



## SBI concludes with 2 arrests

### Nearly two year investigation finds no widespread crime

BY CATHARIN SHEPARD  
Staff writer

After nearly two years, the State Bureau of Investigation has wrapped up its probe into alleged payroll fraud in Hoke County, and arrested two former public employees on more than 50 felony charges each. Based on information presented from a nearly 40,000-page SBI report, a Hoke County grand jury last Wednesday indicted former Hoke County Sheriff's Office deputy Dedrick Lapeze Graham, 48, of the 300 block of Doc Brown Road and former Hoke County Human Resources

director Latonya Michele Benjamin, 40, of the 400 block of North Wright Street on 51 counts each of obtaining property by false pretenses. Benjamin was additionally charged with 51 counts of accessing a government computer to defraud. Graham and Benjamin surrendered to SBI agents Friday morning, according to Hoke County District Attorney Kristy Newton's office. While dozens of other people fell under scrutiny, and rumors ran rampant through the community during the investigation, ultimately the SBI found no evidence of widespread payroll fraud at the sheriff's office

or Hoke County government, the district attorney said Friday in a two-page statement about the probe. "There is no evidence to suggest that any other individuals engaged in criminal conduct related to this investigation," Newton concluded. According to the arrest report, Graham and Benjamin allegedly conspired between October 2013 and January 2016 to alter Graham's overtime pay. Officials did not reveal how much money the two were accused of taking. Graham was held under a \$150,000 secured bond and (See INVESTIGATION, page 6)



A Raeford Police officer guards the entrance to the Hoke office building in February 2017. (File photo)




Carthens

### School bus driver credited after accident

BY CATHARIN SHEPARD  
Staff writer

A school bus accident last month could have been worse if not for the actions of driver Helen Carthens, Hoke County Schools officials said last week. Hoke County Schools Bus 43 was crossing Old Maxton Road at Walter Gibson Road when another driver allegedly failed to stop at a stop sign and crashed into the side of the bus at 55 miles an hour, according to a report filed by the (See BUS DRIVER, page 5)

**Phases of the Oreo**  
Angel Marquez and Harper Branam (left), and Samari Parker (right) are among 6th graders at West Hoke Middle School learning about the phases of the moon by recreating them using Oreos. The students exercised great restraint during the project in the school's library—they managed to wait until the end to eat some 400 cookies. (Ken MacDonald photos)

## When child said family wouldn't eat that weekend, teacher stepped in



Jackson, second from left, with Principal Kim Gray, left, and Partners in Education members Sharon Burney, Della Maynor and Linda Revels. (Contributed photo)

### Her 'I Need Box' is one of 6 projects funded by Partners in Education

BY CATHARIN SHEPARD  
Staff writer

Don Steed Elementary ESL teacher Donna Jackson said she will never forget the moment when one of her young students announced that his family wouldn't have food to eat that weekend. "How do you answer that? Of course I wanted to find out more. It didn't even register with me, but it had started raining and he immedi-

ately thought, if it's raining, my mom and dad can't rake pine straw, which equates to no money," Jackson said. Jackson went to Food Lion to buy a gift card with her own money to help, and said she knows many other teachers who have done the same thing. That was just one of many such situations she's seen. "In the five years I've been in this position...I already knew how many needs there were for some students, but in this position I've really, really

seen the needs even more," she said. Some struggle without heating at home in the winter, or don't have shoes that fit them. Those needs were the inspiration for her project, the "I Need..." Box. Jackson and five other teachers each received \$500 mini-grants last week from the Hoke County Partners in Education to help them pursue projects in their classrooms. The nonprofit group holds an annual (See MINIGRANTS, page 6)



## Count will gather data on homeless in Hoke County

The Hoke County Open Door Soup Kitchen will sponsor the 2019 state-wide Point-In-Time Count that surveys how many people in Hoke County, and across the state, are homeless. The count will take place January 31, 2019. The project is an annual mission conducted by the N.C. Coalition To End Homelessness. The intent is to gather up-to-date information about

the homeless population in North Carolina. The data includes the total number of homeless people identified in the county, their age ranges, family/marital status and more. Volunteers will gather together January 31 to physically canvass the entire county, locating and surveying those in need of shelter. The count lasts for 24 hours and is conducted in

shifts. The organization also partners with local government and community agencies to learn about the homeless people they serve. The Open Door Soup Kitchen is on a mission to aid the local hungry and homeless population, the organization said in a press release this week. "If you or someone you know is (See HOMELESS, page 9)

### Band to perform at N.C. State

The Mighty Marching Bucks will perform live on television at an upcoming N.C. State women's basketball game, according to Hoke High band director DeVon Pickett. (See BAND, page 6)

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