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VOLUME 155, No. 201
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WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 18 2024

\$3

Ledger-Enquirer

City sued twice over wastewater in Chattahoochee River

BY KALA HUNTER
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Phenix City is facing two lawsuits, one from the state of Alabama, over allegedly violating the Clean Water Act.

The Chattahoochee Riverkeeper and the Alabama Department of Environment have both sued the Phenix City utilities department in recent days. Both groups say the city has violated

permits because the local wastewater treatment plant has water flowing into the Chattahoochee River at contamination levels higher than the Environmental Protection Agency and the state of Alabama allow.

These suits come 60 days after the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper delivered a required notice with the intent to sue on July 16.

"It is time for Phenix City to step up and prioritize infrastruc-

ture before further harm is done to the river and those who depend on it," Jason Ulseth, the director of the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper, said in a statement. "Recreators throughout the Chattahoochee River Basin deserve the right to swim, paddle, and fish on clean waterways."

The Clean Water Act and the operation permit by the Alabama Department of Environment, which is the National



Courtesy of the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper

Water conditions on the Chattahoochee River near the outfall pipe for Phenix City, Alabama's wastewater treatment plant.

Pollutant Discharge Elimination System Permit, require the plant to remove a certain amount of effluents such as ammonia,

suspended solids, and bacteria or E. coli that are harmful to

SEE WASTEWATER, 2A



MIKE HASKEY mhaskey@ledger-enquirer.com

The South Columbus Public Library is set to reopen Sept. 17, 2024. The renovation and expansion project has created an open floor plan, large windows and unique lighting.

New \$9.4 million library branch opening in South Columbus

BY MARK RICE
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Pepper Grimmert, manager of the South Columbus Public Library, lived for part of her childhood in the neighborhood, so she has professional and personal experience to put this moment in proper perspective.

When the expanded and renovated SCPL opens Tuesday at 2034 South Lumpkin Road,

this \$9.4 million project will be a huge boost to this community, Grimmert predicts.

"They don't have all the resources that are available in other parts of town," she told the Ledger-Enquirer. "That is our goal, to bring all that to the residents and make them feel they're just as important as anybody on the north side."

For two years, the SCPL operated one-third of a mile away in the former school at Our Lady

of Lourdes Catholic Church while the new facility was built.

The new SCPL's 21,000 square feet more than doubles the size of the original branch that was built in 1992. Alan Harkness, director of the Chattahoochee Valley Libraries, explained the rationale for a bigger and better facility to match the level of the two other branch libraries in Columbus.

"The old building was built

before the internet," Harkness told the Ledger-Enquirer. "... In order to do what you need in an urban public library setting, we needed more space to do that, especially here, being between two schools (South Columbus Elementary and Eddy Middle)."

Grimmett and her eight fellow staff members at SCPL have a combined 78 years of experience working in libraries.

SEE LIBRARY, 2A

Chris Spraggins, an MCSD teacher of the year, has died

BY MARK RICE
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Chris Spraggins, a successful educator and coach who was the Muscogee County School District 2006 Teacher of the Year and a Georgia state finalist in 2008, has died.

Spraggins died Friday morning at home in Phenix City while battling Alzheimer's disease, daughter Caroline McCaleb told the Ledger-Enquirer. He was 70.

His obituary is pending, but funeral arrangements are set. Visitation is Wednesday from 6-8 p.m., and the service is Thursday at 2 p.m., both at Striffler-Hamby Mortuary in Phenix City.

Spraggins taught chemistry and biology for 40 years before retiring in 2016. He coached baseball and golf. The list of local schools where he worked spans the Bi-City area: Columbus High School, Chattahoochee Valley Community College, Troy University, Smiths Station High School and St. Anne-Pacelli Catholic School.

The comments on his Facebook page after McCaleb announced his death show his positive influence, such as:

"Your dad was one of my favorite teachers at Pacelli,"



Chris Spraggins

SEE SPRAGGINS, 4A

Operation seizes \$279M in drugs from Columbus to California

BY BRITTANY MCGEE
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The dozens of arrests made in Columbus Thursday were part of an investigation that has

resulted in more than \$279 million worth of drug seizures and 101 arrests, Sheriff Greg Countryman announced.

