointestinal conditions.

The results contradicted field drug tests conducted during the stop indicating the possible presence of fentanyl and cocaine.

Backlog of cases

SLED said the timeline reflects

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SCREENSHOT | INDEX-JOURNAL

Body camera footage from a May 15, 2024 traffic stop in Greenwood County shows deputies examining pills found in a prescription bottle during a vehicle search. Roadside drug field tests later indicated the possible presence of narcotics, but laboratory analysis by the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division determined the pills were Dicyclomine, a legal prescription medication.



MYA ATTEN | INDEX-JOURNAL

Nashari Williams smiles beside South Carolina State Superintendent of Education Ellen Weaver during the classroom announcement naming her a South Carolina Teacher of the Year state finalist.

'Someone's got to be their champion'

Hodges teacher named state finalist

By Mya Atten
matten@indexjournal.com

HODGES — Encouraging students to believe in themselves is part of Nashari Williams' daily mission at Hodges Greenwood School of Inquiry.

Now, the second-grade teacher is receiving statewide recognition after learning

Friday she was named a finalist for South Carolina Teacher of the Year.

The recognition comes with a \$10,000 award and moves Williams to the next stage of the statewide competition, which includes an interview with a panel of judges. The

See **CHAMPION**, page 7A



Students Nora and Mason clap as second-grade teacher Nashari Williams learns she has been named a South Carolina Teacher of the Year state finalist.

Election board rules Tillman ineligible for special election

By Renee Ortiz
rortiz@indexjournal.com

The race to fill a vacant seat on the Calhoun Falls Town Council has narrowed to two candidates.

Election officials determined a third candidate did not meet constitutional eligibility requirements to appear on the ballot.

The Abbeville County Board of Voter Registration and Elections announced that Charlie Eugene Paul Tillman has been ruled ineligible to run in the March 31 special election.

As a result, voters will choose between Micheal Brandt and Linda Lee Richey. Attempts by the Index-Journal to reach Tillman and the other candidates for comment were unsuccessful.

The special election is scheduled to fill the town council seat vacated when Viggo Lassen was elected mayor in November.

Why the candidate was ruled ineligible

In a written statement, the elections board said it made the determination following a review of candidate qualifications and consultation with the South Carolina State Election Commission.

The board cited provisions of the South Carolina Constitution and state law governing eligibility for public office.

According to the statement, Article VI, Section 1 of the South Carolina Constitution disqualifies a person convicted of a felony from holding public office, unless that person has received a pardon or

See **INELIGIBLE**, page 6A



CHARLIE EUGENE TILLMAN



MICHEAL BRANDT



LINDA RICHEY

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BACKLOG

From page 1A

broader challenges faced by the agency's drug analysis department, which currently has a backlog of thousands of cases awaiting testing.

As of March 1, 2026, the SLED drug analysis department had 19,137 pending cases, according to information provided to the Index-Journal.

That figure represents an increase from 16,056 cases reported July 1, 2025.

During their most recent fiscal year, SLED reported completing analysis on 50,023 items, representing 18,784 cases and nearly 20,000 laboratory reports.

SLED clarified that when the department is fully staffed with 12 analysts, it typically completes about 1,300 cases per month.

SLED also noted that testing turnaround times were significantly shorter in 2018.

Bryan Getchius case timeline

- May 15, 2024: Traffic stop and arrest in Greenwood County
- June 5, 2024: Evidence received by SLED lab by GSCO
- Aug. 14, 2025: Case expedited for testing by Greenwood County Solicitor's Office
- Oct. 1, 2025: SLED lab confirms pills were prescription medication
- Oct. 13, 2025: Charges dismissed
- Oct. 27, 2025: Court orders arrest record expunged by Solicitor's Office

"Drug Analysis Department processing time was under 45 days prior to the passage of the 2018 Hemp legislation," the email reads.

Prioritizing cases

According to SLED, cases can be moved forward in the testing queue when agencies or prosecutors request priority analysis.

"It is important to note that the department prioritizes cases per agency requests in order to keep investigations moving and for court

purposes. However, there are new cases currently being analyzed by the lab," the email reads.

The agency said prioritized cases are typically completed within three to four weeks once testing begins. In the Getchius case, the laboratory said the evidence was expedited, following a request from an investigator with the solicitor's office in August 2025.

