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# NEW YEAR'S SPECIAL SECTION Year in Review

## JANUARY

### FIRST BABY OF THE NEW YEAR BORN JAN. 3



Photo courtesy of Drew Memorial Health System

Mother Erica Mata (center), Dr. Chapman, Auxilian Barbara Brown, Chelsea Gulleddge and Melissa Chapman, in celebration of baby boy Reece Owen Mata, the first baby born in the Olivia Faith Beebe Nursery at Drew Memorial Health System in 2023.

## MARCH

### DCE TEACHER EMILY HOWARD AWARDED MILKEN EDUCATOR AWARD

By: ASHLEY HOGG  
editor@monticellonews.net



Ashley Hogg/Advance Monticellonian

Drew Central School was full of excitement Thursday, February 23, 2023 as elementary students filed into the basketball gym for a surprise presentation.

Faculty and staff had been given limited information about the event in order to keep the award presentation a secret.

Governor Sarah Sanders, along with Arkansas Secretary of Education Jacob Oliva and Dr. Joshua Barnett with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, presented Emily Howard, third grade teacher, with the Milken Educator Award and a

See MILKEN Page 2C

## APRIL

### Day family named 2023 Drew Co. Farm Family of the Year

By: JEFF McDONALD  
reporter@monticellonews.net



Ashley Hogg/Advance Monticellonian

Dustin Day (left) and Stephen Day (right) were chosen as Drew Co. Farm Family of the Year.

Farming and agriculture are true staples of the Southern United States. Agriculture is one of the areas biggest influences on the economy, and also plays a huge part in the day to day lives of the local residents.

Each year, a board in Drew County chooses a family that they feel exemplifies farming and agriculture excellence in this region. This year's recipients of the Drew Co. Farm Family of the Year are the Stephen and Dustin Day families.

The Day brothers are the fourth generation to farm in the Drew and Desha Co. area. They began farming together in 2014, joining their father who is still involved in day to day operations of the farm.

The Day's great-grandfather was the first to farm in this region, and for a long time, the Days were well known as cotton farmers. These days, the family

grows cotton, corn, soybeans, rice, and wheat.

Stephen and Dustin are both active in McGehee First Baptist Church, and they are also on the leadership team of Delta Outdoor Church in McGehee. They are also founding members of Wincott Gin Company.

The farm is a family venture with Stephen, Dustin, and their father, Mark, handling the day to day management of the farm. Sydney Day, Dustin's wife, along with her mother-in-law, Denise, handle all bookkeeping in the main office.

When asked what has kept this family farming for four generations, the Days stated, "A love of farming and hard work. The ability to adapt to different situations and having good land. Farming is in our blood, and having a strong family and God's grace is very important to us."

The annual Farm Family edition with full coverage of the Day's and their farm operations will publish this June.

## APRIL

### DMHS accepts LOI from Baptist; passes resolution on Sustainability Plan

By: JEFF McDONALD  
reporter@monticellonews.net

The monthly meeting of the Drew Memorial Health Systems Board of Governors was held on Monday, April 24. All of the members of the board were present with the exception of Lagarian Cross.

DMHS Chief Executive Officer, Scott Barrilleaux, stated that he he been in weekly talks with the state agencies that determine whether or not DMHS will receive any further funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). Barilleaux said that there were two con-

ditions that DMHS must meet in order for the funds to be approved. The first of these is that the DMHS Board of Governors pass a resolution to approve the sustainability plan which had been drawn up several months ago by members of the senior leadership team at the hospital. This plan shows that the board is aware of the issues the hospital is facing, and that they are working to address the issues as outlined in the sustainability plan.

Chief Operating Officer, Jenny Guthrie, added that the plan has been a "working copy",

See DMHS Page 2C

## JUNE

### CONSTRUCTION BEGINS ON SCOGIN DRIVE PROJECT



Halen Murphy/Advance Monticellonian

The Arkansas Department of Transportation has begun construction on the Scogin Drive Project. The first phase was started on U.S. Highway 278 West. This project will offer access to the University of Arkansas at Monticello, and will contain several roundabouts to help with the flow of traffic.

## DECEMBER

### As one door closes, another opens

#### Baptist Health holds ribbon cutting at former DMHS

By: JEFF McDONALD  
editor@monticellonews.net

On Sunday, December 3, the merger between Drew Memorial Health Systems and Baptist Health became official. On Monday, December 4, an official ribbon-cutting ceremony was held at 10 a.m. to formally announce that what was formally known as Drew Memorial Hospital would now be known as Baptist Health Medical Center-Drew County.

Chief Executive Officer



Joanna Poole/Advance Monticellonian

Members of Baptist Health leadership, Board of Trustees members, and local dignitaries participated in the ribbon cutting for Baptist Health Medical Center. For additional photos, see Page 6A.

of Baptist Health Troy Wells, opened the ceremony by addressing the large crowd that gathered in front of the hospital for the momentous occasion.

"We are humbled and honored to have you all here today," Wells said. "Today is historic as we bring together and celebrate two historic institutions in Bap-

tist Health and Drew Memorial Health Systems. This is just an awesome day for us all."

See HOSPITAL Page 10C

## JANUARY HIGHLIGHTS

### Local NAACP holds MLK celebration at New Life

By: **ASHLEY HOGG**  
editor@mونتicellonews.net

The local chapter #6042 of the NAACP and youth chapter #67AJ, hosted a lively MLK celebration Monday, January 16 at New Life Assembly of God church in Monticello.

The program began with Rev. Daryl Daniels and Toccara Daniels welcoming the crowd and reminding everyone of the purpose of the gathering.

The special MLK community choir opened the program with "We Shall Overcome" which brought the crowd to their feet and set the tone for the evening.

NAACP Secretary Miyoshi Smith addressed the group and thanked local sponsors of the event.

Oak Grove Assembly of God pastors Brandon and Amanda Laudell read scripture and said the opening prayer.

The crowd and the choir were then lead in song to "Lift Every Voice."

Monticello Mayor Jason Akers and Drew County Judge Jessie Griffin were present, along with Judge Bruce Anderson, Quorum Court member Zachary Hill and City Council members Cedric Leonard and Clarissa Pace.

Akers and Griffin thanked the crowd for the opportunity to speak and reiterated the nights theme of "Tear Down Walls."

Meygan Bivens, a local high school student, gave a youth perspective and call to action to the crowd.

An offering was taken and another selection from the choir was performed.

The keynote speaker for the night was Veronica Smith Creer, former Mayor of El Dorado and author.

Freedom Fund Chair Peggy Orr, recognized the 2022 Freedom Fund Honorees that included several individuals, Union Bank and Monticello Youth Cheer League.

The mission of the local NAACP chapter is to achieve equity, political rights, and social inclusion by advancing policies and practices that expand human and civil rights, eliminate discrimination, and accelerate well-being, education and economic security of black people and all persons of color.

## FEBRUARY HIGHLIGHTS

### Marquis Martin case turned over to State Police

By: **ASHLEY HOGG**  
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In a statement from Drew County Sheriff Tim Nichols, a formal request has been filed by the Sheriff's office and the 10th Judicial District Prosecuting Attorney, for the Arkansas State Police Criminal Investigation Division to take over the murder investigation of the late Marquis



Ashley Hogg/Advance Monticellonian

Martin.

Nichols stated that he has also been in contact with the Federal Bureau of Investigation regarding the Martin case and said that the FBI will assist the Arkansas State Police as they can.

Martin, 26, of Wilmar, went missing around February 9, 2020. His body was recovered on March 7, 2020, in an area north of Wilmar.

Up to this point, the investigation was being handled by the Drew County Sheriff's Department.

The Advance-Monticellonian will continue to update the public on this case as new information becomes available.

## MARCH HIGHLIGHTS

### Quorum Court votes to raise trash rates; impose late fees

By: **MELISSA ORRELL**

Trash woes continue in the county as Drew County Judge Jessie Griffin addressed issues in his opening statement to the Drew County Quorum Court Monday, March 13. The court members passed an ordinance to raise trash rates and impose late fees in the county.

Griffin informed the court the trash generated in the city of Monticello and Drew County was too much for the transfer station contractors to handle. Drew County made the decision to split costs with the City of Monticello by using the transfer station when the cost to dump trash in Ashley County raised in 2022. Griffin announced while Monticello Mayor Jason Akers works with contractors to get more drivers and containers to handle the amount of trash or, a solution is found, the county will once again be using the Ashley County landfill twice a week.

Later in the meeting, the court voted to increase trash collection fees in the county. An increase in fees was discussed throughout the tenure of the previous County Judge Robert Akin. The county has tried to keep costs down but continued to lose money year after year

with the continued increase associated with trash collection and disposal. Ordinance 2023-06 raises the collection fees for residential units to \$20.50 per month, plus applicable sales tax effective Saturday, July 1, 2023. The ordinance also added a 10 percent late fee if the quarterly billing for services is not paid in full by the 20th day of the month following the quarter in which billing was made. Landfill usage fees were also increased to \$30 per ton of solid waste delivered to the landfill, plus applicable sales taxes with a 10 percent late fee added to any use charges that are not paid when due. An emergency clause was also passed by the court allowing the increase in fees to take effect on July 1.

Trash volume and fees were not the only solid waste and sanitation issues brought up in the meeting. Griffin also informed the court he made a mistake when hiring a part-time employee for the land fill, inadvertently breaking the county's nepotism policy. The employee hired is the mother of another employee of the sanitation department, who works at the landfill at times. While the county currently has the landfill separate from sanitation on the books, the two are essentially one department. After discussion between Griffin and County Attorney Cliff Gibson, Griffin asked for 30 days to find a replacement and to allow the employee to find another job. The decision was made to let the two-week notice stand in order to avoid any future conflicts with the policy.

During his opening remarks, Griffin also announced a meeting he had with the State to bring broadband in to Drew County, asking anyone in the county who is interested in being involved in broadband installation in Drew County to contact the County Judge's Office. Griffin announced the State was interested in ensuring access to broadband in all houses in the county but still needed to work out how to get access to some harder to reach areas.

Griffin's remarks were followed by the County Treasurer report with Treasurer Charlie Searcy announcing the County

General Fund at the end of February had a \$107,000 balance compared to a deficit of \$41,000 at the end of February 2022. The quarter cent sales tax sits at \$4.9 million compared to \$4 million in 2022 and the general excess at \$1.23 million compared to \$1.27 million in 2022. The AARPA fund which are being used for the Sheriff's Department and Jail is at \$888,000 compared to \$1.3 million last year stating we are in much better shape this year compared to last year.