The investigation included nearly a dozen state and federal agencies, spanned several

states, and resulted in 31 arrests in Columbus and Alabama Thursday.

Of the 31 individuals arrested, 19 were arrested on federal charges and 12 were taken into custody on state charges.

These individuals are alleged members of the "Zohannon gang" and the "Crips gang", Muscogee County Sheriff Greg Countryman said during a Friday press conference.

The Muscogee County Sheriff's Office worked with the FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration and other agencies to conduct the investigation over the past two years, Countryman told the Ledger-Enquirer.

"We have 31 reasons to re-

joice today," Countryman said. "When I took office as sheriff, I promised the citizens that I would do my part in fighting crime in Muscogee County. With the help of the FBI and DEA, we did just that."

This operation, called Operation Sweet Silence, spanned areas of Georgia, Alabama and California.

In total, the investigation

SEE DRUGS, 3A



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PEOPLE

Jane's Addiction cancels tour; Perry Farrell apologizes

UPL.com

The alt-rock band Jane's Addiction has canceled the rest of its tour after lead singer Perry Farrell tried to punch guitarist Dave Navarro on stage during the weekend.

"The band have made the difficult decision to take some time away as a group," the musicians said in a statement Monday. "As such, they will be cancelling the remainder of the tour."

The announcement came after Farrell was removed from the stage last Friday for hitting Navarro's guitar while he was performing a solo late in the show.

"This weekend has been incredibly difficult and after having the time and space to reflect, it is only right that I apologize to my bandmates, especially Dave Navarro, fans, family and friends for my actions during Friday's show," Farrell said in a statement to Variety on Monday.

"Unfortunately, my breaking point resulted in inexcusable behavior, and I take full accountability for how I chose to handle the situation."

Another statement posted on social media and signed by Navarro and band-mates Eric Avery and Stephen Perkins referred to "the mental health difficulties" of Farrell. "We hope that he will find the help he needs," the message said.

This was the band's first tour in 14 years. They released their latest album, "Imminent Redemption," in July.

BIRTHDAYS: SEPTEMBER 18

Britannica

Biographical information from September 18 is from Encyclopaedia Britannica. Explore more at [britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com).

Lance Armstrong, American cyclist (b. 1971).

James Gandolfini, American actor (b. 1961).

Steven Pinker, Canadian-American psychologist (b. 1954).

Ben Carson, American neurosurgeon and politician (b. 1951).

Greta Garbo, Swedish American actress (b. 1905).

Samuel Johnson, English author (b. 1709).

ON THIS DATE: SEPTEMBER 18

Historical events from September 18 are brought to you by Encyclopaedia Britannica. Explore more at [britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com).

2020: American lawyer Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who was the second woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court (1993-2020), died at age 87.

2014: Scottish voters rejected a referendum that would have made Scotland an independent country.

2001: For the second straight day, Typhoon Nari pounded Taiwan with record rainfalls, causing massive flooding and killing 79 people.

1965: Japanese astronomers Ikeya Kaoru and Seki Tsutomu discovered Comet Ikeya-Seki.

1898: British forces under Sir Horatio Herbert Kitchener confronted French forces commanded by Jean-Baptiste Marchand at the disputed fort of Fashoda in the Egyptian Sudan.

Is Georgia one of the happiest or saddest states in the US? See where GA falls on the list

BY SUNDI ROSE

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Happiness can come in many forms, but it seems to be fairly elusive to many Americans. In fact, only 47% of people consider themselves "very satisfied" with their lives, which is an all time low. A new study conducted

by WalletHub, assessed all 50 states using 30 key metrics related to happiness, including depression rates, income growth, and unemployment rates.

Georgia ranks better than most states in the nation, coming in at a very respectable no. 20. Georgia even did a little better in the "emo-

tional physical well-being" ranking no. 18, while coming in no. 30 for community and environment.

WHAT ARE THE 10 HAPPIEST STATES IN THE U.S.?

Hawaii
Maryland
New Jersey
Utah

Delaware
Minnesota
Connecticut
Idaho
Nebraska
Massachusetts

WHAT ARE THE 10 LEAST HAPPY STATES IN THE U.S.?

