

The Tidewater News

121ST YEAR, NO. 20

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11, 2026

\$1.00

Council votes to provide utility bill relief

BY TITUS MOHLER
STAFF WRITER

The Franklin City Council voted unanimously Monday, March 9, to provide relief to city residents in the face of particularly high utility bills. The council agreed to extend the due date from March 20 to April 1 and also agreed to provide an extension to the payment plan already offered by the city to include the new utility bill.

Ward 2 Councilman Richard Grizzard provided the recommendation that served as the foundation of a motion made by Ward 3 Councilman Gregory McLemore. Grizzard said, "Last year (then-City Manager) Ms. (Roslyen) Oglesby did an extension to give us the extra time. That extension was to change the (bill due) date as proposed from the 20th to the first. I'm in 100% agreement with doing that (now) and us doing some research and coming back at the next meeting on the 23rd and working on this

payment plan, but I think ... you could get an extension on the payment plan you already have to include your new bill, so it would be incorporated into the payment plan you already have. You would just change the figures and redo the calculations to keep your payment plan going. "If you are not on a payment plan, this is a fine time that you could get on one," Grizzard added. "But I don't think you should be on two payment plans at the same time." "I can live with that,"

McLemore said. Ward 4 Councilman Dr. Linwood Johnson said, "I agree with that also, Mr. Grizzard, but what I'm saying is, before we vote on anything tonight, we need to research, because in the past in every City Council I know of local government, before they vote on something of this magnitude, you do all your due diligence, research before, and come back on it, because if we do something and it's not right, it'll come back and bite us in the near future. "And this is an important rec-

ommendation, I agree with it, something needs to be done, and we want to do that," Johnson added, "but we want to do it in

SEE RELIEF, A6

Pay schedule faculty/staff survey results revealed

BY TITUS MOHLER
STAFF WRITER

The Southampton County School Board took in a presentation Monday, March 9, featuring the results of the board-approved faculty and staff survey pertaining to pay schedule, investigating the interest level in switching from a once-monthly to a twice-monthly schedule.



Lane

The survey had been created by Board Member Orris Lane, who advocated at a recent Southampton County Board of Supervisors meeting for bi-weekly pay for all county employees, which includes Southampton County Public Schools (SCPS) employees.



Harris-Muhammed

Lane gained approval on Feb. 9 from the School Board regarding the content and timing of the faculty and staff survey, and she again addressed the board about the survey on March 9.



Tindle

"As you know, the board drafted a survey asking Southampton County Public Schools employees for their input if they would like to be paid on the 15th and 30th of each month," she said. "I would like to thank all employees from central office staff, to administrators, teachers, cafeteria workers, bus drivers and anyone who works for the school division for their input in the survey. Going forward, I would like for (SCPS Acting Superintendent) Dr. (Shonda) Harris-Muhammed to present the data to the board and the public."

SEE RESULTS, A5



The Hubs Vine was humming with fellowship Saturday, Feb. 28, during the second annual Walk of Love Gathering, created to uplift widows and widowers in the region.

TITUS MOHLER | THE TIDEWATER NEWS

Walk of Love Gathering succeeds in its mission

BY TITUS MOHLER
STAFF WRITER

Micah Nowell Dillon, who organized the Walk of Love Gathering, noted that the second annual edition of the event was a "complete success."

Held at The Hubs Vine on Saturday, Feb. 28, the gathering was designed to uplift widows and widowers during the Valentine's Day season, which can be a particularly difficult time for those who have lost a spouse.

Dillon was pleased that the event served at least 90 widows and widowers, including Dorothy "Bambi" Councill, who was wife to former longtime Franklin Mayor Jim Councill, and Patty Dillon, who was the wife of David

Dillon, the founding pastor of Rock Church in Franklin. Micah hosted the Walk of Love Gathering through the Franklin-based nonprofit that she founded, The Widow Walk (TWW).

