

SMOKE SIGNAL

VOLUME 58, ISSUE 10

Serving the Smoke Rise Community since 1968

January, 2026

www.smokesignalnews.com



A Message from Tucker's New Mayor, Anne Lerner

Smoke Rise has always been an important part of Tucker's story reflecting the very best of our city with neighbors who care for one another, residents who are deeply invested in the life of our city and people who look forward with hope. Long before Tucker officially became a city, I had the honor of working alongside many of you, volunteering with local organizations that helped lay the groundwork for the city we enjoy today.

As your new mayor, my commitment to you remains the same: to serve with transparency, collaboration and a steady focus on what strengthens our community.

Your councilmembers, Virginia Rece and Roger Orlando, continue to serve with dedication and integrity. During my time on council, we worked together tackling issues that mattered to all of Tucker and finding common ground through listening, learning and cooperation. That spirit of collaboration will guide our decisions as mayor and council.

I want to offer my gratitude to Frank and Gaye Auman and their entire family. For more than a decade, Frank dedicated countless hours to helping Tucker become a city and then shaping the foundation of our young city as mayor with steadiness and commitment. Gaye and their family were right there beside him, supporting the work that helped move our community forward. We are all beneficiaries of their service and for the legacy they have built as Tucker enters its next chapter.

Looking ahead, I am filled with hope because together, we have real opportunity to keep the momentum going and to continue to build a bright future for Tucker.

Public safety isn't just a promise; it's a foundation. We will work closely with law enforcement, community groups, neighborhoods and businesses to ensure every corner of our city feels secure and supported.

Economic growth matters too, but not just any growth. We will shape a vision for our city that attracts thoughtful investment, quality jobs and small businesses that reflect Tucker's unique character. I believe we can grow our local economy while preserving the neighborly feel that defines both Smoke Rise and Tucker.

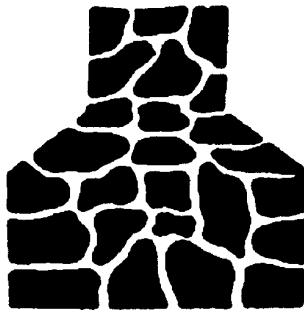
We will also plan for lifelong community growth. That means ensuring that residents at every stage of life have housing options that allow us to grow up and grow old in Tucker — as neighbors and friends enjoying our city for generations to come.

And because our parks and green spaces are the heart of our city, we will continue investing in our parks. From upgrading existing parks to expanding our trail network and creating recreation opportunities, we'll work to make our neighborhoods more connected and welcoming to all ages.

But more than any project or plan, what gives me hope is you. Your energy and your ideas have carried this city forward. Thank you for your continued trust and your willingness to be part of this journey. I'm proud to serve as your mayor and I'm excited about what we'll accomplish together.



District 1 Post 2 Council Member: Roger Orlando, Mayor Anne Lerner, and District 1 Post 1 Council Member Virginia Rece.



SIGNAL

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Mayor Frank Auman was presented the KEY to the CITY of TUCKER at the last City council Meeting of 2025.

Thank You Tucker District 1 Voters for Four More Years

By Roger Orlando, Councilman, District 1

Presently, I serve not only as a Councilman, but also as a member of the Downtown Development Authority [DDA.] I acquired a lot of knowledge over the past four years. In four years, I learned about tax abatements, chicanes, Capital Improvement Programs, code enforcement, SLUPs, Tax Allocation Districts and the application of untold other governmental terms and abbreviations. Naturally, it's time to take this knowledge and move forward to continue to transform Tucker-in ways always for the better-over the next four years.

Public safety is the sine qua non of Tucker's growth in all business sizes and income levels. Without this citizens and visitors alike will be less likely to visit and patronize our local businesses or to make Tucker their home. Moving forward I will both be supporting the men and women of the Dekalb County Police Department who presently and honorably serve within the Tucker City limits, as well as continue the conversation with citizens and business leaders as to the efficacy and desirability of a referendum to create a Tucker police force of our own. Presently, such a move might create a feeling of unification within our city. Also, a local police force might result in lower 911 response times, more visibility for deterrence and greater oversight and accountability to our local government leadership. More study, discussion and thought is needed before the possible presentation to the citizens of Tucker for their consideration upon ballot referendum.

Lastly, congratulations to former Mayor Frank Auman on a decade's long job very well done and a warm welcome to our new Mayor, Anne Lerner. Mayor Lerner is strong, knowledgeable, focused and motivated. I predict that good things will continue to happen for Tucker, Georgia!



Smoke Signal

P.O. Box 1038, Tucker, GA 30085

A non-profit service organization devoted to furthering neighborhood cooperation with the aid of good neighborhood communication.

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Classified ads and flyers are still available!

Smoke Signal Deadlines

JANUARY 13

Please e-mail articles to:

staff@smokesignalnews.com

Articles and photos should be sent in .doc or .docx format. Articles sent in .pdf format cannot be edited. Photos and graphics should be submitted in .jpg or .pdf format.

Deadline for classified ads is JANUARY 10

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Congratulations to our former First Lady Gaye Auman who was chosen as the December 2025 Tucker Citizen of the Month. You can read more about her in the InTucker December 2025 magazine. For ten years, Gaye Auman has been by the side of our first mayor, her husband Frank. She attended with him countless ribbon cuttings for new Tucker businesses- in all kinds of weather. In the process, she tried the food of almost all of the new restaurants here. She has been to park dedications and events around the city and can be seen with her children and grandchildren enjoying our new and expanding City of Tucker. She attended city council meetings, 911 ceremonies and more! She is a member of the Smoke Rise Country Club and is a member of the Mountain Mums Garden Club where she was President for two terms. She has been a champion for their Walk to Remember project and for the NETWorks food bank. Gaye can be seen in everything TUCKER. She has written for the *Smoke Signal* off and on for several years. And she does all this with a real smile on her face. Congratulations, Gaye! You are an all-around wonderful humble human being, and we are proud to have you in Tucker.

