Tunstall riding for himself, others at 90

Sports, B1

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Diesel prices have schools eyeing natural gas

KIM GRIZZARD
Staff Writer

Pitt County Schools is exploring alternative fuel options for buses as record high diesel prices threaten to put a strain on the school district's budget.

Executive Director of Operations Aaron Errickson told the Board of Education this week that the cost of diesel fuel, which the school system purchases in bulk, has risen by more than 50% in the last 90 days. Prices have gone from $3.50 per gallon to $5.46 per gallon as of Sept. 25.

With 161 diesel buses using a total of 1,800 gallons a day during the school year, the cost increase is significant.

"The average (diesel fuel) delivery went up from $22,000 to roughly between $36,000 and $41,000," Errickson said.

By comparison, the 28 propane buses in the PCS fleet have seen about a 14% increase in the cost per gallon during the same time period. The cost of propane is about half the cost of diesel fuel.

Low-pressure gas could provide another option, Errickson said, adding that the school district has had discussions about being part of a pilot project to roll-out natural gas-powered school buses.

According to The Transportation Project, nationwide there are more than 150 school districts operating approximately 5,500 natural gas-powered vehicles.

Durk Tyson, director of natural gas systems for Greenville Utilities Commission, said compressed natural gas currently sells for $3.32 per gallon, compared with $6 a gallon for diesel.

FILE PHOTO/REFLECTOR

Pitt County Schools officials are discussing using buses fueled by natural gas due to the high cost of diesel fuel.

More **FUEL** | **A7**

EMPLOYEE SUCCESS STORY

Custodian finds niche at courthouse

ECVC program helps Greenville man complete apprenticeship, grow in workplace

KIM GRIZZARD
Staff Writer

In the 1946 Christmas classic "It's a Wonderful Life," George Bailey — played by actor James Stewart — gets a rare chance to see the difference his life has made.

Eighty years later, James Stewart of Greenville had a somewhat similar experience. This week, Stewart watched the screen along with hundreds of others as friends, family and colleagues offered praise for him and his work.

His story was highlighted on film during the 61th anniversary banquet for Eastern Carolina Vocational Center, a nonprofit organization that provides job opportunities for people with disabilities. In the ceremony, held Thursday at Rock Springs Center, the 24-year-old was honored as ECVC's 2026 Employee Success Story of the Year.

Paralympian and a best-selling author John Register, a U.S. Army veteran and motivational speaker, gave the keynote address at the banquet, held in conjunction with National Disability Employment Awareness Month. The annual event recognizes an individual with a disability who has achieved success through employment.

"James is very helpful," said Glenett Ward, who has been Stewart's ECVC janitorial supervisor for three years. "He's easy to work with; he follows directions. He's a good employee."

For people with disabilities, finding employment can be a challenging. Stewart, who has autism, went to work right after high school, landing a job at a local grocery store. But the 2020 graduate of Ayden-Grifton High School found that his first job offered limited work hours, and he was eager to do more.

More **STEWART** | **A6**

CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

James Stewart has been named Eastern Carolina Vocational Center's 2026 Employee Success Story of the Year. He has been employed with ECVC's janitorial services staff at the Pitt County Courthouse for about three years.

Stewart helps supervisor Glenett Ward with some cleaning supplies in the courthouse basement, where former cells have been repurposed for storage space.

$62M sought to build new high school

KIM GRIZZARD
Staff Writer

Pitt County Schools is seeking more than $60 million in state funding for a new high school.

Executive Director of Operations Aaron Errickson told the Board of Education this week that the school district has plans to apply for a grant from the Needs-Based Public School Capital Fund to use toward the construction of a new D.H. Conley High School. County funding would be required to cover about $90 million to $100 million, even with state funding.

"This grant is our best opportunity to move forward faster," Errickson said Monday.

If grant funding is approved, Errickson said, it would be four years before a new high school is completed. Land has not yet been purchased for the school, which officials said would require a minimum of 100 acres and would take a year to design and an additional two years to build.

District 9 representative Benjie Forrest said four to six years might be a more accurate estimate of how long it would take for a new school to open.

The school district's 15-year plan, approved in September 2025, calls for a new Conley campus to be constructed in the Black Jack area to be more centrally located within its attendance zone. It could be designed to accommodate as many as 2,400 students.

Under the plan, Conley's current campus on Worthington Road would become home to Hope Middle. Hope's location on Mills Road would be converted into an elementary school.

More **SCHOOL** | **A7**

Building Hope celebrates temporary home

Outreach raising funds to build on Albermale Ave.

