



Taylor Jones makes her best pitch for Charlotte 49ers softball

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TROY HULL

Our Lady of Consolation Catholic Church's aging sanctuary, beset by mold and infrastructure issues, will undergo a \$6.7 million initiative to upgrade and expand the building. Our Lady of Consolation is Charlotte's lone predominantly Black Catholic church.

\$6.7M joint investment in Our Lady of Consolation

Renovation and expansion effort unites parishioners and Charlotte Diocese

By Christina Lee Knauss
CATHOLIC NEWS HERALD

Parishioners at Our Lady of Consolation Church and the Diocese of Charlotte have established a partnership to invest more than \$6.7 million to renovate and expand their church on Statesville Avenue.

Since 2020, Masses at the historically Black parish have been celebrated in the overcrowded Parish Life Center, since mold, electrical problems and a lack of available restrooms have kept parishioners from using their aging church building.

The news thrilled Harry Scott, who was

3 years old when his mother took him to the church's groundbreaking in 1955. He's been a parishioner for 70 years and serves as chairman of the parish council.

"We are ecstatic over this response to our needs," Scott said, "and look forward to working with the team to execute these plans."

When the parish was founded in 1955, its property included a church, school, rectory and convent. The school and convent were closed decades ago, but the parish continued to operate on the same site in northeast Charlotte, an area undergoing tremendous population

growth.

Despite its strategic location and continuing growth, the parish has struggled under the financial burden imposed by its aging facilities. More than a decade ago, the parish was forced to abandon its cafeteria because of the cost to repair and maintain it was beyond its financial means.

Within five years, the school suffered the same fate and abandonment of the church building followed in 2020.

"In recent years it became clear that action beyond the means of parishioners was required to avoid loss of the parish

Please see **REINVESTMENT** | 2A

America's most religious: Southerners still lead

By Herbert L. White
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Southerners are the most religious of Americans, but their numbers are declining, according to national research.

Between 2020-25, religiousness in all regions has been stable, Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Studies show, but over a longer span has fallen off across the country. Levels of religiousness in the South now mirror 2007

levels in the Northeast and West.

The survey found 51% of southerners pray every day, matching 2007 levels in the West (53%) and Northeast (50%). Seventy-four percent of Southerners identified with a religion as of 2023-24, which is less than 2007 shares in the West (77%) and Northeast (83%).

The Midwest is generally the second-most religious region, followed by the Northeast and the West.

Pew has conducted the survey three times (2007, 2014, and 2023-24), with more than 35,000 randomly sampled respondents on each occasion.

In each region, the surveys show long-term declines in religiousness on questions about affiliation, daily prayer and belief in God.

In the South, the share of adults who identify with a religion fell to 74% from

Please see **RELIGIOUS** | 2A

Former Eastland Mall takes on sports future

By Herbert L. White
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The former Eastland Mall site is now a space for sports.

The March 6 groundbreaking of the \$67.1 million Eastland Sports Campus is a milestone for east Charlotte, where community leaders have lobbied for new investment since the mall's demolition in 2013. The 30-acre complex is expected to spark economic development in the corridor through its three tenants - Edge Sports Global, BIC (Belton Ivory Canty) LLC and Charlotte Soccer Academy.

City leaders estimate the campus will create 500 jobs, generate \$169 million in annual economic impact, and generate 130,000 hotel room nights each year for youth sports.

The "groundbreaking is a milestone, not a finish line," said Greg Ascianto, executive director of CharlotteEAST, a nonprofit community advocacy group. "We look forward to how this project will help the Greater Eastland area once again become one of the

Please see **SPORTS** | 3A

NC sees largest drop in coverage after health care credits expire

By Eric Tegethoff
NORTH CAROLINA NEWS SERVICE

North Carolina saw the largest drop in coverage in the nation after the expiration of enhanced Affordable Care Act tax credits at the end of 2025, according to a new report from Protect Our Care.

The report finds more than 210,000 people got rid of their ACA coverage between 2025 and 2026. Republicans in Congress refused to extend the improved tax credits, putting the cost for insurance out of reach for many. Across the nation, coverage numbers have dropped by more than 1.2 million since 2025.

"This also isn't counting folks who are being forced to reduce their coverage and rely on high-deductible plans that will force them to pay thousands of dollars more in out-of-pocket costs before their coverage

even kicks in," said Vaishu Jawahar, director of policy programs with Protect Our Care.

The Protect Our Care report adds that more than 20 million Americans saw their premiums double or triple this year. Nearly 5 million people are expected to lose coverage by the end of the year.

Jawahar said a greater number of people living without insurance impacts everyone.

"Hospitals will have to distribute those bills and distribute those costs," she said, "and then everyone will end up paying higher costs, having higher hospital bills, higher premiums as a result of these losses in coverage."

She said this only adds to the strain created by cuts to Medicaid under the "One Big Beautiful Bill Act"

Please see **LESS** | 3A

Housing loophole threatens tax base

By Greg Childress
NC NEWSLINE

A growing number of apartment complex owners in North Carolina are taking advantage of a state law that grants property tax exemptions to nonprofits that provide affordable housing to low- and moderate-income residents, Wake County officials say.

In a scheme that one longtime affordable-housing developer refers to as a "rent-a-nonprofit structure," for-profit apartment complex owners can hand over fractions of ownership to nonprofits to qualify for generous tax exemptions. The move can result in significant reductions in property tax value for cities and counties, sometimes tens of millions of dollars.

"This is a huge leak in your tax base, and the city of Raleigh's also," Wake County tax administrator Marcus Kinrade told county commissioners during a recent meeting. "Most of these things are occurring in the city, so it's affecting them even worse than it's affecting the county."

Lower tax values mean less revenue for counties to fund schools, libraries, public safety and health and human services, which can force local governments to reduce services or raise taxes.

Exemptions in Wake County have nearly doubled — from 66 in 2020 to 136 in 2025, Kinrade said. The exemptions for low- and moderate-

Please see **NC HOUSING** | 3A

US Senate candidates start sprint to November

By Sarah Michels
CAROLINA PUBLIC PRESS

If North Carolinians hoped for a respite from political ads for a few months, they will be sorely disappointed by the U.S. Senate contest.

After early victories on primary Election Night, former Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper and former Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Whatley got right to work.

Cooper and Whatley were always the presumptive nominees for the seat, from which Republican Thom Tillis is retiring after high-profile disagreements with President Donald Trump, including over Medicaid funding cuts in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

Cooper garnered 92% of the Democratic vote and Whatley won 65% of the Republican vote in their six-person primaries. Republican Don Brown was the only other candidate to put up a semblance of a fight, earning 16% of the primary vote.

During the next eight months, each of the two primary winners will face a different series of challenges.

While Whatley, a Watauga County native who previously chaired both the Republican National Committee and the North Carolina Re-

Please see **COOPER** | 2A



Cooper



Whatley

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Reinvestment in Our Lady of Consolation

Continued from page 1A

site in this critical growth area," said Emmett Sapp, the diocese's director of construction and real estate.

"In 2024, we began working with the parish to investigate ways the diocese and the parish could partner to address the parish's facilities challenges and enable it to respond to the needs of the church."

Parishioners learned about the partnership at two town hall meetings held Feb. 22 after morning Masses. Representatives from the diocese discussed funding for the building project and plans to seek an architect and contractor, and fielded questions from the audiences who erupted in applause when they learned about the project's scale.