Smoke Rise Baptist Church

5901 Hugh Howell Road
Senior Pastor: Dr. Chris George, cgeorge@smokerisebaptist.org
Phone: 770-469-5856 SmokeRiseBaptist.org

SUNDAY
9:45 a.m. - Attend Sunday School through Zoom or In-Person
11:00 a.m. - Attend Worship via Live Stream or In-Person
WEDNESDAY
5:00 p.m. - Attend our Wednesday Dinner
6:00 p.m. - Followed by activities and Bible Study for all ages

Eastminster Presbyterian Church

5801 Hugh Howell Road
Rev. Jeanine Fulton, Pastor
Phone: 770-469-4881 [Website: Eastminster.us](http://Eastminster.us)

SUNDAY
9:15 a.m. Adult & Children's Sunday School
10:30 a.m. In-Person and Live streaming of Worship service

First Moravian Church

Pastor: Reverend Elroy Christopher
(770) 491-7250
[Website: Gamoravian.org](http://Gamoravian.org)

SUNDAY 10:00 a.m. Sunday School-Adults & Children
11:00 a.m. Worship
12:00 p.m. Fellowship Time

Mountain West Church

4818 Hugh Howell Road
Pastor: Mo Huggins
770-491-0228 Mwchurch.com
SUNDAY 9:00 a.m., 10:30 a.m., and 11:55 a.m. Worship
MONDAY 7:00 p.m.
In-person and streaming online on [Facebook and mwchurch.com](http://Facebook.com/mwchurch.com)



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Eastminster Presbyterian Church

As a new year unfolds, Eastminster Presbyterian Church shares a blessing of hope and peace for everyone, grounded in a shared sense of belonging and purpose. May God's grace bring healing where it is needed and encourage us to love our neighbors through service and compassion. With gratitude for this community, we extend this blessing into the year ahead, embracing God's abiding presence and the shared moments that bring us together.

Upcoming Special Events:

- Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, February 18, with a drive-thru imposition of ashes. Dinner will be at 5:15 p.m., followed by a worship service with the imposition of ashes at 6:00 p.m.
- Winter Concert: "Spirituals for the Soul," celebrating the music of the African American diaspora, featuring acclaimed local singers Samantha Burke and Mali Browning on Saturday, February 21, at 3:00 p.m.
- Heritage Sunday is on February 22, celebrating our community's diverse cultures with music, food, and heritage displays.
- Friends & Neighbors Day is on Sunday, March 15, a morning filled with food, faith, and fellowship.

After School with Heart: ESAP Registration Is Open

Need after-school care or full-day camp when schools are closed? Look no further than the Eastminster School Age Program (ESAP). Serving children ages 3 through 5th grade, ESAP is a trusted ministry of Eastminster Presbyterian Church, offering safe, engaging, and faith-filled care for the 2026–2027 school year. Tours and enrollment are now available.

Call 770-469-9489, email csears@eastminster.us, or visit eastminster.us/afterschool to learn more.

Eastminster Presbyterian Church welcomes neighbors of all ages and backgrounds to take part in upcoming gatherings and events. We look forward to sharing these moments with our community.



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Tucker in December

By Gaye Auman, Contributing Writer

December in Tucker has had many people exclaiming, "Tucker looks like a Hallmark movie!"

The season began with the Annual tree and Menorah lighting on the new Tucker Town Green. Santa & Mrs. Claus arrived to the excitement of MANY children. The Tucker Rec Center provided hot chocolate stations, Santa letter writing, ornament making, cookie decorating and train rides while children and adults waited to talk with Santa. The fountains lit the water with red and green lights. It was another spectacular evening in the new park.



Main Street has been bustling with activity since the park has drawn the attention of citizens. Parking is available on Railroad Avenue, and in the lots behind the churches and banks in the City Annex lot after hours. There is also street parking and the surface lots behind Local 7. The trails & sidewalks connect all of these spaces with a flat, leisurely walk. The distance is less than the walk inside Northlake Mall from where Sears used to be to Macys, and much more enjoyable.



Be sure to shop and eat local during the holiday season and into the new year. Speaking of eating: Tucker Brewing Company has opened for breakfast and lunch in the garden. Be sure to check out their menu: it's delicious! They

offer soups and salads, as well as sandwiches, for lunch, filling a needed niche in our area.

Frank is finishing his ten years as Mayor. The City held a reception for him before his last Council meeting Monday. Dozens of members in the community came to express their appreciation and pay tribute to

Frank for his part in founding our City. Frank offered a few reflections on the City's history and thanked all of those who contributed to its success. The Council presented Frank with a Proclamation and a key to the City.

Frank has several other business meetings, signings, and ribbon cuttings before officially handing over the reins to the new Mayor, Anne Lerner, the second Monday in January.

Be sure to check Tuckerga.gov for upcoming events including the Winter Concert Season indoors at the Rec Center, the MLK day of service and multiple class offerings.

Happy New Year!!



Cousins First Meeting and Mountclaire's First Neighborhood Block Party

By Kathy Rhinehart, Smoke Rise Resident

Back in the summer, Bill and I enjoyed a delightful dinner with our friends Connie and William Henry at Smoke Rise Country Club. During dessert, Connie shared some exciting news – her “fifth” cousin, Jamie Lee Yawn Smithwick and her husband Ashton had recently purchased a house just two doors down from where we live in the Mountclaire neighborhood. Jamie Lee’s great great grandmother and Connie’s grandfather were siblings. Connie and Jamie Lee are both originally from Vienna, Georgia, and although Connie has always been closely connected to Jamie Lee’s family, she had never met Jamie Lee. Connie looked forward to meeting her relatives, especially knowing they would soon be living only a mile from each other.

Food is the perfect Southern hello. On a cold and rainy Sunday evening Connie and I welcomed the Smithwicks to Mountclaire with a home-cooked meal. Cooking has always been my favorite pastime, and that evening “Kathy’s Kitchen” was filled with the comforting aroma of white chicken chili simmering on the stovetop and jalapeno cornbread baking in my grandmother’s black cast-iron skillet. Connie complemented the meal with a selection of fresh fruit.

