

The Macon Melody

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Bibb County's local source for community news

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Southwest, Mount de Sales, Stratford earn region titles



TOP: Brandon Ashley hoists the region trophy as Southwest players celebrate their 79-76 triple overtime win over Dublin in the Region 2 championship. (Jason Vorhees / The Melody)
BOTTOM LEFT: Mount de Sales players celebrate after winning the GIAA District 6-4A/3A championship game against Stratford Academy on Friday, Feb. 14, 2025, at First Presbyterian Day School. The Mount de Sales Cavaliers defeated the Stratford Eagles 55-54. (Jessica Gratigny / For The Melody)
BOTTOM RIGHT: The Stratford Eaglettes celebrate after winning the GIAA District 6-4A/3A championship game against Piedmont Academy on Friday at First Presbyterian Day School. The Eaglettes defeated the Piedmont Lady Cougars 67-55. (Jessica Gratigny / For The Melody)

For more on local basketball region titles, **see Page B1.**

Macon voters to weigh extending increased sales tax

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Macon voters are set to decide next month whether to approve a penny-on-the-dollar sales tax to raise \$450 million for county projects related to public safety, recreation, road paving and economic development. The proposed 2025 SPLOST, which stands for Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax, would continue the 2018 SPLOST penny sales tax, which was approved by 60% of voters in 2016 and helped the county pay for new fire stations, sheriff's patrol cars, debt retirement,

new parks and road repairs among other projects. Mayor Lester Miller has floated ideas including the possibility of a new local or regional jail and extending the regional airport runway, but specific projects will be determined at a future date. The 2025 SPLOST will be the lone ballot item. Election Day is March 18. The deadline to register to vote in the election is Feb. 18 and the last day to request an absentee ballot is March 7. Early voting is set for Feb. 24 – March 14 at the Macon Mall and the Elaine Lucas Senior Center. Saturday voting is set for March 1 and 8 at the Macon Mall from 1-5 p.m.

See SPLOST, Page A3

Local OB-GYN opens doors for patients in underserved regions

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As an obstetrician/gynecologist in Middle Georgia, Dr. Keisha Callins' work often extends beyond the walls of her doctor's office. Of the 159 counties in Georgia, only 82 have an OB-GYN. Callins is the only OB-GYN regularly serving Twiggs and Jones counties and splits her time between Jeffersonville and Gray each week. Patients come from Dublin and as far as Augusta to receive care. More than half of the patients she sees are uninsured. Callins is a part of Community Healthcare Systems Inc. — a health care network with 19 clinics and school-based health centers throughout Middle Georgia. It accepts all insurances and offers a finan-



Dr. Keisha Callins

cial assistance program. "Finding the diagnosis is the easy part," she said. "(But the hard part is) making sure they have the money to get it, or they have the transportation to come to me, or what kind of things in the community need to change so they can access that care." She says a big part of her

See OB-GYN, Page A2

Periodical — Mail Label

MGA technology museum plugs into past

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If you want to wax nostalgic over a Nintendo GameCube or listen to the clackety-clack of an IBM Wheelwriter keyboard, you can punch your ticket at the Museum of Technology. If your fingers long to push the buttons on a TEAC reel-to-reel tape recorder, then slide over and take a spin on a rotary dial phone, the corner room in the Middle Georgia State University library could be your happy place. It is vintage Epson, Atari and Tandy. It's all about microprocessors and monochrome monitors. Apple artifacts abound. The Museum of Technology is free and open to the public for self-guided tours during library hours. Don't come expecting the Smithsonian, though. It's not much larger than your grandmother's kitchen. But rather than grandma's collection of cookbooks, there are user guides for WordPerfect word processors and instruction manuals for Radio Shack gadgets. "It's important to have a connection to the past and seeing and learning from the way we did things," said Tina Ashford, associate pro-



Jason Vorhees / The Melody

Guests can play a game of "Gridrunner" on a working Commodore 64 at Middle Georgia State's Museum of Technology located in Macon campus library.



\$2.00

See TECH, Page A2

Tech, from A1:

fessor of information technology at MGA and the faculty curator for the museum.

Ashford and her son, Ryan, collaborated on the idea for a museum after growing weary of an empty display case in the hallway at the university's IT department.