KIM GRIZZARD
Staff Writer

Hope has a new address. Building Hope Community Life Center this week celebrated a move of only a short distance but one that represents a major step forward.

Dozens of supporters attended a ribbon cutting ceremony Wednesday at the nonprofit ministry's new location, 215 W. Ninth St., next door to the place Building Hope called home for more than two decades.

"This is an exciting new chapter for Building Hope," said Paul Anderson, area executive/senior vice president of Southern Bank, who serves as chairman of the board for The Greater Greenville Chamber of Commerce.

"For more than 20 years in their previous facility, they've been investing in the lives of children and families in our community, providing academic support, leadership development, service opportunities, summer programming, and so much more. While this new facility is a temporary home, it represents something much bigger, a place to continue that work today while building toward their vision for a permanent purpose built built facility in the future."

At a 25th anniversary celebration event in April, Building Hope announced that it is exploring options for purchasing vacant property on Albemarle Avenue for its new location. Executive Director Sheena Parker said she expects the official launch of the capital campaign to be in the fall of 2027,

More **HOPE** | **A6**

REFLECTOR

Supporters, volunteers and staff members tour Building Hope Community Life Center's new facility during a ribbon-cutting and open house on Wednesday.

145th year, No. 271 © 2026

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Today: 84, late storm
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Detained Palestinian-American journalist with NC ties released on bail by Israel

REFLECTOR

A Palestinian-American journalist detained by Israeli authorities at a West Bank checkpoint on Sept. 15 has been released on bail, according to reports.

Naqaa Hamed, who has family ties in eastern North Carolina, is a freelance journalist who has worked for Iran's Press TV, U.S. news outlet Drop Site News, Turkey's TRT and 4D News (a Palestinian media group). The Iranian and Turkish outlets are state-owned media.

Hamed was arrested by Israeli authorities at a checkpoint near Bethlehem after covering Israeli settler frictions with Palestinians in the West Bank.

On Sept. 28, an Israeli court released Hamed.

According to reports, including from AFP and Telesur, Hamed was released on $2,600 bail on the condition she reappear for questioning if summoned.

Her family in North Carolina, including a sister in Greenville, welcomed her release. "She is free," Fatema B. Salem posted on Facebook.

U.S. Sen. Chris Van Hollen, a Maryland Democrat, also welcomed her release.

"Detaining journalists for doing their job is an assault on free speech and freedom of the press, and Naqaa Hamed should have never been locked up in the first place. I was glad to work alongside her family to push for her release,

X/U.S. REP. RASHIDA TLAIB

A picture of Palestinian-American journalist Naqaa Hamed posted by U.S. Rep. Rashida Tlaib, D-Michigan. Hamed, who works for Iran's Press TV and other outlets, was arrested by Israeli authorities earlier this month.

and relieved that she will be reunited with them. I will keep fighting for the release of all Americans wrongfully detained by the Israeli government or any foreign government," Van Hollen said in a statement.

The Maryland Democrat has been critical of Israel's war in Gaza and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government.

Israeli officials have not responded to requests for comment on Hamed's detention. Israeli media outlets previously reported that Hamed was being detained and questioned about cooperating with an enemy entity.

Israel and the U.S. have been at war with Iran since the end of February.

Israel has been cracking down on Palestinians, including in the West Bank, since Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023 attacks.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) had called for Hamed's release. Palestinian advocates say Israeli authorities unjustly harass and detain Palestinian journalists, including Hamed.

Stewart/from A1

With encouragement from his parents, he enrolled in a custodial apprenticeship program that Pitt Community College helped ECVC to create 2019. Participants who successfully complete the program receive nationally recognized certifications. Stewart finished the program in less than a year and was invited to join ECVC's custodial team at Pitt County Courthouse.

"I don't think there's anything that he cannot tackle. He's one of my go-to guys," Ward said. "He's a great team player."

She should know. Ward has known Stewart his whole life; the two first met when he was a baby. His parents, Frank and Laurie Stewart — both employees of the Pitt County Sheriff's Office — stopped by the courthouse to introduce their newborn son to some of their colleagues.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

James Stewart, ECVC's 2026 Employee Success Story of the Year, with his supervisor, Glenett Ward. The two met when Stewart was still an infant and his parents introduced him to colleagues at the Pitt County Courthouse.

"(But) we didn't truly get to know each other until I started working here," Stewart said.

Stewart has gotten to know quite a few people since he started working at the courthouse, where he shows up for work by 7 a.m. to make sure the entrance is ready for visitors before he goes on to other duties.

He enjoys meeting people and working in the building that is more than a century old.