50. Louisiana
49. Arkansas
48. West Virginia

47. Tennessee
46. New Mexico
45. Alaska
44. Alabama
43. Oklahoma
42. Mississippi
41. Kentucky
40. Ohio

All things considered, Georgia seems to enjoy a fairly average amount of happiness.

FROM PAGE 1A

WASTEWATER

human and environmental health.

"We have not seen any noticeable changes since our notice," Henry Jacobs, deputy director of the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper said. "When we had initial conversations with the city with our lawyers there was a willingness to meet and walk through the plant. Then they canceled the treatment center tour and it's been radio silence since then."

John Spraggins, utility director of Phenix City, told the Ledger-Enquirer in July he was waiting on parts for their primary clarifier system, which would help lower spikes of total suspended solids and other pollutants that are in violation of the operating permit.

"Manufacturing of the parts dictates the speed. We're working with a contractor to get started on the clarifier construction," Spraggins said in July.

The Ledger-Enquirer

asked Spraggins and Phenix City Assistant City Manager, Chan Gamble for an update on the parts and the work over the last 60 days but Gamble said the city will not comment on pending litigation.

In a press release on Monday, Phenix City acknowledged the lawsuit from state of Alabama but said the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper lawsuit was "duplicative and unnecessary."

"Phenix City is working together with ADEM to modernize our sewer system to continually meet the needs of the growing population in the City's service area. Our Utilities Department is nearing completion of an approximately \$15 million project to upgrade the current wastewater treatment plant and is developing plans to improve the wastewater collection system, some of which was installed close to one hundred years ago."

The Chattahoochee

Riverkeeper was unaware previously that Phenix City was delivered a lawsuit by ADEM three days before they filed on Sept. 16.

The Chattahoochee Riverkeeper said in a statement Tuesday it was reviewing the ADEM lawsuit and was committed to holding Phenix City accountable over the alleged water violations.

"The news that the Alabama Department of Environmental Management just filed its own lawsuit against Phenix City further reinforces the fact that it is well past the time for Phenix City to cease its violations of the Clean Water Act and continuing pollution of the Chattahoochee River," the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper said in a statement.

The Chattahoochee Riverkeeper said in its lawsuit that it seeks declaratory judgment, injunctive relief, the imposition of civil penalties of up to \$66,712 per day for each of the city's violations of the Clean Water Act.

This number is based on Clean Water Act penalties that would go toward the

Federal Treasury not the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper.

ADEM is enforcing the violations based on the Alabama Water Pollution Control Act, which authorized the attorney general to recover penalties from violations of \$25,000 per violation.

The Phenix City wastewater treatment plant reported effluent violations and E. coli results greater than its permitted amount of 2,419 col/1000ml in the following months: January, 2020, March 2021, April 2022, January 2023, October 2023, November 2023, January 2024, February 2024, March 2024, April 2024, May 2024, June 2024, and July 2024, according to records reported to ADEM by Phenix City.

Chattahoochee Riverkeeper said the plant has not properly maintained infrastructure and has had non-permitted discharges of raw sewage in the form of sanitary sewer overflows.

"The sewage overflows have been regularly occurring since 2021, no fewer than 90 times, discharging 2 million gallons of raw

sewage in February 2024 alone," according to the lawsuit.

Since January 2020, the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper found 60 violations of Ammonia, 55 violations of total suspended solids, effluent for carbonaceous biochemical oxygen 21 times, exceeded total suspended solid removal 13 times, and E. coli violations 11 times.

The ADEM previously gave notice to the Phenix City utility department that it was violating a pollution discharge permit on Dec. 19, 2023, according to a copy of the permit provided to the Ledger-Enquirer by Chattahoochee Riverkeeper.

It isn't clear why ADEM decided to file a lawsuit now. ADEM and the Attorney General's office of Alabama did not respond to questions in time for publication.

The ADEM lawsuit against the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper is available online through the Circuit Court of Russell County.

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The South Columbus Public Library is set to reopen September 17, 2024. The renovation and expansion project has created larger spaces for children's activities, community meetings, reading and relaxation. There are also more computers, and better internet access.