The sample had been with SLED since June of 2024.

Questions about the timeline

The Index-Journal contacted the Greenwood County Sheriff's Office asking about the timeline for submitting evidence to SLED and what the typical process is for sending drug samples for laboratory testing.

The newspaper also contacted the Eighth Circuit Solicitor's Office seeking clarification about how cases are prioritized for testing and why the evidence in this case remained in the backlog for more than a year before the expedited request was made.

Eighth Circuit Solicitor David Stumbo provided the following response: The prosecutor with the Solicitor's Office received the SLED results back in October of 2025. The report revealed the seized pills were another controlled substance and were not fentanyl.

"Because the prosecutor did not realize at the time that Mr. Getchius had a prescription for that controlled substance, he initially emailed a plea offer to the defense attorney regarding the misdemeanor possession of a controlled substance. The defense attorney brought it to the prosecutor's attention that his client did actually have a lawful prescription for that specific controlled substance in his possession," the Solicitor's office email reads.

It was the lawful prescription that led to the full dismissal of the charges.

"Our prosecutor immediately responded that he would be sign off/dismiss the charges, closing the case. The email thread shows this exchange all transpired within a few hours on the same day," according to the Solicitor's

Office email.

Lawsuit filed

Getchius has since filed a federal civil rights lawsuit against Greenwood County, the Greenwood County Sheriff's Office, Greenwood County Sheriff Dennis Kelly and several deputies.

The suit contends Getchius was wrongfully arrested and prosecuted, after roadside drug tests misidentified prescription medication as illegal narcotics. Court records show Getchius was arrested in May 2024 and charged with multiple drug offenses, including trafficking fentanyl.

After SLED laboratory testing confirmed the pills were a legal prescription medication, nearly 17 months later, the charges were later dismissed.

Court records show the charges against Getchius were dismissed in October 2025.

Stumbo later signed an order expunging the arrest record and directing agencies to destroy records related to the case.

INELIGIBLE

From page 1A

completed their sentence at least 15 years prior to filing for office.

The clock does not start at conviction, rather it starts when the person has fully completed their sentence, including:

- jail or prison time
- probation
- parole

Only after the entire sentence is completed does the 15-year waiting period begin.

State law reinforces those requirements.

Under S.C. Code Ann. § 7-5-120(B), a person convicted of a felony or offense against election laws is disqualified from registering to vote, or holding office, unless that disqualification has been removed through a pardon or other legal restoration of rights. S.C. Code Ann. § 7-11-15 further requires that candidates meet all constitutional and statutory qualifications for office at the time they file to run.

At a meeting on March 2, the board voted to determine that Tillman did not meet those eligibility require-

ments and ruled his name would not appear on the ballot.

Questions about eligibility

Questions about Tillman's eligibility surfaced shortly after candidate filings for the special election were posted on SC Votes.

On Feb. 25, the Index-Journal contacted the Abbeville County Board of Voter Registration and Elections seeking clarification about whether Tillman met constitutional requirements to hold public office.

While an on-the-record interview was declined, Elections Director Jatavius Coleman confirmed the county office does not conduct background vetting of municipal candidates and referred questions about eligibility to the State Election Commission.

The same day, the Index-Journal contacted the State Election Commission seeking clarification on how Article VI of the South Carolina Constitution applies to candidates with felony convictions involving moral turpitude.

After follow-up inquiries on March 9, the commission responded March 10 through spokesman TJ Lundeen.

"The State Election Commission does not have any authority in this matter," Lundeen said in an email. "This

would have been decided by Abbeville County's Voter Registration and Elections office and/or its board."

The Index-Journal also submitted a Freedom of Information Act request Feb. 25 to the South Carolina Department of Probation, Parole and Pardon Services seeking records of any pardon or restoration of civil rights granted to Tillman.

In a Feb. 26 response, agency spokesman Scott Hawkins said the department was unable to locate any records associated with Tillman.

"SCDPPPS is not in possession of any documents related to Charlie Eugene Paul Tillman," Hawkins wrote. "Both our Records division and our Parole and Pardon section have performed searches for records under this name."