The cost to renovate and expand the church is estimated to be \$6.7 million. To fund the project, the diocese will initially grant the parish \$4 million over six years. The parish must contribute at least \$1.5 million to the project from proceeds received from a capital campaign expected to launch in spring 2027.

Once the parish secures its contribution through funds and pledges, the diocese will grant an additional \$1.1 million. The parish must also meet its other diocesan financial obligations.

Any remaining balance will be paid by the parish through a 10-year diocesan loan. Diocesan funding commitments for the project will come from returns on investments set aside for long-term growth initiatives following the sale of a major real estate holding in 2022.

"As in all capital campaigns in the past 40 years, the development office will work closely with the parish to help conduct a successful campaign," diocesan development director Jim Kelley said. "As part of the diocesan philanthropic initiative, the parish will conduct its capital campaign in the

spring of 2027."

Once funding is secured, plans for the project include renovating and expanding the existing church building. Plans call for asbestos abatement and mold remediation, construction of a new narthex and restrooms, replacement of interior finishes and an increase in seating capacity from 262 to approximately 450.

Father Marcel Amadi, parochial administrator of Our Lady of Consolation and its mission St. Helen in Gastonia, responded to questions with words of faith.

"Be grateful to God that this is happening," he said.

Although other buildings are not included in this project, the parish has been working to save its historic campus. In 2020, the parish launched a capital campaign and raised more than \$1 million that was invested in stopping deterioration of the old school building where restrooms for the church are currently located.

Future plans call for the school to be transformed into a learning center offering education programs for the parish and community.

"It's great to have a way to get back into the church," Scott said, "which we so desperately have wanted and need."



It's great to have a way to get back into the church, which we so desperately have wanted and need.



Our Lady of Consolation Catholic Church parishioner **HARRY SCOTT**

Religious ranks grow smaller

Continued from page 1A

86%, while the share of Midwest adults dropped from 83% in 2007 to 69% in 2023-24. Also, 47% of adults in the West say they believe in God with absolute certainty as of 2023-24, down from 65% in 2007. In the South, the share who say this is 63%, 16 percentage points lower than in 2007.

Black Americans are among the most religious groups in the U.S., but religion differs substantially among the demographic, with older adults more religious than their younger counterparts, and women more religious than men. Pew found nearly three-fourths of Black adults (73%) are Christian, including 65% who are Protestant, 4% Catholic, and 4% who identify with other Christian groups such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Black adults affiliated with the Christian faith is down from 79% in 2014 and 85% in 2007, which is similar to the overall U.S. population but still more likely than American adults overall (62%).

Four percent of Black adults identify with non-Christian religions, including Islam while 22% are religious "nones," or adults who are not affiliated with a religion, including 3% who identify as atheist or agnostic and 19% who say their religion is "nothing in particular."

Majorities of adults in each region identify as Christian, but they have gotten smaller since 2007. For example, 68% of southerners are Christian as of 2023-24, a 15% slide compared to 2007.

The shares identifying with each region's largest Christian subgroup have also declined. In the South, for instance, 31% of all adults are evangelical Protestants, down from 37% in 2007. Similarly, the share of evangelicals in the Midwest has fallen from 26% to 23%.

Catholics are 28% of the population in the Northeast, down from 37% in 2007. In the West, 20% of adults are Catholic, down from 25%.

Meanwhile, the share of religiously unaffiliated adults in each region has risen since 2007. For example, it has roughly doubled in the Northeast and the Midwest, from 16% to 30% in each.

The share of people who collectively identify with religions other than Christianity has increased slightly in each region. In the South, that share has doubled from 3% in 2007 to 6% in 2023-24. In the Northeast, it is 10% compared to 7%.

Colorectal cancer diagnoses among younger Americans a growing concern

By Cameron Williams
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Colorectal cancer is no longer a disease for older individuals.

New studies and statistics from the American Cancer Society indicate rates of colorectal cancer are moving in two different directions. The disease continues to decline in older adults while rates are rapidly rising in those individuals 65 and younger.

The triennial report, Colorectal Cancer Studies 2026, found that a large reason for these rates rising is due to cancers in the distal colon — the last section adjacent to the rectum. As a result, rectal cancer makes up nearly 33% of all colorectal cancer diagnoses.

"After decades of progress, the risk of dying from colorectal cancer is climbing in younger men and women, confirming a real uptick in disease because of something we're doing or some other exposure," said Rebecca Siegel, senior scientific director, surveillance research at the American Cancer Society and lead author of the report. "We need to not only significantly increase re-

search efforts to understand the cause but also circumvent these deaths through earlier detection by educating clinicians and the general public, especially knowing the five-year survival for early disease is more than 90%."

The study reports that colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer in both men and women in the U.S. and second leading cause of cancer-related death. For adults under 50 years of age, it is the No. 1 cause of cancer-related mortality.

In 2026 alone, an estimated 158,850 new cases of colorectal cancer will be diagnosed, and 55,230 people are expected to die due to the disease. More than 200 new diagnoses a day are found in people younger than 65 years old. In North Carolina, an estimated 5,050 new cases of colorectal cancer will be diagnosed, and 1,900 people will die from the disease in 2026.

Risk factors and screening
According to researchers, over half of colorectal cancers can be attributed to modifiable risk factors. Some include smoking, unhealthy diets, high alcohol

consumption, inactivity and excess body weight. Most all are preventable and should be to lower the risk of developing the disease.

Many additional cases and deaths are preventable through appropriate screening and access to high-quality treatment. Scientists found that half of all people diagnosed before age 50 are 45-49 years and eligible for screening. Yet the prevalence of screening in this group is just 37%, and three-in-four colorectal cancers in adults younger than 50 years are diagnosed at an advanced stage.

"These findings further underscore that colorectal cancer is worsening among younger generations and highlight the immediate need for eligible adults to begin screening at the recommended age of 45," said Dr. William Dahut, chief scientific officer at the American Cancer Society. "The report also shines a light on the crucial importance of continued funding for research to help discover new therapies to treat the disease and advance patient care."

Cooper and Whatley start their sprint to Election Day

Continued from page 1A

publican Party, may be extremely powerful in Republican circles, he isn't a household name. According to a Republican-sponsored January poll, 43% of surveyed voters have no opinion on Whatley. Only 15% said the same about Cooper.

To win, Whatley will have to define himself to voters, particularly North Carolina's unaffiliated voters, who make up 39% of the electorate.

Cooper, on the other hand, is a familiar name. As a 14-year state legislator, four-term attorney general and two-term governor, the Nash County native has had plenty of opportunities to introduce himself to voters. However, he also has a lengthy track record to defend against his opponents' criticisms.

Already, powerful state and national donors have poured money into the race. Political watchers predict the race to be the most expensive US Senate race in history, with upwards of a billion dollars in spending by the time Nov. 3 rolls around. Whatley campaign puts crime at forefront

Before taking the podium, Whatley made the rounds chatting with members of law enforcement at the North Carolina Fraternal Order of Police Lodge #9 in Charlotte.

The day after clenching his party's nomination, Whatley previewed the next eight months for reporters. During the next stage of his campaign, he said he will be everywhere: in every county and every town, making sure voters know him and his message.

The race will be one of contrasts between him and Cooper on tax policy, regulatory policy and affordability, Whatley said. But first, he will talk about Cooper's track record on crime.

"The fact is, the highest, most important function of any government, whether it's a state government, a local government or the federal government, is protecting its citizens," Whatley said.

Wednesday, Whatley positioned Cooper as a "soft-on-crime" Democrat who has and will promote policies that keep criminals out of prison and on the streets.