After wrapping up the treasurer's report, Griffin addressed rumors about the hospital. While no hospital report was given, Griffin assured the court and those in attendance that the hospital will remain in Drew County. He stated that while talks were ongoing in solving the problems at the hospital, many options were still on the table and that although he is not a voting member of the hospital board, he still is able to ask questions, give input, and will keep the County updated as they are available. He reiterated that nothing is being hidden and that Drew County would continue to have a hospital. This was followed with an update from the Southeast Arkansas Regional Library Monticello Branch by Judy Calhoun, regional director, who reported over 103,000 visitors to the Southeast Regional libraries with 29,000 of those visiting the Monticello branch with over 900 new library card holders in the last year.

Calhoun was followed by Hazalene McCray with the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture. McCray announced the beginning of the "Walk Across Arkansas" program which began on Monday, March 13. She also announced the availability for scholarships for families, youth and single parents available through varying program throughout the State. Many of the programs will pay milage, \$15 an hour for part time working students, and laptops. McCray stated no one in the county should have to miss out on a college education unless they didn't want to go to school. The division is also working on an obesity grant to have walking

## MILKEN

Continued from Page 1c

check for \$25,000.

Barnett explained that the Milken Educator Award is unique because no one can apply or be nominated for the award. The foundation finds winners from across the country. Many Arkansas educators have received this award but Howard is the first from Drew County to be a recipient.

"In just six years as an educator, Emily Howard has demonstrated outstanding dedication to honing her craft, increasing student achievement and uplifting her peers," said Dr. Barnett. "Emily understands the unique educational needs of a rural community and works daily to strengthen the collective role of students, educators, parents and community members in building a culture of growth. The Milken Educator Award honors her service as a role model for the state and nation, and for her potential to impact the profession for decades to come. Congratulations."

Hailed as the "Oscars of Teaching," Milken Educator Awards inspire and uplift with the unique stories of educators making a profound difference for students, colleagues and communities. The specific states and schools on this year's winners' list remain a closely guarded secret until each Award is announced.

"We are always excited to celebrate excellence in teaching, and today we celebrate Ms. Howard," Oliva said. "Ms. Howard exhibits all the wonderful characteristics and traits of exceptional teachers. From her inviting classroom and student and parental engagement to using student data to guide instruction and student growth in key academic subject areas, Ms. Howard reflects the epitome of great teaching. Congratulations to her on this well-deserved honor!"

paths by the courthouse for a safe place to walk.

The extension office is currently running five 4-H clubs in the county. Current clubs cover everything from livestock, horse riding and shooting clubs. McCray encouraged members of the court and the community to recruit kids to be involved in the clubs.

Following McCray, LaToya Williams of the Drew County Health Department approached the Court for permission to move forward on acquiring a grant for the Drew County Health Department to make improvements to the current building including a drive through. The county would be required to match 10 percent of the funds with Griffin stating the road department could do work to help with construction for the county to meet their match. While there are no estimates of the cost at this time, the court gave Williams permission to apply for the grant and

Along with the financial prize, recipients join the national Milken Educator Network, a group of more than 2,900 and growing of exemplary teachers, principals and specialists. The network serves as a rich resource for fellow educators, legislators, school boards and others dedicated to excellence in education.

The honorees will also attend an all-expenses-paid Milken Educator Awards Forum in Los Angeles, where they will network with their new colleagues as well as veteran Milken Educators and other education leaders about how to increase their impact on K-12 education.

In addition, they will learn about how to become involved in the Milken Friends Forever (MFF) mentoring program, in which new Milken Educators receive personalized coaching and support from a Milken Educator veteran on ways to elevate their instructional practice and take an active role in educational leadership, policy and practice.

"We find you. You don't find us!" Unlike most teacher recognition programs, the Milken Educator Awards initiative has no formal nomination or application process. Candidates are sourced through a confidential selection process and then reviewed by blue ribbon panels in each state. The most exceptional candidates are recommended for the Award, with final selection made by the Milken Family Foundation.

Veteran Milken Educators demonstrate a wide range of leadership roles at state, national and international levels.

The \$25,000 cash Award is unrestricted. Recipients have used the money in diverse ways. For instance, some have spent the funds on their children's or their own continuing education, financing dream field trips, establishing scholarships, and even adopting children.

to continue exploring the plans and cost for improvements.

Finishing up with old business, Griffin announced the county had made an offer to the City of Monticello to purchase the building currently housing the County's 911 system for \$85,000 and in-kind ground work for Monticello when they begin work on a smokehouse. The building appraised at \$120,000. The item did not make it on to last City Council agenda but should make it on to the upcoming agenda.

Griffin also announced the county could have the employee handbook rewritten for \$2,500 and announced county officials needed to review the handbook with employees and make suggestions to the court for any changes that need to be made stressing the importance of hearing from employees about improvements that can be made to existing policies.

Moving into new business, the court passed Ordinance

## DMHS

Continued from Page 1C

and that the leadership team has made changes to show the actions taken to correct some of the issues discussed in the plan. A motion was made and seconded to pass the resolution unanimously.

The second stipulation is that DMHS receives a letter of intent (LOI) from Baptist.

Barrilleaux asked the members of the board if the agenda could be amended to allow him to present the LOI to the board, as he had just received it from Baptist's attorney.

After being presented with the LOI, the board members were given several minutes to look it over. Carl Lucky made a motion to accept the LOI presented by Baptist, and Wayne Owen seconded the motion. Chairman Mike Akin called the motion to a vote, which passed with one dissension from board member, Robin McClendon.

Melodie Colwell, Chief Financial Officer, gave the March financial report to the board during the meeting. She stated that the month of March saw

a cash decrease right under \$600,000. Colwell said, "This is primarily driven by the fact that there were three pay periods paid out in March." Salaries were over budget \$66,000 for the month of March as well. This is due, in large part, to the in-house contracts the hospital has. These will continue to cause budgetary issues until DMHS can re-budget.

The board was also presented with a change to the Physical Therapy policies and procedures. This change was made after some recent issues in the PT area. These changes will be applied to anyone in this service area moving forward.

The Board of Governors held a conference call with TruBridge and HRG employees to discuss billing, collections, etc. The HRG representatives state that the month of March, DMHS saw record revenue in the amount of \$10.6 million, which was up 20 percent from February. They also stated that they had been keeping up with the situation with DMHS and wanted to know what they could do to help from a support standpoint, and what the future plans were. Barrilleaux

stated that the July 1 date with Baptist is still the hospital's main goal. Barrilleaux also reiterated that Baptist has no plans to change any third party relationships so long as they remain beneficial.

The board was also informed by TruBridge that in the past they have set up employment agreements to allow employees to be absorbed by TruBridge with no strings attached. They made this offer to the board in regards to employees at DMHS who are qualified to work on coding and billing.

With no further business, the next meeting was scheduled for May 22.

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2023-04 unanimously to further clarify the definition of “domestic animal” to include, “without limitation, domesticated dogs, cats, birds, poultry, horses and cattle,” for use in Emergency Ordinance 2022-16 which addressed vicious dogs in the county.

Ordinance 2023-05 was introduced and approved unanimously. The ordinance cleans up accounts in the 2022 budget. Following the unanimous passing of Ordinance 2023-06 to raise rates for solid waste and the landfill, the court then moved to pass Ordinance 2023-07, introduced by Justice Joe Williams. The ordinance prohibits the use of Rose Hill Cut-Off Road from being used by log trucks and other commercial trucks. Residents on the road have reported being run off the road by fifth wheel trailers hauling hay and other big trucks, even though signage is already present at both entrances to the road. Former Drew County Judge Robert Akin addressed the court and stressed the construction of the road was originally gravel before it was paved and is not built with the foundation necessary to support heavy trucks and machinery also stating the paving process narrowed the road and it is not wide enough to safely handle big truck traffic. While the need for a cut-off road leading to U.S. Highway 425 for commercial business is understood by the county, Rose Hill Cut-Off Road is not sufficient and illegal use of the road by log trucks and large commercial trucks will be punished by fines ranging from \$100 to \$1,000. Griffin stated the County would begin to look for solutions to access issues for commercial trucks.

The court also approved the reappointment of David Funderburg to the Public Facility Board and agreed to allow Gabby Owens to serve full time as a custodian for the county.

**APRIL HIGHLIGHTS**

**Local economy is discussed at public meeting**

By: **ASHLEY HOGG**  
 editor@monticellonews.net

An economic round table discussion was held Thursday, April 6 at the University of Arkansas at Monticello by the Monticello Rotary Club.

Katelyn Busby, Edward Jones Financial Advisor, Dr. Matt Pelkki, Forest Economics Professor at UAM and Todd Smith, President of Commercial Bank, were the featured speakers.

Over the past year, the Monticello Rotary Club has revamped its membership and meets weekly for engaging and informative programs. The recent economic round table discussion was the third public meeting this year, following Robert Raines, owner of The Gangster Museum of America, and Jim Hendren and Misty Orpin with Common Ground Arkansas.

Dr. Pelkki opened the forum discussing the impact that the university has on the local economy and how great our dependence on forestry is in the area.

He also discussed upcoming plans for the university to build pavilions made of local timber, to provide shaded areas on campus. Those in attendance were shown blue prints of what these structures are planning to look like.

Smith then spoke to the crowd about local sales tax and the importance of bringing in businesses to the area. As a new member of the Monticello Economic Development Commission, Smith is aware of the importance of maintaining and growing new business in our area so we can thrive.

Katelyn Busby closed the program discussing the stock market and inflation. She stated that in the current climate, inflation sits at around six percent with the goal being around three percent.

Busby also spoke about the upcoming jobs report that would be released and how our area does not always feel the full impact of market ups and downs.

After the speakers had concluded their independent presentations, a brief question and answer session was opened to members of the audience.

The crowd engaged in

**JULY HIGHLIGHTS**

**LOCAL BUSINESS CATCHES FIRE OVER THE WEEKEND**



The Monticello Fire Department was dispatched to a fire at Breaker on Saturday, July 1. There are no reported injuries.

Jeff McDonald/Advance Monticellonian

**GROUNDBREAKING FOR NEW ARBY'S BEGINS**



Construction crews beginning work on the site of the future Arby's.