Hawkins suggested that if a pardon existed, it could potentially be held by federal officials or the South Carolina Department of Archives and History if it predated the agency's available records.

Prior removal from office

Tillman previously served on the Calhoun Falls Town Council in 2012 before being removed from office in 2014 following a felony conviction involving

threats against a public official.

Tillman was arrested in April 2012 by a Calhoun Falls police officer and charged with five offenses, including threatening a public official.

In June 2014, then-Gov. Nikki Haley issued an executive order declaring Tillman's council seat vacant after the conviction was determined to involve moral turpitude under South Carolina law.

Under the South Carolina Constitution, individuals convicted of a felony involving moral turpitude are disqualified from holding public office unless they have received a pardon or otherwise met the legal requirements to have their civil rights restored.

That constitutional provision was among the factors cited by the Abbeville County Board of Voter Registration and Elections in determining Tillman was not eligible to run in the March 31 special election.

Election details

Early voting for the Calhoun Falls special election is scheduled to begin later this month, with the election set for March 31.

Voters will now choose between Brandt and Richey to fill the remaining council term.

Timeline: Tillman eligibility review

Feb. 25

The Index-Journal began asking questions about candidate eligibility after learning that Charlie Eugene Paul Tillman had filed for the Calhoun Falls special election.

Requests for clarification were sent to the Abbeville County Board of Voter Registration and Elections and the South Carolina State Election Commission.

A Freedom of Information Act request was also filed with the South Carolina Department of Probation, Parole and Pardon Services (SCDPPPS) seeking records of any pardon or restoration of civil rights.

Feb. 26

SCDPPPS agency spokesman Scott Hawkins responded that the department was not in possession of any records related to Tillman.

March 2

The Abbeville County Board of Voter Registration and Elections voted at a meeting to determine Tillman did not meet eligibility requirements to run for office.

March 10

The State Election Commission responded to questions from the Index-Journal. Spokesman TJ Lundeen said the commission does not have authority over the decision and that the matter would be determined by the county elections office or its board.

March 12

The Abbeville County Board of Voter Registration and Elections confirmed to the IJ that Tillman had been ruled ineligible and that his name would not appear on the March 31 ballot.

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Donald Leopard

NINETY SIX — Willie Donald Leopard, 89, of Ninety Six, widower of Shirley Kirby Leopard, passed away Sunday, March 22, 2026 at the Saluda Nursing Home.

Born on August 9, 1936, in Saluda, SC, he was a son of the late Willie and Leila Leopard.

Donald worked at Greenwood Mills, Sloan Plant, where he served with commitment for over 40 years as a Fixer and Supervisor in the card room. His strong work ethic and steady presence made him a respected figure among his colleagues.

Beyond his career, Donald was a cherished member of the Ninety Six First Baptist Church. He was also an active member of Masonic Lodge #47, reflecting his dedication to fellowship and service.

Among Donald's proudest accomplishments was his long-standing involvement with the Ninety Six High School Football "Chain Gang," where he volunteered for 44 years and never missed a home game. This commitment demonstrated his love for community and sport.

Donald is survived by his children, Randall Leopard; Karen Kelly (Dennis); Susan Ann Morris; Kenneth Earl Morris (Anna); Ray E. Morris; and Johnny Morris (Laurie); grandchildren, Allison Blankenship, Tanya Bailes, Michael Morris, Kayce Alford, Natalie Brand, Zach Billings, Kelly Graham Weeks, Kirby Morris, Brent Leopard, Kayla Leopard, Adele Kelly Price, Gabe Kelly, Jillian Goff, and Aaron Smith; great-grandchildren Nick, Megan, Joey, and Beau Blankenship; Krew and Kaiden Morris; Ashton and Kensie Bailes; Caroline, Charlotte, and Savannah Alford; Bennett, Holden, and Davis Goff; Wade Smith; Hannah Grace and Sarah Brand; Patton, Sutton, and Britton Weeks; Cora Grace, Asher, and Cohen Billings; Gracie Leopard; Reynolds and Addie Grace Morris; and Collins Kelly Price.

In addition to his parents and wife, he was preceded in death by a daughter-in-law, Susan George Morris; and his brother, Grady Leopard.