"Roy Cooper, as the governor of North Carolina, is the one who marched with (Black Lives Matter) and Antifa while our cities were burning down," he said. "He is the one who signed an executive order to create a task force which recommended cashless bail and pretrial release and pushed those policies onto every judge and every magistrate and to every court across this state, and set up a revolving door that put criminals — violent criminals — back on the streets again and again and again."

The Task Force for Racial Equity in Criminal Justice, formed after Black Lives Matter protests happened across the country, did recommend cashless bail for those charged with Class I, II and III misdemeanors who were not deemed threats to public safety. However, the recommendation was never implemented by the legislature and Cooper has said he never supported cashless bail.

In September 2025, as part of the lead-up to the state legislature's crime omnibus bill, Iryna's Law, Senate President Pro Tempore Phil Berger told reporters that while many of those task force recommendations were never enacted, they "reflect an attitude on policing, on an attitude on criminal justice, an attitude on how things ought to be taking place."

"And those attitudes, in many respects, are the things that inform the kinds of decisions that were made by the magistrate in this case and by other magistrates that are of the same political will," he continued.

Whatley also referred to a settlement Cooper made in 2021 after being sued by civil rights groups over the spread of COVID-19 in the state's prisons. In the settlement, Cooper was instructed by the courts to give early release to 3,500 prisoners.

In campaign advertisements and in speeches, Whatley and his supporters have repeatedly blamed Cooper for the fatal stabbing of Ukrainian refugee Iryna Zarutka on the Charlotte transit system last August.

They've claimed that Zarutka's killer, DeCarlos Brown Jr., was one of the prisoners Cooper released early. But that is not true.

While Brown Jr.'s prisoner number was listed in settlement documents, he was actually released five months before Cooper agreed to the settlement. According to a North Carolina PolitiFact fact check, he was listed in the court-ordered settlement as a way for Cooper to avoid actually releasing 3,500 prisoners, and instead count some already-released prisoners toward that total.

Regardless, Whatley plans to push for a federal version of North Carolina's Iryna's Law as one of his first acts in Congress.

"I will back the blue, and I will support them, and I will make sure that they have the resources that they need to carry out their missions across the state," he said, referring to police. "And I will make sure that we have federal sentencing guidelines that are going to put criminals behind bars."

Whatley has the backing of aspects of the law enforcement community, including an endorsement from the North Carolina Troopers' Association. At the press conference, Charlotte-Mecklenburg FOP Lodge #9 President Daniel Redford, State FOP President Chet Effler, Iredell County

Sheriff Darren Campbell, Cabarrus County Sheriff Dan Shaw, Cleveland County Sheriff Alan Norman and retired state trooper Richard May stood behind Whatley and offered their support.

Shaw said they need better policies that support community safety.

"We need the leadership that is going to put the families of our state first, their safety first," he said. "We have battled the early release of prisoners from state prisons. We've battled very lax pre-trial detention policies that put criminals back on the street where law enforcement officers are faced with a revolving door of arresting and re-arresting the same offenders."

Cooper wants to 'make stuff cost less' If Whatley's strategy is redefining Cooper's record in a negative light, part of Cooper's strategy is connecting Whatley to President Donald Trump's policies, especially his response to natural disasters.

Trump has endorsed Whatley in the race, and named him "recovery czar" after Hurricane Helene struck Western North Carolina.

At a Raleigh Brewing campaign event Wednesday morning, Cooper launched a statewide tour focusing on his plans to "make stuff cost less" if elected to the US Senate.

"Fixing this problem of food and grocery prices starts at the source," Cooper said. "Our farmers, we've got to do more to support them and to stop these chaotic tariffs that are making their jobs so much harder."

He would fight to reduce the cost of health care, just like he fought for Medicaid expansion in North Carolina in 2023, he said. Rising utilities, housing and childcare expenses are also on his mind, but the first agenda item Wednesday was food and grocery costs.

Cooper invited Wilson County farmer Pender Sharp to the Raleigh event. Sharp said the current federal economic policy is making it harder for farmers like him to make a profit and feed the world. While there have always been ups and downs in farming, he said this time is different.

"Just like all farmers have, we've had good prices, bad prices, droughts, floods and good weather years," Sharp said. "But never in my history as a farmer have I seen so many wrong decisions coming out of Washington — tariffs, trade wars, things that are destroying American agriculture, and especially right here in North Carolina."

Another element of the fight against high grocery bills will be to limit grocery store mergers that give already-powerful corporations a monopoly over prices, Cooper said. He also plans to ensure corporations aren't using consumers' personal data against them to charge higher prices.

Wake County educator and mother Stephanie Walker said her family's purse strings have tightened since Trump took office.

"I'm an educator, and I love what I do," she said. "Every single day, I get to wake up and I know that I'm going to make a difference. But right now, rising prices from childcare to groceries are causing my paycheck to shrink."

Democrats turned out in large numbers for North Carolina's primary election. Nearly 42% of registered Democrats showed up to the polls, while just 28% of Republicans and 30% of unaffiliated voters did the same.

That proves to Christyna Thompson, press secretary for the Democratic Senate Majority PAC, that connecting the dots between Trump's policies and Republican candidates is working.

"The cost and chaos message cuts through with exactly the voters we're trying to win," she said.

Thompson is confident that Cooper's record speaks for itself. So is he.

Wednesday, Cooper spoke of his ability to work across the aisle to lower costs, recruit good-paying jobs to North Carolina and hold criminals accountable as a former attorney general.

"I've taken on child predators and drug dealers and worked to keep our community safe," Cooper said. "And I took on the big corporations that are ripping off North Carolina families. I took on Medicaid fraud and brought many people to justice."

But his supporters aren't taking any chances, Thompson said.

"We're leaving no stone unturned, and we're not going to act as if North Carolina is sure-footed territory," she said. "It's a competitive state. It always is. And Whatley, he's going to have the money behind him. He's going to have the national Republican apparatus behind him."

Big spending

Cooper and Whatley have massive funding forces in their respective corners.

According to FEC data, Whatley raised \$6.27 million from July 2025 to mid-February. He's spent \$3.75 million during the primary, leaving him with about \$2.52 million heading into the general election cycle.

On the other hand, Cooper has raised more than \$21 million, and spent \$6.8 million of it so far. Since none of his primary opponents mounted serious campaigns, nearly all of that money has gone toward defending his record and negatively defining Whatley.

Cooper's war chest is the fourth-highest of all Senate candidates this cycle, per the FEC. As Thompson put it, Cooper has "more money than God at this point."



NORTH CAROLINA GENERAL ASSEMBLY LEGISLATIVE ANALYSIS

The North Carolina Court of Appeals ruled in 2013 that Cane Creek Village was entitled to a property tax exemption.

NC housing loophole threatens local tax base

Continued from page 1A

income housing account for a projected \$776 million reduction in taxable property value, the equivalent of \$4 million in revenue, he said.

"This is, in my opinion, the biggest threat to the revenue stream in this county that I could ever imagine," Kinrade said.

This year, the county received about 170 applications for exemptions before the Feb. 1 deadline. The taxable value of those properties is \$1.2 billion, which would result in a loss of \$6.2 million in county tax dollars, Kinrade said.

Wake County isn't alone when it comes to losing taxable value this way. Cities and counties across the state are having billions of dollars worth of formerly taxable properties wiped from the tax rolls as a result of the "loophole" in state law.