While the two cousins were getting acquainted and reminiscing, Ashton and I shared how each of us chose the Mountclaire neighborhood. Bill and I sought to downsize, and our realtor discovered our fully renovated mid-century modern house that fulfilled all our requirements and even exceeded our expectations. (You might just see an article about our new home in the Smoke Signal real soon.)

For Ashton, the decision to move was shaped by his lengthy commute. They searched for a nice, quiet neighborhood closer to his workplace, and their new home offered just that. It also featured a fenced backyard, perfect for their fur baby family – two dogs and a cat – along with several other pleasant surprises.

After enjoying a wonderful visit, Connie and I popped open our umbrellas to leave. That’s when Jamie Lee asked me whether our neighborhood ever had block parties. Since Bill and I had only recently moved in six months prior, I had no idea. It was right then and there I decided to make it happen! Jamie Lee and I started texting and came up with a plan to host the party on November 22, at 4:00 p.m. in the Mountclaire Court cul-de-sac. I chose the menu and obtained email addresses from neighbor Tahira Piraino, and Jamie Lee created the clever invitation. Together the two of us left a flyer at each house on Mountclaire Court and Mountclaire Drive. It was quite a sweet bonding time for us as we discovered we shared a southern drawl and a love for plants, cooking, and Connie.

We later learned that this was indeed Mountclaire’s very FIRST block party, and it was a whopping success!!! The neighbors graciously pitched in to help, and there was an abundance of delicious appetizers, a baked potato bar complete with all the trimmings, four crockpots of hearty chili, and an array of scrumptious desserts. The tables looked festive with Fall decorations and glowing candles. There were even a few door prizes.

We thanked God for the beautiful weather as we played cornhole and made smores over a fire pit. We talked, we laughed, and we danced in the street to some of our favorite tunes.

Our group was wonderfully diverse, spanning from six months old to eighty-six. Two of our neighbors have lived in our little piece of paradise for fifty-eight years. We are truly blessed that

these great folks are our new neighbors and new friends!

Remarkably, the spark for this wonderful event came from a simple question posed by the newest kid on the block, “Oh, do y’all have block parties?” It may have been our first block party, but it certainly won’t be the last. And Connie and William, you will forever be a part of it!

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Salute to Advertiser

Outdoors Well Lit

by Staff Writer Susan Gilbert

Brian Major, owner of Outdoors Well Lit, has advertised in the Classified section for several years, and he attributes much of the growth in his successful business in the Smoke Rise community to the listing. His family-owned and operated company has been working in the Smoke Rise area for over 30 years. In the ad, he offers free assessments to callers who mention they heard about him from the *Smoke Signal*.

Brian's company has worked on my property in Kanawha for about 10 years, managing both the lighting and irrigation. I especially appreciate that he switched

our property from County water to a pump in the creek, so we have no risk of expensive leaks that you only realize when you get a \$1,000 water bill. It's also nice that when his people do come here, they can manage both irrigation and the more than 100 outdoor lights.

What initially sold us on Brian was when he first visited to fix some lamps in disrepair, he did an assessment of the existing system, which was about 20 years old, and proposed converting the incandescent to LEDs, which saved us \$90/month or over \$1,000 annually in electric costs.

He also suggested swapping out the circular ground-based up lights that collect leaves and debris for ones on posts with slanted glass tops that can't collect anything. Having never seen such a fixture, I asked him where they came from, and he

replied that he makes them in his own shop because the ones he was servicing for clients were too prone to breakage and required too much maintenance. They are designed based on his decades of first-hand experience observing how commercially available outdoor fixtures fail.

Curious about why Brian prefers the lighting area of his business compared to any others, he replied, "I have worked in so many areas related to lighting, landscaping, home security, and more, but nothing compares to the glee homeowners express when they first see their home and gardens lit and come alive at night!"

In conclusion, my three reasons for hiring Brian's company are these:

1. He is responsive and trustworthy.
2. He does great work.
3. He truly cares about his customers and wants to continue growing his Smoke Rise business.

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**The Smoke Signal Staff
wishes you a wonderful New Year!**

Smoke Signal Staff and Board members Bob Espy, Joel Gilbert, Susan Gilbert, Cheri Schneider, Victoria Crosby, Frank Luton, Beverly Banister, Maureen Kofkee, Joyce Ray, Mike Canova, Aviva Hoffman, Ann Fulmer, Barbara Luton, Sonia Hellen, and Linda Karr met recently for a holiday celebration and look forward to another year of producing your local Smoke Signal newsletter. Keep those stories and photos coming! (Not pictured: Pat Soltys, Gia Anderson, Pat Baumann and Noelle Joy)

**JANUARY 19
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Thanksgiving Community Partner Support from Smoke Rise Baptist

On the evening of November 23, 2025, several hundred church members of Smoke Rise Baptist gathered for a time of fellowship and thankfulness during a Thanksgiving dinner. Afterwards, the attendees of all ages processed to the gym to assemble 150 Thanksgiving food bags for the clients of NETWorks and the Lilburn Cooperative. A detailed list of requested food items was circulated to the membership during the period of October 26-November 19. Those donated items filled the bags, with each charity receiving 75 bags tailored to their requested needs. Smoke Rise youth members loaded the donated bags into delivery vans, and the bags were transported to the organizations on November 24th.

How did all this get started? It is a nineteen-year tradition begun by Smoke Rise member Jack Carrollton. He saw a need and began organizing the operation by recruiting volunteers to assemble the items and fill the baskets which were used originally donated by a member. The concept was well received and has grown more each year. We are grateful to the Rockbridge Kroger, who donated 150 reusable bags which were filled with many pounds of requested food items. Representatives from NETWorks and the Lilburn Co-op attended the dinner and were recognized for their wonderful work in our community. Stephanie Suggs with NETWorks commented that the organization typically gives out 80 bags of food on their distribution days, and on some days this fall, they gave out 120 bags of food to needy families in our community. For more information on NETWorks or the Lilburn Co-op, please contact the organizations to donate or volunteer.