Services will be held at 11 a.m. on Thursday at Ninety Six First Baptist Church with the Rev. Michael How officiating. Burial will follow at Greenwood Memorial Gardens.

Pallbearers will be his grandsons.

The family will receive friends before the service from 10 — 11 a.m. at the church.

Memorials may be made to the Saluda Nursing Home, 3131 Newberry Highway, Saluda, SC 29138.

The family would like to give a special thank you to the staff on the Riley Unit at the Saluda Nursing Home for their loving care.

Willie Donald Leopard leaves behind a legacy of steadfast devotion, both to his family and his community. He will be remembered fondly for his hard work, his love of football, and the warmth he brought to those around him.

Harley Funeral Home and Crematory is in charge of the arrangements. Messages and photos may be shared with the family by visiting Donald's life tribute page at www.harleyfuneralhome.com.

Condolences can be submitted
indexjournal.com/obituaries

Candidates outline plans for Calhoun Falls council seat

By Renee Ortiz
ortiz@indexjournal.com

CALHOUN FALLS — Shortly after Calhoun Falls Town Council entered executive session Monday night, Charlie Eugene Paul Tillman approached Index-Journal reporter Renee Ortiz to dispute his removal from the upcoming special election ballot and the paper's prior coverage of his candidacy.

Tillman, who was ruled ineligible to appear on the ballot earlier this month, later remained a visible presence at the meeting and was escorted from the room following repeated interruptions during public comment. Tillman has continued to challenge the decision that barred him from the race.

"I asked on multiple occasions, could I run?" Tillman said in an interview Monday, referring to his questions to Abbeville County Elections Director Jatavius Coleman. "He [Coleman] said he didn't see nothing wrong. All of a sudden ... they tell me I couldn't run," Tillman told the Index-Journal.

The Abbeville County Board of Voter Registration and Elections ruled March 2 that Tillman did not meet constitutional eligibility requirements to run for office.

Under Article VI, Section 1 of the South Carolina Constitution, individuals convicted of a felony are disqualified from holding public office unless they have received a pardon or completed their full sentence at least 15 years prior to filing.

The provision is reinforced by S.C. Code Ann. § 7-5-120(B) and S.C. Code Ann. § 7-11-15, which require candidates to meet all constitutional and statutory qualifications at the time of filing.

Abbeville board officials cited those provisions, along with state

law, in determining Tillman was not eligible to run in the special election.

Tillman questioned the timing of the decision and the process used by election officials, arguing he should have been notified earlier.

"They had time to get back with me and tell me that I was ineligible to run," Tillman said. "That way we could have got somebody running in my place."

He also disputed details reported about his prior charges and conviction, maintaining that aspects of the case had been misrepresented.

"I wasn't charged with no five crimes," Tillman said.

In April 2012, former Calhoun Falls Police Chief Mike Alewine arrested Tillman after officers alleged he was speeding and weaving on Highway 81.

Tillman was initially charged with driving under the influence, speeding, failure to stop for blue lights, having an open container and threatening the life of a public official.

During a plea hearing in June 2014, Tillman pleaded guilty to two charges stemming from the 2012 arrest:

- threatening the life of a public official, a felony.
 - driving under the influence (DUI).
- As part of a plea agreement, several other charges from the 2012 incident were dropped, including:
- failure to stop for blue lights.
 - transportation of alcohol in a motor vehicle (open container).
 - speeding.

Tillman further alleged bias in the election decision-making process, stating he believes the outcome was influenced by race.

"A board of white people gonna convict a Black man always," he said. "This is a racist redneck ass county."

During the open session of council's meeting, Tillman again referenced race as tensions escalated. As he was asked to leave following repeated interruptions, shouting as he was escorted out, "Redneck taking the Black man out of the meeting!" and continued yelling accusations of

racism before exiting.

Despite being ruled ineligible to run for council, Tillman said he would remain engaged in local issues and critical of town leadership, pointing to what he described as ongoing procedural problems during council meetings.

Meet the eligible candidates

The special election will fill the council seat vacated when Viggo Lassen was elected mayor in November. Four candidates are now seeking the seat, including Micheal Brandt and Linda Lee Richey, along with two declared write-in candidates, Barbara Foust and Wane Postell.

Early voting began March 16, with Election Day set for March 31.

