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# CONTENTS



8

**COMMUNITY: A FRESH CHAPTER FOR MCKEE PARK**



12

**MEET DENNIS DUPREE**



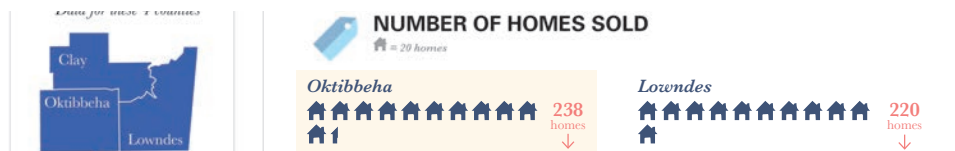
18

**CULTURE: BARTENDER COCKTAIL**



22

**CULTURE: PARKVIEW'S VISION CAPTURES COLUMBUS' EXCITEMENT**



27

**REAL ESTATE: HOME SALE TRENDS**

29



**THREE INSPIRED PEOPLE**

40



**COVER: GENERATIONS OF SUCCESS DEFINE BARGE FAMILY'S ENDEAVORS IN FAITH, FORESTS**

48



**TRAVEL: FROM GRAIN TO BOTTLE**

56



**GOVERNMENT: AROUND THE TRIANGLE**

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## COMMUNITY

# A FRESH CHAPTER FOR MCKEE PARK

THE REVITALIZED PARK IS READY FOR A NEW  
GENERATION OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS

**T**he streets of Starkville bustle with the sounds of traffic, construction workers piloting machinery and Mississippi State University sports fans cheering on their favorite players.

However, just about two miles southwest of downtown, McKee Park juxtaposes the city noise with the sounds of children playing, families splashing in a splash pad area and the clashing of competitors on nearby pickleball courts.

McKee Park, which officially reopened in August, was a part of a nearly year-long construction effort to revitalize the area that was previously dominated by baseball fields and aged park facilities into something more multi-use and modern.

The park, which was designed by Kimley-Horn, now features a 25,000 square foot playground, a 9,000 square foot splash pad, a 3,000 square foot pavilion, a dog park and a pedestrian walkway to balance out other Starkville

park offerings in the city, associate engineer and project manager for the City of Starkville Chris Williams said. Those features compliment 12 existing heavily used pickleball courts.

The more than \$7 million project was something made possible after most baseball activities moved to Cornerstone Park in 2023, Mayor Lynn Spruill said.

“It was more a matter of, what do we need to do in the south part (of the city), in order to fully round out our recreation offerings for our community to the south and complement the things to the north,” Spruill said.

The design focused on a community based style park to complement revamped pickleball courts added to the park area in March 2024, Williams said. The McKee project was a part of the city’s previous 10-year recreation plan from 2016 which included the construction of Cornerstone Park and improvements to J.L. King Park and Needmore Community Center. In a new

10-year plan launched in March, Sports Facilities Companies, an independent contractor that manages the city's parks system, is taking public input, and inspecting current sites to develop a blueprint to be presented to the Board of Aldermen for future developments around the city.

Andrew Pollan, a senior from Starkville at Mississippi State University, said he enjoyed playing on the baseball fields when he was younger, but thought the newly completed park, and pickleball courts, have given the area a "new and fresh" look.



**Pollan**

"I think the intentionality is really good, because I think this is a nice area for families to come if you want to play pickleball or if you want to bring smaller children to the park," he said.

Emily Sesser said she has already brought her daughters, who are 7 and 13 years old, out to the park five times since it opened in August, even

though the commute is a bit longer than to some of the other parks for them.

"I think it's very well laid out," she said. "It's spread out so that the kids aren't right on top of each other with the different activities ... it's even got the nice little walking path around the edges, so I can walk around and still be able to keep an eye on them while I'm getting some extra exercise."



**Sesser**

After officially cutting the ribbon for the facility in August, the area has seen an influx in families trying out the new facilities, Williams said.

"I absolutely think it's wonderful," Spruill said. "It is what we intended to have happen. To see the kind of support and the use of it tells me that that's what the community needed."

STORY BY **BRADEN SIMMONS**  
PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



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**Name:** Dennis Dupree, Sr.  
**Age:** 67  
**Birthplace:** Jackson, MS  
**Spouse:** Shelia Sanders Dupree  
**Children:** Dennis Dupree Jr. and Jasmine Dupree Samuel  
**Grandchildren:** 6, Jonathan, Vincent II, Connor, Dakota, Elijah, and Joshua  
**Hobbies:** Fishing, Watching/Attending NFL and WNBA Sporting Events, Landscaping

# MEET DENNIS DUPREE

**A**fter joining Columbus Municipal School District as a classroom teacher in 1992, Dennis Dupree rose through the ranks to become assistant principal, principal of Hunt Intermediate School and eventually superintendent of student support services.

He was named superintendent of Clarksdale Municipal School District in 2007, and after more than a decade there, he returned to Columbus for a brief stint as interim superintendent.

Now retired, Dupree was the only candidate to qualify for CMSD's lone elected board seat, a position he will assume in January.

News editor Emma McRae asked Dupree in October how his decades of experience will guide his newest chapter at CMSD.

**You've served CMSD in several capacities over the years. What keeps bringing you back to this district?**

CMSD has so much potential. When I say that, I mean it from a standpoint of getting community buy-in, student buy-in and parent buy-in – just getting people to understand what we truly have here and what it could be.

**How did you end up in Columbus?**

I was working in Oxford at the time. I was the head football coach at Oxford High School. I was the first Black head football coach and the only Black head football coach they ever had. My wife had applied for a job here. They had the

perfect job for her – the federal program director and special education director all tied into one. That's her front, so when she applied for it, she got the job. So I gave up my head coaching job to come here with her. She wanted me to stay and still coach there, but I was willing to give that up to come here with her, and so that's how I got here."

**Having worked inside the district, what perspectives or insights do you think you bring to the board?**

Well I look at it on two fronts. The first being, having the opportunity to work here and knowing the ends and outs. But I think moreso, just understanding where you fit in.

Now I've never been a board member, so this is going to be totally new for me. Even though I've had 39 1/2 years of experience in education, I've never been a board member. I've worked with different boards along the way. ... I'm hoping that as a board we can work together as a collective body in supporting the superintendent and supporting the goals and what we set forth in the strategic plan and following those directions and doing what we're supposed to do as board members. That is my hope.

Coming up through the ranks here gave me a different eye. From being a teacher, assistant principal, principal, assistant superintendent, it gave me a different view of how I know things can work, some of the pitfalls, some of the dos

and don'ts. So I'm hoping I can bring that voice to the board, just a little voice in contributing to help the board make crucial decisions that are going to come about.