Jeff McDonald/Advance Monticellonian

thoughtful questions and is looking forward to the release of the upcoming economic impact study that will be released later this spring by UAM.

**MAY HIGHLIGHTS**

**Economic Impact Study highlights UAM's effect on region and state**

SPECIAL TO THE ADVANCE

On April 27, the University of Arkansas at Monticello (UAM) held a public presentation in the UAM Fine Arts Center to share the results of a recently conducted UAM economic impact study.

Dr. Matthew Pelkki, professor of Forestry and George H. Clippert Chair of Forestry at UAM, presented the findings of the study, which he conducted with assistance from Dr. Nana Tian, assistant professor of Natural Resources Economics/Policy at UAM, and Dr. Marsha Clayton, dean of the School of Business at UAM. The analysis utilized database software available through

the Arkansas Center for Forest Business.

The study measured the economic impact of UAM at regional and statewide levels. Findings included that in the 14-county region of Southeast Arkansas, UAM supported 1,296 jobs and \$292,641,512 annually in economic activity, and at the statewide level, UAM supported 3,519 jobs and \$925,014,362 annually in economic activity.

During his presentation, Dr. Pelkki stated, “UAM alumni and those who have attended UAM bring in nearly \$550 million of annual added income statewide because they’ve earned a degree here or they’ve had education here, and that’s enabled them to be better earners from the time they graduate to the time they retire.”

Using data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the study measured additional income earned by people as a result of attending UAM as compared to peers who earned a high school degree and did not attend college. UAM students who attended UAM, but did not earn a degree, on aver-

age, earned \$4,680 more per year than peers with only a high school degree. UAM graduates who received two-year degrees averaged \$8,008 more earned per year; UAM graduates who received four-year degrees averaged \$27,300 more earned per year; and UAM graduates who received graduate degrees averaged \$39,780 more earned per year.

“If someone attends UAM, and they don’t get a degree, but

we’ve given them a chance, we’ve let them see what some of the possibilities are for them, that’s still worth \$4,000 a year in additional annual income,” Dr. Pelkki explained.

Dr. Peggy Doss, chancellor of UAM, addressed the crowd, stating, “All of you know the importance of the relationship between the University of Arkansas at Monticello and your communities and business and industries in our region. What

we realized is that we talk about the economic impact of the university and our students, and all the things that happen because the university is present here, but in the past, we have not had really solid data to use to show that true impact. Now, we have taken advantage of the Arkansas Center for Forest Business and Dr. Pelkki’s expertise to do a true economic impact study.”

“Community and university have a symbiotic relationship.

**MAY HIGHLIGHTS**



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We depend upon each other, and this study so clearly points that out," Dr. Doss said. "We all need to continue working together, as we have, to make sure that the future for this region is bright. UAM stands ready to do our part."

A recording of the full presentation is available on the university's YouTube channel, here.

For additional information regarding the study, contact Dr. Pelkki at 870-460-1949.

## AUGUST HIGHLIGHTS

### ARDOT holds groundbreaking for Scogin Dr. project

#### SPECIAL TO THE ADVANCE

These improvements are going to provide a north-south connection between the Highway 83 Spur and U.S. Highway 278 W.

This project is over one and half miles long and will begin on the southern end, at the intersection of Highway 83 and Jordan Drive.

It will continue northward and follow Scogin Drive for over half a mile, then it will extend for almost one mile of new construction until it connects with Highway 278 W.

Portions of the new roadway will be three lanes and the remainder will be two lanes.

The improvements will also include two roundabouts.

One will be built at Highway 83 and Jordan Drive, and the second one will be located just north, at Scogin Drive and Old Warren Road.

This job will also provide improvements for a railroad overpass on the north end.

One reason why this project is so important to the City of Monticello is that it will provide quicker, more reliable access to the schools and to medical care.

The overpass guarantees that cars and emergency vehicles won't have to stop for a passing train.

This project was made possible through a partnership with the City of Monticello and Drew County. The City contributed \$2,505,000, and Drew County provided \$505,000.

In addition to the financial contributions, portions of Highway 83 and the 83 Spur will be removed from the State Highway System and transferred to the City and County upon completion of the project.

## SEPTEMBER HIGHLIGHTS

### Drew County Grievance Committee meets to discuss recent termination

By JEFF McDONALD  
editor@monticellonews.net

The Drew County Quorum Court called a special meeting to have the county's Grievance Committee meet on Tuesday, September 5. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the recent termination of Chief Deputy Jerome Perez, and the grievance that he filed following his termination. In his grievance, Perez has alleged that his firing was due to discrimination.

The public showed up in full force, with more than 60 people in attendance. Drew County Judge Jessie Griffin said that the building had reached capacity per fire code, and prohibited anyone else from entering for safety reasons.

Drew County Attorney Cliff Gibson opened by stating that the Grievance Committee is made up of the entire Quorum Court, all of whom were present with the exception of Joe Williams and Zachary Hill.

Gibson said that he asked Judge Griffin and Frank Appleberry, Chairman of the Grievance Committee, to have this meeting as soon as possible because Perez deserved to have this situation resolved in a timely manner. Gibson clarified for those in attendance that there would be no actual trial at this meeting, rather this meeting was to determine how the county would move forward with the grievance.

Gibson noted that Perez had properly filed his grievance, and done so in a timely manner. Gibson informed all in attendance



Photo courtesy of Nita McDaniel

## AUGUST HIGHLIGHTS

that there are two ways that this situation can be addressed. The first would be for Perez to request a private hearing where he would go before the Quorum Court in an executive session. Sheriff Tim Nichols would also go into the executive session. The other option would be for Perez to choose a public hearing where anyone is welcome to be present. When given the option, Perez stated that he wanted the hearing to be public.

Gibson said that this hearing will be very formal, much like everyone pictures trials, or what they see on TV. There will be witnesses called for both sides, and all of them will be placed under oath. Gibson said that his role is to represent the county as he is county attorney. He will be examining and cross examining witnesses, and if Perez has an attorney, his counsel will be doing the same.

Gibson added that this is a rather long and tedious process. The hearing could be as short as half a day, but could go for a full day or even longer.

Gibson referenced the committee's policy and procedure manual and made note that the policy states that if the committee is hearing a grievance case, all members must be present. The policy has a stipulation that will allow the committee to appoint someone to sit in their stead. Gibson recommended taking this route because it will be hard to get all nine members on the same schedule. Gibson added that it is beneficial to appoint a lawyer or someone versed in the law since there will be actual legalities discussed in the hearing. The committee agreed to appoint someone. Jack Talbot, an attorney from Pine Bluff, was recommended by Gibson, as he has an outstanding reputation as an attorney. Talbot would sit in on the trial and give his findings and recommendations to the committee members. From this point, the committee has the ability to accept, refuse, or alter these recommendations and have the final say.

Gibson informed the committee that their role is advisory only, they can make a decision and present it to Sheriff Nichols, but he doesn't have to follow it if he feels it isn't what is best for his department. This is due to a past ruling by the Attorney General which states that elected officials have the final say in who is hired or fired in their offices.

Gibson said that the next step will be for Talbot to send Judge Griffin a letter of engagement. They will then schedule a date and the hearing will move forward. Notification will be sent out as information becomes available. Check back with the Advance for updates.

### Official date set for Perez grievance hearing

By JEFF McDONALD  
editor@monticellonews.net

Drew County Attorney, Cliff Gibson, contacted Grievance Committee Chairman, Frank Appleberry, to request a special meeting of the Grievance Committee be held on Monday, September 11.

The special meeting was called to address a situation that arose after last week's committee meeting.

The circumstance that led to this special meeting was that after the original committee meeting, committee member Orlando Jones sent out a text stating that he would like to recant his vote in favor of allowing Jack Talbot, an attorney from Pine Bluff, to hear the

case, make findings based on the testimonies and evidence presented, and give his recommendation to the committee members. Jones expressed some concerns, as Talbot was recommended by Gibson who will be representing the county in this hearing.

"It's nothing personal against Mr. Talbot or Mr. Gibson," Jones said. "I think we need to do everything to make sure that this is fair to both sides."

Gibson stated that Jones could not recant his vote because it was given during an open meeting, placing it on the record, which means it has to stand as it is.

"Mr. Jones can, in my opinion, ask the committee to reconsider its action in the appointment of Mr. Talbot," Gibson stated. "I think his request to take back his vote should be treated as a request to reconsider by this committee."

"This committee does have another option," Gibson added. "That option is for the committee members themselves to sit on the grievance hearing. They would hear all evidence, and make the final advisory recommendation to Sheriff Nichols. This would eliminate any questions of fair versus not fair, or right versus wrongdoing by any individual."

Gibson said that at this point, this is probably the best course of action, as it is the only one that will allow Deputy Jerome Perez to have this hearing held in a timely manner. Trying to find someone else to appoint would only further delay the hearing and subsequent decision.

Gibson said that with the committee sitting on the hearing, it would allow notice of the hearing to be posted promptly, and all who needed to be informed would have plenty of time to be notified.

Appleberry called for a vote, and the committee members voted unanimously to sit on the hearing and proceed in the fastest manner possible.

The hearing has been set for 9 a.m. on Monday, September 18, in the main courtroom in the Drew County Court House.

### Drew Co. Grievance Committee delivers decision in Perez grievance hearing

By JEFF McDONALD  
editor@monticellonews.net

*\*Editor's Note: There is some explicit language in this story. It has been edited as much as possible, while still allowing it to impact the story the same way it impacted the hearing. As a staff, we feel that it needs to be included accurately describe the events that transpired, as one of the greatest complaints was use of profanity.*

The Drew County Grievance Committee met at 9 a.m. Monday, September 25, to hear the grievance brought forth by Jerome Perez, former Chief Deputy for the Drew County Sheriff's Department. Committee Chairman Frank Appleberry called the meeting to order and determined that all members of the committee were present via roll call. Drew County Attorney Cliff Gibson introduced himself and stated that he was there to examine and cross-examine witnesses on behalf of Drew Co. Gibson also introduced Perez's council, Rickey Hicks from Little Rock.

Gibson opened up by giving a brief synopsis of the situation that led to this committee hearing being necessary. Gibson

introduced exhibit No. 1 as the email that was sent out notifying all necessary parties of the hearing itself.