Micheal Brandt

Micheal Brandt said his focus would be on stabilizing the town's finances and restoring order to council operations.

"I want to help get Calhoun Falls back up again," Brandt said. "We've had a bad stretch, and we need to work on the problems and get back to where we're supposed to be."

Brandt identified completing the town's budgets and audits as his top priority.

"Our biggest problem right now is getting the budgets and audits done," he said. "We need to get money back into the town."

He also emphasized the need to reduce tensions during meetings and improve how council operates.

"I would try to keep everybody calm and work with everyone on council," Brandt said. "I understand procedures and Robert's Rules of Order, and I can help keep things on track."

Brandt said transparency would be a key part of his approach if elected.

"I plan on being transparent and making sure the town meetings are more open so people can voice

their opinions," he said.

He also acknowledged the town's financial strain and said bankruptcy could be one option to consider.

"It could give us time to make the money to pay people back without being pressured," Brandt said.

Linda Richey

Linda Richey said she is focused on improving quality of life in Calhoun Falls and addressing long-standing community needs.

"I want to help my town," Richey said. "There's a lot of things that need to be done around here that aren't being done."

Richey pointed to the lack of a grocery store and vacant buildings as key concerns.

"We have to ride 15, 20 miles just to go to the grocery store," she said. "That's ridiculous."

Richey also addressed tensions within town leadership, saying disagreements among officials have contributed to ongoing issues.

"There's always going to be differences of opinion," she said. "But it's hard to believe in someone when you feel like they're not being truthful."

She also disputed statements she said were made about her during a recent meeting.

"If I was a convicted felon, I wouldn't be running for council," Richey said.

Beyond governance, Richey said her motivation for running comes from helping residents directly.

"I love helping people," she said. "I want this town to feel like it has more."

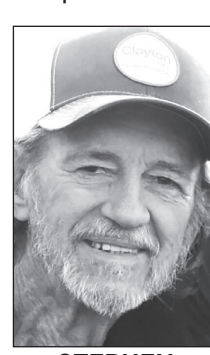
Barbara Foust (write-in)

Barbara Foust, a write-in candidate who spoke during Monday night's meeting, emphasized the need for unity and cooperation. "My objective is to work with the

Stephen Sanders

Stephen Ogletree Sanders, 79, of Greenwood, beloved husband of Carol Coleman Sanders, passed away Saturday, March 21, 2026, at his home.

Born in Greenwood, he was a son of the late Clarence Cooper Sanders and Gertrude Ogletree Sanders. Stephen proudly served in the US Army National Guard, a testament to his commitment and sense of duty. Beyond his service, he was best known as an avid horse lover, a passion rooted deeply in his upbringing. His love extended to the natural world as well, where gardening and caring for dogs brought him joy and peace. Stephen took immense pride in the Sanders family farm and property, cherishing the legacy and the hard work that sustained it. A gifted storyteller, Stephen was known for his captivating tales shared by bonfires, delighting friends and family alike. He loved the outdoors and found solace in moments of solitude. His warmth and simple pleasures made every gathering meaningful, reflecting the depth of his character. Stephen's presence



STEPHEN SANDERS



will be deeply missed by those who knew him and loved him.

He was preceded in death by a brother, Rhett Sanders.

Surviving in addition to his wife are a son, Stephen Ross Sanders (Taylor Haigler); sister, Carol Shaw; brother, Peter Sanders (Joan); grand puppy, Cooper; lifelong best friend, Russell Lawrence; close nephew, Rhett Sanders, Jr.; nieces and nephews, Leslie Bradley (Allen), Cope Sanders (Gina), Chris Sanders (Wendy), Jason Sanders (Beth), Abney Coleman, Michael Coleman and April Cannon; along with numerous extended family and friends.

The family will hold a celebration of life on April 11, 2026, at Flynn's of Maxwell from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Special thanks are extended to the staff of Hospice and other caregivers for the compassionate care and support provided during his final days.

In lieu of flowers memorials may be made to Hospice and Palliative Care of the Piedmont, 409 West Alexander Avenue, Greenwood, SC 29646.

Harley Funeral Home and Crematory is in charge of arrangements.

