

CANDIDATE FORUM

Both Sheriff Candidates Support Satellite Office In Calabash

BY ERIC CARLSON

Both men seeking the county's top law enforcement post told voters last week that they would support efforts to locate a satellite sheriff's department office in the Calabash area.

The two sheriff's candidates, Deputy Lt. Ronald Hewett and businessman James Brown, also said they would apply for money through a state program aimed at putting more deputies on the road to target drunk drivers.

Brown and Hewett were among the 14 local party nominees who spoke at a candidates forum at the

Calabash fire hall Wednesday night. About 40 people attended the event, organized by the town's community service committee.

Robert Anderson, Republican candidate for U.S. Congress, also attended. He was the only nominee for local office who was not given an opportunity to address the gathering.

County Chairman Don Warren was the sole incumbent commissioner to show up for the town's first "Meet the Candidates Night." He was joined by challengers Douglas Simmons, Alfonza Roach, Leslie Collier and Bill Sue.

School board member Yvonne Bright, the only incumbent to be nominated for re-election, attended the forum along with challengers Bud Thorsen, Rozell Hewett, Pat Brown, Clara Carter, Beth Osiek and Glenda Browning.

While the local crowd applauded the commitment of both sheriff's candidates to a more visible law enforcement presence in southwestern Brunswick County, much of the evening's comments revolved around the ongoing funding conflict between the school board and county commissioners.

Warren defended the county's decision to appeal a

jury's recent decision to increase board of education by nearly \$5 million. He noted that current case law gives little guidance about what priority a county should place on school funding compared with other spending needs. He said the question needs to be clarified by the N.C. Court of Appeals.

He also insisted that the outgoing school board should not be the one to decide how to allocate the additional money awarded by the courts. Warren suggested that the current board of education has misplaced its priorities.

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Perfect Barrels

Mark Saunders makes a bottom turn on a nicely formed wave near his home on Holden Beach. A passing low pressure system and offshore winds brought long, tubing waves to Brunswick Islands beaches this week.

STAFF PHOTO BY ERIC CARLSON

BETTER ACCOUNTABILITY?

Brunswick Will Ask State To Let Schools Boards Have Own Tax

BY ERIC CARLSON

Frustrated by what they call a lack of "accountability" in school spending, the Brunswick County Commissioners will ask legislators for changes in state law to require that boards of education raise their own taxes.

In a unanimous vote Monday night, the county board adopted a resolution authorizing Chairman Don Warren to seek support from the N.C. Association of County Commissioners for the idea of splitting school and county funding into two separate budgets.

The resolution asks the association to lobby state lawmakers for a change in the way schools currently are funded through appropriations by county commissioners.

Warren recently was named to the association's board of directors. He plans to present the proposal at the group's next meeting Oct. 15.

The move came after it was announced that the Brunswick County School Board, citing a scheduling conflict, declined to meet with the commissioners and representatives of the state auditor's office to discuss a state audit of school spending.

Both boards have tentatively agreed to an outside study of school performance and budgeting. In a Sept. 26 letter, State Auditor Ralph Campbell Jr. asked representatives of the two boards to meet "for one and a half to two hours" on Oct. 5 with Deputy State Auditor James Benson and others to discuss details of how the audit would be conducted.

Copies of Campbell's letter were addressed to Warren, school board Chairman Donna Baxter, Superintendent Ralph Johnston and County manager Wyman Yelton, Warren said.

"For the record, we were ready to meet with them," Warren said Monday night. "But the school board did not have an hour and a half to two hours to meet with us that day."

Yelton told the commissioners that state officials have assured him that Brunswick County will be "first on the list" of school systems targeted for performance audits once the auditor's office completes its assignments for the N.C. General Assembly. He estimated that the audit could be performed "shortly after Jan. 1."

Yelton said the state asked to have a preliminary meeting with school and county officials this month to plan the audit. However, he said "the schools have a conflict and they need a different date."

The county schools are currently operating under a court ordered level of funding equal to the amount they spent in 1993-94, pending the outcome of a civil suit filed against the commissioners by the board of education. In August, a jury awarded the schools nearly \$5 million more than the county appropriated in its 1994-95 budget. The county has appealed the decision and plans a 10-cent property tax hike to cover the additional expense.

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THREE YEARS LATER

Keeler Finally Leads Detectives To His Murdered Wife's Grave

BY ERIC CARLSON

Residents of the Ash community have driven past the spot hundreds of times in the past three years, little suspecting that the body of Rhonda Diane Keeler lay buried in a shallow grave just a stone's throw from the pavement.

One after another Wednesday morning (Sept. 28), they pulled over to glance into the woods where a strip of yellow crime scene tape was tied around a rectangle of saplings just off Simmons Road.