**Just before you assume the position, the board will either hire Craig Chapman as superintendent or reinitiate the search process for a new candidate. Having had that experience as a superintendent working with multiple boards, what do you feel the board's role is in supporting the next superintendent?**

It's outlined what a board's responsibilities are versus what a superintendent's responsibilities are, and what I'm hoping is that we stay within those guidelines that are set forth for board members and what it says for what superintendents are responsible for.

When there's an issue, I think that sometimes it could go either way. We either crossover or vice versa. I'm hoping we can keep an even keel as a board and hang to our responsibilities and then just let the people we hire work and do what they're responsible for.

**What do you see as the district's greatest strengths and biggest challenges right now, and where do you think the board can make the most positive impact?**

I don't know the answers to all of those things because I'm not officially there to see where we are from a complete standpoint in all of those things, but I think we have a great opportunity to do some things here when it comes to passing the bond issue to get some facility upgrades and get some things in place.

But at the same time, we've got to make sure we're retaining teachers, highly qualified teachers and administrative staff. I'm a firm believer in doing right by people. I just say when you do right by people they will do right by you.

**Is there anything else you want to add?**

I just truly want our system to grow. This was a tough decision for me to even put my name out there to do this, but I felt the need to just for the simple fact that I think I have something to offer. I'm hoping that the other board members will know that I'm truly coming on to support and do whatever I can to help the district. And I think the staff, most of the staff members probably already know me; some of them worked for me back when I was here before. I'm a true believer, as I said, in treating people fair and giving them the opportunity to help our young people grow.

INTERVIEW BY **EMMA MCRAE**  
PHOTO BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**

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RICK'S CAFE BARTENDER KIRBY SWARTZ  
PREFERS HECTIC NIGHTS, SIMPLE DRINKS

**K**irby Swartz' best nights behind the bar are the ones where she can hardly see what's ahead of her.

"I love my regulars, I do, but I think my favorite part about bartending is whenever we're so busy that all you can see is a wave of people in front of you and you're wrapped three times around the bar," she said. "I really just like the hectic mess of it."

Swartz has been bartending at Rick's Cafe in Starkville for seven years, though she's been in the food service industry much longer. At 15, she took her first job waiting tables in West Point before making her way to Columbus and finally, to Starkville.

"I'm a social person, so I like to be able to talk to my people while I'm working," she said. "I just love the service industry. I started when I was younger and got into it, and I just didn't want to stop. ... I don't like to sit still, so it's kind of perfect for me."

But after the whirlwind of orders stops, Swartz prefers to unwind with a simple, well-made drink.

"If you ask me what kind of drink is sentimental to me, it's going to be a rum and coke," she said. "I've been doing this for so long. You get off work and you want to have a quick drink, that's what I get."

For her customers though, she reaches for

something with a touch more flourish: the flower bomb martini.

"It's just a simple, sweet, smooth drink," she said. "The elderflower liqueur tastes really good when you mix it with lemon. If someone asked me for a drink, this is what I'd give them, but that changes every week depending on how I'm feeling."

## FLOWER BOMB MARTINI

Served in a chilled martini glass with a half sugar rim and a flower garnish

1 ½ oz St. Germain elderflower liqueur

1 oz Tito's vodka

¾ oz freshly squeezed lemon juice

½ oz simple syrup

Step 1. Run a lemon over one half of the edge of a chilled martini glass. Dip in sugar to create the rim.

Step 2. Combine all ingredients in a shaker. Fill with ice and shake vigorously.

Step 3. Strain drink into martini glass and garnish with any flower

STORY BY **CADENCE HARVEY**

PHOTO BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**





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CULTURE

# PARKVIEW'S VISION CAPTURES COLUMBUS' EXCITEMENT

BUYERS SNAP UP LOTS AS DEVELOPERS SHARE  
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Cody Coleman



Helen Pridmore



Garrett Parish, Saunders Ramsey, Nic Parish

About a year ago, Cody Coleman moved his business, Elevation Real Estate Group, to a building on Fifth Street South in downtown Columbus.

If all goes to plan, his new home will soon sit walking distance from his office.

“I already eat, work and shop downtown,” said Coleman, who now lives in New Hope. “I feel like making the decision to live there was easy.”

Coleman was among the first to put down a deposit for a lot in the planned Parkview neighborhood, where the Friendly City Development group is reimagining five blighted blocks east of the Roger Short Soccer Complex known historically as Burns Bottom.

As of early October – less than a month since developers unveiled their plans for the mixed

use neighborhood and made 28 residential lots available – 12 were already snapped up. Lots are priced from \$48,000 to \$80,000.

“I love the vision the developers have for that area,” Coleman said. “It has all the amenities that you could want. The fact it will overlook the (soccer complex), that’s a beautiful setting. ... I’m thankful I was able to get in on the front end. I know all of us that I’m aware of who are purchasing lots are ready for the ground to be build-ready.”

Friendly City Development, led by Starkville developer Saunders Ramsey and brothers Nic and Garrett Parish with Burns Dirt Construction in Columbus, agreed in August to purchase 77 lots in Burns Bottom for \$800,000 from the Columbus Redevelopment Authority.

The developers also have an exclusive 4 1/2-

year option to purchase a handful of additional lots north of Burns Bottom for \$350,000. Those could draw commercial development to Parkview.

The CRA has committed spending \$5.2 million – obtained from state and federal sources – on infrastructure and ground prep work at the site before Friendly City officially takes possession. Houses could start popping up as soon as 2027.

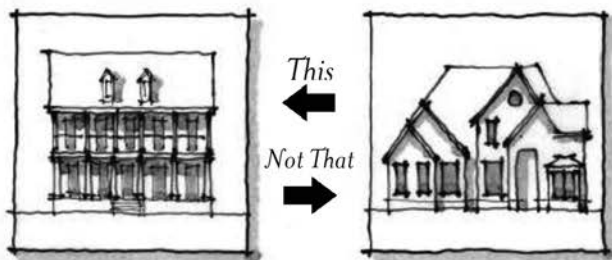
At a public meeting in September at Rosenzweig Arts Center, which 80 area residents attended, the developers touted a neighborhood of access, walkability and “porch culture,” where houses would face each other in an environment where residents would feel encouraged to know their neighbors.

Modeled from Southside Columbus, but newer, the developers will allow various styles of homes possible for Parkview, including creole, acadian and French colonial-inspired, among others. While all homes must be built to certain aesthetic standards, they won’t all have to fall in the same size or price range.

“We will not use the word subdivision. This is not a subdivision,” Ramsey said during the public meeting. “... This is a neighborhood (and we want to enhance what you’ve already done in Columbus.”