As a nonprofit, The Widow Walk has the following mission, purpose and vision:

- The mission of equipping widows/widowers on a path together toward a new start with a new finish;
- The purpose to create a national community of widows/widowers empowering one another; and
- The vision to develop eternally minded resources focused on grief education, expression and empowerment.

The Walk of Love Gathering was a labor of love or-

chestrated by the TWW board members and their family members, including children and grandchildren.

Micah estimated around 130 people were present at the event, including those helping facilitate it.

The Hubs Vine provided the dinner, and she thanked the establishment "for crushing it again. People thought that the food was good last year, they thought the food was even better this year. The dessert was decadent, was top-tier. I wanted more of it."

The food was plated and served by members of the Smithfield High School Culinary Department, including teacher Nic Hagen.

SEE GATHERING, A5

New-look SCPS '26-'27 academic calendar OK'd

BY TITUS MOHLER
STAFF WRITER

The Southampton County School Board voted Monday, March 9, to approve the draft 2026-27 Southampton County Public Schools (SCPS) Academic Calendar that featured some key differences from past years, including a before-Labor Day start.

Board Vice Chair Dr. Jennifer Tindle presented the draft calendar to the board on Monday, representing the Calendar Committee.

"This was not an easy task, not that it ever is, but this year our goal was to put a calendar together that did a bunch of different things," she said. "We wanted it to really speak to the staff feedback, and so the Calendar Committee was made up of several central office staff members and then a representative from each school, and they did an amazing job at going out and polling all of the staff and really finding out what was important to the staff that we have currently as far as helping with retention."

She noted that the end product benefited from insights about recruitment and being able to put together a calendar that essentially gives everybody everything that they want.

"You will notice that it looks very different than all of our other calendars," she said. "It does have for the first time a before-Labor Day start. Keep in mind, though, that this year Labor Day is late."

The holiday arrives on Monday, Sept. 7.

"And so with a before-Labor Day start, we would be starting on August the 31st," Tindle said. "So it is a before-Labor Day start, but it's not significantly earlier than we've

SEE CALENDAR, A6

Commemorating Franklin's 150th

STAFF REPORT

Another celebratory feature has been added to the 150th birthday celebration for Franklin on March 15.

The Franklin 150th Birthday Celebration Committee commissioned The Charleston Mint to design a commemorative keepsake ornament befitting the important milestone in the city's history.

"We wanted to showcase the steamboat and the freight train, both of which were instrumental in Franklin's being organized as a town back in 1876, just 100 years after our nation was founded," officials stated in a committee news release. "The Blackwater River and the loblolly pine were gifts of

nature that played such vital roles in the economic development of our little town.

"From its organization as a town in 1876, this little town of Franklin — formerly known as Franklin Depot — went on to thrive," officials added. "It became the center of much social and business activity in Southampton County over the years. People traveled for miles to enjoy what Franklin had to offer."

On Sunday, March 15, at 3 p.m., citizens are cordially invited to join in a celebration of Franklin's 150th birthday. This celebration will take place at Barrett's Landing, the place where the town's history really began.

"Bring a chair and come



SUBMITTED | NANCY PARRISH

The Charleston Mint designed this commemorative keepsake ornament in honor of Franklin's 150th birthday, which arrives Sunday, March 15. These ornaments will be for sale at the 150th celebration on March 15.

down to enjoy a beautiful afternoon of music provided by the 150th Birthday Celebration Choir and a wonderful history lesson from Gaynelle Riddick, our beloved local historian, as well as hearing from a few others," officials stated.

Franklin Ward 6 Councilwoman Jessica G. Banks and Mayor Paul Kaplan noted during the Monday, March 9, City Council meeting that they are participating in the choir, and they encouraged people to come out to the March 15 event.

"Last Tuesday, I was at Franklin Baptist Church for the 150-voice choir," Banks said, alluding to one of the rehearsals. "It was very refreshing, it was a beautiful moment. So there are some

good things going on in our community, so I just hope that people can avail themselves to come out and support these events."

Echoing Banks' point, Kaplan said, "Be part of this community's activities."