Gibson next asked that all potential witnesses who may be called be identified for the benefit of the court reporter. Hicks agreed and asked if it would be preferable to the committee and Gibson, if they could swear the witnesses in while they had them there to save time later in the hearing. All parties agreed and the witnesses were sworn in as a group and then sequestered in the Quorum Courtroom to avoid witness corroboration and tampering.

Gibson then delivered his opening remarks. He remarked that the committee was meeting because Perez was claiming that Sheriff Tim Nichols fired him due to his race. Gibson noted that this hearing would allow both the employee and the supervisor to be heard and then the Grievance Committee would have to determine whether or not Perez's termination was lawful, or does it violate Perez's constitutional rights in some way.

Hicks followed with his opening statements and said that Perez was not claiming there was racial discrimination, or implying that Nichols was a racist.

"We are here because his termination was unconstitutional," Hicks said. "He feels that his termination violated his First Amendment rights. Mr. Perez says that the situation at the jail was just the culmination of a larger number of things."

Hicks then thanked the committee members for their service and said that one of the "great American rights" was being seen in action through due process of the law.

Hicks said that terminating Perez, who had no write-ups or verbal reprimands, was going from zero to one hundred at the drop of a hat.

"I feel that a lot of things are going to be revealed," Hicks said.

Hicks added that the reason Perez's constitutional rights had been violated was because Nichols began to treat him differently after hearing a recording where others were telling Perez that he should run for Sheriff and that he would make a better sheriff than Nichols. Hicks argued that if Perez did say he wanted to run, he has that right, and can not be treated differently or discriminated against for voicing that information. In wrapping up his opening statement, Hicks reiterated that there were no claims of racial discrimination.

Hicks then called his first witness, Sheriff Nichols, to testify before the committee. Nichols stated that he had been in law enforcement since 2007. He added that during the campaign process and following the election, Perez had supported him fully. Nichols stated that whenever he announced that he would run, he was contacted by Perez in 2021 telling him that if Nichols won, he wanted the Chief Deputy position. Nichols said that after talking with Perez, he agreed to make the call pending he wins the election. When asked how long he had known Perez, Nichols said that he had known Perez since 2015 through work-related interactions. When Hicks asked if, through his dealings and knowledge of Perez, Nichols felt comfortable appointing Perez as Chief Deputy, Nichols said that he did at that time. Hicks asked what the Chief Deputy's job duties are.

"The Chief Deputy supervises the patrol side of the Sheriff's Office," Nichols said. "They are also assisting in the administrative, scheduling, time off requests,

they are the right hand of the sheriff."

When asked if the chief deputy had any authority in the detention center, Nichols stated that the Jail Administrator, Courtney Hale, was directly beneath the sheriff, and had the authority to run the facility. Nichols said that the Chief Deputy and Jail Administrator had the same level of authority, in their respective areas. They do not have to answer to each other, only the sheriff.

This question was prompted after Perez and Hale had a verbal spat at the jail earlier in the year. Allegedly, Perez mentioned to Hale that a prisoner on lockdown shouldn't be receiving special privileges. Hale told him that he might as well just run the jail too. This situation led to a meeting between Nichols, Perez, and Hale. Nichols said that during this meeting he clarified yet again, that Hale was in charge of the jail, and she made the final decisions.

Hicks then asked Nichols how Perez had performed in his Chief Deputy duties. Nichols said that in the eight months since being in the position of Chief Deputy, Perez had not made a great effort to attend training that Nichols had asked him to go to. Nichols also said that it wasn't uncommon for Perez to come in at 9-9:30 a.m. Nichols said that Perez would do anything he was asked, and would go to events, but he would have liked to see Perez be a little more involved in his downtime. He wished Perez would have communicated if he was going to be late, or that Perez would go out on patrol with the other deputies if he had free time. Nichols said that Perez met the requirements to be a deputy, but maybe not the Chief Deputy.

Hicks also asked Nichols if he had discussed the recording where there was talk of Perez running for sheriff. He said that they had discussed it, and Perez told him that he wasn't going to run at this time, and they ended the discussion there.

Hicks then asked Nichols to give a rundown of the series of events that led to Perez being terminated. Nichols said on August 20, Perez sent him a message about some issues that were going on in the detention facility. Nichols said that he relayed this message to Hale, who told him she would have a staff meeting to address these issues.

On August, 23, Hale set a meeting with all jail staff for 8 a.m. Perez was present at the meeting, and Hale asked him to leave. He refused to leave. Hale

called Nichols, who called Perez and asked him to leave the jail and come to the Sheriff's Office, Perez refused Nichols three times, and hung up on him the third time, according to Nichols. During one of these attempts to get him to leave, Perez began to question why he couldn't be at the meeting.

Nichols said that a short time later, Hale called him crying. After refusing to leave the meeting, Perez mumbled under his breath and shook his head throughout the entire meeting, according to what Hale relayed to Nichols. During this mumbling, he kept saying that this meeting was "bull\*\*t", and that nothing important got discussed.

Nichols said that when Perez finally came to meet him, he denied using profanity. He then proceeded to slam a box down on Nichols' desk and asked if Nichols wanted his badge, to which Nichols answered no. This was shown via body cam footage recorded by another officer. Perez further said that none of the jail issues were even discussed. Perez said that Hale and Jail Compliance Officer Jacob Parker were in collusion and that's why they told Nichols he had used profanity during the meeting. Perez stressed that he had Nichols' back, but that the Sheriff didn't have his, especially when it comes to Hale.

In a later message, Perez said that "he wasn't going to that jail for s\*\*t. I don't care if they're beating the s\*\*t out of one of them. Don't call me."

Nichols said that Perez was insubordinate and displayed conduct unbecoming an officer. Nichols also said that Perez refused to give a written statement and that he should use the camera footage from the meeting as his statement.

On August 28, it was also alleged that Perez approached Parker about his writing a statement. Perez told Parker that he understood he was trying to do his job, and not get fired, but Hale wouldn't make it much longer as Jail Administrator.

Nichols added that had Perez just left the meeting at the jail and came to talk to him the rest of this situation could have been avoided.

Gibson then began his cross-examination of Nichols.

"When you were trying to get Perez to leave the meeting and come talk to you were you trying to save him," Gibson asked. "Was there a point when you realized it wasn't working?"

Nichols answered yes, he was

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trying to save Perez and that he did reach a point where he knew that he couldn't do anything else. Gibson then asked him why he hit this point and Nichols said that it was just the totality of all of the things that we've discussed here today, it wasn't just one thing.

It was at this point that Gibson requested the committee be shown the videos of the meeting between Perez and Nichols following the jail meeting, and the meeting when Perez was terminated.

During the termination video, Perez requested copies of all videos, but Nichols refused under the advisement of legal counsel. He later provided Perez with the requested videos.

"I still stand by my decision to terminate Mr. Perez. I stand by it today, and I'll stand by it tomorrow," Nichols said when asked if he had any regrets. "I did what I feel was best for the county. This wasn't an easy decision. I've lost sleep over this. I've prayed over this. I am confident that I did the right thing, and I continue to stand by it."

After redirecting the witness, Hicks asked Nichols if Perez was aware that he was being filmed during the two meetings at the Sheriff's Office. Nichols said that he couldn't be sure one way or the other. Hicks then asked why these specific meetings were recorded.

"We recorded these meetings because Mr. Perez has a habit of over-talking and having to have his say," Nichols said. "He also always wants you to prove anything you say to him. He can't just accept anything."

"Can you not understand how Mr. Perez could feel betrayed," Hicks asked. "As he says repeatedly that he has your back, and that you don't have his?"

"I couldn't say what Mr. Perez feels," Nichols answered.

After this, a few members of the committee had questions for the sheriff. Orlando Jones asked if the Chief Deputy/Jail Administrator structure had always been the way it currently is. Nichols said that to his knowledge, yes it had.

Committee member Joe Williams said that he never thought that race was the issue at hand. He also says that in his line of work, procedure is very important and asked if Nichols could give a more thorough description of the Chief Deputy's duties.

"It's very clear that the two of you were very close, maybe too close in retrospect," Williams added. "Why could we not have recommended anger management or other training?"

"Has any other deputy ever told you 'no'?" asked Williams.

"Not to my knowledge," answered Nichols.

In one final question to Nichols, Hicks asked that if the committee were to recommend that Perez be rehired, would Nichols abide by the recommendation.

"No, I will stand by my decision regardless of the recommendation," Nichols said.

At this time, 11:30 a.m., the court recessed for lunch until 1 p.m.

When the court reconvened at 1 p.m., Hicks called Perez to testify before the committee. Perez stated that he had four years of law enforcement experience, stating that he had worked for the Monticello Police Department,

where he transitioned into the School Resource Officer role, before accepting the Chief Deputy role once Nichols was elected Sheriff.

Hicks asked Perez to list his job duties and responsibilities as Chief Deputy. Perez said that he had never been told what those duties or responsibilities were. Perez says that initially, he wasn't told of the hierarchy or chain of command either. He said Nichols had only told him to 'keep doing what you're doing' when asked about job duties.

Perez said that he started noticing issues at the jail almost immediately. He said there was an issue with an inmate who was on lockdown for fighting, and they were going to let him have special privileges. Perez said that he approached Hale about not giving the inmate special privileges while on lockdown. Perez said that she told him, "I'm tired of this s\*\*t, here's the keys. You run this mother f\*\*\*ng jail."

Perez also noted that inmates were allowed to go outside and smoke when they shouldn't be outside. He also said that employees were constantly using their cellphones inside the jail which is against the rules.

Perez also stated that there was never a meeting between Nichols, Hale, and himself where the chain of command for the jail was discussed.

When asked about the recording where there was talk of Perez running for sheriff, he said that yes there was a recording, but he was not there, some friends made the recording. He did state that at some point in the future, he would not be against running for sheriff, but at this point, eight months in, he's just worried about figuring out how to be Chief Deputy.

Perez also mentioned that jail staff had left firearms in vehicles that trustees have access to, which is unsafe and unacceptable.

In regards to the August 23 meeting, Perez said that he was only at the jail because the sheriff called him, so he assumed Nichols wanted him there. Perez said that when he arrived, the people who should be documenting everyone who entered and exited the facility were too busy playing on their cellphones rather than focusing on their jobs. Perez said that at no time did Nichols direct him to leave the meeting and return to the office immediately, he did ask him to come by, just not immediately.