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Grand Re-Opening of Smoke Rise Country Club

By Susan Gilbert, Staff Writer

At the December 17th Grand Re-Opening Ceremony at Smoke Rise Country Club, Mayor Frank Auman shared his memories of the Club's origins, when the community came together 27 years ago to preserve nearly 200 acres of green space for golf, tennis, dining, social events, and community gatherings. He added, "The club has been a major stabilizing force in the community/Tucker, and Tucker should embrace the Club for social life, business use, and health benefits." Adding, "That is, it should not be such a well-kept secret!"

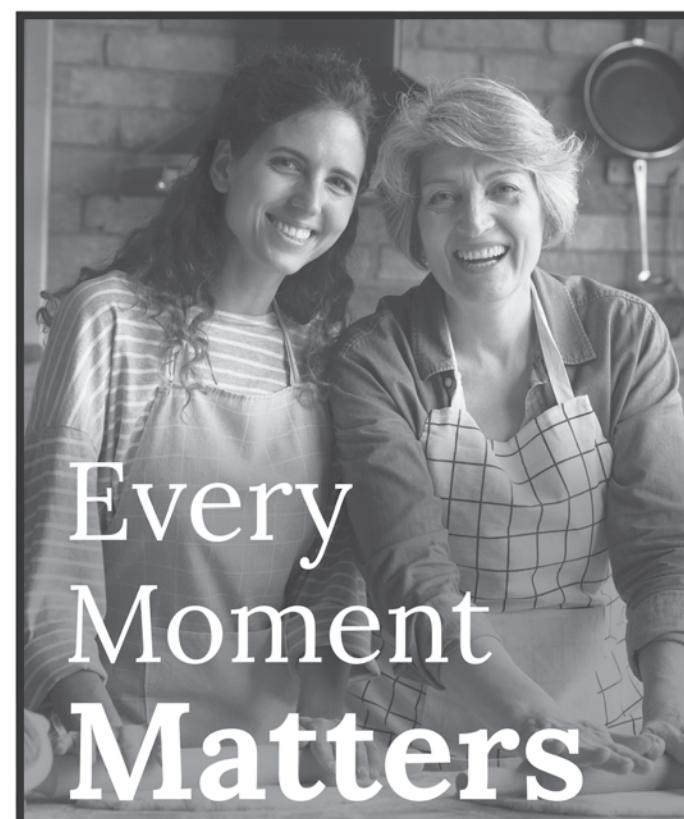
Mayor, Frank mentioned that most ribbon cuttings were for new businesses opening, but this was a perfect opportunity to remind Smoke Rise of the 2+ year renovation and recovery from a cold December flood. More than 40 members, City officials, and staff turned out to celebrate this grand event.

Shown here, Club Board Chairman Art Wood praised the patience and perseverance of so many Board members, staff, and the membership, who stuck together and have now transformed the facilities for a fresh new era. The course is in the best shape ever and is getting rave reviews from golfers. After returning to private status in August 2025, public play has been eliminated, and only members and their guests use the course. Tennis continues to boom as it has for many years, and the dining has been elevated to what members are calling, "Fine dining has come to Tucker!" He pointed out that the Club's culture is welcoming, down-to-earth, and, as clubs go, one of the most reasonably priced Clubs in Atlanta. It's a great time to visit the Club and take a tour to see for yourself the extraordinary private country club that is nestled right here in Smoke Rise.



Dutch Bros Coffee Now Open in Tucker

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Woman's Club Spreads Christmas Joy Throughout the Community

The GFWC Stone Mountain Woman's Club celebrated the Christmas season by playing 'elf' throughout the community. They gave a Christmas party for the residents of The Oaks Assisted Living Home. The club members enjoyed songs and refreshments with the residents there.

Four Stone Mountain Woman's Club members journeyed to Tallulah Falls School to judge the Holiday decorations on the doors of the Middle School and the High School rooms. Monetary prizes were awarded to the rooms with the most uniquely decorated doors.

Members of the club also baked 350 cookies which were delivered to the teachers at Smoke Rise Elementary School and Stone Mountain Elementary School. SR residents Marty Bryan and Kathy Gallo delivered the cookies to the schools.



It was not all 'elf' work in December, though. The Woman's Club held their Christmas party on the regular meeting day where they enjoyed entertainment, a catered lunch and where the Club Woman of the Year, Jane Brown, was announced. Smoke Rise resident, Terry Ingwersen, and former Smoke Rise resident Shari Carter were hosts for the party.

Dear Neighbor,

I'd like to invite you to our next Community Connection breakfast, a quarterly gathering where District 4 residents can connect with one another and engage directly with local leaders about the issues that matter most in our community.

Saturday, January 31

9:00–11:00 a.m.

East Central DeKalb

Community

& Senior Center

4885 Elam Road,

Stone Mountain

Irvin Johnson, our DeKalb County Tax Commissioner, will be our Special Guest speaker, and Urban League of Greater Atlanta will be there to talk about the new Water Rate Assistance Program (WRAP).

Representatives from several DeKalb County departments — including Sanitation, Roads & Drainage, Code Enforcement, and Law Enforcement — will also be available to provide updates and answer questions.

Breakfast will be served while supplies last, and for those who can't attend in person, the meeting will be streamed live at YouTube.com/@DeKalbCountyGov/streams.

I hope you'll join us to connect, share ideas, and continue building a stronger District 4 together.

*Warm regards,
District 4 Commissioner
Chakira Johnson*

SRA SIGNATURE REALTY AGENTS

20  26
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New Year

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Pictured above is Smoke Ride Elementary 2025-2026 Teacher of the Year Mrs. Chelsea Brown

Smoke Ride Elementary proudly celebrated its 2025-2026 Teacher of the Year, who was recently invited to lead the Pledge of Allegiance alongside fellow Teachers of the Year from across the Tucker Cluster. This special recognition highlights not only Mrs. Chelsea Brown's dedication to students, but also the hard work, professionalism, and positive spirit she brings to the school community each day. As a committed educator who consistently goes above and beyond, she represented Smoke Ride Elementary School with pride, reflecting the excellence and heart that define our school.