They filled it with a computer relic that had been gifted to Tina by a former colleague.

It wasn't long before their idea needed more ... er, disk space.

"I had been collecting old computer stuff for years," said Ryan, a computer information technology instructor at Central Georgia Technical College. "Having grown up with the newer stuff, I found it interesting. It was a more fun time in computing."

Thus began the search for vintage video consoles and mature motherboards. They tracked down Commodore 64s and Atari 5200s. They found Apple iMac G4s and Epson QX-10s.

Estate sales and eBay became their best friends.

They purchased a MacIntosh SE at an estate sale in Warner Robins. It was practically right out of the box ... as if it had "teleported" from the 1990s, Ryan said.

Tina said many recycling centers do not accept computers and other outdated electronics. They often end up in the garbage and landfills.

The Ashfords are not immune to dumpster diving for computer antiquity.

"We're junkers," Tina said, laughing. "We've dug some out of dumpsters."

One man's modem is another man's treasure.

The Ashfords sought items of historical significance and restored them. They located an original MacIntosh from 1984 and an IBM RT PC workstation computer that was released two years later.

A former student Tina taught in her first year at Middle Georgia State in 1998 contacted her about his collection.

"He asked if I was still interested in old computers, and I said, 'Of course,'" she said.

He loaned the museum a rare and ex-

pensive Altair 8800 from his archive. It has special significance because of a local connection.

The late Ed Roberts was often referred to as the "father of the personal computer." He developed the Altair 8800 in 1974. (It was featured on the cover of Popular Mechanics magazine in January 1975.)

Roberts was a member of the first graduating class at Mercer's School of Medicine in 1986 and became a small-town physician in Cochran. (Middle Georgia State has a campus in Cochran.)

He was Bill Gates' first employer, and the Microsoft founder visited him in a Macon hospital when Roberts died in April 2010.

One of the most popular exhibits in the museum is a red rotary dial telephone. Students who stop by are often curious about how it looks, feels and even how to use it.

Just for fun, Tina purchased a \$49.95 Bluetooth adapter on Amazon that can pair the rotary phone with a cell phone. (There are also acoustic couplers that were once used to transfer data.)

The Ashfords said there are no plans to expand the museum, although with technology constantly being outdated and updated, it could easily outgrow its walls.

There are visitors old enough to remember party lines, pay phones, answering machines, floppy disks and cumbersome keyboards that can weigh more than a fat puppy.

Some folks can recall when Microsoft Windows software was introduced with games – Solitaire and Minesweeper – as standard equipment, which helped teach a generation of computer neophytes how to use a mouse. (And how to not get much work done at the office.)

"I think there are a lot of lessons on what we did right and the missteps we took," Tina said.

She said a lot of seemingly outdated devices are still being utilized. Until it was upgraded last year, San Francisco's subway and light rail transportation system was running on 1980s technology.

"You would be surprised at how much legacy is still out there," Tina said.



Jason Vorhees / The Melody

Tina Ashford, an associate professor of information technology at Middle Georgia State and the faculty curator for the Museum of Technology and her son, Ryan, collaborated on the idea for a museum after growing weary of an empty display case in the hallway at the university's IT department.



Top row from left: Senators David Lucas, John Kennedy and Rick Williams.

Bottom row: Representatives Miriam Paris, Floyd Griffin, Dale Washburn, Tangie Herring and Anissa Jones.

Here's what Macon legislators are pushing this session

Laura Corley

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Macon's legislative delegation has introduced a slew of legislation under the Gled Dome so far this session.

Here's what our senators and representatives are pushing:

EDUCATION

Rep. Floyd Griffin, D-Milledgeville, introduced House Bill 436, which would repeal the Georgia Promise Scholarship Act passed last legislative session and championed by Senate President Pro Tem John Kennedy, R-Macon. The scholarship act provides up to \$6,500 in state money to help cover the cost of private school tuition for students who have been enrolled for at least one year in one of the hundreds of schools identified by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement.

Kennedy introduced legislation to address chronic absenteeism in schools. The bill calls for public school districts to file written student attendance protocols with the education department outlining detailed procedures used to identify, report, investigate and prosecute cases of alleged violations of the compulsory attendance requirement.

The bill also revises language in the attendance law to ensure no student is expelled by a public school sole-

ly due to absenteeism.