FROM PAGE 1A

LIBRARY

She promises customer service worthy of this state-of-the-art facility.

"We have staff that are going to treat you like they would any of our family," she said. "... When (visitors) walk in, they're going to get somebody that will spend time with them and find what their needs are. If we can't meet their needs, then we'll connect them with resources that can help with their needs."

VIRTUAL TOUR OF THE NEW SOUTH COLUMBUS PUBLIC LIBRARY

The new SCPL has open sight lines for better security and a brighter atmosphere.

"It's a more inviting environment for browsing," Grimmer said.

The storytime area includes a tiny stage for presentations and playtime.

The children's area also is home to an Everbright, where kids can rotate hundreds of illuminated dials through a spectrum of 158 colors. It's a kid-friendly way to introduce them to the world of computer coding, Grimmer said.

For visitors who have infants and toddlers along with them, they can keep the little ones occupied and safe in what's dubbed the Crawl Space, designed for parents and guardians who need time on a computer while still keeping an eye on their child.

The teen area has two video game stations that are screened for appropriate content. A studio, equipped with a 75-inch TV, provides space for teen programming, such as video blogging, music recording, crafts and gaming.

In addition to Wi-Fi, the new SCPL has for public use 49 desktop computers, 2 MacBooks, 10 iPads and 15 laptops. The computer lab has 13 computers and an 85-inch TV. This all expands the SCPL's computer capacity by more than 50%.

The meeting room is a flexible space for as many as 75 people, featuring a 98-inch TV screen with A/V hookups.

There are two study rooms, one for four to six people and the other for 8 to 12. The larger room has a TV with A/V hookups.

Throughout the new SCPL, the walls display photography by local artist Kenny Gray, depicting people and scenes in south Columbus.

Outside the building are two fenced-in spaces for youth activities. One space is for teens, the other for younger children.

COLLECTION ITEMS, SERVICES AT THE NEW COLUMBUS LIBRARY

At approximately 8,000 printed items, the size of the new SCPL's collection doubles the previous one. But as part of the CVL system, SCPL customers can request any item from any branch through the computerized catalog and have it routed to their preferred branch.

Those items also may be returned to any branch in the CVL, which is a fines-free system. So no need to worry about returning borrowed items late; CVL just wants you to bring them back so other customers can benefit from them.

Like all CVL branches, the SCPL will offer a variety of science, technology, engineering, arts and math kits, commonly referred to as STEAM kits. The library also has Launchpad learning tablets, Wonderbooks (children's picture books with built-in audio), museum passes, METRA bus passes and blood pressure kits.

SCPL is the only CVL branch that offers fax services. Additional services include 3D printing, reading programs and an emphasis on a variety of free activities to serve children and teens visiting after school.

Programming includes early literacy, educational and cultural events, storytimes, book clubs, one-on-one computer sessions, computer classes and crafting.

SOUTH COLUMBUS PUBLIC LIBRARY'S OPERATING HOURS

The SCPL is open:

- Mondays, Tuesday, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.
- Wednesdays from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.
- Closed on Sundays.

WHERE \$9.4M CAME FROM FOR NEW SOUTH COLUMBUS PUBLIC LIBRARY

Funding sources for this \$9.4 million project are:

- \$3.8 million from the Chattahoochee Valley Libraries' reserves
- \$3 million from private donations to the

Muscogee County Library Foundation

- \$2 million from the Georgia Public Library Service and through the Georgia General Assembly
- \$600,000 from the Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax for capital projects in the Muscogee County School District. MCSO owns and operates the public libraries in Columbus.

Harkness expressed his gratitude for this project's public-private partnership.

"We could not have done this without our Muscogee County Library Foundation and a number of donors who stepped up and said they wanted to be a part of what we're doing here," he said. "They wanted to make a difference in south Columbus."

This project's architect is Scott Holmes of the Hecht Burdeshaw firm in Columbus, and Gordy Fortson Construction Company of Fortson is the contractor.

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Postmaster: Send all UAA to CFS: NON-POSTAL & MILITARY FACILITIES; send address corrections to McClatchy 1601 Alhambra Blvd Suite 100 Sacramento, CA 95816.

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