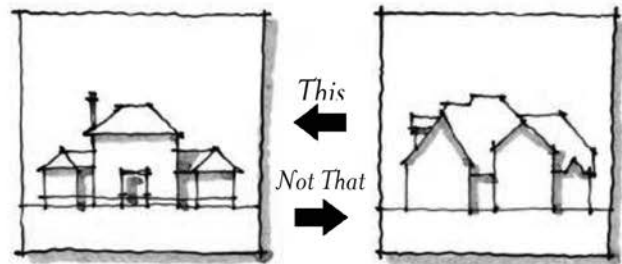
Ramsey has seen success with a similar concept at Adelaide, a development named for his grandmother and located off South Montgomery Street in Starkville. The neighborhood, featured in the Spring 2019 edition of Progress, was first

## This, Not That (simple design guidelines for traditional construction)



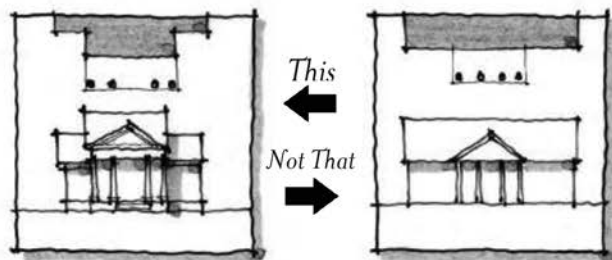
### Simplicity of Form

*Traditional designs are simple in their shape and construction. Their elegance and timelessness are by-products of their simple and straightforward approach. As you design, work to simplify the massing, roof, and window placement on your house.*



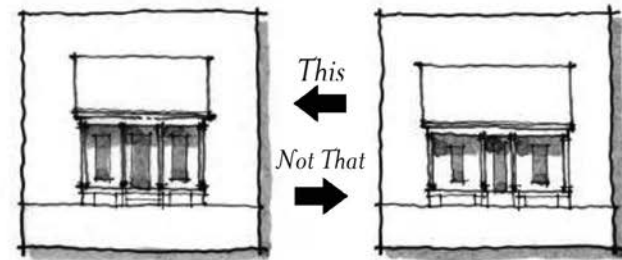
### Standard Roof Pitches

*Roof shapes can be one of the most costly elements to a home. Simplifying the roof shapes means simplifying the walls as well. As you design, work to keep the roof shapes simple and all the same pitch. Design all gables, or all hips. Of course, this is subject to the style you choose, but in general, keeping the pitches and type the same will make your house look more traditional and keep cost down as well.*



### Main Body Massing

*The picture on the left has classical massing and detailing – the porch element works together with a projection in plan to create a more classical front and heirarchy of the entry. The picture on the right is a house with some similar elements, but due to lack of properly massing the overall form and lack of heirarchy, it comes off like a ranch style house.*



### Regular Column Spacing

*Intercolumniation is the regular spacing of columns. As you design, work to keep the column spacing all the same. Don't vary the spacing based on window placement or door placement. Set the column spacing first, then work to align windows and doors within that spacing. In a few styles, such as Greek Revival, there is a precedent to pair columns together, but the overall spacing of those pairs still remains regulated.*

planned in 2013 and is well into its third phase, with homes built on about 70 of the 96 available lots.

So far, Ramsey said, the response to Parkview has been similar to when Adelaide lots came available.

“It has been pleasantly surprising to see excitement from the local community,” Ramsey said. “It confirms our belief that good design, good planning and a willing community can make a special place.”



Helen Pridmore watched Adelaide come together from the ground up.

Her business, Lighting Unlimited in Columbus, installed the post lights at Adelaide when the development started and also worked in many of the homes built there.

“It is so well thought out,” Helen said of the development. (Ramsey) had a lot of parameters to make sure people didn’t just come in and build houses that would make the rest of the houses not appraise as high. If you build five great houses, then somebody comes in and plops down a house that has windows too small or just isn’t built as nicely, it drags the whole neighborhood down.”

When Helen and her husband Scott Pridmore left their 145-year-old home on College Street where they had lived for 18 years, Helen said they both believed one day building a home in Burns Bottom was “inevitable.”

Both were adamant about staying downtown. But they wanted something new and were content with living in an apartment until that opportunity arose.

Helen’s life changed suddenly, when Scott died in November. Meanwhile, even after a summer 2024 announcement the CRA was negotiating with Friendly City Development, no news on that front seemed forthcoming.

“I was starting to get antsy,” Helen said, even considering moving to an older rental house she owns instead.

Shortly after the Parkview deal was announced, Helen received a text from Ramsey.

“Hey. You ready?” it read.

It came at the right time, and Helen was the first to put down a deposit for a lot.

“I’m very excited about it,” she said.

Helen is also certain the excitement will continue for others as Parkview’s development progresses.

“Everybody poo poos every good thing that people try to do in Columbus,” she said. “I have complete and total faith in Saunders and the Parishes that they are going to do this right.”

STORY BY **ZACK PLAIR**  
 COLEMAN PORTRAIT BY **MCKELLAR PROFFITT**  
 PRIDMORE PORTRAIT BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**  
 OTHER PHOTOS BY **GADE CHAMBLEE**