Rep. Tangie Herring, D-Macon, introduced House Bill 333, which calls for the state to annually update its salary schedule for professionals in elementary and secondary education and include adjustments for inflation.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Sen. David Lucas, D-Macon, introduced a bill calling for a 10-day waiting period for the purchase or transfer of certain firearms.

Rep. Dale Washburn, R-Macon, introduced House Bill 225, which calls for the abolishment of automatic speed detection cameras.

Sen. Rick Williams, R-Milledgeville, introduced Senate Bill 32, which would set a minimum sentence of 10 years for people convicted of knowingly and willfully obstructing, opposing or doing violence to a law enforcement officer.

HEALTH

Lucas introduced the Peach Care Plus Act of 2025, which calls for expanding Medicaid coverage to individuals earning up to 138% of the federal poverty level. The bill also would create an 11-member advisory committee for the Peach Care Plus Program. Savings from the program would be deposited into the state's indigent care trust fund.

Herring introduced House Bill 332, which would create a temporary state advisory

group to develop and update protocols for screening children for trauma. The advisory group would meet before October and report its findings, recommendations and funding estimates to the General Assembly by October 2026. The advisory board would be dissolved by 2027.

MONEY

Kennedy introduced Senate Bill 68 aimed at lowering insurance costs for doctors, businesses and residents, a priority of Gov. Brian Kemp. The Georgia Recorder reports the bill would cap evidence of pain and suffering and limit an owners' liability for injuries that occur on their property. It also would limit special damages awarded for medical bills to the actual amount paid by the plaintiff.

Another piece of legislation introduced by Kennedy, Senate Bill 69, would require third-party sources of funding for lawsuits to register with the Department of Banking and Finance. It also prohibits foreign governments from funding lawsuits.

Rep. Anissa Jones, D-Macon, introduced House Bill 292 which would allow certain employers to claim an income tax credit of \$3,500 for each employee it has who qualifies as a "living wage employee," meaning they make at least \$15 and work 30 or more hours each week for at least one year. Employers must have at least five "living wage employees" to qualify.

Lit award recognizes Macon author, Mercer professor

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Every two years, one Georgia writer receives the Townsend Award for an extraordinary work of fiction.

The award, managed by the Atlanta Writers Club in partnership with the Georgia Writers Museum, was created in honor of magazine mogul Jim Townsend. This year, it will be presented April 16 at the Callanwolde Fine Arts Center in Atlanta.

The suit-and-tie event will include a cocktail party before the award ceremony, which will recognize all 10 finalists and their work.

Chip Bell, one of the event's organizers, said awards like the Townsend are especially important when taking a look at student reading scores and how many adults read for leisure.

"It's primarily a way to recognize literary greatness," he said. "We're trying, this ties back some ways into literary excellence within the study, to encourage people to read."

Mercer University English professor Gordon Johnston is among 10 finalists for the award. His book is titled "Seven Islands of the Ocmulgee: River Stories."

The collection of short stories centers around the Ocmulgee River and was inspired by Johnston's familiarity with the river's history and geography.

The stories came to him as "responses to the river," accumulated over his many trips.

"The river is a presence," he said.

"The book is about how it kind of figures into the lives of these people."

The book is Johnston's first work of fiction. He's written other poetry books and co-authored a guide to the Ocmulgee Mounds National Monument.

The Ocmulgee gives many people life in Macon, he said, and his book is a testament to the idea that rivers and bodies of water everywhere are integral to people and cultures.

"I'm a big believer in putting down roots where you are," he said. "Most Americans don't have a very deep sense of the landscape they live in."

The same places that inspired his book also inform his teachings. He takes classes into nature and tries to develop a shared sense of the landscape.

Johnston does not consider himself a traditional professor, but "more of a writer who teaches," he said.

Johnston's classes have a strong connection to nature, like "Writing the American Wild" or his backpacking course.

Like a river, he said, his book has many "tributaries" feeding into it or many people who have contributed to its formation.

"To have my book in the company of books by writers of that caliber, that's a real validation of my writing," he said. "So I'm just happy to be in the finals, honest to God I feel like a winner already."

Editor's note: Gordon Johnston is the father of Macon Melody Sports Editor Micah Johnston.

