

Sumter City Council now has full team for the 1st time in months

BY BRYN EDDY
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Sumter's Ward 1, which covers areas north of Broad Street, down Main Street to Morris

College and other areas of the city, now has representation after being without its own council person for a while now. Councilman Anthony Gibson was sworn into the Ward 1 seat

on Sumter City Council on Tuesday, Aug. 29, along with councilmen Calvin K. Hastie Sr. and Colin C. Davis, whose

SEE COUNCIL, PAGE A3



Anthony Gibson is sworn in as the councilman for Ward 1 on Tuesday, Aug. 29, during council's regular meeting.

Sumter district specifies employee retention bonus totals Tuesday

Stipends for full-time, returning workers range from \$3,000 to \$4,500; will be issued Oct. 31

BY BRUCE MILLS
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After preapproving a bonus for all returning district employees in the spring, Sumter school board unanimously approved another round to be distributed this fall.

All full-time, returning employees from last school year, to include teachers and staff, will receive a bonus ranging from \$3,000 to \$4,500 based on years of service in October, while all part-time, returning workers will earn bonuses in the range of \$1,500 to \$2,250 based on service time.

After the full board's approval at its regularly scheduled meeting Monday, Sumter School District administration issued a statement on Tuesday with the specific totals for the employee bonuses, or "retention stipends" as they are officially called.

The stipends are for teachers, bus drivers, food-service workers and all other employees, regardless of classification.

SEE BONUSES, PAGE A3

Idalia swamps wide stretch of Florida coast

BY DANIEL KOZIN
Associated Press

CEDAR KEY, Fla. — Hurricane Idalia made landfall Wednesday in Florida as a Category 3 storm and unleashed devastation along a wide stretch of the Gulf Coast, submerging homes and vehicles, turning streets into rivers, unmooring small boats and downing power lines in an area that has never before received such a pummeling.

More than 330,000 customers in Florida and Georgia were without electricity while rushing water covered streets near the coast. As the eye moved inland, high winds shredded signs, sent sheet metal flying and snapped tall trees.

"We have multiple trees down, debris in the roads, do not come," posted the fire and rescue department on the island of Cedar Key, where a tide gauge measured the storm surge at 6.8 feet — enough to submerge most of the downtown. "We have propane tanks blowing up all over the island."

Idalia came ashore in the lightly populated Big Bend region, where the Florida Panhandle curves into the peninsula. It made landfall near Keaton Beach at 7:45 a.m. as a high-end Category 3 hurricane

SEE IDALIA, PAGE A3



A Sweet passion

2 Sumter men share interest of beekeeping

BY SHELBY GOULDING
The Sumter Item

The jumpsuit is worn out, spotted with markings and discolored patches. It carries years of hard, meticulous work. What was originally pure white has grown to be covered in dirt from fields, scratches from tree branches, minuscule pricks and sweet nectar.

SEE BEEKEEPING, PAGE A6



Leverne Newman, left, and Michael Baier have a passion for beekeeping and have been sharing their hobby for more than a decade.

PHOTOS BY MIA LEE PHOTOGRAPHY / SPECIAL TO THE SUMTER ITEM



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DEATHS, B4

Jimmie W. Crawford
Violet Lois Whinery Dobbis
John Marvin Sanders
Alfonzo Colclough
Vernetta R. Abrams

WEATHER, A8

WINDY WITH RAIN
Wind and rain today and humid; clear to partly cloudy tonight
HIGH 85, LOW 60

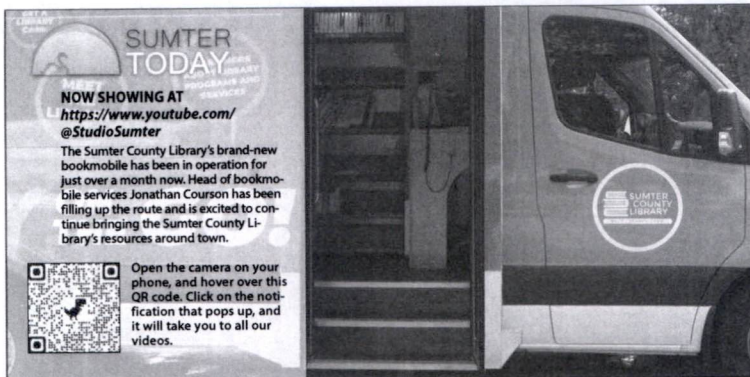
INSIDE

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EX (2)