Developers talk to members of the public at Columbus Arts Council



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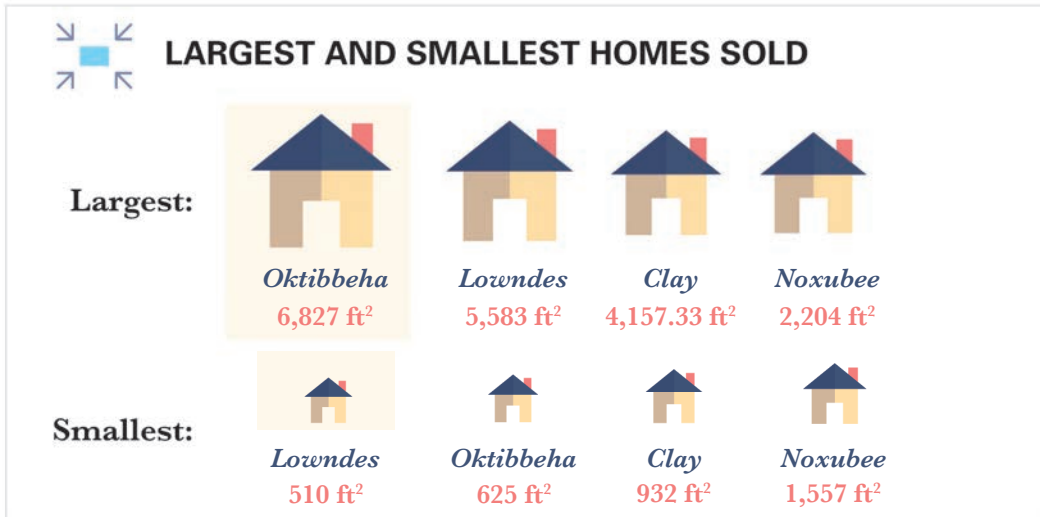
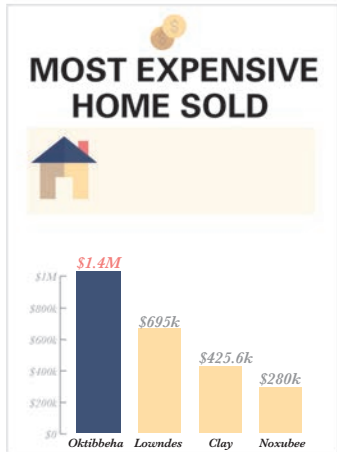
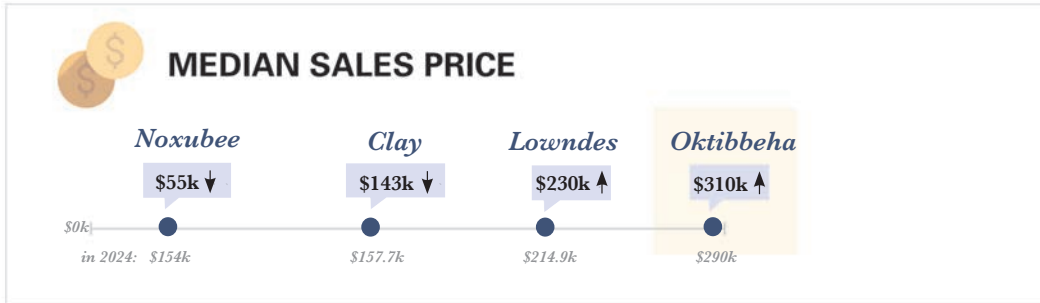
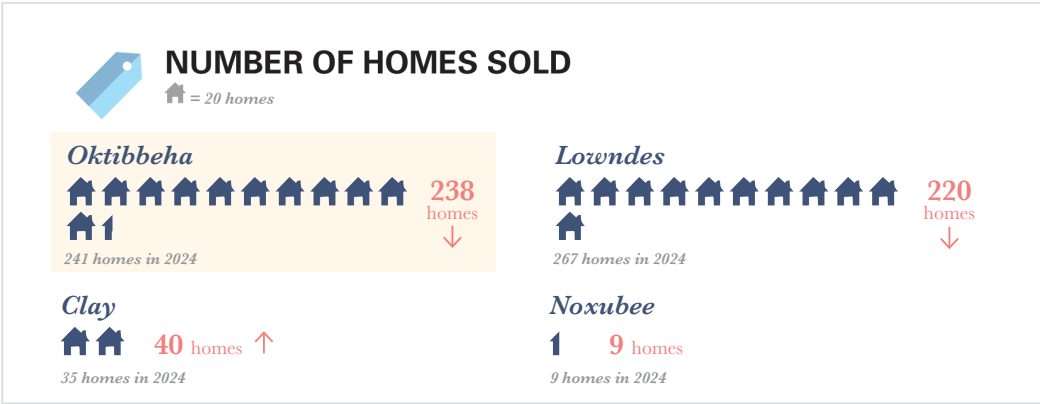
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REAL ESTATE METRICS FROM JANUARY - JUNE 2025  
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Data courtesy of Greater Golden Triangle Association of Realtors®

This information is deemed to be reliable, but not guaranteed. This does not reflect homes sold by owner or other homes not listed in MLS sold in these areas.



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## 3 INSPIRED PEOPLE

**I**n every community, there are those among us who lead by quiet example. They seldom hold positions of power, nor do they have a title or any official designation that distinguishes them from their neighbors. Yet they are often the ones who, having found their own inspiration, serve to make us better people and a better community. The spark of imagination they ignite through the pursuit of their own dreams, passions and curiosity can spread down the street, through a neighborhood, across a community. Their stories are an inspiration and in the telling of their stories, others may be similarly inspired. In each edition, Progress tells the story of three of the “Inspired People” of our community.

PROFILES BY **SLIM SMITH**  
PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



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## PIERCE MOORE

When you hear Pierce Moore's story, it sounds a lot like the plot on the old sitcom "Green Acres."

In that show, Oliver Douglas abruptly leaves his job as a big city attorney to try his hand at farming on a run-down farm in Hooterville.

In the true story, Moore left his job as a promising vice president at a prestigious investment bank to start farming at the Brooksville farm his family had owned since the 1850s.

"It's funny," says Moore, 40. "When my friends in investment banking heard about it, they asked me what in the world I was doing. The people here in Brooksville wonder what I'm doing, too. Did I lose my job or something?"

From Moore's point of view, it's a natural transition.

As an investment banker, he was making money. What he wasn't making was a difference.

During COVID, Moore and his wife, Jaime, began to think of a different life, one that revolved around farming, which Moore described as a more authentic life.

"It's like that Bible verse about living a quiet life and working with your hands to win the respect of others," he said.

In 2021, Moore started out intent on focusing

his full attention on mushroom farming, but soon saw a way to make a much greater impact by partnering with other farmers who share Moore's farming philosophy that focuses on food sovereignty. Food sovereignty is the right for people to have access to healthy, locally-produced food that is produced through ecologically sound, sustainable farming methods.

Today his Blue Courage operation grew into partnerships with about 30 farms in Mississippi and Alabama, with Moore providing the marketing and logistics to get their foods to customers' doorsteps.

It's kind of like the Amazon of healthy locally-produced foods. Moore delivers the products ordered from his partner farms online and delivers it to the customer's doorstep, all within 48 hours.

His plans also include starting a truck operation based on the food truck model.

Now three years into his business, Moore said his advice for entrepreneurs is simple.

"Pay attention to the little things and be consistent," he said. "Everything isn't going to go exactly how you planned it, but stick with it. I'm not the smartest guy around, but I am tenacious."



  
Habitat  
for Humanity

## KATHY ARINDER

When Jackie Hager announced she was retiring from her position as executive director of the Columbus Habitat For Humanity, Kathy Arinder figured her “dog-eating” days were behind her.

“At the time, I had always been in real estate,” Arinder said. “It’s sort of a dog-eat-dog job, so when I heard there would be an opening at Habitat, I really thought it would be something I would enjoy.”

Arinder knew Hager and many of the Habitat board members. Her father had served on the Habitat board, so she was already familiar with the organization and eager to be a part of it. “The more I learned about the job, the more I wanted it,” she said.

Arinder, 64, became executive director in April 2007 and remains as enthusiastic about her job and the work of Habitat as she was the day she began work there 18 years ago.

“There are so many things I like about the job, starting with all of the people I work with, our volunteers and our board. But for me, the part I liked best was putting people in homes who had never owned a home before. Every time it happens, it’s such a blessing.