How we got here

The law was adopted in 2010 to help increase the supply of low-and moderate-income housing by giving owners a break on property taxes. Such housing generally offers rents at or below 80% of area median income.

The loophole was created in 2013 when the NC Court of Appeals ruled that Cane Creek Village, a low-income housing project in Mitchell County owned by a for-profit limited liability company but controlled by a nonprofit, was entitled to a property tax exemption.

Northwestern Housing Enterprises, Inc., the nonprofit in that case, owned 0.1% of Blue Ridge Housing, which held the title to the property. A for-profit partnership, North Carolina Equity Fund III Limited Partnership, owned 99.9% of Blue Ridge Housing.

Although the loophole has existed since 2013, Kinrade said apartment owners began to take advantage of it in greater numbers starting in 2023 after several law firms and real estate brokers began marketing it to apartment owners.

Properties receiving exemptions are generally older apartment complexes, Kinrade said. Because of their age and condition, owners can rent them to tenants earning 80% of area median income or less, he said. Eighty percent of area median income or less is generally accepted as the standard for low-and moderate-income housing.

An analysis by Durham-based Self Help, the nonprofit developer and lender that coined the "rent-a-nonprofit" phrase, estimates that 94% of multi-family units in Wake County could eventually be exempted from property taxes because they provide rents at 80% of area median income or below, Kinrade said.

If Self Help's analysis proves true, Kinrade said, the amount of property removed from the county's tax base would cost \$140 million in revenue.

"Just doing a little work on the ownership structure can qualify these properties for full exemption based on the Blue Ridge Housing model," Kinrade said.

To illustrate how the loophole works, Kinrade used the Village at Broadstone Station Apartments in Apex, which was built in 2013. The apartment's website bills it as a luxury apartment community.

Kinrade said the owner paid property taxes until 2024 when the apart-

ments were sold to an investment group in Beverly Hills, California for \$66.2 million that year. He said the investment firm partnered with an Oregon nonprofit called the Foundation for Affordable Housing and used the loophole to qualify for a property tax exemption.

"To my knowledge, they didn't change the rents," Kinrade said. "The rents are the same as they were prior to the purchase. It just so happens that because incomes are high in Wake County, 80% of median income is pretty high too."

NC Newsline was unable to reach the foundation or the complex's owners for comment.

Fixing the problem

County leaders' concerns have gotten the attention of lawmakers. State Rep. Erin Paré (R-Wake) has pledged to work to close the loophole.

"Closing the 'loophole' in the law will recover forgone revenue (tax revenue lost) that would otherwise go to funding schools and other essential services," Paré said in a social media post.

Paré co-chairs the House Select Committee on Property Tax Reduction and Reform that House Speaker Destin Hall created to review the factors contributing to rising local property taxes and to identify ways to reduce the burden on homeowners.

In January, Self Help told the House Select Committee on Property Tax Reduction that property tax exemptions for affordable housing are critical to alleviating the state's affordable housing crisis, but the current wording of the law is too vague, ripe for abuse and "deviates from the original spirit."

Self Help recommended lawmakers require qualifying properties to be 100% nonprofit-owned and operated as affordable housing. It also wants properties to have federal, state and local government financial support, long-term affordability restrictions and a nonprofit general partner with control and a long-term ownership option.

The North Carolina Association of County Commissioners made similar recommendations to the committee, but also said the state should require an annual application process in which owners would report the number of low-income units it has in an apartment complex.

Kinrade said lawmakers must change the law to clearly define low-and moderate-income housing.

"We're not against affordable housing, but we want it to be in the classic form of affordable housing and not this rent-a-nonprofit structure we think is just taking advantage of taxpayers," Kinrade said.

He said there must be more oversight to ensure owners who receive exemptions provide housing to residents earning 80% or less of area median income.

"There's really no ability to ensure that the residents who are receiving these affordable rents qualify based on their income unless the tax office gets in the business of auditing these properties every year, which is going to strain our resources," Kinrade said.

State Senate Leader Phil Berger has also formed a committee to take a look at property tax concerns.

Less health insurance coverage in NC

Continued from page 1A

passed last year. More than 700 hospitals are now facing closure or cuts to services, and nearly 340,000 jobs are expected to be lost by the end of the year. Jawahar said that means people will have to travel farther for care and are more likely to face crowded facilities.

"We're seeing maternity wards close, we're seeing hospitals having to convert to emergency only facilities, we're seeing ERs close," she said. "So people are going to have to travel further to get their health care. They might be in worse condition by the time they get it."

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Rising optimism among small and middle market business leaders suggests growth for North Carolina

JPMORGAN CHASE

Business optimism is returning for small and midsize business leaders at the start of 2026, fueling confidence and growth plans.

The 2026 Business Leaders Outlook survey, released in January by JPMorgan Chase reveals a turnaround from last June, when economic headwinds and uncertainty about shifting policies and tariffs caused some leaders to put their business plans on hold.

Midsize companies, who often find themselves more exposed to geopolitical shifts and policy changes, experienced a significant dip in business and economic confidence in June of 2025.

As they have become more comfortable with the complexities of today's environment, we are seeing optimism rebounding in the middle market nationwide - an encouraging sign for growth, hiring, and innovation. Small businesses, meanwhile, maintained steady optimism throughout 2025, but they aren't shielded from domestic concerns. Many cited inflation and wage pressures as the top challenges for 2026 and are taking steps to ensure their businesses are prepared for what's ahead.

Overall, both small and midsize business leaders are feeling more confident to pursue growth opportunities, embrace emerging technologies and, in some cases, forge new strategic partnerships. That bodes well for entrepreneurs in North Carolina. Here are a few other key findings from the Business Leaders Outlook about trends expected to drive activity in North Carolina this year:

1) Inflation remains the top concern for small business owners. Following the 2024 U.S. presidential election, many anticipated a favorable business environment. By June 2025, however, that feeling shifted amid concerns about political dynamics, tariffs, evolving regulations and global economic headwinds.

Going into 2026, 37% of respondents cited inflation as their top concern. Rising taxes came in second at 27% and the impact of tariffs was third at 22%. Other concerns included managing cash flow, hiring and labor costs.

2) For middle market leaders, uncertainty remains an issue. Almost half (49%) of all midsize business leaders surveyed cited "economic uncertainty" as their top concern - even with an improved outlook from a few months ago. Nationally, revenue and sales growth was second at 33%, while tariffs and labor both were third at 31%. In the Southeast, labor and revenue and sales growth were the number two (at 34%) challenges facing midsize businesses, while tariffs fell at number three.

3) And tariffs are impacting businesses costs. Sixty-one percent of midsize busi-

ness leaders said tariffs have had a negative impact on the cost of doing business, as compared to 41% in the Southeast.

4) Despite challenges, leaders are bullish on their own enterprises. Though the overall outlook is mixed, 74% of small business owners and 71% of middle market companies are optimistic about their company's prospects for 2026.

5) Adaptation is the theme. For small business owners surveyed across the U.S., responding to continuing pressures is important in 2026. Building cash reserves (47%), renegotiating supplier terms (36%) and ramping up investments in marketing and technology are among the top priorities.

6) Big plans are on the horizon. A majority of midsize company leaders expect revenue growth this year, and nearly three out of five of (58%) plan to introduce new products or services in the coming year, while 53% look to expand into new domestic and/or international markets. Forty-nine percent say they're pursuing strategic partnerships or investments.