Napier Heights Food Co-op to bring fresh food directly to the neighborhood

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The Napier Heights Food Co-op Market has returned, bringing fresh food and locally made goods to Macon's Napier Heights and Pleasant Hill neighborhoods.

Vendors set up booths outside of Booker T. Washington Community Center Thursday afternoon for the grand opening.

While the initiative originally launched in Tattnell Square, the market's new location will bring fresh products directly to neighborhoods with limited food accessibility.

"We're trying to get the good quality vegetables in the community to the people who need it," said Ashley Woodford, the co-op's market manager.

Folks can use EBT at the market to buy fresh produce and foods. If they spend their EBT, then they can earn the same amount in tokens, which they can spend on more fruits and veggies at the market.

"I'm glad it's here. I think it's something great for the community," said Joe Booze, who has an office in the community center for his organization, Wealth ASAP.

Booze grew up in Napier Heights and still has family in the area. He noted that there aren't a lot of fresh food options within walking distance of the residents.

One vendor, John Pope owns



Jason Vorhees / The Melody

Clifford Porter stands in front of his handmade woodworking and ceramics. He hopes to come back to the Napier Heights market every week.

Creekside Farm, a 15-acre farm in Monroe County. He brought jalapeño salt, greens, bread and other goods to the market this week. He plans to have spring and summer veggies, like tomatoes and corn, available at market days later in the year.

Clifford Porter owns a shop in Baldwin County and frequents markets — like the food co-op and the one on Poplar Street — to sell his handmade ceramics and woodworking.

Porter said he hopes to come back to the Napier Heights market every week.

Not only is the market meant to fill a need within the community, but it also supports small business efforts, Woodford said.

Currently, vendors only pay a \$10 fee to be a part of the market if they make more than \$50 in sales.

Woodford hopes to gain new vendors in the near future.

The market will be open to the public every Thursday from 3:30-6 p.m.

Those interested in becoming a vendor can visit napierheights-foodcoop.org, email napierheightsfoodcoop@gmail.com or call 478-227-0997.



Jason Vorhees / The Melody

Macon’s regional airport will replace flights to Baltimore with flights to Washington Dulles International Airport starting May 1.

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Macon’s regional airport will replace flights to Baltimore with flights to Washington Dulles International Airport starting May 1, increasing access for travelers not wanting to make the trek to Atlanta.

The airline will also start offering flights to Plattsburgh, New York starting May 1.

Contour Airlines, a commercial airline flying out of

the Middle Georgia Regional Airport, currently only sends passengers to Baltimore / Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport.

One or two flights will run per day, all week. The airline is offering an introductory \$99 ticket, which includes a checked bag, according to a Macon Bibb-County press release. A one-way ticket normally costs about \$140.

“This change not only opens connections for Macon travelers, it creates a new audience of visitors to Middle Georgia from across the country,” said Gary

Wheat, president and CEO of Visit Macon. “We now have the opportunity for a broader reach in our marketing efforts in showcasing our community as a premier destination.”

The airport received \$4 million from the Georgia Department of Transportation last summer to construct new hangars and build out other infrastructure. The grant came as the airport looks to build a new guitar-shaped fixed base operation and work on its runway expansion project.

OB-GYN, A1:

job is advocating for her patients’ needs and directing them to additional care. If she can’t provide the necessary help, she works to find someone who can.

“Someone walks in, they share something and I can either do nothing with that information or I can make the call,” she said.

When the patient in front of her shares a problem, she often asks herself, “how many people go through that?”

For instance, Callins noticed many of her patients needed a specific probiotic that the pharmacy in Twiggs County did not carry. After talking with pharmacists, Callins helped ensure they would stock the drug.

“A patient came to me and we had a wall,” she said. “That patient helped me create a door, and that door becomes a door for everybody else.”

Callins has always gravitated towards a broader-picture approach. Her focus on improving quality of care for the whole community stems from her childhood experiences growing up in Jamaica.

Destined from a young age

Callins’ mother always said her daughter wanted to be a doctor at just six years old.

An appendix removal procedure at age eight further solidified Callins’ interest in the medical field. Her pediatrician did not take her concerns seriously at first and thought she was trying to avoid school. After the removal surgery, Callins recalled vomiting from the pain and having to sleep in it because the nurse was too busy to check on her.