Although she had kind of lost track of the actual number, Arinder said Columbus Habitat has built between 25 and 30 homes during her tenure.

“Every one of those homes has a really special and unique story,” Arinder said. “I guess the one that stands out the most came in my second or third year. We had a family that came in who had six children and had adopted six more. That’s a family of 14. We built a six-bedroom home, which at the time may have been the biggest home Habitat had built anywhere.”

“The other one that sticks out was the home we built in nine days,” Arinder said. “Habitat

had what they called a blitz build where you build a house really quickly. It seemed like a neat idea. We worked with Fairview Baptist on that one.”

Arinder said the home built for a woman and dedicated to her on her 90th birthday is a special memory, as is home built for a special needs client name Joy, who calls Arinder every September to remind her how many years she’s been in the home.

In truth, every home is unique and so is the owner’s story, Arinder said.

They have also proven to be excellent homeowners, Arinder said.

“We have about 20 who have paid off their mortgages and one their home outright,” she said. “I think we’ve only had one foreclosure and that was because the owner died and there were no family members to take it over.”

Arinder said another point of pride is the Habitat ReStore, located on Gardner Boulevard. The ReStore sells donated building materials and furnishings.

“We just had our 10th anniversary there,” Arinder said. “That was one of those things where we had to step out in faith because it was all new to us.”

The main purpose of the store was to generate money for Habitat’s operations. While it has achieved that goal, Arinder began to see another purpose.

“We have been blessed time and time again with some many donations, some very nice things,” she said.

A lot of those donations were things that belonged to a loved one. That’s hard to do sometimes, so we know it’s special. We treat it special and want to see that those things go to people who will love them, too. I’ve come to see that as a mission, too.”



# CHERRI LIGHTSEY

**A** week after she had knee replacement surgery Cherri Lightsey didn't know how long her recuperation would take. What she does know is that however long that is, it will be entirely too long.

"I'm not good at sitting around," said Lightsey, 61. "I'm one of those people who has to be busy."

What Lightsey has been most busy with is volunteering, something she poured her energy into after retiring 10 years ago.

"I just know that for me, this is what I'm supposed to be about," she said. "It's what I love."

Whether it's working on the many service projects of First United Methodist's women's service group in Starkville or helping with Starkville Strong's Neighbors Helping Neighbors or Second Servings, Lightsey seems to always be in the middle of the action, if not the spotlight. She shies away from attention, believing that the focus should be on the work, not the worker.

Lightsey worked for 38 years on the staff of Dr. Ken Parvin, who specialized in breast cancer surgery. As a two-time cancer survivor, she knew the importance of mammograms, something that wasn't covered by Medicaid until 2014.

"I think the mammograms cost maybe \$50 or \$75, which doesn't seem like much, but it is for low-income women. It was pretty disheartening to see women with advanced breast cancer that could have been detected by mammograms. So that became a crusade for me."

Lightsey started a fund to pay for mammograms for low-income women in 2006, a fund that still provides breast-care funds for women.

Lightsey was also one of the people who helped establish Starkville's Habitat for Humanity in 1986 as one of two representatives working

with the national organization to establish the local chapter.

"That was really one of the first things I worked on in the community as a member of the First United Methodist women," Lightsey said. "Mostly, I helped with family selection and with finance and fundraisers."

Lightsey was a member of Habitat's board of directors for 12 years.

When Brandi Herrington and a few friends started Starkville Strong in 2020, Lightsey took notice.

Starkville Strong was founded as a community action group. When the group began expanding its efforts to address food insecurity, homelessness and housing instability - issues close to Lightsey's heart - she reached out to see what she could do, which turned out to be plenty.

"Cherri was the one who came along and helped us get Neighbors Helping Neighbors off the ground," Herrington said. "It's an event where we allow participants to shop for what they need free of charge from our grocery store set up. She had contacts with United Produce, which began providing fruits and vegetables for the program. That was huge for us."

Likewise, Lightsey used her contacts to bring local restaurants into Starkville Strong's Second Servings program, which partners with local restaurants, community organizations, Greek life organizations at Mississippi State University and others to redistribute surplus food to people who need it.

"That's the thing that's really impacting me now," Lightsey said. "Once a week, I was helping pack food for Second Serving on Thursday morning. So I've got to get this knee working so I can get back to work."



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Left to right: Madison Wells (RN), Alison Woods (RN), Christa Wilburn (RN), Acrissa Reese (RN)

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COVER

# GENERATIONS OF SUCCESS DEFINE BARGE FAMILY'S ENDEAVORS IN FAITH, FORESTS

BARGE FOREST PRODUCTS EXPORTS LUMBER  
WORLDWIDE WHILE LAKE FOREST RANCH SHAPES  
THOUSANDS OF LIVES

**I**n 1942, Charles Barge was offered about 51,000 acres of cut timberland running through Noxubee and Winston counties.

With the forest cut clean by a company that didn't yet know the principles of sustainable forestry, Barge turned all his efforts toward regrowing the timber.

Barge didn't know at the time his decision to regrow the forest would anchor his family for generations, building the Barge family's legacy on two fronts: the Barge Forest Products timber company, which supplies lumber across the globe, and Lake Forest Ranch, a Christian

summer camp and retreat center that has shaped thousands of children and families for 75 years.

Over the past eight decades, a single philosophy has guided the family's success.

"The No. 1 thing that marks the family out is our commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, and that's in our business, and it's in the camp," said David Barge, president of Barge Forest Products Co. and grandson to Charles Barge. "... We look at it as though we are stewards of what God has given us, and we manage it for his glory, not for ours. He's blessed us greatly, and that's how we look at it."

Barge Forest Products, along with members of the family, still own all of the acreage, which is set to provide about 70% of the timber the company will process this year, mostly for one-inch boards, the company's bread and butter, as well as high-grade rough lumber for export.

Managing that acreage means more than planting and waiting. David said the company is currently working toward a 50-year rotation plan – shorter than the current 80-year rotation, but longer than the standard for larger companies – to keep the forest productive.

To do that, the company thins smaller, less developed trees, leaving more room for others

to mature. The approach over time allows the timberland to recover from being cut while also producing stronger, higher-quality timber with fewer rings per inch than competitors.

“We think that we have the highest-grade lumber of any manufacturer, and most of our buyers, most of our customers would agree,” David said.

International exports currently make up around 30 to 35% of the company's business now, with Europe, North Africa and the Caribbean making up the largest markets.

Generations of a successful family business have come with challenges, David said.

In the 60s and 70s, the timberland was



plagued by southern pine beetle epidemics due to overcrowding, which weakens the ability of trees to repel the beetle.