The bottom line

Rebounding optimism among U.S. business leaders at the start of the year is setting the stage for an active 2026. With business leaders looking to implement ambitious growth plans that position themselves for the future, momentum in North Carolina could be beneficial future goals for leaders looking to launch, grow or scale their business this year.

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Sports campus breaks ground on future

Continued from page 1A

Piedmont's premier tourism destinations, and CharlotteEAST will be here to shepherd that work and ensure our existing, booming small business ecosystem benefits from the opportunities this development brings."

City government committed \$30 million to construction and site improvements in 2023. The campus, a public-private initiative, will feature six full-size multipurpose athletic fields and a 100,000-square-foot indoor sports facility with courts for basketball, volleyball, and other sports. The soccer fields will take eight months to build and will

open first. The indoor facility will take 12-to-14 months. The full project is expected to deliver in 2028.

City leaders anticipate ESC will attract visitors from along the East Coast for youth athletic events and training. The campus will also headquarter health and wellness facility, walking and biking paths, academic learning center and public green space.

"When the City of Charlotte created CharlotteEAST—then the Eastland Area Organization Task Force—back in 2002, the assignment was straightforward: identify a catalytic project that could

bring sustained economic activity to this corridor," Ascuitto said. "The Eastland Sports Campus is exactly that, a long-awaited anchor designed to bring jobs, investment, and opportunity back to East Charlotte, fulfilling the vision CharlotteEAST laid out more than two decades ago."

The ESC is one of several development projects underway at the 80-acre Eastland Yards site, which includes affordable senior housing, mixed-use apartment and retail project, townhomes and single-family homes, and a park expected to open later this year.

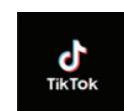
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International law needs international enforcement

By Lawrence S. Wittner

SPECIAL TO THE POST

Donald Trump's war of choice in the Middle East is but the latest indication that the system of international law which provides guidelines for the behavior of nations in world affairs is crumbling.

In the late 19th and 20th centuries, after thousands of years of violent international conflict, efforts to establish global norms for nations in connection with war, diplomacy, economic relations, and human rights accelerated. These efforts resulted in the founding of the United Nations (which develops, codifies, and enforces international law), the International Court of Justice (which settles legal disputes among nations and provides advisory opinions on legal questions), and the International Criminal Court (which investigates and tries individuals charged with the gravest crimes of concern to the international community).

Of course, the U.S. military attack on Iran flies in the face of the UN Charter, which, in Article 2, states that "all Members shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means" and that they "shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state." Furthermore, contemptuous of the United Nations, Trump has withdrawn the U.S. government from dozens of UN agencies and blocked the U.S. government's payment of billions of dollars in mandatory dues to the world organization.

Other nations are also clearly out of line with international law. The Russian government's over four years of war and occupation of Ukrainian territory are flagrant violations of the UN Charter, as attested to by a ruling of the International Court of Justice and numerous overwhelming condemnations by the UN General Assembly. The Israeli government is also a prominent transgressor, having joined the U.S. military assault on Iran and conducted an illegal occupation of conquered Palestinian territory for decades while violating international humanitarian law in its treatment of the civilian population.

Disgusted by the ability of these and other nations to act with impunity, Majed al-Ansari, Qatar's foreign policy advisor, remarked bitterly in 2025: "We are moving into a system where anybody can do whatever they like. As long as you have the ability to wreak havoc, you can do it because no one will hold you accountable."

This lack of accountability is striking. Within nations, there is usually effective enforcement of law. But, on the global level, law enforcement is weak, indeed. When the International Criminal Court announced warrants for the arrests of Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu for war crimes, a former Russian president threatened the judges with a hypersonic missile attack and the U.S. government imposed heavy sanctions on the judges. Meanwhile, Putin and Netanyahu remain at large.

Scornful of international law, some national officials openly champion a return to the traditional might-makes-right conduct of international affairs. "You can talk all you want about international niceties," sneered Stephen Miller, Trump's influential White House aide, "but we live in ... the real world ... that is governed by strength, that is governed by power. These are the iron laws of the world since the beginning of time."

Naturally, officials of nations that are militarily powerful find a power politics approach appealing, as do people with militarist and nationalist views. Trump recently announced: "I don't need international law."

Conversely, officials of less powerful nations are dismayed by the resurrection of a might-makes-right standard, as are people with peace-oriented and internationalist views. They argue that what the world needs is not the abandonment of international law, but its more effective enforcement. Furthermore, they contend that a return to great power imperialism in a world bristling with modern weapons, including nuclear weapons, is a recipe for catastrophe.

But if effective enforcement of international law is preferable to a power politics approach to world affairs, can that effective enforcement be attained?

There are certainly feasible, small-scale actions along these lines that could be taken. One is to increase the number of nations that accept compulsory jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice. Currently, only 75 nations of the 193 UN member states do so. Another is to increase the number of nations that are parties to the statute of the International Criminal Court. The current number is 125, and does not include the United States, Russia, China, and Israel.

Even the use of the veto in the UN Security Council employed most frequently by the U.S. and Russian governments could be limited to some degree. One way is to simply enforce Article 27 in the UN Charter providing that a party to a dispute shall abstain from voting on that dispute. Another championed by France and Mexico is to exclude the veto in situations of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.

Lawrence Wittner is professor of history emeritus at SUNY-Albany.

The white privilege predicament

Last week I wrote about something my father, who is white, has said for years: when many white Americans hear the phrase "white privilege," they respond by listing all the



BEN
JEALOUS

ways their lives have been hard. But if you talk about "white advantage," the conversation changes. Advantage is measurable. It doesn't

erase suffering. It simply acknowledges that race still tilts the system.

After that column ran, readers reached out asking me to elaborate.

To understand why, we have to go back to the beginning of the American story.

Early in colonial America, poor Europeans and enslaved Africans sometimes recognized that they shared a common predicament. They ran away together. They rebelled together. For a brief moment in our history, working people across color lines sometimes saw each other as allies rather than enemies.

That possibility deeply unsettled the people who held power. So over time, colonial elites built a system designed to prevent that unity. Europeans were given small advantages — permission to carry weapons, positions in militias, small measures of authority over enslaved Africans. At the same time, racial contempt was deliberately cultivated between the groups.

Racism itself became a tool of political control. The wedge worked. In many ways, it still does.

White communities across America are hurting. Factories have closed. Life expectancy for many working-class Americans has fallen. Addiction and suicide have devastated entire towns.

Acknowledging white advantage doesn't deny any of that.

It simply says this: if two people walk into the same job interview with the same résumé, race still affects the outcome. If two families try to build wealth across generations, race still shapes the odds. Social scientists have measured this for years. In a well-known study, Princeton sociologist Devah Pager sent

out identical résumés to employers.

Applicants with traditionally white-sounding names received far more callbacks than those with Black-sounding names, even when their qualifications were the same.

Suffering and advantage can exist at the same time. My father understood something many activists forget: language can open conversations, or it can shut them down.

For decades he worked with thousands of men — mostly white — helping them confront trauma and take responsibility for their actions. He saw how quickly people shut down when they feel their suffering is being dismissed.

That's the predicament. The reality of racial advantage is undeniable. But the language we use to describe it sometimes pushes away the very people who need to be part of the solution.

Rev. Jesse Jackson understood this better than anyone. His Rainbow Coalition was built on a simple insight: racism has long been the oldest political wedge in America. Divide working people by race and those in power stay se-

cure. But if working people across racial lines ever truly unite, the coalition would be powerful enough to transform the country.