SUMTER TODAY
 NOW SHOWING AT
<https://www.youtube.com/@StudioSumter>
 The Sumter County Library's brand-new bookmobile has been in operation for just over a month now. Head of bookmobile services Jonathan Courson has been filling up the route and is excited to continue bringing the Sumter County Library's resources around town.



Open the camera on your phone, and hover over this QR code. Click on the notification that pops up, and it will take you to all our videos.



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BONUSES

FROM PAGE A1

Full-time staff who were employed for the 2022-23 school year and returned this year will receive stipends based on the following years of district service: zero to nine years (\$3,000); 10 to 19 years (\$3,500); 20 to 29 years (\$4,000); and 30 or more years (\$4,500).

Part-time staff who were employed last school year and returned this year will receive half of those bonus levels based on service time: zero to nine years (\$1,500); 10 to 19 years (\$1,750); 20 to 29 years (\$2,000); and 30 or more years (\$2,250).

The retention stipend will be issued in the Oct. 31 paycheck, according to Shelly Galloway, the district's executive director of communication and community engagement.

The district will cover the employee's portion of FICA and Medicare taxes (7.65%). The employee will be responsible for his/her own federal and state withholding taxes, she added.

Superintendent William Wright Jr. said the district remains committed to supporting its employees and creating a positive work environment that fosters growth and development.

"We believe that investing in our employees is crucial to the

DISTRICT RETENTION BONUSES

FULL-TIME EMPLOYEES	
Years of service	Total bonus
0-9 years	\$3,000
10-19 years	\$3,500
20-29 years	\$4,000
30+ years	\$4,500

PART-TIME EMPLOYEES	
Years of service	Total bonus
0-9 years	\$1,500
10-19 years	\$1,750
20-29 years	\$2,000
30+ years	\$2,250

Source: Sumter School District

success of our school district," he said, "and this retention stipend is just one way to show our appreciation for the hard work and dedication of our employees."

District employees also received retention stipends in 2022 and 2021, but this year's totals are significantly higher.

The announcement at the board meeting came after an independent project consultant reviewed findings of a months-long, district-wide salary study that confirmed the district is behind on pay to its employees. The full-scale study of all employee classifications was the first of its kind since two school districts in Sumter County consolidated into one in 2011.

the roads around the chic shops and restaurants of St. Armands Circle in the Sarasota area were underwater.

Astounded by the flooding that turned Tampa's Bayshore Boulevard into a river, Bill Hall watched a paddleboarder ride along the major thoroughfare.

"This is actually unbelievable," Hall said. "I haven't seen anything like this in years."

In Tallahassee, Florida's capital city, the power went out well before the center of the storm arrived.

Tallahassee Mayor John Daley urged everyone to shelter in place. Florida residents living in vulnerable coastal areas had been ordered to pack up and leave as Idalia gained strength in the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

"Don't put your life at risk by doing anything dumb at this point," Gov. Ron DeSantis said Wednesday at a news conference. "This thing's powerful. If you're inside, just hunker down until it gets past you."

IDALIA

FROM PAGE A1

with maximum sustained winds near 125 mph.

RJ Wright stayed behind on Cedar Key so he could check on elderly neighbors. He hunkered down with friends in a motel and when it was safe walked outside into chest-high water. It could have been a lot worse for the island, which juts into the Gulf, since it didn't take a direct hit, he said.

"I got pretty gnarly for a while, but it was nothing compared to some of the other storms," Wright said.