HEALTH NOTES:

by Cheri Schneider, M.D., staff writer

Five-Two-One-Zero: Easy Changes for 2026

I wrote a short article on childhood obesity in 2014 for the *Smoke Signal*. Today I thought I would share a small part of it again. The concept is very SIMPLE and was so helpful to me that I thought it might help you as well. Remember, you are as young as you feel!

The first step in treating an overweight child is to modify or change their lifestyle. This is true of us adults, too.

The mnemonic to remember is this: 5-2-1-0.

- Eat 5 fruits and vegetables each day.
- Have 2 hours (or less) of total 'screen time' per day. (television, video games, computer, phones)
- Get 1 hour of exercise or activity a day.
- Drink zero sugary drinks!

That's it! If we did these four things we would all be healthier...and probably thinner, too!

We Are Stronger Together

Victoria R. Crosby

We are stronger together as we march and sing celebrating the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. We march in protest of inequality and make our demands peacefully.

There will be many roadblocks ahead, and we will not let ourselves be misled, but we'll remember the messages Dr. King told, "Peace is more precious than diamonds or silver or gold." We're stronger together and we can weather any storm the future may send.

As Dr. King wrote, "In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends."

Our late President Jimmy Carter embodied his religious philosophy by building houses for Habitat for Humanity.

Like MLK he worked tirelessly for those who were less fortunate than he.

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." We remember Dr. King's words of strength and power, and we will not cower to those who would destroy our rights.

For justice and freedom is our goal, not the destruction of America's soul.

We are stronger together as we're connected by the dream, and we shall overcome because we are a team.

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techtalk

By Susan Gilbert, Staff Writer

Improving Your Writing Skills

'Tis the season for making New Year's Resolutions to improve ourselves. While health and fitness might be tops on many people's lists, I thought some readers might be interested in some easy and inexpensive ways of polishing your prose.

My dislike of English and writing began in high school, when my teacher would return my paper covered in red ink with corrections to my word choice, punctuation, and sentence restructuring. I tried to learn from the corrections, but I rarely saw the logic in the change and preferred the way I originally wrote it.

Then all the crazy words had the exact spelling but different pronunciations. These are called heteronyms; examples include "lead" (to guide, pronounced: leed/) and "lead" (the metal, pronounced: led), and "tear" (to rip, pronounced /tear/) and "tear" (a drop from the eye, pronounced: tier). Other examples are "read" (present tense) and "read" (past tense), "live" (as in a live show) and "live" (to reside), and then there is "polish" (to shine) and "Polish" (from Poland). How arbitrary and confusing.

To avoid the issue, I chose my college major in physics with a minor in math, which I assumed would keep me away from anything subjective. Both subjects were black and white with no middle ground for interpretation. Your answer was either right or wrong.

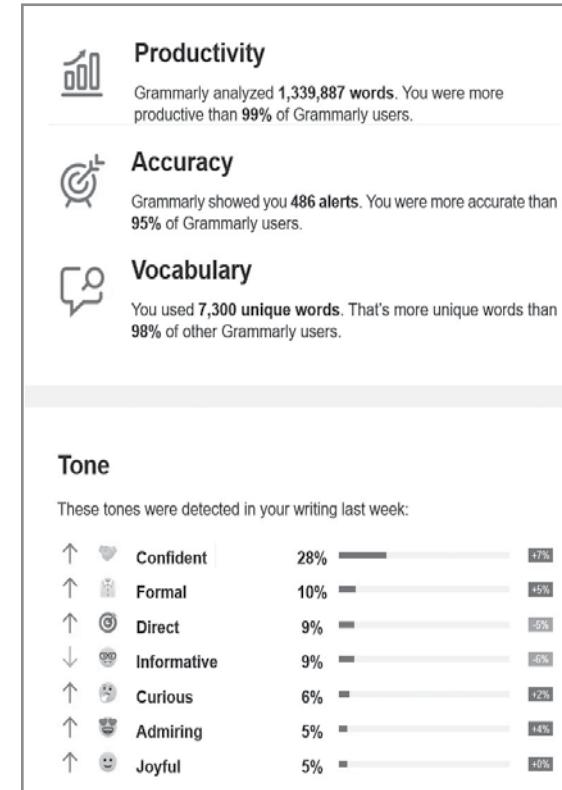
My jobs out of college were teaching, consulting, and running a business, which required a lot of writing, so I had to get serious about doing it well. Occasionally, I had an editor or co-worker review my work and give me feedback, but that took me back to an arbitrary opinion about what was correct. I found the little Strunk & White paperback helpful and kept a copy with me wherever I worked. It contained clear rights and wrongs, providing me with a shield against subjectivity.

Along the way, I started using a free application called Grammarly and enjoyed it for years. When they offered a professional version for \$72 annually, I tried it out and learned a tremendous amount from having it between me and my writing. Having used it for over a year now, I have to say it has been highly beneficial. Because it shows you the recommended change that you can either accept or reject, I am beginning to wonder if I need it any longer, because most of the time, seeing the suggestion, I have already thought of making that change.

An additional advantage of the tool is that you receive weekly reports on your writing, comparing your Productivity, Accuracy, and Vocabulary with those of all other users and analyzing the Tone of your writing. An example is shown here.

Now, and ironically, one of my most enjoyable pastimes is writing for the *Smoke Signal*. Our editors understand that we write for the public ... not academia ... so we write in plain language about the realities of our local community. Plus, I now feel less subject to criticism. After all, who is going to "mess with people who buy ink by the barrel."

Thank you, readers! Wishing You A Wonderful New Year.



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NEWS YOU CAN USE

BY AVIVA HOFFMANN, STAFF WRITER

New Year, New Scams: Beware of Fake Casting Calls

The start of a new year often brings fresh goals, new ambitions, and renewed optimism. For some Georgians, that means finally pursuing a long-held dream - like landing a role in a movie, TV show, or commercial. But, if the year begins with an unexpected text message promising a Hollywood opportunity, it's time to slow down and take a closer look.