The opposite of racism isn't just tolerance. It's solidarity. Our history shows both possibilities. At times we have been divided by race so completely that we could barely see our shared interests. At other moments — Reconstruction, the labor movement, the civil rights era — we have glimpsed what multi-racial democracy can look like.

That history should give us hope. Because if racism was built to divide us, it can also be dismantled.

Rev. Jesse Jackson spent a lifetime trying to show us what comes next. When working people finally refuse the wedge — when we stand together from union halls to houses of worship, from big cities to small towns — the coalition that emerges will be stronger than the politics that have kept us apart for generations.

Ben Jealous is a professor of practice at the University of Pennsylvania and former president and CEO of the NAACP.

The silent crisis in Black communities

By Jonathan L. Dotson

SPECIAL TO THE POST

March is recognized as Amyloidosis Awareness Month, yet for many in the Black community, this disease remains largely unknown — until it is too late.

Amyloidosis is a rare but serious condition caused by abnormal protein deposits that can damage vital organs such as the heart, kidneys, and nervous system. While it may be classified as "rare," its impact in the Black community is disproportionately significant, particularly in its hereditary form. Despite this, awareness remains low, diagnoses are often delayed, and too many families are left navigating this journey without the information or support they need.

This is not just a medical issue — it is a health equity issue.

Far too often, symptoms of amyloidosis are misdiagnosed or dismissed. Fatigue, swelling, shortness of breath, and nerve pain are frequently attributed to more common conditions. As a result, individuals can spend years seeking answers while the disease silently progresses. By the time a correct diagnosis is made, treatment options may be limited, and the emotional, physical, and financial toll on families can be overwhelming.

Through our work at Friendship That Gives, we have seen firsthand how this disease impacts not only individuals but entire families. Caregivers — many of whom are spouses, children, or close relatives — are often the unsung heroes in this journey. They manage appointments, medications, emotional support, and daily care, all while carrying their own mental and physical burdens.

Yet their stories are rarely told.

Caregiving in the Black community often happens quietly. There is a cultural expectation of strength and resilience, but that strength can sometimes come at the cost of silence. Many caregivers do not seek help, do not have access to resources, and do not feel seen. This lack of visibility contributes to burnout, stress, and mental health challenges that ripple throughout families and communities.

We must change that narrative.

Awareness is the first step. We must begin having open and honest conversations about amyloidosis — what it is, who it affects, and why early detection matters. Families should feel empowered to ask questions,

seek second opinions, and advocate for comprehensive testing when symptoms persist without clear answers.

Healthcare providers must also be part of this conversation. Cultural competency, improved diagnostic training, and increased awareness of how diseases like amyloidosis present in Black patients are critical to closing the gap in care.

But awareness alone is not enough.

We must also build systems of support.

At Friendship That Gives, our Fashionably Healthy

Empowerment Series — Community Conversations was created to meet this very need. We are bringing together medical professionals, caregivers, patients, and community leaders to create safe spaces for education, dialogue, and connection. These conversations are designed to break the silence, provide resources, and remind individuals and families that they are not alone.

Because no one should have to navigate a life-altering diagnosis in isolation.

This work also extends

beyond physical health. The emotional and mental health impact of chronic illness — both for patients and caregivers — cannot be ignored. Anxiety, depression, and stress are often part of the journey, yet mental health remains stigmatized in many communities of color. Addressing amyloidosis must include addressing the whole person—mind, body, and spirit.

Because awareness can save lives — and in our community, it must.

Jonathan L. Dotson is executive director of Friendship That Gives.

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Sports

THURSDAY, MARCH 12, 2026



CHARLES WATKINS | THE CHARLOTTE POST

The Carolina Panthers have a need for pass rushers who can lift a defense that's been at the bottom of the NFL in sacks the last three seasons. The Panthers have potential contributors in second-year players like Princely Umanmiele (3) and Nic Scorton.

Panthers eye help in free agency

From pass rushers to offensive line reinforcements, Carolina has plenty to weigh at start of league year

By Jeff Hawkins

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

The 2026 Carolina Panthers are open for business.

General manager Dan Morgan is reaching out to free agents with the start of the NFL's league season on March 11. Can the rebuilding Panthers, who claimed the NFC South title and ended a seven-season playoff drought despite an 8-9 record, continue to improve on the 2025 turnaround?

Morgan reportedly is evaluating several moves to reshape the roster before the Panthers kick off with their first Pro

going to be reckless, but we are going to attack our needs."

Adding defensive playmakers tops Morgan's to-do list with free agency and the draft festivities April 24-26 in Green Bay.

The NFL announced Feb. 27 that teams' salary cap will be adjusted to approximately \$301.2 million, an increase of \$22 million. The Panthers rank No. 23 with \$7.315 million in cap space, according to Sportrac.com.

Morgan reportedly is evaluating several moves to reshape the roster before the Panthers kick off with their first Pro

Football Hall of Fame appearance since 1995, their inaugural season.

Among the transactions he could make to create additional financial flexibility, Morgan could cut or trade defensive lineman A'Shawn Robinson, who has a 2026 cap hit of \$12.5 million, edge Patrick Jones II (\$10.1 million), tight end Tommy Tremble (\$8 million) and quarterback Andy Dalton (\$5.8 million).

Despite the urgency to remain competitive, Morgan declared: "We are going to remain patient."

Depending on the Panthers' eventual

budget, Morgan helped solidify the offense by committing to a fifth year for quarterback Bryce Young, announcing at the scouting combine last month that coach Dave Canales handed the play-calling duties to offensive coordinator Brad Idzik and activating wide receiver Jalen Coker's exclusive rights tender.

Here are defensive positions Morgan likely will target:

Outside linebacker/edge

There is a common thread to Morgan's agenda: reinforcing the front

Please see **PANTHERS** | 6A

Health still a virtue as the Hornets move forward

By Cameron Williams

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Healthy Hornets are a threat, no question about it.

Charlotte, 33-33 going into Wednesday's game at Sacramento, is playing break-even basketball for the first time since four games into the season. Coach Charles Lee applauded their fight, the long road to this point, and building upon it.

"It's a testament to the hard work these guys are putting in every day," he said after a 117-90 win against Dallas on March 3. "I think we're seeing the fruits of our labor and we're getting better and better in a lot of different areas. ... I'm really proud of the growth we're making. I think we're getting a lot of contributions from a lot of guys at different moments in the game, and it's helping us a ton."

The Hornets, who are 10th in the Eastern Conference standings, are getting contributions from their starters, but bench depth has also been critical in their climb.

Please see **HEALTH** | 6A



Lee



NBAE

Miles Bridges (0) of the Charlotte Hornets goes up for the rebound during the game against the Phoenix Suns on March 8, 2026 at PHX Arena in Phoenix, Arizona.

CIAA delivered thrilling tourney

What a CIAA tournament. It hadn't been this exciting since its early years in Charlotte. Yes, the favorites won but the drama that got them there was well worth the price of admission, or paying to watch on ESPN+.

Our College Corner wrote that the "Must See TV" championship matchups were Fayetteville State vs. Winston-Salem State on the women's side, and Bluefield State vs. Fayetteville State on the men's. And they delivered.



BONITTA BEST

The Rams (26-3) were the story of the tournament. Some of us - OK, just me - thought maybe the pressure of having never won a tournament title and the hype of being the No. 1 seed would overwhelm the ladies. The longer WSSU stayed in the tourney the hotter the fire.

Instead, there never was any doubt.