DO JUST ONE THING

Choosing the proper haircut for your dog's breed is essential. While it might be tempting to trim your pup's fur during hot summer days, cutting too much actually can backfire. Breeds with long, dense coats rely on their fur to shield their skin from the sun and help regulate temperature. In colder months, an overly long coat can still trap heat and cause overheating, even when it seems chilly outside.



CHARLIE TILLMAN



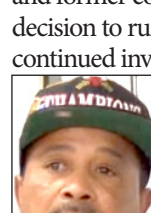
BARBARA FOUST

to do what is right and what is best for everyone," Foust said.

"Our back and forth is not solving one thing," she said. "We all need to come together and find a way to move this town forward."

Foust encouraged community involvement, saying residents can play a role in helping the town recover.

"Ask what can be done, what we can do as a town. The little things, the everyday things, anything we can do to get this town back on track," she said.



WANE POSTELL

Postell said his experience could help guide current leadership.

"I want to help lighten the load and give them some guidance," he said.

He pointed to the town's debt and ongoing obligations as issues that require a focused approach.

"We've got to take care of one issue at a time," Postell said.

Postell also emphasized the importance of experience and procedure.

"There's a lot of new people up there right now," he said. "It's going to be a roller coaster ride."

Contact Renee Ortiz at 864-943-5643. Follow her on X: @By_ReneeOrtiz



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WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25, 2026

DAILY \$2

From order to outbursts

Distractions, racial tensions, legal warnings dominate Calhoun Falls meeting

By Renee Ortiz
rortiz@indexjournal.com

CALHOUN FALLS — “This is the biggest crock I have ever seen in my life.”

That was the assessment of Monday night’s Calhoun Falls Town Council meeting from Calhoun Falls native and Troy Mayor

Candidate statements

Candidates for the vacant Calhoun Falls Town Council seat offer reasons for running for office: **4A**

Brian Dixon, as the meeting spiraled into procedural disputes, racial tensions, public outbursts and renewed scrutiny over the

town’s handling of its finances and water system.

Dixon, addressing council during public comment, criticized town leadership and urged officials to act decisively.

“This ain’t a black thing. It’s not a white thing. It’s a green thing.”

See **OUTBURSTS**, page 6A



Charlie Tillman remains outside the Calhoun Falls civic center after being removed from Monday night’s council meeting, where racial tensions escalated during public comment.

RENEE ORTIZ | INDEX-JOURNAL

‘I was told to leave’

Former police chief of Calhoun Falls says she was forced out

By Renee Ortiz
rortiz@indexjournal.com

Former Calhoun Falls Police Chief Cynthia Kennedy said she wanted to set the record straight about her 2021 departure after a recent Index-Journal report outlined a timeline of leadership turnover in the town, including her reported resignation.

Kennedy, who served as chief of the small town in Abbeville County from 2018 until December 2021, said the circumstances surrounding her exit were not fully reflected in the timeline.

She decided to reach out to the Index-Journal to provide and describe her recollection of her departure.

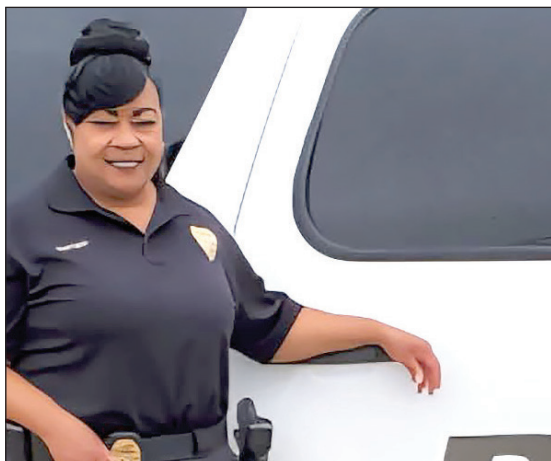
From cosmetology to policing

Kennedy said her path into law enforcement was not traditional.

Before becoming an officer, she worked as a cosmetologist for more than four decades. She later began her law enforcement career in Abbeville in 2000 as a reserve officer before becoming a full-time officer.