“I remember thinking to myself, ‘I don’t want a child to ever experience that,’” she said.

At 16, Callins finished high school and headed to New York. A first-generation American and college student, she majored in biology at the University of Virginia.

After not getting into medical school, she juggled two jobs at a Holiday Inn during the day and evenings at Victoria Secret.

“People see you where you are now... but there are all these speed bumps along the way,” she said. “It’s not like it was a paved road.”

Callins pursued her masters in public health, specializing in health behavior at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Public health is not direct patient care, she explained, but instead focuses on seeking solutions to systemic healthcare issues and healthcare accessibility. Although she didn’t know what public health was growing up, she later realized her interests have always had a particular community focus.

It wasn’t until Callins met a woman after church — who would one day be her mother-in-law — that she decided



Photo provided by Keisha Callins

Dr. Keisha Callins, pictured during her swearing in ceremony, was appointed to the Georgia Sandra Dunagan Deal Early Language and Literacy Board in 2018 by Governor Brian Kemp.

to reapply for medical school.

She attended Morehouse School of Medicine for her doctor of medicine.

Callins gave birth to her son in her third year of medical school, which delayed her graduation by six months. She ended up graduating just two days after her birthday — a bittersweet moment for Callins who had just lost a close classmate on her birthday.

Personal struggles, like loss, helped shape her, Callins said, but she has always wanted to work in rural underserved communities.

Before beginning her residency, she fell in love with women’s health and switched specialties from pediatric to obstetrics/gynecology.

“If you take care of a mom or a grandma, and they’re well, then they take care of everybody else,” she said. “When you get a woman to just feel well, her ripple effect on everything she does is just unbelievable.”

Callins had her second child, a daughter, during her residency.

Coming to Middle Georgia

Following six years of clinical practice in Albany, Callins moved to Macon in 2017 and became the chair of Mercer University’s Department of Community Medicine.

When she joined Community Healthcare Systems, Callins offered Mercer students hands-on clinical teaching opportunities either in Twiggs or Jones County.

Callins believes she can better serve her community if she is actively engaging with it. From rotary club to serving on various committees and boards, she says medicine alone can’t solve everything, so it’s important to have a pulse on what’s happening.

Understanding the struggles faced by her own community is what got her involved in serving Twiggs County, she said.

In 2018, she joined Georgia’s governor-appointed Sandra Dunagan Deal Early Language and Literacy Board. At a conference, Callins began working with a woman she sat next to by chance on a literacy grant project for

Twiggs County.

At the grant meeting that followed, Callins suggested including Twiggs’ local physician in the grant process, but was shocked to find out that the county did not have a regular physician.

Callins began traveling to Twiggs County every week to serve as their local physician.

“If there’s a need for something, and it’s not there, create it,” she said.

Most recently, Governor Brian Kemp appointed Callins to the Georgia Maternal and Infant Health Advisory Commission, which will develop a report with recommendations to the legislature and governor for 2026.

Callins sees herself as a “microphone” for others’ ideas to be brought before the commission and often asks herself: “Whose voice is not here? Who’s not at this table?”

Fourteen people don’t have a 360 view of everything, she said. “If I’m the microphone, then that means I get a chance to amplify the voices around me.”

There are many voices who are qualified to speak at the table. Callins noted that although she may be the only one serving Twiggs, colleagues in other underserved areas are just as dedicated to helping their communities.

“I’m not the only ‘only one,’” she said.

Despite the demanding nature of her job, Callins never feels burdened by her responsibilities as a physician. She always tells her students to pursue a career that doesn’t feel like work.

“I get a chance to help a woman in distress or improve someone’s quality of life or help someone with their delivery... and be a part of that miracle,” she said.

Sometimes, it’s the small wins — helping a person who was denied care or connecting a patient to a new avenue of care — that remind Callins of her impact.

“There are days where I don’t think it’s gonna be fixed at the top level,” she said. “So then I just have to get down, and I have to just help the person in front of me.”

SPLOST, A1:

Go Big for Macon-Bibb, a committee that registered with the state late last month, is raising money to educate voters about the importance of SPLOST and campaigning for its approval.

“We’re serving at the pleasure of the mayor but we’re not an entity of the county government by any stretch of the imagination,” said committee member Erin Keller, who is vice president for development at New-Town Macon. “This is one of those necessary things that we need to continue.”