Perez said that during the meeting, nothing was addressed that needed to be done, and nothing changed, so he left the meeting. He said while he was leaving, Hale told him what he thought didn't matter anyway because he didn't work there.

He responded with, "Neither do you", but meant to say you won't for much longer.

Perez said that Nichols always sides with Hale in every situation. He said that this lets him know that Nichols doesn't have his back like he claims.

Perez said he asked Nichols what the point of him being there was if he couldn't make any decisions. He said Nichols told him that they were good and that he loved him. Perez said that he thought everything was resolved at that point. Perez added that when Nichols then proceeded to terminate him, he

was caught off guard and didn't know what to do.

At this point, Hicks produced a four-page document that Perez had typed for the committee members that was designed to highlight certain points of his testimony.

Gibson objected to this document as he had not been allowed to see it until that very moment, and neither had Sheriff Nichols. Gibson further objected that this was a typical surprise tactic that is common in this type of proceeding. Gibson added that the committee needs to have time to review, and they need to know that this action is unfair to all involved. Gibson added that this document could have serious implications and that it needed to be held until the following day so that it could be read and studied, and so that Gibson could see if he needed to call witnesses to possibly impeach the document. No one wanted to have a second day's proceedings so they agreed to hold off on the document.

Perez added that Shelly Smith was fired for saying that he needed to run for sheriff, and would make a better sheriff than our current one.

Hicks asked Perez what he hoped to gain from this hearing. "I just want my job back," said Perez.

Gibson then began his cross-examination of Perez. He began by asking if Perez thought he would be a better sheriff than Nichols. Perez stated that he never said that, and that he can't control what other people have said. Gibson then asked Perez if he was emotional whenever he met Nichols after the August 23 meeting. Perez said that he was indeed emotional. Gibson asked if he lost his cool at any point. Perez said he had not at any point lost his cool.

Gibson then moved to the issue of Perez being accused of using profanity directed at Hale following the meeting. On the video provided by Nichols, Perez denied having used profanity, but later recanted and said that he had said the meeting was "bull\*\*t", but that he did not direct it at Hale personally. Gibson asked him if it made it okay because it wasn't directed at her, and Perez said that it wasn't.

Gibson further addressed Perez and stated that Nichols truly valued him, and had done a lot to try to save him.

"That's not true," Perez said. "Just because he says it front of everyone doesn't make it true. It only makes it his opinion."

When asked about refusing to provide a written statement on the jail incident, Perez says that Nichols told him not to worry about writing one. Gibson went on to state that every jailer wrote one. Perez said that was because they thought their jobs were on the line.

"Yours was too," Gibson said. "I didn't think it was at the time," Perez replied.

In the statements written by the majority of the jailers, Perez was deemed unprofessional, and his actions were seen as unnecessary. Perez said that these statements were full of lies and that the employees who wrote them were liars.

Hicks jumped in and said that Gibson was breaking evidentiary rules by reading these statements when the people who gave them were present to testify.

Hicks was then allowed to redirect the witness. He brought up the firearms being left in vehicles. Perez said that initially, he didn't have the photos, they were given to him at a later point, but he did bring it to Nichols' attention because Hale wouldn't.

Perez also stated that even if he had known he was being recorded in Nichols' office, he still would have been highly emotional.

At this point, Perez did get emotional and showed how taxing and stressful proceedings like this can be. In a sign of humanity, committee member Orlando Jones requested a brief recess to allow Perez to recompose himself. The committee agreed and recessed for 10 minutes.

Upon reentering the witness chair, Jones asked him why he was so passionate.

"I was just there to tell him that I had his back, and I feel that it wasn't mutual," Perez said.

"Did you feel that you were in a safe place to show that passion?" committee member Ben Higginbotham asked. "With someone who called me his brother, his family... yes," answered Perez.

Hicks called his final witness, Jacqueline Jones. Jones is an employee of the Drew Co. Detention Facility, who has worked there for approximately 10 years. Jones said that she was certain that Perez had addressed security and safety concerns regarding the jail. Jones said that she had addressed concerns to Perez such as notes being passed between inmates, and staff helping pass notes.

Jones said that she didn't see Perez at the August 23 meeting due to where they were each located in the building. She says that she would have been able to hear him if he were being disruptive, and she says she did not hear him.

Gibson began his cross-examination by asking Jones if she left the meeting at the same time as Perez. She stated that she was directly in front of him. She was asked if she had seen or heard Hale crying after the meeting. She stated that she did not because she was already outside. She said she only heard about it later from others.

Gibson then moved to his witnesses and called Jail Administrator Courtney Hale. Hale stated that she had worked as the Administrator's Assistant for around 10 years, and came on as Jail Administrator in January when Nichols took office.

Hale then discussed the episode where she and Perez disagreed on giving an inmate special privileges. She said that she told him that he did not run things in the jail. She also said that, unlike Perez's statement, there was indeed a meeting between Nichols, Perez, and herself to discuss who has authority over the jail.

Hale said that before the August 23 meeting, Perez received a text from a jail employee discussing some issues. Perez then informed Nichols who in turn informed Hale. She said that she informed Nichols that she would schedule a meeting with all of her employees. On August 23, she scheduled a meeting for 8 a.m. with all of the jail staff which was around 12-13 at that time. Hale said that she asked Perez if she could speak with him

privately, and asked him to leave the meeting.

"I am the Chief Deputy, and I'm not going anywhere. I have the right to be here," Perez stated according to Hale.

Hale says that Perez then returned to the booking room and shut the door. Hale decided to continue with the meeting anyway and says Perez stood in the break room door the whole time.

Hale says that she started going through the agenda, and Perez was constantly saying "This is bull\*\*t". Hale decided to adjourn the meeting. Hale said that at this point Perez once again declared the meeting to be bull\*\*t and that nothing of importance was even covered. Hale said he also told her that she had, "no clue how to run this f\*\*\*ing jail" on his way out the door.

Hale said she was so upset by the incident that she began crying and had to step out to call the sheriff.

Hicks opened his cross-examination of Hale by asking her if she told Perez, "Here are the keys, you run this mother f\*\*\*er." She replied that she did not.

"Did you leave the jail," asked Hicks.

"Yes, I stepped out for about 10 minutes to call the sheriff," Hale replied.

Hicks then asked if Perez had directed any profanity directly at Hale. She replied that no he had not. Hicks asked if it is common for profanity to be used in a jail. Hale said that it is.

Upon the redirect, Gibson asked Hale if she felt like Perez was trying to impose his authority on her. She said that she did and that she felt like he was trying to intimidate her.

Gibson called his next witness, Vincent Shaw, who has been a jailer for around a year. Shaw said that in his opinion, Hale reacted very well to a highly un-called-for situation. He said that she was left in a vulnerable state, and was left in tears.

During cross-examination, Hicks asked Shaw why half of his statement was written in cursive and half was printed. Shaw said that was just the way he writes. Hicks also asked if Shaw would say that Perez had disrupted the meeting. Shaw said he would not say he was disruptive during the meeting.

On redirect, Gibson asked Shaw would someone making the situation highly emotion not be considered disruptive. Shaw said if it happened in the meeting, yes, but all of this happened after the meeting.

Gibson then called Paul New to testify. New is a jailer at the Drew Co. Detention Facility.

New said that there was indeed drama at the meeting. New said he witnessed Perez in the booking office and saw Hale pull him to the side and asked him to leave. New said that he heard Perez say that he was the Chief Deputy and that he had the right to be there. New said that after the meeting, he heard Perez state that the meeting was bull\*\*t and that nothing had been discussed. New said that Perez was very unprofessional and that his behavior was uncalled for.

During cross-examination, Hicks asked if Perez's actions could be considered disruptive. New said that during the meeting no, but Perez could have found a better way to handle the

situation.

On redirect, Gibson asked how Hale reacted to the situation. New said that she was visibly upset and shaking. He said she clearly felt demeaned in front of her entire staff.

Gibson then calls Ms. McHenry, who is a jailer at the facility and has also worked at the juvenile center in Dermott.

McHenry said that during the meeting on August 23, Perez deliberately embarrassed Hale in front of her staff, which was un-called for.

She wasn't in the wrong," McHenry said. "He was."

On cross-examination, Hicks asked how Perez embarrassed her.

"By telling her that she wasn't doing her f\*\*\*ng job," said McHenry.

McHenry went on to say that his behavior was un-called for, but she didn't get to observe all of it because she was in the control booth.

On his redirect, Gibson asked how Hale reacted to Perez's behavior.

"She broke down and started crying," McHenry said. "I hugged her and told her to stop crying."

Gibson then called his final witness, Jail Compliance Officer, Jacob Parker.

Parker said that on August 23, there was a called meeting for all jail staff. He said that when he arrived, Perez was there. Parker stated that Hale called Perez to the side, and asked him to leave, but he stated that he wasn't going anywhere, as Chief Deputy he had the right to stay. Parker said that Hale agreed to move forward with the meeting. He said that he addressed the staff on some compliance issues, and then Hale asked if anyone had any comments or questions. Parker said that Perez sat through the meeting shaking his head the whole time and mumbling about the meeting being bull\*\*t.

On cross-examination, Hicks asked Parker if in his opinion he thought Perez disrupted the meeting. Parker said that it wasn't disruptive, but Perez was mumbling the whole time.

Hicks also asked Parker if he was aware of firearms being left in places where inmates could get to them. Parker said that he didn't know and that it had not been brought to his attention. Upon being shown the photos that Perez provided, Parker admitted that one of the firearms was his weapon and that he had left it in the vehicle by accident while on a transport job.

Gibson said he had nothing further.

This led to both Gibson and Hicks giving closing statements. Gibson said that the jail has passed multiple inspections, and is moving in the right direction, and a lot of these inspections should serve to negate some of the complaints.

Gibson further stated that one thing about this hearing is certain and that is that there is no racism or First Amendment violations. He added that the Sheriff acted within his scope, as he can hire and fire his employees as he sees fit.

"What we have here is a man who wanted to be in charge of everything, who wanted to be sheriff."

See HIGHLIGHTS Page 8A

## SEPTEMBER HIGHLIGHTS

# 5th Annual Hattie's Hotrods held at Monticello Sports Complex



Jeff McDonald/Advance Monticellonian

Pictured from left to right: Alvin James, winner of the Family Pick for Truck, Bryan Davis, Olivia Davis, Troy Meaux, winner of the Family Pick for Motorcycle, Bill Deeb, winner of the Family Pick for Cars, Brandy Davis, and Drake Davis. The Davis family is pictured with the truck, motorcycle, and car that won Davis Family Picks on Saturday, September 16, at this year's Hattie's Hotrods event. There were a lot of entrants, several food trucks were on hand, and a good time was had by all. All proceeds went to Hope Place Monticello and While We Wait, a non-profit that serves bereaved parents who have lost a child.