Some followed the fresh tire tracks leading back to the root-lined hole where, a few hours earlier, their former neighbor Timothy James Keeler, 34, showed Brunswick County Sheriff's detectives where his young wife was buried.

"He didn't say a word about what happened. He just showed us where it was," said Assistant District Attorney Rick Green, who accompanied investigators to the grave site.

Mrs. Keeler's nude body was found wrapped in plastic and burlap and buried under about a foot of dirt in a wooded area about a tenth of a mile from N.C. 130, Sheriff John Carr Davis said Wednesday. She was tentatively identified by a metal rod known to have been inserted in her leg.

An autopsy later determined that Mrs. Keeler, 29, died of a bullet wound to the head, probably from a .22-caliber weapon, said Detective Lt. Donnell Marlowe, who headed the original investigation into her disappearance.

Mrs. Keeler was last seen Aug. 17, 1991. At the time, neighbors told detectives that they heard screams and



CRIME SCENE tape outlines the shallow grave in Ash where Brunswick County Sheriff's detectives found the body of 29-year-old Rhonda Diane Keeler last week. Her husband Timothy James Keeler, 34, (left) led investigators to the wooded area beside Simmons Road where he allegedly buried her three years ago.

gunshots coming from the Keeler home that night. They also said the couple had ongoing marital problems.

When originally questioned, Keeler told investigators



CRIME SCENE PHOTO BY ERIC CARLSON

that his wife wandered off while the two were drinking at "biker bar" in Charlotte. As the police investigation began to focus on Keeler, he told detectives he would be

willing to take a lie detector test.

Keeler disappeared from Brunswick County the day before the polygraph test was scheduled to be administered. He was charged with murder a few days later.

Many of those who stopped at the grave site last week remembered the massive search that ensued when a piece of Rhonda Keeler's finger and some of her hair were found buried behind the couple's home on Milligan Road shortly after Keeler left the area.

Helicopters, airplanes, boats, body-sniffing dogs and scores of volunteers from the Ash community, including local fire and rescue squads, combed the area without success.

"We probably searched within 15 feet of where the body was eventually found," Sheriff Davis said Wednesday.

Investigators believe that after killing his wife, Keeler initially buried her in a swampy area about 300 yards from their home. When police began to close in on him, Keeler is thought to have dug up the body and moved it to its final resting place, about three miles away.

Detectives feel that the hair and finger segment were probably severed and left behind at the first grave site when Keeler uprooted the body.

The sheriff would not say why, after more than three years, Keeler suddenly decided to reveal the whereabouts of his dead wife. He was captured outside Charlotte last month when a car in which he was a passenger was stopped by police conducting a routine DWI investigation.

"He hasn't told us anything except where she was," Davis said Wednesday. "He just decided yesterday that he would show us the spot this morning."

Lt. Marlowe said detectives are unsure about Keeler's

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ANNUAL MEETING SATURDAY

BEMC Drops Membership Fee, But Not Its 42,000 Members

BY SUSAN USHER

Brunswick Electric Membership Corp., which holds its annual meeting Saturday, isn't doing away with its membership, but it has done away with its membership fee.

Until recently, anyone who signed up for electrical service paid not only a connection fee, but a \$5 membership fee as well, and signed a membership card. The membership fees were held, and eventually returned to members.

No more. Two months ago, BEMC directors changed co-op bylaws to eliminate the \$5 one-time membership fee.

That doesn't mean that BEMC is trying to

buy out memberships, as one rumor circulating through the community suggests, said General Manager David Batten. "The board of directors can't legally offer stock or sell out. Only the membership can."

Batten said the decision to drop the \$5 fee accomplished several benefits: it immediately saves each new member \$5, and it saves the co-op the administrative time and cost involved in receiving, tracking and refunding membership fees. New member-customers will continue to sign a membership card and to pay a connection fee.

BEMC's annual membership meeting will

be held Saturday at the Odell Williamson Auditorium at Brunswick Community College on U.S. 17 north of Supply.

Registration begins at 8 a.m., along with activities such as a members' arts and crafts fair and entertainment. The business meeting starts at 10:30 a.m., and will be followed by the awarding of about 50 door prizes.

During the business meeting members will hear operating and financial reports and elect directors from four districts. For the first time in recent years, the incumbents are unopposed: Hubert K. Brittain, District 7; Bryan R. Smith, District 9; Calvin Duncan, District 10; and

Monroe Enzor, District 11. Enzor was appointed to the board this past year following the resignation of Leroy Williamson.

This will be the second annual meeting at which members will not be allowed to nominate candidates from the floor. A slate of candidates was presented last month by the nominating committee and members could have nominated additional candidates by petition.

Organized in 1939, BEMC has more than 42,000 members and more than 50,000 service connections in Brunswick and Columbus counties and parts of Bladen and Robeson counties.

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