Across the country, and increasingly here in Georgia, people are receiving text messages from so-called "talent scouts" offering auditions for well-known movies or hit TV shows. The message might reference a major production like *The Devil Wears Prada 2* or a popular TV series such as *Will Trent*, asking if you're available tomorrow for a virtual open call you never signed up for. If that sounds exciting, that's exactly what the scammer is counting on.

Georgia's booming film and television industry has earned our state the nickname "Hollywood of the South." With dozens of movies, streaming series, commercials, and music projects filming here every year, more Georgians are hoping to break into the entertainment business, or at least curious when an opportunity appears. Unfortunately, scammers know this - and they also know that the new year is when many people are more open to opportunity and change.

Once you respond to one of these messages, the "audition" often turns out to be something very different. Instead of reading lines or meeting a casting director, you may find yourself subjected to a high-pressure sales pitch. You may be told you need to pay for professional headshots, sign up for acting classes, or submit a fee to "secure your spot." In some cases, scammers ask for bank or credit card information before you can move forward. That is a MAJOR red flag!

Paying to get a job is always a sign of a scam. Legitimate casting directors, talent agencies, and production companies do not charge upfront fees to audition. Real agencies make money by taking a commission after you're hired and paid (not before).

As part of a scam-smart start to the new year, here are steps to consider:

- Don't respond to unexpected texts. If you didn't apply to a casting call, don't reply, or click any links. Responding can pull you deeper into the scam.
- Do your research. Look up the casting call, production name, or casting director online along with words like "scam," "review," or "complaint." A quick search can reveal whether others have had bad experiences.
- Never pay to get paid. Fees for auditions, test shoots, or headshots are a common scam tactic. (same for lottery winnings, etc.)
- Report and delete. Forward unwanted texts to 7726 (SPAM) or use your phone's "report junk" feature. You can also report scams to the Federal Trade Commission at ReportFraud.ftc.gov.

Georgia's entertainment industry offers real opportunities, and the new year is a great time to pursue new goals. Just make sure your fresh start doesn't begin with a fake casting call.

We Need You!

Smoke Rise - this is YOUR paper! The Smoke Signal began more than 50 years ago and remains, to this day, a community newspaper created, written and produced by volunteer, Smoke Rise neighbors for the entire neighborhood.

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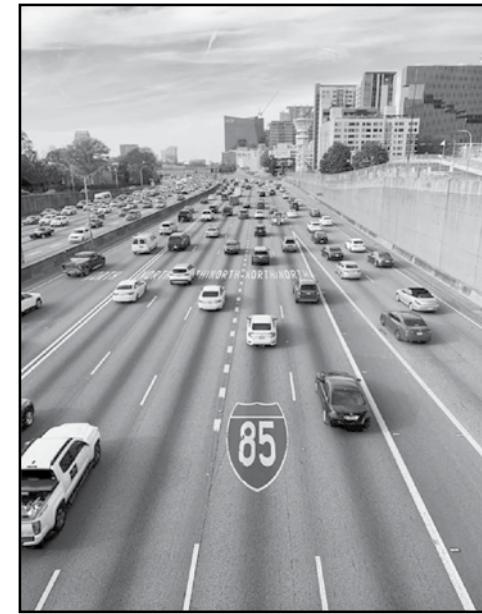
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Lexus and Lightning Lanes: The price of convenience?

By Joel Gilbert, Staff Writer

We have had high-occupancy vehicle lanes for a while here in Atlanta but have now moved to dynamic pricing to reflect the perceived value of shorter travel times on our Interstates. Many areas around Atlanta have six or more lanes on each side, yet they still congest to a standstill during morning and evening rush hours.

I never use those toll lanes even when the traffic is at a standstill. In my mind, there is something just wrong with paying \$5-10 to save ten minutes or so, but it tickles me to see them grind to a halt as well ... with no refunds because too many people are in them.



These lanes are called Lexus lanes by the locals because that is the typical car brand using them. We drive a Lexus but don't use the lanes. I might feel different if I were trying to get to work or had a time-dependent issue, but it just galls me to think about how much people are spending for convenience.

Maybe I am just out of touch because Disney just announced "Lightning Lanes" that give patrons no-wait access to rides and attractions, thereby avoiding the lines. I stopped taking my kids to Disney because we spent half the day in lines, so I guess this makes sense, until you realize the surcharge is \$300-400 a day per person for this privilege.

Why is it that Disney gets a pass on things like this when they are under the gun to eliminate so many characters that are the bedrock of the Disney stories we grew up liking? Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs is under fire as are many other wonderful stories from our childhood.

How can society say it wants affordability, equity, and inclusion, then encourage class discrimination like this? Plus, where is the moral outrage from those who can afford these fees over the obvious price-gouging, since there is no way this privilege costs Disney this much? This is clearly pricing for the perceived value of convenience and does not reflect the costs of providing the service. If you only have a few hours in the park, this makes some sense, but fails on so many other levels, in my opinion.

But perhaps there is something to be learned here for other industries? Having spent much of my career working with utilities, I am aware that electricity is priced based on the costs of providing it. Is there a market for premium power choices, and possibly for better reliability? If so, can utilities that have been regulated keep prices in line with costs charge for something that may reflect value rather than costs?

Lots to think about, and possibly some concrete lessons to learn from Lexus Lanes and Disney. Stay tuned.



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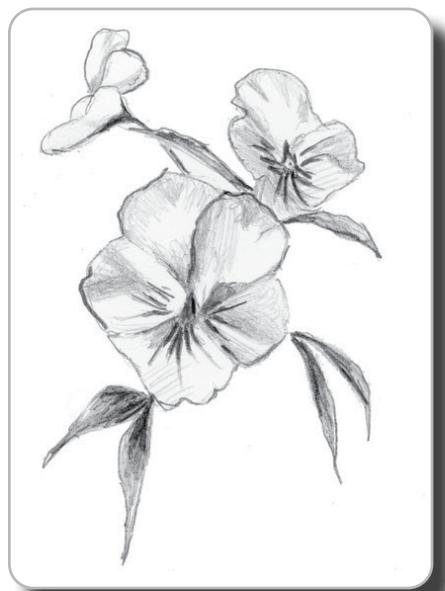
Out the Window Article and illustration by Beth Henson, Staff Writer

Winter Pansies

Looking out the living room window, I couldn't help but notice that my patio gardens had entered their deep winter slumber. The bright, golden-yellow lantana was now just a tangled protrusion of unwieldy branches, and the once-fuzzy lamb's ear lay flattened to the ground in an unrecognizable clump. The lovely angel-winged begonias were nowhere to be found alongside the drooping abundance of iris.