The system remained a hurricane as it crossed into Georgia with top winds of 90 mph, after drenching Florida mostly to the east of Tallahassee. Forecasters said it would punish the Carolinas overnight as a tropical storm.

Some models had predicted that Idalia could circle southward toward land again after that, but the National Hurricane Center predicted it would move deeper into the Atlantic this weekend.

In the town of Perry, the wind blew out store windows, tore siding off buildings and overturned a gas station canopy. Interstate 275 in Tampa was partially flooded, and toppled power lines closed northbound Interstate 75 just south of Valdosta, Georgia.

About 200 miles to the south of where Idalia made landfall,

COUNCIL

FROM PAGE A1

ceremonies were postponed until Gibson's could take place, but the two have been serving on council since they won their seats.

Gibson won his seat in November 2022 after the former longtime council member retired.

He earned the most votes in the original election and secured 65% of the vote in a runoff election to become the new representative of Ward 1. However, candidate Reginald "Reggie" Evans, who earned 6.21% of the vote, filed appeals protesting the election results soon after, saying the election was not properly administered.

All appeals were denied unanimously, first at the Sumter County Election Commission, then at the South Carolina Election Commission and at the Third Judicial Circuit.

Evans then filed an appeal to the South Carolina Supreme Court, and it was denied in early June.

Then Evans filed another petition against the state supreme court's decision on June 8, and it was denied on Aug. 10, according to court records.

This whole process was costly for the city.

City manager Deron McCormick said the city has consistently spent about \$11,000 each election from the last five years, but because of all the legal fees entailed in this recent Ward 1 election, the city spent approximately twice that.

"I'm excited that we can go ahead and move forward and I can start serving our com-



Calvin C. Davis is sworn in as the councilman of Ward 5.



Calvin K. Hastie Sr. is sworn in as the councilman of Ward 3.

munity," Gibson told *The Sumter Item*. "I'm super excited for closure here."

During the appeal process, Gibson still attended council meetings, but as a resident, something that Mayor David Merchant appreciated, and Gibson said he tried to do all he could for Ward 1 residents without serving in the councilman capacity quite yet.

"Constituents in Ward 1 would reach out and give me their concerns, and I would always relay the message to city council and the city manager to try to help out as much as I can," he said. "I couldn't do much, but now that it's over, we're going to

try and make up for the time that we lost."

The ceremony celebrating all three new councilmen took place at the Sumter Opera House. Family, friends and local officials were present and prayers were sprinkled throughout the program, leaving the three councilmen looking ready to serve their community.

Merchant said he is excited to have a full team again. The first council meeting where Gibson will be in his seat should be on the first Tuesday in September at 1 p.m. in Council Chambers on the fourth floor of the Sumter Opera House.



Are you a survivor?

or do you know someone who fought breast cancer?

The Sumter Item is asking for names of these brave people to appear in our special publication, Health Matters 2023, on October 7th, 2023.
Deadline: September 22, 2023

Submitted By _____ Phone _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Survivors Name _____

Number of years cancer free _____

*Please provide a contact number for any surviving honorees for verification

the Sumter ITEM

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South Carolina House Speaker vows to fix loophole in local election law

Watch WIS News 10 at 7 p.m. Monday through Friday.

By Chris Joseph

Published: Aug. 24, 2023 at 7:29 PM EDT

SUMTER, S.C. (WIS) - South Carolina's most powerful state lawmaker is vowing to change a law that kept more than 7,200 Sumter residents from having a voting city councilman for the last nine months.

Speaker of the House Murrell Smith (R-Sumter) represents a group of Sumter citizens in the city's Ward 1, which covers the northernmost part of the city. Since November 2022, Ward 1 has faced a perfect storm of death, appeals, and laws which prevented any voting representation at the city level. "I would apologize for this issue, I think disenfranchising citizens of their ability to be a part of representative democracy should not occur, unfortunately, this was a unicorn situation," Smith said. "I think those of us who have the ability and opportunity to try and correct this will deal with this immediately."