The Rams defeated their three opponents by an average of 25 points, including a 17-point blowout over the Broncos in the final.

WSSU won its first championship under a first-year head coach who caused as much sensation for looking gorgeous as she did for coaching. (Hey, when you've got it, you've got it.)

The Rams got a parade, an Instagram congratulatory message from the mayor and a major shoutout from alumnus Steven A. Smith on "First Take." Love him or hate him, it's the best free recruiting tool money doesn't have to buy.

It was satisfying to see the hype around the women because, let's face it, they still have to fight to earn respect.

For example, the women's championship game was livestreamed on ESPN+, while

Please see **CIAA** | 6A

Charlotte Latin grad stands out for USWNT

By Steve Goldberg

FOR THE CHARLOTTE POST

Argentina wasn't the biggest test for the United States Women's National Team in the She Believes Cup, but the Americans still had to dominate.

That U.S. coach Emma Hayes went again with Claudia Dickey between the posts shows her trust in the Charlotte Latin graduate who now plays for the NWSL Seattle Reign. The U.S. downed Argentina 2-0.

Having only played in friendly matches earlier, it was the first tournament start for Dickey, who was backed up by Phallon Tullis-

Joyce, the Manchester United keeper who previously started ahead of Dickey in Seattle.

In her first eight USWNT starts, Dickey, 26, earned seven clean sheets. She started the final four matches of 2025 before Mandy McGlynn got the nod to start 2026. Goalkeeper is one of several that have been in flux as veterans have retired, and Hayes has been expansive in growing the pool of national team players.

Over her first 32 matches in charge, Hayes has given 32 players their first caps.

Historically, four women have dominated the position, including Brianna Scurry, who

earned 175 caps from 1994 to 2008; Hope Solo (202 caps from 2000 to 2016); and Alyssa Naeyer, 115 caps from 2014 to 2024. The next highest is the 54 appearances made by Nicole Barnhart between 2004 and 2013.

Asked if Dickey or any of the athletes challenging for the starting spot might attain that dominance in the position, Hayes said, "That's a great question, which of course I don't have the answer to. But what I do know is I've been really happy with Claudia Dickey and Mandy McGlynn from the last camp. I think with Phallon, we didn't get the chance

Please see **DICKEY** | 6A

Game changers share interests in lifting Charlotte softball

By Cameron Williams

cameron.williams@thecharlottepost.com

Taylor Jones and Jaylah Jarrell are leaving their impact on a sport where Black athletes aren't highly visible.

The sophomores are the only African Americans on the Charlotte 49ers softball roster, and they are making an impression with a program looking to build its resumé in the American Conference.

"It is amazing to have both Taylor and Jaylah on our team," Charlotte (13-12) coach Courtney Breault said. "I think that they are great people on and off the field, but just to see them come out and really compete, they

both have a great presence about them."

Jarrell is second among 49ers in batting average (.400) and total RBIs (17). Jarrell's batting average is up from her freshman season where she hit .329 in 85 at-bats to earn American co-freshman of the year.

"Jaylah, she's a great personality," Breault said. "She's fun. She keeps everybody light and laughing, and you need that on the team. And ever since, she kind of solidified herself in the lineup last year, and this year, she's just a game changer for us. She has the ability to make the most amazing plays. She's clutch, and just somebody that's infectious to be around."

Jones, a right-handed pitcher, leads Charlotte in innings pitched with 58.1. She has a 5-6 record but leads the 49ers in starts with 13 as of March 10. Jones spent her first season at Queens, where she made 29 appearances in the circle.

"Taylor is a little bit more stoic," Breault said, "but she has a real presence that the girls can get behind and she wants the ball, she wants the moment. And it's been great to see her go and do the most and do the best with her opportunities. Obviously, we've seen her have some huge wins and huge moments too. [She has] thrown complete games, I think,

Please see **SHARED** | 6A



TROY HULL | THE CHARLOTTE POST

Rico Dowdle (5), who ran for more than 1,000 yards in 2025 with the Carolina Panthers on a one-year deal, is an unrestricted free agent and not likely to return.

Panthers eye immediate impact in free agency

Continued from page 5A

seven, spearheaded by the franchise's long-suffering pressure rate. The Panthers ranked No. 30 in sacks last season with 30. In 2024, they were 29th with 32 and last in '23 with 27.

Free agent D.J. Wonnum, who posted 7.5 sacks over the past two seasons following a nagging quad injury, is not expected to return and Morgan has not publicly tipped his hand regarding a free-agent pursuit of former Miami Dolphins edge Bradley Chubb.

Morgan invested a second-round draft pick (Nic Scourton) and a third rounder (Princely Umanmielen) last year. Scourton emerged during the second half, producing five sacks and could be a future cornerstone. Umanmielen remains a work in progress.

Trey Hendrickson may be the biggest name on the edge market, but the former Cincinnati Bengals star likely has already priced himself out of the Panthers' short-term plans. Could Morgan's attention shift to K'Lavon Chaisson? The former first-round pick had a breakout season with New England last season and could emerge as a solid mid-level signing for the pressure-needy Panthers.

Inside linebacker

This is where the Panthers lack playmaking skill. Christian Rozeboom, 29, held down the starting job last season after Josey Jewel unexpectedly retired during the summer. The 29-year-old free agent recorded a team-high 122 tackles last season but often appeared exposed in pass coverage.

For defensive coordinator Ejiro Evero's 3-4 defense to click, inside linebackers need to be versatile. Outside of 2024 draft pick Trevin Wallace, who missed five starts last season, positional depth could develop via free agency and the draft.

Quay Walker entered free agency

after the Green Bay Packers declined the fifth season on his rookie deal. Walker, a defensive captain in 2025, posted four straight 100-plus-tackle seasons. Walker, a defensive captain in 2025, could serve as a long-term fix, along with former Jacksonville Jaguars standout Devin Lloyd.

Veteran Bobby Wagner, the 2025 Walter Payton Man of the Year, remains available and could help Canales reinforce a positive locker-room culture.

Offensive line

Among the Panthers' 17 free agents, the top-heavy group features center Cade Mays and running back Rico Dowdle. Both are expected to attract significant interest throughout the league. Mays could be a long-shot candidate to return, but Dowdle seeks a primary role and would rather not share time with Chuba Hubbard again.

As left tackle Ikem Ekwonu recovers from the ruptured patellar tendon injury he suffered during the first quarter of the wild-card game loss to the Los Angeles Rams last January, Morgan could view the return of swing tackle Yosh Nijman as a vital link. The 30-year-old veteran is a strong run blocker and inconsistent pass protector. With a 2025 cap hit of \$3.4 million, Nijman could prove to be a cost-effective, short-term solution.

During the scouting combine, Carolina was linked to Alabama tackle Kady Proctor, who could be in play with the 19th draft pick.

"I see even bigger things moving forward to where this is going to be a consistent thing and not just a flash in the pan," Morgan said. "Like, we're expecting to win now. We're not coming into a season unsure; we feel like we know where we are."

"We feel like we know who we are. And we're just ready to get to work and we have to earn everything."

Dickey stands out for USWNT

Continued from page 5A

to select her because she was injured back in the back end of November, December. So I'm looking forward to having Pallon back with the group, and for now I'm happy with this group.

"I think, in terms of our game model and what we're looking to do, these players fit really well with that. And do I think those days of 100 caps will be there? I don't know. But I do think in general, are you going to see any player getting like 150 caps or plus, I think those days are gone in world football."