Fortunately, a contract with American Can Company, now Georgia Pacific, to thin pulpwood – smaller trees that are processed into wood pulp used to make paper products – from the land created a new market for the company and laid the foundation for a healthier forest.

“He entered into what amounted to a 10-year contract, and we had pulp-wooders everywhere, and we were cutting all this pulpwood, and it changed the forest,” David said. “That’s what made the forest what it is today because we were able to thin for 10 years.”

Recently, the company has struggled to find consistent markets for pulpwood from the forest. But those tables are set to turn as well once the biocarbon facility at Aluminium Dynamics in Lowndes County and Huber Engineered Woods’ planned oriented strand board facility slated for Noxubee County are finished.

“Both of those are going to take more than a million tons a year of pulpwood,” David said. “... So we’ll finally have a market for our pulpwood. It will change us entirely.”

### THE RANCH

David’s father, Richard Barge, took over the company after Charles passed away, managing the timberland, which are now named for him, for 50 years. Richard also took up his father’s second endeavor, Lake Forest Ranch.

Founded in 1950 by Charles and his wife, Bonnie Barge, as a place to bring youth primarily from the Jackson area, Lake Forest Ranch is a Christian summer camp and retreat located in Macon.

“Our motto is ‘Building relationships for eter-



nal impact,' and that's what we do," said Board of Directors Chair Steve Morris, a former camp director and cousin to David. "In the summertime, we run a full program – 10 camps, about 10,000 campers spread out over those 10 weeks. It's all about their relationship with Jesus Christ."

The camp consists of 20 cabins for campers, more for adults, a full year-round staff and a summertime staff along with year round availability to rent the camp for retreats.

What started as a small weekend getaway for teenagers has grown into a multi-age program hosting thousands from across the country, primarily from Southeastern states, though Morris would like to see more local interest.

"We hear just about every year from people we haven't heard from for 30 or 40 years (saying) 'I was saved at Lake Forest Ranch,' or 'My grandkids go to Lake Forest now,' from as

far away as Indianapolis, Indiana to of course nearby," Morris said.

The success of both the camp and the timber company, David said, is driven by the family's active involvement in both endeavors, a commitment he hopes to see sustained for decades to come.

"They're all sold out on this, and many of them are also directors on the Lake Forest Ranch board and most of them have worked at Lake Forest Ranch," David said of other Barge family members, including additional generations. "So I've tried to instill in them, the companies and train them on how the companies operate, and they're involved."

STORY BY **EMMA MCRAE**

PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



# A Safe Place to Grow: Thrive at Children's Health Center

In January 2025, Children's Health Center proudly opened the doors to Thrive, a dedicated behavioral health clinic designed for children, teens, and young adults ages 4 through 26.

The new clinic brings much-needed services to Columbus and the Golden Triangle at a time when families across Mississippi are struggling to find time-ly, mental and psychiatric health care.

"Parents often feel overwhelmed when their child is facing behavioral health challenges," says Brandon Holley, Psychiatric Physician Assistant. "Thrive was created to give families a place to turn—where they can find answers, support, and a team that truly understands."

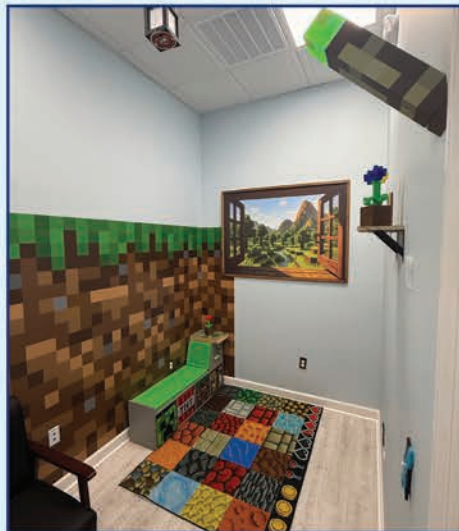


Brandon Holley, Psychiatric Physician Assistant

## Meeting a Critical Need

Thrive offers a wide range of services, from counseling and psychiatric care to medication management and developmental evaluations. Because it is part of Children's Health Center, patients also benefit from close coordination with their primary pediatric care team.

This integrated model ensures that a child's physical and emotional health are addressed together—helping them succeed at home, in school, and in relationships.



Minecraft room

## Play Therapy at Thrive

One of the unique services offered at Thrive is play therapy, led by our licensed therapist, Dusty Nabors. Play therapy is an evidence-based approach that allows children to express thoughts and feelings in the most natural way they know—through play. Instead of relying solely on words, children use toys, art materials, and imaginative activities as tools for communication.

In this safe and supportive setting, they gain the freedom to share what's on their minds in ways that feel comfortable and empowering.

"Play therapy bridges the gap between the imagination and the mind. My goal for every child is that, one day, they won't need me anymore—because therapy should be a helper, not a holder," says Dusty.



Dusty Nabors, Licensed Therapist

Dusty works with children across a wide range of ages and needs—from preschoolers experiencing behavioral challenges to adolescents coping with anxiety, trauma, or life transitions. Through guided play, children learn to regulate emotions, build problem-solving skills, and practice healthier ways to relate to others. Families often notice positive changes such as improved communication, greater self-confidence, and stronger resilience.

By making therapy both accessible and engaging, Dusty ensures every child feels understood and supported. At Thrive, play therapy is not just about play—it's about equipping children and teens with the skills they need to grow and thrive, both now and in the future.

## Community Impact

By investing in behavioral health today, Thrive is investing in the future of Columbus. Every child who learns coping skills, every teenager who finds their confidence, and every young adult who receives support is a step toward a stronger community. As Thrive continues to grow, families across the region can look forward to more resources, more support, and more opportunities to see their children truly thrive.