To my delight, the hanging basket of white pansies remained perky, even after we had experienced plummeting temperatures. Surprisingly, Mother Nature taught them to dehydrate their leaves during frost, preventing ice crystals from forming and bursting their cells. As daytime temperatures warm, they cheerfully bounce back, their roots rehydrating the leaves once more.

In their quiet resilience, the pansies offered a gentle winter reminder that even in the coldest seasons, a little life still finds a way to smile.



How to Attract More Birds to Your Garden

by Linda Karr, Staff Writer

Try some of the following tips:

- Build a brush pile to provide shelter from the elements and predators for birds and other wildlife. Unless you have a lot of property you might want to limit the size of the pile to 5 or 6 feet. If you can locate it in the sun, it will also provide extra warmth for the birds and animals. The pile should be dense enough to provide shelter but with enough openings that allow easy movement. Make the first two layers of logs about 6" in diameter. Start with the bottom layer parallel to each other and about 10" apart. Run the next layer perpendicular to the first layer. Use rot-resistant wood such as cedar, oak, or other hardwoods for a longer lasting brush pile. Now, pile smaller branches and twigs on the structure with more density toward the middle. Don't add leaves or grass clippings or other debris that will clog up the access.
- Hang your feeders 10' from dense bushes and evergreens. This allows the birds a place to escape but far enough away in case a neighborhood cat is waiting to spring. If it's sheltered from the wind that is even better.
- Suet is rich in calories and provides extra energy for birds like the woodpeckers, nuthatches, titmice, brown creepers, bluebirds, and chickadees.
- Clean your feeders regularly to reduce the spread of avian diseases.
- If squirrels have taken over your feeders, make sure they are at least 10' from any nearby jumping point. Try using a baffle below or above the feeder according to how they are jumping on it. You can also try suspending a feeder from a cable that stretches across an open space or try a squirrel resistant feeder.
- Make sure you keep fresh water available.

And for the kids so they can feel like they helped to attract the birds try:

Making a milk carton bird feeder using a half gallon milk or juice carton. Rinse out the carton and let it dry. Cut openings at the bottom to insert two dowels or sticks through for the birds to perch. Cut four openings at the bottom over the dowels/sticks. Hole-punch a space at the top to insert twine or fishing line to use as the hanger. Fill the feeder with seed using the spout of the carton. Replace the top on the spout.

Making a pinecone bird feeder by tying a wire, string, or fishing line to the top of the pinecone. Using the string roll the pinecone in peanut butter and then coat with bird seed.

Hang these feeders in spots so the kids (and you!) can easily view the array of winter birds that come to them and the kids can learn to identify each of them. They could even start a journal to keep up with which birds they see in which months.



Mountain Mums Garden of the Month: A Tropical Touch at Home

After nine years in the Smoke Rise neighborhood, Jay and Kellie Rappaport have turned their yard into a peaceful, vacation-inspired retreat. Growing up in Florida, Jay developed a lifelong fascination with palm trees—something that now defines his beautiful backyard. "Palm trees make you feel like you're on vacation, even when you're at home," he shared.

Jay has personally planted every tree, plant, and flower in his backyard, creating a landscape filled with sabal palms, windmill palms, and a variety of colorful plantings. His dedication shows in every corner of the yard, bringing a touch of the tropics to our community.

Georgia Iris Society Meeting

SATURDAY, JANUARY 10, 2026

The Georgia Iris Society will meet at 2 p.m. on Saturday, January 10, 2026 at St. Bartholomew Episcopal Church, 1790 Lavista Road, NE, Atlanta, GA. 30329.

Georgia Iris Society member and former President, Henry Everett will present a program on "Dutch Iris."

Our meetings are free to the public and all are welcome. Join us for education, beautification and recreation.

For more information,
contact Henry Everett, 678 684 3729.



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Denise Finley, hostess with Victoria Crosby, Club President. Gina Dilley and Janice Gummersall helped with set up and clean up.

SRGC Serves Friendship, Potluck Style

By Alex Helton, Club Member

The Smoke Rise Garden Club recently gathered for one of our favorite traditions: the Annual Holiday Luncheon.

Our club loves to mix and mingle, so we started the event, held at member Denise Finley's home, doing just that. We admired her husband States' one-of-a-kind model ship collection and the numerous improvements made by Smoke Rise craftsman Jens Christiansen, husband and father of Deb and Katie respectively.

The meal took place in the Finley's festively decorated solarium (thanks volunteers). It was better than any restaurant, plus we didn't need to wait for our checks at the end.

So much food was provided that desserts had to be placed in the adjacent dining room. I appreciate that our members are top notch cooks who embrace carbs. The short walk to the dessert table let us burn off calories to get there.

For a newer member like me, this luncheon helps me get to know members and to meet the loved ones who came along.

It's also something that makes Smoke Rise Garden Club so special.

It just occurred to me: you can join us.

You'll be automatically included at the 2026 Holiday Gathering. Who knows? If the Finley's are open to having us back, you'll see it all for yourself.



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Smoke Rise Morning Glories Celebrate the Holidays!

For the last two years our club has been meeting at Park Springs for our monthly meetings. The location is perfect and the seasonal décor is lovely. This year's December meeting was equally delightful thanks to our hosts, Geri and Doug Burns. We played a fun holiday gift game and had time to visit and enjoy the fellowship of garden club.