Lindsay Heaps, who scored the first goal against Argentina, earned her 171st cap. Dickey wasn't the only North Carolina

alumna on the roster for the She Believes Cup. Maddie Dahlien played for the Tar Heels from 2022-24.

Dahlien, who lined up at outside left back, earned her first start for the United States in her second camp and third cap. She debuted on Jan. 24 in a 6-0 win over Paraguay.

Allie Sentnor scored 21 goals in 48 games at North Carolina over the 2022 and 2023 seasons. She has become a regular pick for Hayes and has scored six goals in 16 matches for the senior national team since 2024.

A second-half substitute, Sentnor scored in the 66th minute, but it was called back for an offside violation.

Health a virtue as Hornets aim for postseason berth

Continued from page 5A

"The bench, I actually thought the whole team, at moments, had really good spurts," Lee said after the Dallas game. "I thought Brandon [Miller] had a really good first quarter, I thought [La]Melo [Ball] kept us steady a lot of times and was able to execute some lobs. I think Grant [Williams] came in, Josh [Green] came in, gave us really big minutes. Sion [James] gave us really big minutes, I think Ryan [Kalkbrenner] was much better in his second stint. As a team, we really had a lot of really good moments. ...

"To hold a team under 100 again, to win every quarter, that's a testament to our guys and the consistency they showed with their competitive spirit."

Said Miller of Charlotte, which has held opponents under 100 points 16 times this season: "Every game is not going to be an offensive game, so it's about finding ways

to affect the game [defensively], and of course, everybody having that two-way mindset goes a long way. Whether it's us helping the helpers, a shift, a weakside block, or whatever it is, it's always about being there for each other."

Williams said when he was traded to Charlotte, talks about changing the culture were at the forefront. He's excited about the trajectory they're on.

"Charlotte has always been a gold mine, and I think that the Hornets organization is the same thing," Williams said. "We have a lot of people who believe in us. It's a premier organization that we are trying to establish, and not just across the Charlotte area in North Carolina, it's South Carolina, Virginia and all the fans around us and across the country or across the world. So [it's a] super exciting direction that we're headed and to be a part of it is definitely a blessing."



CHARLOTTE ATHLETICS

Taylor Jones, a sophomore pitcher at Charlotte, leads the 49ers in innings pitched with 58.1.

Shared interests in lifting 49ers softball

Continued from page 5A

against Michigan State and Virginia Tech and threw really well against Clemson. She has the ability to be one of the best pitchers in the American and to shut down any team. It doesn't matter who they are. It's awesome to see."

According to data compiled by opendorse.com, a collegiate athlete marketing and monetization platform, NCAA softball is predominantly white with Black players historically representing 4-6%. Jarrell said she has personally never felt treated differently but

wants girls that look like her to chase their softball dreams if they want to play.

"It feels really good to have people look up to me," Jarrell said, "and for me, that is something I take seriously. I do want people to be able to look up to me and chase their dreams because they see what I am able to do."

Jarrell attributes her growth from her freshman year to a lot of practice, but

also a check in mindset.

"I have to tell myself every now and then 'it's OK, I know I am going to make errors, it happens,'" she said. "But it isn't about making the mistakes, but how you come back from an error. I had a rough first couple of weeks and it was really hard for me. So, I had to regroup and find my way back to where I was and when I did, things clicked again."

Jones has had success from the start with her new team, which means a lot to her.

"As an African American pitcher, there's not many of us out there," she said. "So, for me I just want to show young kids like me that it is possible if you put in the work. I feel like it is two times harder just to get seen, but it is possible to compete at this level being an African American."

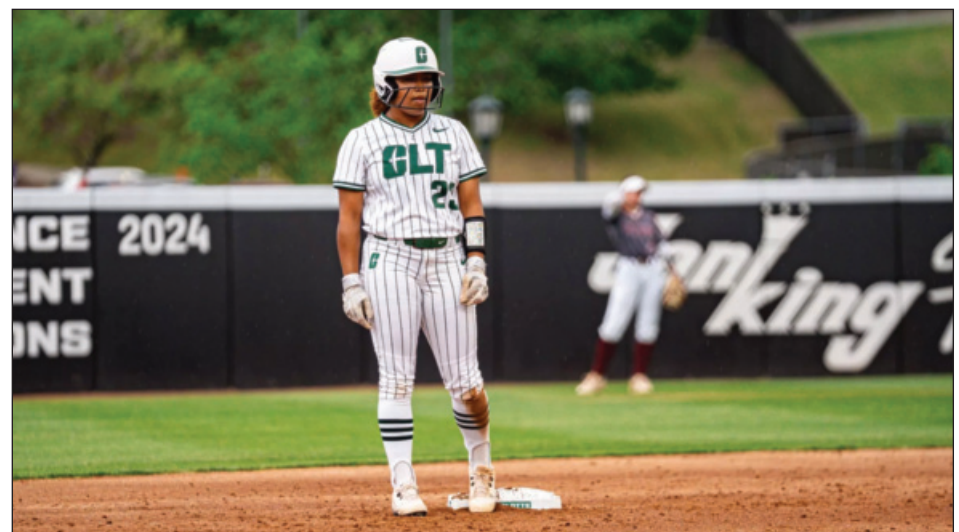
Jones said the transition to Charlotte has been smooth.

"One thing about Charlotte was the access they had to different things," she

said. "They also have a lot of community support and also just a more winning team helped a lot. The team chemistry, it is something they are very big on here and our team is very close-knit. I was really looking for that."

The 49ers got off to a hot start with wins against No. 14 Virginia Tech, No. 23 Clemson and Michigan State. While Charlotte has cooled since, Breault is confident they will get it turned around, with Jarrell and Jones leading the way.

"I think both of them lead by example," Breault said. "I think what they've done is they've put their head down, and they've worked really hard and they want to keep getting better and better, and they don't get the highs or the lows. They just stay really steady and keep continuing to be themselves and play with no fear, so that's what we want. We know that they're going to be big parts of what we do going forward, and we're just excited to continue that ride."



CHARLOTTE ATHLETICS

Sophomore Jaylah Jarrell second among 49ers in batting average and runs batted in.

CIAA delivered tourney thrills

Continued from page 5A

the men's was broadcast live on ESPN. The "U" may have fewer viewers than ESPN and ESPN2, but more than ESPN+.

The road begins again. The Rams and Broncos are ranked No. 3 and No. 5, respectively, and assured of a postseason spot. Will WSSU be content with just winning the CIAA, as so many teams have done in the past? Or will the Rams see what Shaw's women saw in 2012 - that a national championship is not out of reach.

You look familiar

Bowie State men's basketball coach Darrell Brooks announced his retirement after the season, and with the heartbreaking loss of vice president of athletics Clyde Doughty Jr., the Bulldogs were a sentimental favorite in the tourney.

But we all knew it had to come down to Fayetteville vs. Bluefield, didn't we? How

could it not.

Last year, FSU coach Devin Hoehn was at BSU, and BSU coach Lou D'Alessio was at FSU. Then, several players and coaches on both sides switched with their coach. How much better could it get?

A championship game that went down to the final seconds and solidified a newfound rivalry for the future.

And just like the women's side, the CIAA will get two teams in the postseason: the Broncos at No. 4 and Virginia Union, which dropped to No. 7 after losing two straight games to close the season - to rival Virginia State on the road and a determined Johnson C. Smith in the tournament.

The conference still has the best two representatives to try to end its drought in the Atlantic Regional.

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