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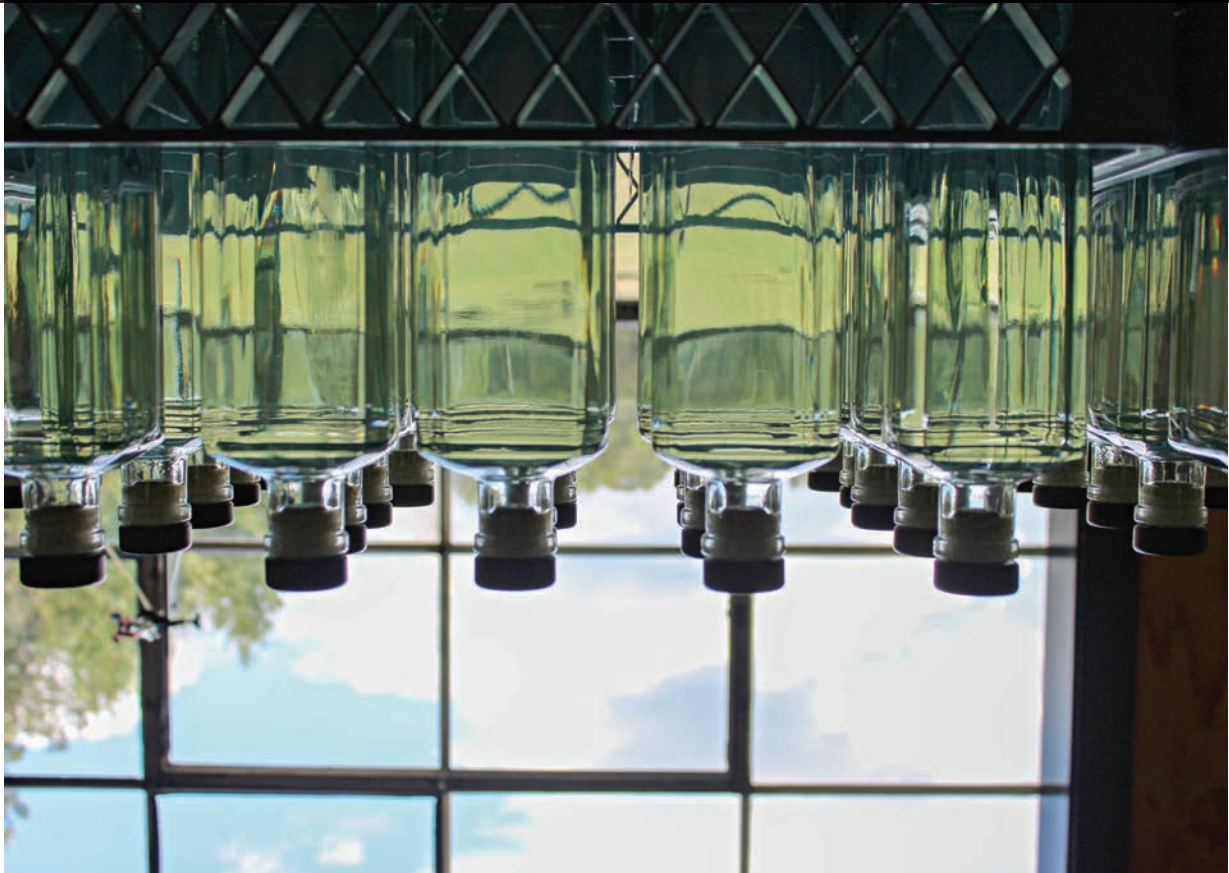
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From left are Deputy Clerk Tia Rushing, Chancery Clerk Cindy E. Goode, Deputy Clerks Amy Barksdale, Tina Fisher and Shantrell Granderson.





# FROM GRAIN TO BOTTLE

RICE GROWN IN THE DELTA IS USED  
TO MAKE GIN NEAR OXFORD

The rice at Two Brooks Farm begins beneath a foot of water in the Mississippi Delta. Crawfish slip between the rows, and thousands of ducks and geese gather in the shallows. Eventually, that rice culminates in something entirely unexpected: hundreds of corked bottles of gin in Taylor, Mississippi.

From start to finish, the journey takes months. Jasmine rice is planted in the fields each spring, tended through the summer and harvested in the fall before it's milled, sorted, bagged and boxed. From there, thousands of pounds are hauled south to Wonderbird Spirits in Taylor, where the grain is fermented, distilled and bottled.

The Wagners' Two Brooks Farm sits in Minter City, where father-son team Mike and Lawrence Wagner carry on ten generations of family farming. The fields stretch between 3,500 and 4,000 farmable acres, about half of which is farmed for eight varieties of rice.

"It used to just be a swamp out here," Law-

rence said. "Nobody wanted to touch it because of the soil type, so (my dad) bought it ... and he just had to figure out how to make it work for him. That's how he landed on rice and soybeans."

The farm is bordered by rivers, and the soil is a heavy, gumbo-like clay. Each winter, the flat rice fields are flooded to suppress invasive weeds and to create a habitat for water fowl. Seeds are dropped from the air into the standing water by plane.

Each harvest yields about 8 million pounds of rice, from black and sushi rice to jasmine and arborio. After milling the rice, about 4 million pounds remain and are sold to food distributors and online buyers across the south east. Millions of pounds are stored in large grain bins sprawled across the front of the farm.

Mike purchased the farm in the early 1990s, and Lawrence came home to help run it around 2016 after graduating from Missis-



issippi State University.

“I remember when we were first starting, I just didn’t know how we were going to set ourselves apart because back then, to me, rice was just rice,” Lawrence said. “I started eating it and I remember going back to another variety of jasmine sold on the coast and ... it blew my mind because it was the first time I noticed a real, real difference.”

The difference eventually made its way about 150 miles northeast, where Wonderbird Spirits now turns Two Brooks rice into gin. It’s the only known gin distiller in the county to use rice as a base, and it’s one of few in the world.

Co-founders Chand Harlow, Rob Forster and

Thomas Alexander built the distillery from the ground up, beginning in 2017. The group set out to use Mississippi agriculture to create a grain to glass gin.

“We scoured Mississippi looking for something really cool to ferment on,” Forster said. “We tried a lot of heirloom corn, thought about sweet potatoes, but it was really that jasmine rice from the Delta that created that really clean, silky aromatic thing.”

The process takes about 20 days. Rice is poured into a mash pot and heated, before more rice, infused with a Japanese mold called koji, is added. After a long cook and a week of fermentation, the mash turns into a traditional Japanese



rice wine called sake, which is then distilled about 20 times before botanicals are added.

A single mash of 1,300 pounds of rice yields about 600 bottles of gin.

“The reason we do that is not because we like to work 10 times harder for no reason,” Harlow said. “... Our singular goal here is to make the best gin we possibly can, and that’s the way we feel we have to do it.”

The flagship gin, called “No. 61,” was the distillery’s first recipe, blending ten botanicals including pine needles gathered from the woods behind the stillhouse and red clover harvested from the pasture out front. Bottles are corked, labeled and numbered by hand.

While most distilleries create a neutral base spirit for gin, Wonderbird leaves in the flavor Two Brooks’ rice offers.

“We go through so much trouble to make this great rice base that we want to keep a little bit of the flavor elements of the rice,” Harlow said. “... The flavor was unreal and super smooth and (has) a silky mouth feel.”

From its first bottles in 2019, Wonderbird has grown to distribution in eight states, with hopes of reaching a dozen by 2026.

Everyone seems to agree: rice is hard to work with.

“Rice is very labor intensive and time intensive and sensitive, so a lot of folks don’t want to deal with it,” Wagner said. “... But my thoughts right now are I’m going to do it until I can’t, until I’m bankrupt or dead.”

“It’s a very hands-on, labor intensive, but beautiful process,” Harlow said.

