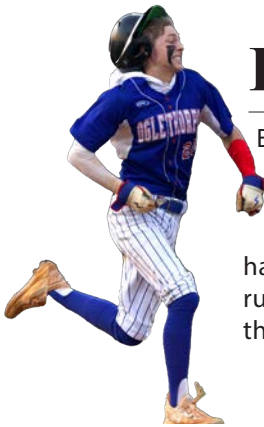


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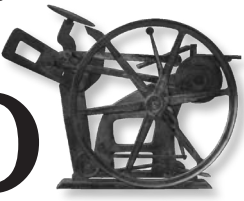
INSIDE

Evans Wilkins hustles to first during Oglethorpe County's game at North Oconee last week. He had two hits, scored two runs and stole a base in the loss.

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# THE OGLETHORPE ECHO



Volume 150, Number 25 March 21, 2024 ■ Oglethorpe County, Georgia \$1



NAVYA SHUKLA/FOR THE OGLETHORPE ECHO

Katie Edwards, a counselor at Oglethorpe County Elementary School, helps third-grader Londyn Wilson with a worksheet during a guidance lesson last month. The lessons are regularly held to guide students' empathy, emotion regulation, perseverance and more.

## High need, low accessibility

*Oglethorpe County residents face barriers to mental health care, even as teens and schools are willing to have the conversation*

By Navya Shukla and Sydney Rainwater  
For The Oglethorpe Echo

Sonja Thompson Roach remembers the moment last year when a photographer took photos and interviewed her son and his friends for a Time magazine story on mental health and teens.

The photo and interview shoot in her Northeast Georgia home required absolute quiet for the audio and the right time of day for the lighting.

But one thing stood out the most. She heard her son, August, answer questions about his father's death from COVID-19 in 2021, giving information to the photographer that would be helpful for other kids. And Thompson Roach then heard his friends share their experiences being bullied. She was proud of them for speaking out. "It's just so, so revealing, and you want to honor the fact that they're really trying to deal with all of these things," said Thompson Roach,



who lived in Oglethorpe County and now lives in Hartwell. "And at the same time, really be attuned to maybe the fact that they are struggling with feelings that you really never even scratched the surface of as a parent." Statistics indicate alarming rates of depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation among children and teens across Georgia and the U.S. Georgia ranks in the top 10 of states with youth with substance abuse disorder (No. 2) and those who experience major depression (No. 10), according to "The State

of Mental Health America," a 2023 report by Mental Health America, a national advocacy organization dedicated to mental health. Care is particularly hard to come by in rural communities like Oglethorpe County that struggle to provide adequate mental health resources for children and families. "In rural areas, there are very few providers, and the ones that are, are so restrained," said Stacie Johnson, who worked in the mental health field for nine years as a counselor before becoming an advocacy coordinator for the Northeast Georgia Court Appointed Special Advocates.

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## Barrs seeks 'blessing' for development

*Mixed-use project borders Highway 78 in Arnoldsville*

By Margaux Binder  
The Oglethorpe Echo

Andy Barrs proposed a development project at the Economic Development Authority meeting on Tuesday night.

Barrs, CEO of Barrs Industries, said he owns a 114-acre plot of land that borders U.S. Highway 78 and Arnoldsville Road. He said about 35-40% of the property sits within the Arnoldsville city limits.



Andy Barrs

Barrs said he sees the land as an "opportunity to serve the county," so he was seeking feedback on his proposal and wanted to collaborate with the county to meet its needs. Barrs said he plans to develop the plot himself, but hopes to gain the EDA's "blessing."

"I'm not trying to impose a vision," he said. "I've lived in the county and owned property in the county for about a dozen years or better. And I'd love to get feedback as to how this property could be beneficial to the county."

Barrs had several possible concepts for the development:

- a 50-lot housing development with options for single and multi-family homes.
- a commercial area in the plot's southeast corner that could include a general store.
- inclusion of health care resources, as Barrs said the county is a "desert when it comes to health care."

Barrs, who provided information packets to the EDA board, said he hopes the development attracts commerce and increases tax revenue for the county.

"I only want to do something that would be a true asset to the community," Barrs said.

The EDA agreed to review his proposal and continue conversations about the development.

"I think everyone here definitely wants to see some mixed-use development, something other than just a bunch of rooftops," said Will Brown, EDA chair and District 4 commissioner.

### In other business, the EDA:

■ Heard an update on The Wolfskin Solar Project, a solar farm on Double Bridges Road, which is "about ready to turn the switch on," said Jeff Sharp, code compliance officer. The solar farm passed required testing after self-reporting any issues to the Environmental Protection Division and correcting them. The Wolfskin Solar Project is now waiting on grass to grow in and cover the site before activating, Sharp said.

See BARRS, Page 6

## Lexington looks to fill council seat

By Jordan Howard  
The Oglethorpe Echo

The Lexington City Council is searching to fill its open seat. Greg Reece and Cindy Haynes stepped away in December, and Jennifer Whitlock took over one of the seats, joining Ronnie Boggs, Jill Severn and Cory Crayton. That leaves the city council one person short. Boggs, who has served eight years, said the city has struggled to find people to fill the seats.

### CITY COUNCIL REQUIREMENTS

Candidates must be 21 years old, a resident of Lexington for at least one year prior to the date of election, a registered and qualified voter in Lexington and must continue to live in Lexington during the term of office.

"Individually, as council members, we have talked to differ-

ent people, and we've yet to get a warm body," he said. Lexington will hold qualifying in August and an election in November for the open seat, city clerk Kim Bradford said. While the council can run its operations, having only four voting members can lead to a split vote. Lexington manages its council meetings with Mayor Craig Snow setting the agenda and the council members making the decisions and voting.

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ASHLEY BALSAVIAS/THE OGLETHORPE ECHO

Lexington city councilman Ronnie Boggs (left) and Lexington Mayor Craig Snow chat during a county comprehensive plan meeting in 2022. City officials are looking for someone to fill the fifth seat on the city council.



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