The "unicorn situation" On Nov. 2, 2022, Ward 1's incumbent Thomas Lowery died. On Nov. 8, Sumter municipal election voters in Ward 1 sent candidates Anthony Gibson and Joe Brown to a run-off. Gibson won two weeks later. Reginald Evans didn't make the run-off, coming in last place (out of five candidates) with just 62 out of 999 votes. Sumter County Court records show Evans began a legal campaign on Nov. 10 to challenge the results. He filed multiple appeals, taking it all the way to the S.C. Supreme Court.

His argument was two-fold and he presented both without success. He claimed he was informed people outside the ward voted. He claimed there weren't enough votes in two precincts when their tallies are compared in the Ward 1 race and his simultaneous campaign for Sumter County School Board District 9 (Morris College and Folsom Park).

He lost his initial challenge with the county election commission (at least one commissioner cited a lack of evidence), twice in circuit court (which found no error in the commission's decision), and twice in the S.C. Supreme Court (by failing to order a transcript from the circuit court). However, his continued appeals successfully triggered a state law that kept Gibson from taking his seat.

The law in question is section 5-15-140 which covers local elections. It reads in part: "...The notice of appeal shall act as a stay of further proceedings pending the appeal." The same chapter allows for incumbents to remain in power until the election challenge is settled, but Ward 1 didn't have a living incumbent.

E4 (3)

Evans said the lack of representation for the district is not his responsibility, falsely claiming Governor McMaster could appoint a councilman. South Carolina's Governor is empowered to appoint county, not municipal, officers.

"[The local election appeals process] is dangerous, but I do it with a clear conscience," Evans said. On Aug. 10, the S.C. Supreme Court denied Evan's request for a rehearing. Evans appealed to federal court on Aug. 9. On Aug. 17, a magistrate judge recommended the case be sent back to the state level, where it's been settled. Any decision from a federal District Judge is unclear. Sumter City Attorney Danny Crowe sent WIS a statement that it's his understanding the case has been concluded and the federal appeal will not be successful.

Sumter City spokesperson Shelley Kile confirmed Gibson is still scheduled to be sworn in on Aug. 29. Smith said he wants to keep the situation from repeating itself. "I think that everyone believed that this was going to go to the circuit court that circuit court would rule at some point, and it would be in a quick manner," he said. Smith said he's been reaching out to City of Sumter leadership and the S.C. Election Commission for its feedback, but he views the stay as an issue. "I think we may need to look at the stay as well as maybe expedite the appeals. In some cases in the law the Supreme Court need to immediately takes things up," he said. He said he is aiming to address the issue in the next legislative session in January 2024. "Everybody's got the right to exercise any protest in accordance with the law. So you can't deny that right. But also, you've got to accept reality too," he said. Smith recently endorsed former President Donald Trump. Trump has repeatedly made false claims about his loss in the 2020 election and is facing criminal charges for attempting to overturn it. "I think you have to accept elections. That's just part and parcel of the democratic process and there can be anomalies, and certainly with the Presidential Election I think you saw a lot of anomalies up there. End of the day democracy doesn't function unless you comply with the elections and the voice of the people," he said. In the meantime, Gibson has been attending council meetings and working to provide Ward 1 representation when he can. "Hearing the needs of the people and I can't do anything, because my hands are tied until this whole thing is over. I've had moments of frustration, but you know, I trusted the court system," he said.

Gibson said Evans was using his rights, and while he's not upset, Gibson said he worries about the precedent. "If we don't get this law changed soon, there will be more people that will try this in the future. All it's going to do is divide us, it's not going to bring us closer together," Gibson said. Gibson said he wants to see elected leaders installed while the appeals play out. "If you don't have any evidence or proof that there was any fraud, then that person should be able to take their seat and move forward. This should never happen again. That loophole has to be fixed," he said. Gibson said he's excited to get an opportunity to tackle Ward 1's issues, including blight and safety. "Now that I have three years three months left to serve. I've got to maximize that, I've got to make every moment count," he said. Gibson said he had faith that Smith would succeed in making the change.