Still, it finds its way from flooded fields teem-







ing with wildlife to tasting rooms serving martinis.

“We’re not in the getting drunk business,” Forster said. “We’re in the storytelling business and the connection business and the making beautiful fun things business.”

Wonderbird Spirits offers tours of their Taylor, Mississippi location, and bookings are available at their website [wonderbirdspirits.com](http://wonderbirdspirits.com).

Two Brooks Farm offers tours of their Minter

City, Mississippi, farm, which can be requested by emailing [abbey@twobrooksfarm.com](mailto:abbey@twobrooksfarm.com). The Two Brooks storefront is located at its office in Sumner, located at 129 East Court Street. Their rice is also sold at Baked at Broussards in Columbus.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY **CADENCE HARVEY**

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Main Street Starkville

# AIRPORTS, ROADS AND BRIDGES

## MAJOR INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS TAKE PLACE ACROSS GOLDEN TRIANGLE REGION

All across the Golden Triangle, crews have been hard at work developing new parks, repaving new roads and constructing new buildings.

### **STARKVILLE/OKTIBBEHA**

Road work has been a way of life in Starkville as the Highway 182 revitalization project continues to make progress with about a third of the mile-long project complete. The project, which begins near Long Street and goes up the west side of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., is projected for completion in 2028.

Downtown, the \$7.5 million Main Street Revitalization project, which began construction in July, is on pace to be completed by the end of 2026. The project will be moving closer to City Hall in November when phase 3 of 6 for the project begins. Crews have been tearing up

streets and installing new landscaping and electrical work for improved lighting on the downtown street.

Starkville's McKee Park celebrated its official opening in August after completing more than \$7 million of work in July. The park, which was previously four baseball fields, broke ground in September 2024 and now houses a new playground, splash pad, dog park, additional parking and new pedestrian pathways.

Starkville also received an \$8 million Safe Streets for All grant in July that will be put towards a new roundabout for Highway 12 near Garrett Road. The project should begin construction in 2026 and is projected to be completed by 2028.

Oktibbeha finalized the \$55 million sale of OCH Regional Medical Center in September to Baptist Memorial Healthcare. The sale agree-

ment also outlined \$96 million of investments that Baptist will be responsible for implementing in the hospital over the next five years which includes maintenance, recruitment and infrastructure improvements.

The county finished a \$1.5 million replacement of the Morgantown Bridge in August, which had previously been closed for two years due to age and structural issues. The county also replaced the Old West Point Sturgis Road bridge which began construction earlier this Spring and reopened in July.

Oktibbeha also completed a \$2.4 million repaving project in July of about 10 miles of Sturgis Maben Road.

### **COLUMBUS/LOWNDES**

Columbus has continued to chip away at drainage infrastructure with about \$6 million in ARPA funds addressing flooding issues in Wards 1, 4 and 5. The projects include ditch and box culvert clearing, replacing some drains and

erosion control in ditches. Crews have nearly wrapped up a box culvert and pipe replacement. The city is close to wrapping up the first of 10 sites, which are projected to be completed by May 2026.

The city began \$1.8 million in Fifth Street North improvements in October, which will include narrowing lanes, new lighting, a new signal at Fifth Avenue North and Fifth Street North and adding sidewalks and bike lanes.

The nearly decade-long redevelopment effort in Burns Bottom is projected to complete roughly \$5.2 million worth of initial infrastructure improvements by 2026. Friendly City Development, after entering into a \$800,000 deal with the city's redevelopment board in August, began selling the first batch of 28-lots in September to be turned into single-family homes which could begin construction as early as the end of 2026.

Near the end of this year, the city is also looking to bid out a replacement for Waterworks Road's Luxapallila Creek Bridge which is esti-



Luxapallila Creek Bridge at Waterworks Road



mated to cost about \$4 million and is projected to begin construction in 2026 with completion estimated near the end of 2026 to early 2027. Traffic will be rerouted during construction around Highway 182.

Also beginning next year is about \$3 million in repaving efforts that will include streets across the city as well as a number of parking lots in need of improvements. The effort is expected to be completed in 2026.

The Terry Brown Amphitheater is awaiting final funding and grant decisions to be decided for improvements and finalization of the facility but construction is anticipated to begin and be completed in 2026.

In September, Mayor Stephen Jones broke a deadlocked city council vote to spend \$1 million in internet use tax revenues on facilities upgrades. The largest component of that spending plan is a new \$750,000 roof on the Municipal Complex, which has been plagued with leaks over the past several years.

Rural King farm and home store opened in September at the old K-Mart building along Highway 45 North. The store is Rural King's first in Mississippi and brought with it about 70 new jobs to the city.

The Columbus-Lowndes County Airport's runway completed a \$1.8 million repainting in March. Just about a month later in April the

airport also completed construction of a \$1.2 million box hangar to begin to field tenants and increase capacity at the site. The airport has a number of ongoing and future projects which include a new weather system projected to be completed by 2026 and a new open hangar to increase capacity at the airport, which is projected to be completed by the spring of 2027.

Out in Lowndes County the Cinco Megasite was celebrated as the fifth TVA-certified Megasite in the region and was awarded a \$5.5 million grant from the state for a million-gallon water tower in May to go along with \$25 million in bonds awarded by the Board of Supervisors in February.

#### **WEST POINT/CLAY**

West Point has plans to repave about \$1.2 million in city and neighborhood streets to continue to build on about \$8.8 million in repaving the city has done over the last three years. The city will begin addressing 22 roads starting in October.

Down Highway 45 South, West Point has been working since May on installing a new sewer line to increase capacity around the southside of the city limits. The line will filter to the city's main plant and will increase capacity for the city's sewage system. The \$3 million project is projected to be completed by sometime in late winter this year.



Columbus Municipal Complex



West Point to undertake \$1.2 million road improvement project



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## MACON/NOXUBEE

In Noxubee County there has been continued work on the county's new \$2 million emergency operations center; some structural concerns delayed the project until early 2026. The location for the center will be by the current center in Macon city center on Washington Street. The intent is for the building to be a safer and more modern center for the county.

Huber Engineered Woods has continued construction of the organization's newest wood mill near Shuqualak. The project continues toward a completion date in 2026. The project is projected to bring about 150 new jobs for positions in logging, hauling and hospitality.

The county also has a lot of bridge work set to begin including a bridge repair on Lynn Creek Road, which should be complete sometime near the end of October to early November.

A \$350,000 bridge out on Mickens Clay Road is projected to begin construction sometime in December and is estimated to be complete sometime between March and May of next year.

The county is also looking to perform \$1.2 million of road re-sealing which will cover about 10 miles of roads.

STORY BY **BRADEN SIMMONS**

PHOTOS BY **DEANNA ROBINSON**



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