This December the club was asked to decorate only the exterior of the Wells Brown House in Stone Mountain Village. The Stone Mountain Historic Society plans to have a New Year's Day luncheon to start the new year in place of the usual December gathering. This project has been on-going for the last fifteen years. We were happy to add newly created red bows to the Wells Brown sign, lamp post and to the garland on the Juliet balcony. The wreath of evergreens and holly adorned the front door. The 1870 house has a new roof, and the grounds are maintained by the DeKalb County Master Gardener group assigned there for a project site.



Botanical Garden off Panola Road. If you are interested in hearing his topic or want to attend our meeting, please contact President Amie Walsh at 404 729-4871. Happy New Year to all the gardeners in Smoke Rise!



The Grow with Us Little Gardeners Youth Garden Club at the Mountain Park UMC is a wonderful project for our community service. Led by President Amie Walsh, various members of the club volunteer one morning twice a month to work with the students ages 3 and 4 planting pansies, making wreaths and pinecone bird feeders. After the Christmas break, we will resume fun garden activities with the children until May.

Our January 14th meeting will feature Sheldon Fleming who is the Naturalist Coordinator for the City of Stonecrest in DeKalb County. Sheldon's talk will focus on the re-use of the former Metropolitan Golf Course into the Stonecrest

Mountain Mums Garden Club Enjoys Festive Holiday Luncheon

By Maureen Fraser Club Member

The Mountain Mums Garden Club gathered for its annual Holiday Luncheon at Smoke Rise Country Club, hosted by Mary Lou Still with co-hostesses Gaye Auman, Beth Henson, Kathy Rhinehart, and Cheri Schneider. A festive atmosphere filled the room, highlighted by a beautiful poinsettia donated by Kate Graham as a raffle item. Mary Lou's famous rum cake was also a hit and quickly became a favorite treat among members.

President Sally Young opened the meeting, and members enjoyed an inspiration titled "The Season of Christmas," presented by Kate Graham. Following lunch, members took part in a lively White Elephant gift exchange that brought plenty of laughter and good-natured stealing.

Several gardening tips were shared with members this month:

- Protect bulbs: Spread pine straw to protect bulb foliage from the cold.
- Winter care: Continue spot-spraying or digging out chickweed, violets, and wild onions in your lawn.
- Rake leaves: Remove the last of the fall leaves to prevent dead spots in spring.
- Planting: Plant woody vines like Carolina jessamine, wisteria, and crossvine now.
- Houseplants: Keep houseplants in the coolest indoor spot possible to prevent premature drop of flowers and leaves.
- Christmas cacti: Water only when the soil feels dry to maintain plant health.



Mountain Mums members also recently brought holiday cheer to residents of ATRIA Park of Tucker by helping create Christmas trees made from large pinecones, Pompoms, and glittery stars. In January, the club will return to make Snow Angel door hangers.

Anyone interested in joining the Mountain Mums Garden Club may contact Mary Jacobson at mjacob1010@gmail.com. More information and photos of the club's projects can be found on their Facebook page.

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Food & Home Fixin's

by Joyce Ray, Staff Writer

January 2026 – I did a “double take” when I typed the year. It doesn’t seem possible to see another year roll around so quickly, but here we are, about to celebrate the 250th birthday of our country. We have much to be thankful for and many prayers to pray for this new year to become what we want to make it.

This basic, delicious Lentil soup recipe contains all the elements that the traditional southern New Year’s Day meal should include for good fortune for the coming year. This formula for success is: Collard Greens which represent money (the folding kind), Pork for prosperity and black-eyed peas or any kind of beans or lentils for wealth. Serve it with corn muffins which represents gold coins.

I hope you also enjoy the Southern Living Apple Cabbage slaw. It is quick to prepare and a good companion dish for the soup and can be served in any season.

Lentil Soup

Peel and chop the following vegetables:

1 medium yellow onion
 4-5 medium carrots
 2 med. potatoes (cubed)
 1-2 parsnips
 2 stalks of celery
 4 minced garlic cloves

Warm ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil in large Dutch oven over medium-low heat. Add the peeled and chopped vegetables with minced garlic and sauté about 5 minutes, stirring until onions are translucent.

Add the following spices and stir in pot for one minute:

1 T. Ground Cumin, 1 T. Curry Powder, 1 T. Dried Thyme, 2 tsp salt, 1 tsp freshly ground black pepper, ½ tsp red pepper flakes. 1-2 T lemon juice.

Pour in the following ingredients:

1 large can (28 oz) diced or crushed tomatoes
 1 cup lentils (brown or green, washed and cleaned)
 1 lb. sausage (browned and crumbled)
 8 cups vegetable broth or your favorite flavor
 2 cups water

Bring the mixture to a boil, then partially cover the pot and reduce heat to a gentle simmer. Cook for about 30 minutes or until lentils are tender but still hold their shape.

Add 4 cups of your favorite greens: Collards, Turnip Greens, Spinach, a handful at a time. Cook for 5 minutes or more until they have softened to your liking.

Remove from heat and stir in 2 T lemon juice. Taste and season to your preference. If you prefer the heat of more red pepper, add in ¼ t. at a time or serve with hot sauce at the table.

Apple Cabbage Slaw

4 cups green cabbage
 (finely shredded or one medium head of cabbage)

2 medium apples, cored and chopped.
 (I suggest Gala or Honey Crisp)

1 cup shredded carrots
 2 finely chopped green onions
 2 T. Dijon mustard
 ¼ cup salad oil
 ¼ cup apple cider vinegar
 2 T. Honey
 Salt and pepper to taste
 1/3 cup Sliced almonds
 1/3 cup dried cranberries

Prepare the vegetables: in a large bowl combine the shredded cabbage, chopped apples, onions and shredded carrots. Make the dressing: in a separate small bowl, whisk together the apple cider vinegar, oil, honey, Dijon mustard, salt and pepper until smooth. Pour dressing over cabbage mixture and mix until everything is coated. Toss in the almonds and cranberries just before serving. Chill in the refrigerator for about 30 minutes before serving.

*Note: almond slices can be toasted to add more flavor to the slaw. Add 1 T. butter to small skillet over medium heat and toss in the almonds. Stir and remove almonds before they get too brown. Drain on paper towels until ready to use.