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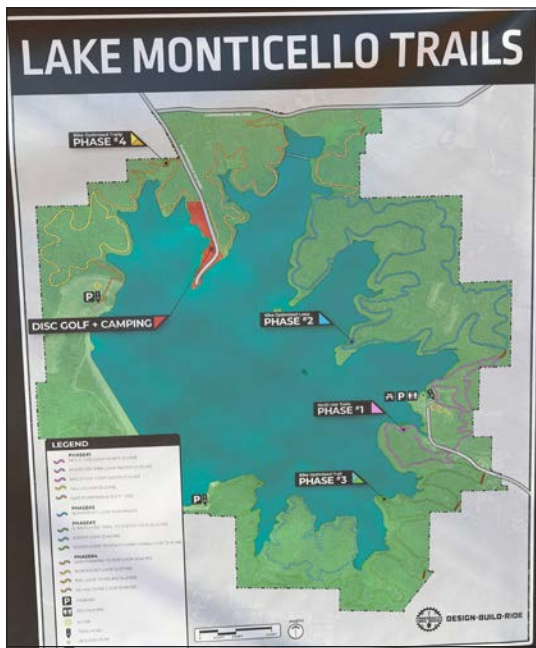
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STAFFING & SCREENING

# Lakewoods Trails opens Phase One for riders and walkers

Phase One of Lakewoods Trails opened at 10 a.m. on Saturday, September 30.

There were lots of bikers present, and there were many supporters there to see the first part of the project come to fruition. Grants have been applied for to begin Phase Two. Go out and enjoy this new feature in Monticello, but please obey the rules of the trail and help keep the trail clean and functional for all to enjoy.



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JANUARY HIGHLIGHTS

SQUARE BEAUTIFICATION



Ashley Hogg/Advance Monticellonian

Several months ago, Union Bank and Trust Co. reached out to local business for assistance with a downtown square beautification project. Thanks to these generous donors, the project for new banners on the square was fully funded and the banners are being put up by City workers this week. Thanks to Union Bank for spearheading this project and Patrick's Auto Wash, Lucky's of Monticello, Commercial Bank, Clearview Glass & Mirror, Sammy Mullis Insurance, Monticello Rotary Club, Phillip and Reathel Privett, Majors Forest & Lawn, Tommy and Beth Maxwell, Kiwanis of Monticello, David and Gail Hooker, and Drew Co Farm Bureau Insurance. Take notice of other projects in the downtown area such as fresh flowers in sidewalks planters in conjunction with the Drew County Master Gardeners and the murals just East of the square, painted in conjunction with the UAM Art Department.

JULY HIGHLIGHTS

MAIN STREET ART HOLD KID'S CAMP



Photos courtesy of SCoburn Images

The camp ran from Monday, June 26-June 30. They covered and replicated works of prehistoric art, Van Gogh, Frita, Dali, and Warhol. The camp served as a fund raiser with all proceeds going to the Art Education Opportunities scholarship fund, which awards a \$1,000 scholarship to a Monticello student, and another \$1,000 scholarship to a Drew Central student who chooses to further their art education at the University of Arkansas at Monticello.



MARCH HIGHLIGHTS

HOMETOWN HEROES



Ashley Hogg/Advance Monticellonian

Local EMS workers with Monticello Ambulance recently traveled to Mississippi to assist residents after a massive tornado killed more than 20 people and injured countless more. Charlie Goehle, (left) EMT, Ron Berry, (right) Paramedic, and Mark Staley (not pictured) Manager and Paramedic, made transport calls last Friday after the EF4 tornado hit the hospital. The men stayed through Saturday, helping transport the injured to medical facilities as away as Jackson, Miss.

OCTOBER HIGHLIGHTS

WESTERN SIZZLIN DEMOLISHED



Photo courtesy of Lon Tegels/UAM

The Western Sizzlin building was demolished on Monday, October 16. No official plans have been announced by the current property owner.

*Wishing You All the Festive Feels*

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*Thanks for bringing so much joy to our year with your visits.*

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*Just Bring In Our Competitors' Quotes.*

iff, but he's not," Gibson said. "This is very unfortunate," Gibson added. "But I don't think that there is any proof that Sheriff Nichols violated any laws through his actions. I don't believe that this is a sustainable grievance." Hicks closed by thanking the committee members for their attentiveness to this matter, adding that there is so much on the line.

"I staunchly disagree with Mr. Gibson's remarks," Hicks said. "You are the gatekeepers, and just because he is an elected official doesn't mean that he is above you. He must be held to the law just like everyone else. I argue that there was a First Amendment violation. Due to the recording of the people talking about Mr. Perez running for sheriff, Sheriff Nichols began to treat Perez differently."

"This petty little spat is not grounds to terminate someone," Hicks continued. "Jerome is supposed to bring up issues, and the only complaint that they have is that he used the word 'bull\*\*it'. To get emotional over the use of profanity in a jail setting is questionable."

"In an effort to have a unified community, send the message that a man who gave so much shouldn't be fired for one issue," Hicks concluded.

Committee member Jones made a motion that the committee be moved into executive session for deliberation of the evidence. The committee members voted in favor and they moved into a private location to review the facts presented.

After nearly an hour, the committee came in from the executive session. Grievance Committee Chairman Appleberry called for the members to cast their votes. Justices Frank Appleberry, Roger Harris, Donna Ursry, Sheila Maxwell, Steve Piggott, and Zachary Hill all voted that Perez had not sufficiently proved that Sheriff Nichols had violated his First Amendment rights or discriminated against him, while Justices Joe Williams, Orlando Jones, and Ben Higginbotham felt that Perez had provided sufficient evidence that a violation had occurred. In the end, the grievance was not upheld.

**White set to retire; Hogg to assume Publisher duties**

By Advance Staff editor@monticellonews.net Tom White, publisher of the Advance-Monticellonian and the Eagle Democrat has announced he is stepping down as publisher of the newspapers and as president of the parent organization, Drew County Newspapers, Inc. The effective date is September 30, 2023. Long time employee and current General Manager/Advertising Manager Ashley Hogg will be named publisher and president of the corporation upon White's departure. He will remain with the organizations on a part-time basis as a consultant.

White came to the Monticello newspaper in 1996 when Frank and Mary Jackson retired and sold the newspaper to Smith Newspapers, Inc. In 2022, he stepped in to keep the Warren newspaper from closing by purchasing it from Danny and Pam Cook who were also retiring. Prior to the move to Monticello White was co-publisher of the



Jeff McDonald/Advance Monticellonian Ashley Hogg (left) and Tom White (right) pictured outside of the Advance office. Hogg will step into the publisher role upon White's retirement.

McGehee-Dermott Times-News.

As a child and teenager, he worked at the Eagle Democrat when his late grandfather, W. L. Love and later his late father, James P White Sr were publishers of the Warren newspaper. "I am very proud of what we have accomplished at the newspapers since taking over the operations in Monticello over 27 years ago and more recently in Warren. Any success we had has been due to the outstanding employees that I have had the pleasure to work with over the years. They are the ones that made it all happen, but we would not have been able to accomplish anything without our avid readers and the businesses in the area that have supported us with their undying loyalty and advertising dollars," White said.

"As I have aged and started contemplating retirement, my goal has been to make sure I leave the newspapers in better shape than I found them and that includes leaving them in capable hands. I am confident that I have found that with Ashley Hogg. She has worked with us for several years in most positions at these newspapers. She started in 2012 when she was not long out of high school and excelled in our advertising sales department. Since then, she has also been a reporter, editor, bookkeeper, advertising manager and general manager. At times she has stepped up to handle multiple positions simultaneously. I think she is as well versed and prepared for the challenges ahead as anyone I have ever known. She has earned this opportunity."

"It is my sincere hope that our readers, advertisers, and our communities will support her and the talented individuals that make up the team here for many years to come," White added. "After 57 years in a business that doesn't know when it is time to 'clock out', I am looking forward to having more time for family and friends, but these newspapers, our employees and these communities have been so

very good to me and my family. I can't fathom where my family would be if we had not taken a chance and made the move to our hometown 27 years ago, and it was an honor to come back to my original hometown, Warren, even if it was for a much briefer time. Thank you is not enough but thank you all."

"I am overwhelmed with this amazing opportunity that I have been trusted with," Hogg added. "It has been a joy to work in this industry and I am excited about the future. Tom took a chance on me when I was very young and over the years, I have learned many valuable lessons from him that I will hold on to. The staff at The Advance-Monticellonian and The Eagle Democrat have been committed to providing a quality product that is factually accurate and timely, that is not going to change."

Hogg is a graduate of Drew Central High School and the University of Arkansas at Monticello. She has one daughter and is married to Brandon Hogg.

"On behalf of the staff of The Advance-Monticellonian and The Eagle Democrat, we would like to wish Tom well in his upcoming retirement. He has served this community for many years, and more than deserves to have the ability to spend time with his family and devote more time to the hobbies he enjoys," Jeff McDonald, Editor of The Advance-Monticellonian said. "We are also looking forward to the future with Ashley at the helm. We are excited to see what the future holds, and hope to continue bringing our communities the same level of quality news for years to come."

**OCTOBER HIGHLIGHTS**

**Drew Memorial Health System enters into management agreement with Baptist Health**

SPECIAL TO THE ADVANCE Baptist Health has reached

a definitive agreement to add Drew Memorial Health System in Monticello to the Baptist Health system. The acquisition will be subject to customary regulatory approvals, and in the interim, Baptist Health will immediately begin managing Drew Memorial Health System's general operations.

In December, Baptist Health will officially add Drew Memorial Health System, which includes a 60-bed hospital, two clinics, and home health. That same month, the Monticello hospital will become Baptist Health's 12th hospital and will be named "Baptist Health Medical Center-Drew County."

"Baptist Health was approached by Drew Memorial Health System a number of months ago about our interest in merging Drew Memorial Health System into the Baptist Health system," said Troy Wells, president and CEO of Baptist Health. "In today's challenging health care environment, it is not uncommon for independent community hospitals to look for a system partner. Baptist Health has a proven track record for operating our rural hospitals efficiently, allowing them to remain viable while providing quality health care in much needed areas of our state."