Others on the committee include longtime Macon City Councilperson Theron Ussery, lawyer Virgil Adams, realtor Stephanie Folsom and insurance broker Izza Sola, according to a news release from political consultant group Southern Majority.

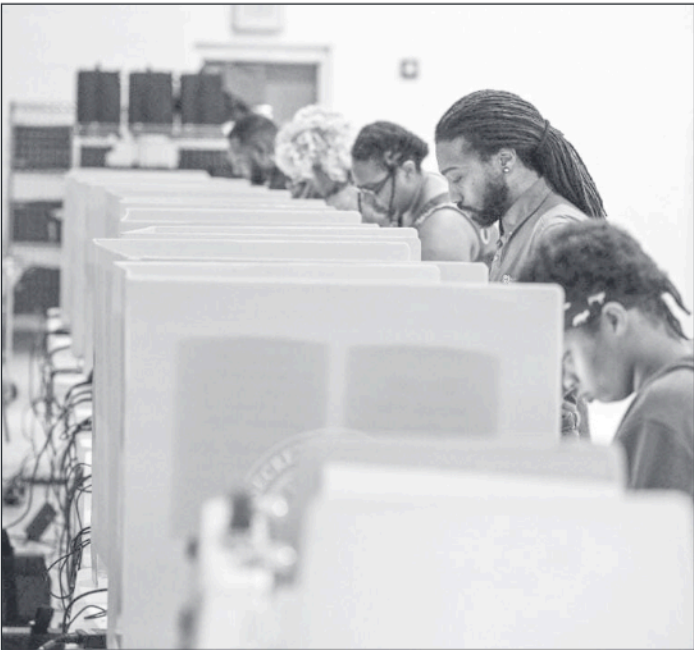
A 2009 study by Georgia Tech on county exports shows more than 70% of SPLOST revenue for Bibb County came from the pockets of people who do not live here. Data on how much revenue was generated by non-county residents for the 2018 SPLOST is not available.

State law limits how the county can spend SPLOST dollars to capital improvements and special purposes such as public safety, recreation and transportation.

The 2018 SPLOST was capped at collecting \$280 million. As of late last year, the county collected \$253 million and had spent \$232 million, county spokesperson Chris Floore said. Annual revenue was higher than expected, causing the county to collect near the capped limit years earlier than anticipated.

Among projects the 2018 SPLOST helped pay for are:

- **Improvements to Central City Park** (field lighting, skate park) – \$4.2 million
- **Stormwater improvements** – \$19.8 million
- **Closure of the**

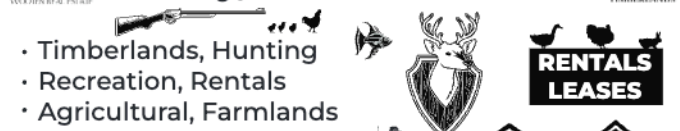


Jason Vorhees / The Melody

Voters cast ballots at Greater Bellevue Baptist Church on Mumford Road in Macon in the 2024 general election.

- **Walker Road Land-fill** – \$19.2 million
- **Cliffview Lake Park** – \$1.8 million
- **Improvements to Jeffersonville Road** – \$4.3 million
- **Ocmulgee Heritage Trail** – \$2.8 million
- **Filmore Thomas Park** – \$2.4 million
- **Electric buses** – \$3.8 million
- **Delores A. Brooks Recreation Center, field lighting** – \$1.2 million
- **Barrington Hall sidewalks** – \$397,509
- **Debt retirement for the Macon-Bibb County Industrial Authority and Macon-Bibb County Urban Development Authority**
- **Renovations to the Booker T. Washington Community Center**
- **Improvements to the campgrounds at Lake Tobesofkee** – \$597,270
- **Improvements and additions to the courthouse** – \$2.5 million
- **Improvements to the district attorney’s office** – \$305,000
- **Renovations to the Robert Train Building and the Grand Opera House**
- **Improvements at Claystone and Arrowhead parks**
- **Crossing guards for Bibb County schools** – \$300,000
- **Verkada cameras, FLOCK cameras and other sheriff’s office equipment** – \$2.7 million
- **Flashing lights for school speed zones** – \$500,000

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