Her decision to pursue policing was influenced by her cousin, Danny Wilson. Wilson was an Abbeville officer who was killed in the line of duty in

See **CHIEF**, page 8A



SUBMITTED

Former Calhoun Falls Police Chief Cynthia Kennedy stands beside a department vehicle during her tenure as chief. Kennedy, who led the department from 2018-21, said she was asked to step down from the role and later submitted a resignation letter.



[JPTPS NU MYA ATTEN | INDEX-JOURNAL

M’Kenzi Moore studies her geode in awe as the crystals are revealed.



At Northside Middle School, sixth grade science Teacher Tara Farley examines geodes alongside her students.

Let’s rock!

Northside teacher turns abstract science into a ‘priceless’ adventure

By Mya Atten
matten@indexjournal.com

The moment the hammer struck, the entire class held its breath. Then came the classic cracking sound.

Inside each rock, hidden for millions of years, crystals shimmered back at a classroom full of sixth graders as science came to life in their hands.

At Northside Middle School, that moment was more than just a lesson. It was the result of an idea sixth grade science teacher Tara Farley refused to let stay out of reach.

“I am always looking for hands-on ways for my students to experience science,” Farley said. “... one of my teaching philosophies is that if they cannot get their hands on what we are studying, then they will never truly understand it.”

Holding a colorful, crystal-filled geode, she said, it “transforms abstract concepts into tangible learning moments.”

“Most of my students may never experience something like this, but I wanted to connect to their curiosity about rocks and treasure,” Farley said.

But turning that idea into reality wasn’t easy.

The challenge wasn’t the mess. Her students loved that. It was the cost.

Even the smallest geodes were too expensive for an entire class, leaving the experience out of reach and confined to videos on a screen.

That changed with community support.

In June 2025, Farley applied for funding through AdoptAClassroom. With support from Eaton Corporation and matching funds, the project became a reality by August, with \$200 donated.

Faith Home Restore in Greenwood also

See **ROCK**, page 7A

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PHOTOS BY RENEE ORTIZ | INDEX-JOURNAL

Calhoun Falls Town Council opened its March meeting with a temporary resolution 2026-01 to appoint Amanda Brandt, pictured left, as temporary town secretary, as the interim clerk and clerk of court Stephanie McElrath was not in attendance.

OUTBURSTS

From page 1A

Dixon said. "Everybody in this room is paying for something they're not getting, and y'all are responsible for it."

Executive session concerns

The meeting opened with a temporary resolution 2026-01 to appoint Amanda Brandt, as temporary town secretary, as the interim clerk and clerk of court Stephanie McElrath was not in attendance.

Questions about compliance surfaced after council then entered executive session to discuss legal issues with the Abbeville water lawsuit, and the hiring of department heads.

The agenda showed executive session near the end of the docket and council made no votes to amend the agenda.

Mayor Viggo Lassen called for a motion to enter executive session. Only one council member, Mayor Pro Tem Amy Battaglia, indicated support.

No full vote of council was recorded before council left the room for about an hour.

Dixon later told council the move could have legal consequences, stating the session was entered "fraudulently" and warning that discussions held during that time could be subject to public disclosure if challenged.

To which Lassen replied "Y'all, I'm still learning."

Water lawsuit update

Following executive session, town attorney Juankell Shingles provided an update on the ongoing water dispute with the City of Abbeville.

The court declined to appoint a receiver or impose an immediate rate increase but ordered increased financial oversight and operational requirements, including:

- weekly financial reporting to Abbeville.
- mandatory monthly billing for all customers.
- installation of properly calibrated water meters on a set timeline, through September.
- prioritization of payroll, operations and debt obligations.

The court also warned that further action could be taken if compliance does not improve.

Staffing changes

Council moved forward with several staffing decisions, including:

- appointing Marsha Lomax as clerk-treasurer, with a start date of April 6.



MARSHA LOMAX

■ removing Stephanie McElrath from the clerk-treasurer position.

During public comment, concerns were raised about the transition, including whether adequate training would be provided for the incoming clerk after McElrath was removed from the position.

"When you hire an employee and you don't have anybody to train them, you're setting them up for failure," Dixon said.

Council also announced the hiring of a utility clerk, Amanda Brandt, and discussed ongoing staffing needs across departments.

Racial tensions

Tensions escalated following discussion of the town's business license ordinance and public comment period.