"This is an energizing and exciting day for Drew County and the surrounding communities," said Scott Barrilleaux, CEO for Drew County Memorial Hospital. "To combine forces with the outstanding reputation of the Baptist Health team will complement the quality of care this area has come to expect."

Drew Memorial Health System has approximately 350 employees on its campus in Monticello. The health system offers numerous services such as a cancer and infusion center, emergency department, wound center, rehab therapy, respiratory therapy, women's services, a sleep center, radiology, and laboratory, among others.

The period from October until acquisition in December will allow the opportunity to minimize disruptions to operations and help with a smooth transition.

**NOVEMBER HIGHLIGHTS**

**QC hears brief hospital update; small business owners concerned with landfill costs**

By JEFF McDONALD editor@monticellonews.net

The Drew County Quorum Court held its monthly meeting on Monday, November 13, at 6 p.m. in the District Court building. Drew County Judge Jessie Griffin called the meeting to order and a quick invocation was said, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance. The roll was called and all of the Justices of the Peace were found to be present. Following the roll call, the minutes from the October meeting were approved.

County Treasurer Charlie Searcy gave his report next. Searcy said that County General is currently at negative \$1.3 million. He said that the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) account

which is funding the Sheriff's Office and the Detention Facility is currently at negative \$2.5 million, but that number will be absorbed back into County General in 2024. The one-cent sales tax collection is currently \$1.8 million. Through a combination of these and a few other accounts, the accounts were a combined negative \$1.8 million as of the end of October.

Searcy added that the operating expenses show negative \$643,614, compared to negative \$787,000 this time last year.

"We held our own this year," Searcy added.

Judge Griffin then gave his report. He noted that the courthouse was struck by lightning a few months ago. He said that the crew to fix that should be on the job by the end of the week. He added that some parking spots would have to be blocked off to allow the crews to complete the job.

Griffin also noted that there are crews in the basement of the courthouse who are doing work to seal the concrete and help waterproof the basement.

The Road Department has a new form with all of the pertinent information on any county job that is performed. It will detail such things as what work was done, who did the work, and an inventory of supplies used.

Judge Griffin also said that the county has purchased new software that will allow employees to sign in and take classes. He said that hopefully, they can roll that out soon.

Judge Griffin also noted that a lot of work has been done at the landfill. He said that a great deal of work has been done on the roads and that they are preparing to open new cells at the landfill in 2024.

Drew Memorial Health Systems CEO Scott Barrilleaux gave an update on the hospital. Barrilleaux said that in September, the average daily census was 17 which is the best it's been all year. He also added that Emergency Room numbers had been trending in a "northerly fashion."

"This may not be a good thing, but I'm glad we were there whenever the citizens of Drew County needed us," Barrilleaux said.

Barrilleaux added that Labor and Delivery are ahead of where they were last year. There have been a couple of hospitals in the area who have closed their OB practices and several of those patients have been transferred to DMHS. Barrilleaux added that November could be a record year for deliveries at this rate.

Barrilleaux noted a loss of \$425,000 in August which leads to a negative \$3 million operating loss year to date. He noted that the hospital does show a

bottom line of \$4.2 million. He added that this is due in large part to ARPA funds and Employee Retention Credits the hospital has received.

"Without those, it would have been another rough year for us," Barrilleaux said. Barrilleaux added that net patient revenue was \$15 million, while total operating revenue was \$48 million. In other words, DMHS billed \$48 million but only collected \$15 million.

"That math isn't great," Barrilleaux added. "That is the reimbursement environment we are currently living in."

Barrilleaux added that the relationship with Baptist Health is still good and ongoing. The December 3, merger date is still a go, with a ribbon cutting to take place on December 4.

"When Baptist was first presented to us, did you not say that there would be no nurses leaving," asked County Collector Tonya Loveless. "Now we've lost 40!"

"First of all, I never said that," responded Barrilleaux. "Second off, we didn't lose 40 nurses. We lost 40 employees, not all of which were nurses."

"I think I was told the number was somewhere around 47," Judge Griffin said.

"That's about right," Barrilleaux replied.

Barrilleaux then read a press release from Baptist Health, the release that was shared on the Advance Monticellonian Facebook page.

"I want to clear the air," Barrilleaux said. "When I went to the state over a year ago, they required that we come up with a sustainability plan, which we did, and adopted. It was during this time that talks began with Baptist as well. In the sustainability plan, we had to figure out how to reduce expenses. Salaries make up roughly 60 percent of all of our expenses. We can only cut so many things out and find so many better prices. If the state had made us implement this plan, there would have been even more Draconian cuts. In the end, our goal is to make sure that there is a hospital in Drew County. None of us need to lose sight of that. No one wants to do what happened."

"I think the timing, being the holiday season wasn't good," Judge Griffin said. "I'm not happy about that."

"I'm trying to get us to the merger, that's the bottom line," Barrilleaux added.

When asked if more layoffs were expected, Barrilleaux said that he didn't see that happening.

Sheriff Tim Nichols reported that repairs on the jail roof should begin this week.

The court members then

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passed an appropriation ordinance that deals with the levying of taxes for 2023-2028.

The court also passed an ordinance that would change Commercial Solid Waste late fees. This ordinance allows for charges to be levied after the customer gets 30 days past due.

Drew Co. Assessor Cheri Adcock asked to move money from one account to another to pay for restoration to a Plat Book that her office uses that dates back to the 1920s. The restoration is guaranteed for life. The council passed the appropriation.

The court also approved an ordinance that would pay county employees a stipend. Full-time employees would be paid \$750 and part-time employees would be paid \$250. The stipend would be prorated for the employees who didn't work for the full year.

Judge Griffin discussed a Crisis Communication Plan for 2024. He said that he is currently drafting an outline for how information will be communicated in emergencies.

Judge Griffin also reappointed Norman Hill to the Public Facilities Board.

In the closing of the meeting, Will and Brittainy Caldwell came before the court to discuss how the recent increase in land-fill fees has made it harder for them to run their small business. SeArk Dumpster Rentals has had to resort to dumping in other counties. Judge Griffin asked the Caddells to come meet with him to discuss options and solutions to help all small businesses that have been affected by the price increase.

### Baptist Health attempts to set the record straight; not all doom and gloom

By ADVANCE STAFF  
editor@monticellonews.net

On Wednesday, November 8, Drew Memorial Health Systems experienced what has been referred to as, "a healthy staff reduction." As expected, rumors and varying stories filled many text messages and social media posts across Drew County and the surrounding area.

During a report to the Quorum Court, DMHS Chief Executive Officer Scott Barrilleaux was confronted by the County Collector Tonya Loveless with the question, "Why were there 40 nurses who lost jobs, when he said no nurses would be fired whenever Baptist became involved?"

Barrilleaux clarified that he had never actually said that, and that while 40 employees lost their jobs, not all of them were nurses. He then read the following statement released by Baptist Health:

"Leadership teams at Drew Memorial Health System (DMHS) and Baptist Health, are working together to identify areas where labor efficiencies can be gained at DMHS. A significant number of positions are being reduced (over 40). The individuals impacted will have the opportunity to apply for other openings across Baptist Health."

"This is an effort to operate Drew Memorial similarly to oth-

er Baptist Health regional facilities, and take advantage of the scope and size of Baptist Health. This will be one of several initiatives to operate DMH safely and more efficiently, and continue to provide high-quality care to the community. In December, Baptist Health will officially add Drew Memorial Health System, which includes a 60-bed hospital, two clinics and home health. That same month, the Monticello hospital will become Baptist Health's 12th hospital and will be named Baptist Health Medical Center-Drew County."

With all of the uncertainty surrounding the situation, the staff at the Advance-Monticellonian reached out to the leadership at Baptist Health to request a meeting so that we could gain information and provide the facts to our community.

Chief Operating Officer Doug Weeks, Chief Marketing Officer Lawrence Montgomery, and other members of the Baptist Health leadership team met with Advance-Monticellonian Publisher, Ashley Hogg and Advance-Monticellonian Editor, Jeff McDonald on Thursday, November 16, to answer questions and provide additional information surrounding the events of November 18.

"We've heard that the number of people who lost their jobs is anywhere from 40 to 62," Hogg said. "Can you give us an actual number of jobs lost?"

"The total number of employees impacted in the staff reduction is 43," Weeks replied.

"There have been rumors going around that 40 nurses lost their jobs," McDonald added. "Would you be willing to share what the exact number is?"

"The number of RNs and LPNs that lost their job is eight, with six of them being RNs and two being LPNs," Weeks replied.

"The number of nurses impacted by this were very small."

Weeks then showed a breakdown of the totals for positions that were terminated. Aside from the six nurses, most areas of the hospital only saw a staff reduction of one to two employees, if any, except Patient Care Technicians, or Certified Nurses Aides, where the total was 20. Weeks said that in most cases, patients feel more comfortable and at ease when they know that they are being seen by an RN or LPN rather than a CNA, which is the reason for the drastic number of Nurses Aides who were let go.

Weeks also added that making the decision to let anyone go was not one that he or anyone else involved took lightly. He said that they could have reduced everyone's hours to allow everyone to stay employed, but in doing so, most, if not all of the employees would have had to find secondary employment to make ends meet. Weeks also added that all of the employees who were terminated have the opportunity to apply for other open jobs in the Baptist system for the next 90 days. These employees are also able to have their PTO paid out, which they wouldn't if they were still employed, they qualify for COBRA insurance, they have access to their retirement accounts, and

if they apply for another job in the system they can hire in with all of their accrued seniority.

The leadership at Baptist also wanted to stress that everything isn't doom and gloom in this situation. Weeks stated that everyone who remained employed and was making under-market salary received a raise. He said that this came out to 230 employees receiving raises that ranged from \$2 to \$10 per hour equaling over \$1 million. Employees will also have a better retirement plan with greater contributions coming from Baptist than what they have had in the past. They will also be eligible for annual wage adjustments.

Weeks also added that in the future the staff at DMH will fluctuate based on the census numbers. There will be times when the census is up and more staff is needed. He said that in those times, more staff will be added. On the other hand, if the census starts to go down, they will lessen the staff to match. He said that this is the model that Baptist has always followed, and it has worked.