Liz Burgess, who is part of the celebration committee, noted that the March 15 event will also include the placement of a beautifully hand-painted Memory Chest. The chest will contain letters and memories from the people of Franklin and will be opened in 2076 along with the time capsule placed during Franklin's 100th anniversary in 1976.

Committee officials stated in the release that attendees will want to bring \$20 so they can purchase one of the

commemorative keepsake ornaments.

"It will be a wonderful addition to your other City of Franklin keepsake ornaments and hopefully the beginning of continuing this tradition of annual ornaments in future years," officials added.

All proceeds will go toward purchasing much-needed new Christmas decorations for downtown Franklin.

In the event of rain, the celebration will take place at Franklin Baptist Church, which is located at 208 N. High St. in Franklin.

To reserve a limited-edition ornament, text or call Nancy Parrish at 757-334-0476 or Kathy Worrell at 757-653-8474.

The Tidewater News
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2024
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DEATHS

Alexander W. Hatch Jr.
Sandra Hendricks-Hunter
A. Earl Johnson
Paulette D. Lawrence

Bruce Powell Sr.
Audrey A. Spencer
Elizabeth L. Warrington
C. Stephen Whittemore

BEST BET

Life After Work, Part III: Join us on Thursday, March 19 at Camp Community College, 253 James Street in Smithfield from 3 - 4 p.m. for an uplifting and informative session with guest speaker Dr. Angela Sheaffer, who will share keys to positive aging. For more information, email Jenny Thomas at jthomas@pdc.edu. This event is brought to you by the Camp Community College Renaissance Program.

GATHERING:

FROM PAGE A1

“He had eight students that were serving in the back, and to the kids, that was a significant change this year that I believe streamlined it more,” Micah said. “We had the younger serving the older.”

Jasmine Lowery, of Suffolk-based Agape Love Events, provided decorations for the gathering.

“That was new for us this

year,” Micah said.

Danette Crawford, from Joy Ministries, was the special guest speaker.

“Danette Crawford knocked it out of the park as the speaker,” Micah said. “We got a lot of good feedback from that.”

Last year’s guest speaker, USA Today-best-selling author Nancy Naigle also returned and participated in this year’s gathering.

“Part of our Walk of Love Gathering is for it to be intentional, a soft touch from start to finish,” Micah said.

She noted that gift bags that were given to all attendees included custom-made pillowcases with The Widow Walk logo and the phrase “New start, new finish.”

Those pillowcases were created by Leslie Hawkins, who also provided photography at the event.

Micah and fellow TWW board member Judy Hawkins Dunn, plus adviser Drew Dunn, sang to conclude the event.

“Our board did a trio for the first time,” Micah said.



XXXXX | THE TIDEWATER NEWS

From left, Joy Ministries’ Danette Crawford, the special guest speaker at the second annual Walk of Love Gathering, shares the stage with event organizer and The Widow Walk founder Micah Nowell Dillon.

RESULTS:

FROM PAGE A1

“As Ms. Lane shared, our staff, certified and classified, completed the pay frequency survey,” Harris-Muhammed said, indicating that the data she was presenting included the hard copies of the survey that were filled out.

Following were the answers to the question, “How satisfied are you with the current once-per-month pay schedule?”

- Overall Satisfied (Very Satisfied/Satisfied) — 39.8%
- Neutral — 25.1%
- Overall Dissatisfied (Very Dissatisfied/Dissatisfied) — 35.1%

“So our staff, our current staff, has shared with us through the data collection that they would like to go to a bi-monthly pay frequency,” Harris-Muhammed said. “That concludes the report.”

Lane indicated that the survey prompted many different discussions.

“Mainly people were saying that they’re settled in the way that they handle their finances,” she said.

Board Vice Chair Dr. Jennifer Tindle said, “One of the questions asked, ‘Do you have any concerns if the

school division decides to move to a bi-weekly pay schedule?’”

She said the majority of respondents, 68%, said they did not have any concerns, but she noted that among the ones who did, they primarily talked about needing to change billing dates because everything was auto-drafted at the beginning of the month.