Lassen spent about 17 minutes reading the full business license ordinance, 2026-02-01, from front to back. The council later held off on a vote following procedural concerns raised during the meeting.

After the reading, Dixon raised an objection.

"That is not what he just read. That isn't your business license ordinance," Dixon said.

The exchange led to a confrontation involving Charlie Tillman, who was in the audience. Tillman repeatedly interrupted Dixon, prompting Lassen to strike the gavel.

"Call to order! There will be no outbursts! If you outburst one more time you will be thrown out," Lassen warned.

Tillman continued yelling, leading Lassen to call for an officer to escort him out. Tillman stood and, as he walked toward the door, he announced: "Redneck taking the Black man out of the meeting!"

Members of the audience responded, saying race was "not a factor".

Lassen replied, "That has nothing to do with it, it's keeping order!"

Tillman continued shouting: "Racist! Dynasty duck! Racist red dog!" before exiting. He remained outside the doorway for the remainder of the meeting.

The interruption prompted Lassen to again call for order and warn attendees against further outbursts.

Public exasperation on display

Public comment continued with residents raising concerns about water quality, billing inconsistencies and infrastructure failures.

One resident questioned the lack of a timeline for repairing aging water lines, while another described ongoing issues with meter readings and billing.

Lassen acknowledged widespread gaps in records and maintenance, stating the town is working to address years of incomplete documentation.

"There's nothing been done for four years," Lassen said.

Frustration continues

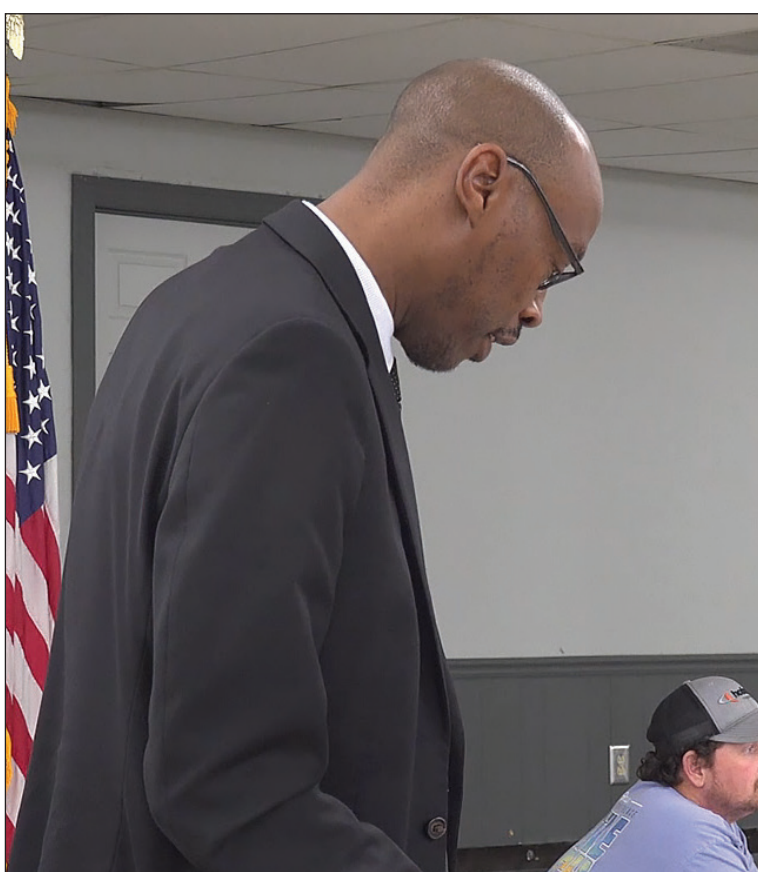
The meeting drew continued criticism for disorganization, with residents repeatedly calling for officials to follow the agenda and maintain order.

Despite repeated calls for cooperation from both officials and residents, the meeting highlighted ongoing divisions within the town's leadership and community.

Dixon urged council to present a unified front and take concrete action.

"You argue in private, you come together in public," he said.

Contact Renee Ortiz at 864-943-5643. Follow her on X: @By_ReneeOrtiz



Calhoun Falls Town Attorney Juankell Shingles provided an update on the town's ongoing water dispute with the City of Abbeville.

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