Hogg then asked what role the current DMH leadership would take after the merger was completed. Weeks said that they would stay on and that there would be a Hospital President who would see to the day-to-day operations of the hospital. He added that all areas of the hospital would begin reporting to a centralized person in Little Rock which would help to streamline all of the processes in the hospital. Weeks also said that reporting to one person who oversees one department allows them to stay on top of things a little easier.

"What is one area that you see this being the most beneficial," asked McDonald.

"Billing and Collections," Weeks replied.

The last numbers reported were that DMH had billed for \$48 million and only collected \$15 million of that. Weeks said that a 30 percent collection rate wasn't ideal for any business, and that this would be one area where a lot of focus and work would be put in.

Weeks also wanted to ensure the citizens of Drew County that Baptist cares deeply for the people in the area and wants to ensure that they have quality medical services for years to come. Weeks said that he has a special place for Monticello and Drew County as he was born in the old hospital in the 1960's. He also added that through Baptist, patients will have access to equipment, technology, and experience like never before. There will be opportunities to have a specialist in Little Rock help diagnose a patient in Monticello via teleconferences and many other advancements.

"The local doctors in Monticello will now be able to consult specialists in areas such as obstetrics and more through Telehealth," Weeks added. "We hope to be able to keep people in the Monticello facility as much as possible. We have met with the team at Mainline Health Systems, and understand the Labor and De-

livery volume may rise in Drew County due to surrounding areas closing their OB departments."

"We also want to emphasize that all current physicians in Drew County that wish to maintain hospital privileges will have the right to do so, no matter if their clinic is affiliated with another health system," Weeks noted.

Baptist Health Systems is scheduled to complete the merger on December 3, and a ribbon cutting will be held on-site on Monday, December 4.

"Drew County has a beautiful hospital with great facilities, and a great staff," Weeks added. "We look forward to the merger and continuing to serve the citizens of Drew County with top-notch medical services."

### DMHS Board holds last meeting before merger with Baptist Health

By JEFF McDONALD  
editor@monticellonews.net

The Drew Memorial Health Systems Board of Directors held their November meeting at 12 p.m. on Monday, November 27, at the Monticello Country Club. This would be the final board meeting leading into the December 3 merger with Baptist Health. With all board members present, Chairman Mike Akin called the meeting to order. The board approved the quality and credentials that were presented in the executive session. The board then approved the minutes from the October board meeting.

Moving into the items on the agenda, the board called for an update from Cassie Wise from TruBridge. Wise reported that as of the end of October, was \$9.4 million, which is on track with the yearly average which is around \$9.42 million. She also reported that there has been an increase in uninsured/self-pay patients. Overall admissions for October was 4,200 which is a little lower than the average of 4,600.

In October, the hospital had

\$2.3 million in cash collections, which was a little lower than expected, November is trending to reach between \$2.6 to \$2.7 million. This should help show some reduction in the Accounts Receivable. Medicare is the largest area of concern, due in part to a large backlog of uncoded services.

Wise also reported that over the past two months, the cash collection rate has been around 30 percent. This is likely to improve in November as the number of self-pay patients increases.

"Why over the last six months have we seen a monthly increase in our AG to the point that it is a 65 percent increase," Board member Carl Lucky asked. "Why are we not collecting what is on the books? Is it fair for someone who is paying you guys money to not be pleased with a six-month continual growth in this backlog? Regardless of you having people who have left, it is your job to make sure this is being collected on. Since May we are at \$600,000 to \$700,000 increase in the backlog. Tell me why we shouldn't be upset about that. Why haven't you figured out a way to solve this in the past six months when you can see it increasing every month?"

Wise said that due to staff turnover and the Baptist merger, they (TruBridge) didn't know who they were working with. With DMHS merging with Baptist, they will go to the EPIC system, and all billing, coding, and collections will be handled in-house. TruBridge will take on a "clean up" role and work to eliminate the backlog.

Chief Financial Officer Melody Colwell gave the October financial report. She said that admissions were up compared to last October. There were 150 in 2023 compared to 118 in 2022, but the 2023 number was lower than last month. 2023 deliveries are at 168 compared to 137 in 2022. So far in November, there have been 24, the expectation of 60 deliveries this month isn't going to happen.

Inpatient surgeries are about

the same as this time last year. Outpatient surgeries are down roughly 20 percent.

Expenses were under budget by \$66,000. The hospital saw a cash decrease of \$2.2 million. Approximately \$1.3 million of this decrease was due to the hospital making two of the four payments to CERNER in October. Another \$286,000 went towards the 401K match for employees. These two items made up the majority of the cash decrease. With no questions for Colwell, the board voted to approve the financial report.

The next item on the agenda was to discuss a resolution regarding the hospital's 401K plan. In moving to the Baptist 401K, DMHS Chief Executive Officer Scott Barrilleaux said that the hospital has been advised that they should terminate their current 401K plan effective December 1. This would move the date up by one month, and would still allow the employees to receive their 401K match payment. The board unanimously agreed to pass the resolution.

"I want to announce a couple of things," Barrilleaux said. "When we were looking at how operations would work out during this process, some things have occurred that I think is going to be really good for us."

Barrilleaux stated that Stacy Ludlow, who runs the Sleep Center, would be moving into the role of manager for both the surgery clinic and specialty clinic, along with continuing her duties in the sleep center.

He also noted that Misty Wilhite will be moving into the role of manager for the Home Health program.

The board announced that the merger will be effective on Sunday, December 3, and that the official ribbon cutting will take place at 10 a.m. on Monday, December 4, at the main entrance of the hospital.

With no further business, the board adjourned until a day and time that will be announced at a later date.

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MAY HIGHLIGHTS

OFF THE SQUARE BAKERY HAS GRAND OPENING



Halen Murphy/Advance Monticellonian

On Tuesday, May 23, the City Drug Store Cafe opened up a bakery in the cafe. They celebrated the opening with a ceremonial ribbon cutting that day at 11 A.M.

JUNE HIGHLIGHTS

RIBBON CUTTING HELD FOR STELLA'S GIRL BOUTIQUE



Jeff McDonald/Advance Monticellonian

Laura Wagon opened the door of Stella's Girl Boutique on Friday, June 9. The boutique features clothes, jewelry, and other accessories. They are located on Main Street beside the rail road tracks. Stop by if you have a chance, they would love to see you.

NOVEMBER HIGHLIGHTS

BINGO HALL HOLDS RIBBON CUTTING



Jeff McDonald/Advance Monticellonian

The Monticello Chamber of Commerce held a ribbon cutting for Ray O'Neil Bingo at 12:15 p.m. on Friday, November 3. If you want to check them out, they are located next door to the Crawfish Shack, behind Ocean's off of US Highway 425 S.

SEARK CHILDREN'S CLINIC HOLDS GRAND OPENING



Sierra Everett/Advance Monticellonian

Dr. James Atkins cuts the ribbon during the grand opening of SEARK Children's Clinic.

DECEMBER HIGHLIGHTS

RIBBON CUTTING HELD FOR GRAND OPENING OF SHOE SENSATION



Jeff McDonald/Advance Monticellonian

Shoe Sensation staff, Chamber of Commerce members, and elected officials took part in the grand opening of Shoe Sensation on Friday, December 1.

HOSPITAL

Continued from Page 1C

Wells then introduced several members of Baptist's leadership, several members of the Board of Trustees, and several local dignitaries.

"I want to say thank you and recognize the employees of the former Drew Memorial, who are now part of the Baptist Health family," Wells added. "Thank you for the work that you've done. Thank you for your commitment to your community and to this part of the state, and thank you for joining Baptist Health."

Drew County Judge Jessie Griffin was next to speak.

"This is another landmark for Drew County," Griffin said. "We are now welcoming Baptist Health to be a part of our family here in Drew County. We look forward to our relationship to continue our services in Drew County. This moment is due to

a large number of people doing what needs to be done to accomplish what is best for Drew County. As with anything, there will be some pros and cons no matter what we do, but it is a step forward and a step in the right direction for our hospital, our county, and the people of southeast Arkansas."

"I'm excited to be here," Dr. James Atkins said. "I'm excited to celebrate the grand opening of Baptist Health Medical Center-Drew County. It's a beginning and a new era of health care in Monticello and Drew County that will positively impact the people of southeast Arkansas. This merger will allow our hospital more opportunities to grow and expand. In combining our strengths, we amplify our ability to meet the evolving needs of our community."

Next to the podium was Monticello Mayor Jason Akers.

"I want to thank Baptist. Since 1921, they have provided services to the citizens of the

state of Arkansas. They are the largest non-profit hospital, employing roughly 11,000 people," Akers stated. "We are a close-knit community. We take care of each other. We argue from time to time, but we are one big family and we are excited to have Baptist here. We have an obligation as Monticellonians to support this hospital, they've come in and done great things, and it is our responsibility as citizens of this town and county to return that favor and show that we are worth the investment."

Following Mayor Akers, former Chief Executive Officer of DMHS, and current President of BHM CDC, Scott Barrilleaux took his place at the podium.

"First and foremost, I want to thank you all for being here, and I want to echo what the mayor said," Barrilleaux said. "It is a wonderful look from this microphone to see so many faces and familiar faces. This day is a huge milestone for our

hospital. The road to this grand opening has been one of dedication, hard work, and collaboration. Countless hours have been invested by a team of individuals who share a common goal to create a healthier community through Christian compassion and innovative services for the people of South Arkansas. Change, especially in the realm of healthcare, can be met with uncertainty. However, I have no doubt that we will be stronger than ever before. Baptist Health will allow us to strengthen our position as the hub for healthcare in south Arkansas, which

has been a goal of ours for over nine and a half years. Lastly, I would like to thank each and every person who played a role in making this a reality, along with our hospital's incredible staff who continue to show up every day and provide compassionate care to our patients. Thank you all for supporting our hospital over the years, and we are excited to serve you as Baptist Health Medical Center-Drew County. Thank you!"

Following Barrilleaux, Glenda Nichols with the Drew County Chamber of Commerce gave a brief welcome into Monticello

and Drew County for Baptist. Ryan Copico followed with an invocation to bless the merger and new business relationship.

After the invocation, Wells held a countdown, which led to new signage being revealed on the building. Immediately following this, the ribbon was officially cut, and a new era of healthcare under Baptist Health was ushered into Monticello and Drew County.

Following the ribbon cutting, a reception was held in the Surgical Center for all to attend.



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