She also noted that a couple people indicated overtime pay could provide a complication to a move in pay schedule.

“A couple people did mention potential problems if payroll wasn’t on time, if you’re splitting your bills and you don’t get the payroll for whatever reason,” she said. “The biggest thing was just having to change billing dates...”

Harris-Muhammed shared some other data that was collected and favored a change to a bi-weekly pay schedule.

“There were three things that they highlighted in the data,” she said. “One was the December pay and their waiting 45 days — depending on the number of days in that year, so it could be 46 — before they are paid again.”

Secondly, she noted that the data indicated a lack of twice-monthly pay served

as a deterrent for some people in coming to work for SCPS.

Thirdly, “again this was redundant, but just the long wait in pay periods,” she added.

“And so to help support this, board members, we could advertise for a part-time payroll specialist to support the current duties of our payroll specialist,” she continued. “That was shared with me out of the Department of Finance, if that is a desire of the School Board. “If it’s not a desire of the School Board to hire a part-time payroll specialist (but you approve ... to move to a bi-monthly pay schedule based on the data collected, we would make it work, absolutely,” she said.

Board Member Christopher Smith Sr. asked if anybody had talked to the Board of Supervisors about the proposed pay schedule change.

Harris-Muhammed said, “I have not spoken with anyone from the Board of Supervisors concerning the pay frequencies.”

She expressed an understanding that the division would take the schedule on and do it itself.

Board Member Dr. Deborah Goodwyn said, “My concern before we take this on is that we don’t have

enough information in terms of what would be the cost of taking it on ourselves. And it’s more than just hiring a payroll clerk. There’s more to the process than hiring a person.”

“That’s the next phase,” Lane said.

Goodwyn said, “But even doing it in phases, as a board member, I’d like to know the cost.”

Developing her point further, she said, “So my concern is that before we decide that this is what we need to do or what we want to do, even though we have the data, I think we need to know how it works and what the cost would be. Even if you say you’re going to do it in stages or phases, we need to know what those phases (are) and what’s the ultimate cost, because we know that it’s not a simple process. It’s not just hiring a person.

“It’s uncoupling from the county system,” she continued. “It means that you’ve got to know somebody who knows payroll, who has their certification, somebody who knows how to use the software and the system and you have to be accountable, so there is a process involved, and as a board member, I’d like to know the cost of doing that.

“And I thought when we

first talked about this, we talked about it from the standpoint of informing the majority of the feelings of the employees and hoping that the county might consider moving to a twice-a-month pay period,” she added. “So I thought that our first step was to share information, to share findings before the board decided we would take it on ourselves.”

Tindle said, “That was the next thing, wasn’t it, was that this would be shared with the Board of Supervisors first before we looked into...?”

Lane indicated she was seeking the School Board’s permission to do that.

Rodgers summarized his understanding of the situation.

“Ms. Lane, you’re seeking our permission to then share the results with the county Board of Supervisors and convey some of our thoughts about whether that would be helpful in recruiting as well as in retention of teachers,” he said. “And so you’ve heard a little bit from Dr. Harris-Muhammed about some of the recruiting benefits and some of the things that we hear from prospective teachers. You have the survey data now from our current staff that can be presented to them.

“Is there any other discussion on the information that we’ve seen here, or is there a motion to take action on what we would ask Ms. Lane to do on it now?” he added.

Tindle said, “I move that we ask Ms. Lane if she will share this information with the Board of Supervisors as we had discussed.”

Goodwyn seconded the motion, and an affirmative vote followed.

Rodgers said, “With that, Ms. Lane, please go forth and prosper and share our information. If you need any support from us, please let us know, and I’m happy to help with that if you need anything, but you’ve been very vocal about taking care of that, and I appreciate your advocacy.”

He then asked Harris-Muhammed “for some prep on at least us understanding what potential costs and what work would be required both if the county were to take it on and if the school system were to take it on so that we have some additional knowledge that the School Board can then use to make a decision as we go forward, hoping that we’ll see the county make a move, but if not at least understand what the fiscal impact would be on us.”

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