"I seeing some of like the old stuff around here (like) the old jail," Stewart said of the basement space where former cells have been repurposed, mostly for storage. "Now that can be interesting."

Heather Tepper, victim witness coordinator for Pitt County District Attorney's Office, said Stewart is well liked.

"He's very kind and considerate," she said. "He's just a pleasure to be around."

Brent Johnson of Pitt County Sheriff's Office, who is assigned to the DA's office, said Stewart gets along with everyone.

"I think he has a routine with everyone," Johnson said. "He's just a well-rounded kid, and he's a joy to have in the office, for sure."

Stewart, who said his parents got his name from Scripture (rather than the screen) is too young to be very familiar with the work of the famous actor whose name he shares. But this award gave him his own chance to be on stage and to stand in the spotlight.

"I can't believe it," Stewart said. "Honestly, I'm just happy for it. This is like a huge deal.

"I thank ECVC for everything they've done for me, like getting the job, helping me complete an apprenticeship program, and being where I am right now, winning employee of the year," he said. "So this year will be my year."

Kim Grizzard can be contacted at 252-329-9578 and kgrizzard@apgenc.com.

Hope/from A1

Building Hope opened in 2001 to tutor and mentor 15 children in west Greenville. Today, the afterschool program serves 41 students from nine area elementary schools.

Its Project Bridges program, a partnership with Pitt County Schools, provides a place where students suspended from school can continue their coursework and receive instruction in character development that is designed to help them avoid additional suspension. Parker said the program has served about 200 students last school year.

But in November 2025, the organization had to close the doors at 309 W. Ninth St. and start meeting at nearby GCF Church. Board chairwoman Tina Weldon said the roof had begun to leak and there were other structural issues at the aging building, which the late Walter Williams donated to the organization some 15 years ago.

Parker said she expected that students would meet at the church for 90 days. Instead, they spent almost nine months there.

While she was grateful to the church for providing the space, Parker was happy to move Building Hope last month from a space of about 400 square feet to more than 4,000 square feet. The new location belongs to Phil Gibbs and Edwin Clark of Hamel Builders, who offered their former offices to the after-school program while funds are being raised for Building Hope's new facility.

"Edwin Clark and Hamel Builders have been probably two of the biggest guardian angels for Building Hope since Mike Williams and Mark L'Esperance started this organization back in 2001," Parker said, adding that the benefactors helped the organization with everything from permits to renovations needed to convert the office space into a place for children.

In addition, a grant from the Eddie and Jo Allison Smith Foundation provided Chromebooks for Project Bridges and appliances needed to convert a former staff lounge into a functional kitchen.

Like Building Hope's larger, old building, the new location provides a designated space for Project Bridges, along with a STEAM lab, a prayer room and a library. A new addition is a sensory room, designed to provide a calming space for students who feel overstimulated.

Program Director Reginald Barrett said features like beanbag chairs and noise-canceling headphones offer a respite for children who need a break from the noise and activity of their peers.

"We have so many students who are on the spectrum, or we call them our neurodivergent friends," Barrett said. "So this is for our friends who are on the on the spectrum or our neurodivergent friends who need a space to come in and kind of just reset."

Parker, a former exceptional children's teacher for Pitt County Schools, said Building Hope has seen a sharp increase in recent years in the number of exceptional children it serves.

"My first year here, right around 10% of our population that we served that was neurodivergent," she said. "Last year that almost tripled to about 30%."

Building Hope's new location also is making room for middle schoolers. After serving only elementary students in its afterschool program for the last few years, Parker said the organization will pilot a program this year that will serve about a dozen sixth-grade girls.

Crowned Girls, set to launch this fall, will utilize the resiliency training that Building Hope staff members have received and also will incorporate spiritual mentorship that was part of the organization's former Women of Worth program.

"They as young girls can really use all of the skills that they learn to not only be successful in life," Parker said, "but to build that self-esteem, self-value, self-worth, which ultimately helps to determine our trajectory."

Kim Grizzard can be contacted at 252-329-9578 and kgrizzard@apgenc.com.

DEATH NOTICES

AYDEN — **Betty Ann Hardesty**, 94, died on Monday, September 28, 2026. A graveside service will be conducted Saturday at 11 am at Ayden Cemetery. The family will receive friends following the service at the cemetery.Arrangements by Smith Funeral Service & Crematory.

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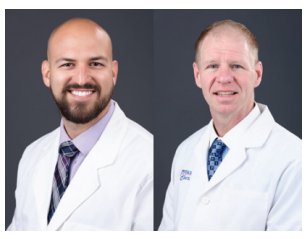

Mason Holtel, MD
Jonathan Taylor, MD

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