

The News-Journal

If it happened, it's news to us

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Hoke's top stories
are on the web
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This week



Relay For Life
surpasses goal
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Emma Mims is
friend to
community
page 2A

Chamber banquet
plans finalized
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Around Town



By SAM C. MORRIS
Contributing Editor

It is almost impossible to predict the weather these days. A couple of days the temperature will be in the 90s and then we go back to the 70s. Last week the weather reporters said we would get rain. My gauge registered three-hundredths of an inch. In Fayetteville and Robeson County there was a downpour. What is causing the clouds to go around Raeford and Hoke County? It was hot over the weekend, but a cold front is coming through Monday night.

The forecast for the remainder of the week, Wednesday through Saturday, calls for the high Wednesday to be in the 70s and the low in the 50s. Thursday the high will be in the 80s and the low in the 50s. Friday and Saturday the highs will be in the 80s and the lows in the 60s. There is no rain in the forecast.

I don't agree with Barbara Bush, former first lady, about Mother's Day. I think it is wonderful to remember her. It has been many years since I wore a red flower on Mother's Day, but it is good to see the smile on my wife's face when she opens her cards, presents or flowers. But last Friday the smile left her face after the florist delivered some baskets to the house.

The story goes; a knock came on the den door and there was a man with two baskets. (See AROUND, page 7A)

Schools cut to cope with state crisis

Employees at risk in coming year

By VICTORIANA SUMMERS
Staff writer

Because of the "graveness" of \$1.5 billion state shortfall, the N.C. Department of Public Instruction notified concerned Hoke School officials last Monday night of a statewide freeze on educa-

tional funding until July 1. An executive order issued by Gov. Mike Easley authorized State School Superintendent Mike Ward to restrict all "non-instructional" spending on supplies and personnel positions not directly related to classroom education, a May 6 memorandum stated. "As you are aware, North Carolina's

revenue collections through April have been very disappointing," said Brad Sneed, representative from DPI. "It is apparent that additional expenditure restrictions are necessary to increase Local Education Agency reversions.

"Our challenge is great, and we know we can rely on you and your staff to help us through these most difficult times." An emergency meeting was called by

Hoke school administrators last Tuesday, which was attended by Phillip J. Kirk, chairman of the State Board of Education. Interim School Superintendent Allen Strickland said the crisis is serious, and massive cuts may be necessary in next year's budget as the new school year approaches.

"It would be a terrible thing if we have (See SCHOOLS CUT BACK, page 6A)

Rockfish mother, child drown in W. Virginia

Community, friends, family mourn loss

By PAT ALLEN WILSON
Editor

"Only God knows," said Carl Mounts, but he and other members of Angie Darnell's family believe she may have lost her life because she refused to let go of her baby daughter as raging waters swirled around them.

Rockfish residents Angelia Dawn Walls Darnell, 28, and Logan Paige Darnell, 14 months, died in West Virginia when flood waters swept their car off a roadway.

"She'd have got out — probably — if she hadn't held on to the baby," Mounts said.

Angie left Rockfish at about 1 p.m. Thursday, May 2 with her daughter to drive to her mother's home in West Virginia. However, she evidently changed her mind about her destination and took another route leading to husband Danny's parents' house. Those who know her said she was anxious to see her three-year-old son Hunter, who was with his father at her in-laws.

The Darnells had been residents of Rockfish for several years. Danny had just taken a construction job in their native West Virginia and had Hunter with him. Angie and Logan were to move back to West Virginia soon; in fact, she had already packed their belongings for the move. This (See MOURNED, page 10A)



Angie Darnell with daughter Logan



Sandra Holcomb with baby Logan's crib at Rockfish Pre-school that they placed in the foyer as a memorial.

Spearman prepares for long battle as state appeals ruling in Hoke education lawsuit

By VICTORIANA SUMMERS
Staff writer



Robert Spearman

The N.C. Attorney General's Office has filed a notice of the state's intention to appeal the verdict in the lawsuit Hoke and other counties filed over unequal education funding. In the recent decision of Superior Court Judge Howard Manning, Hoke was victorious in its arguments that "at-risk students" from disadvantaged counties such as Hoke were not receiving the same "sound, basic" education as those in wealthier counties.

Balanced on the scales of justice is equality in education for North Carolina children, said Bob Spearman, lead attorney for Hoke and four other counties who filed the low wealth lawsuit in 1994.

"The state calculated at one point it would take \$200 million to fully fund the low wealth formula for all the counties in North Carolina on an annual basis," Spearman said. "When the suit first started, the state was only funding about \$15 million per year.

During the course of our litigation, that figure increased to about \$90 million per year, but it is still far short of what it should be budgeted."

Manning ordered the state to take immediate action to improve the education of at-risk students. He said the reform was necessary because the state had failed to prove it provided all children with a "sound basic" education as required by the N.C. Constitution. Now the state seeks to reverse his rulings that called for smaller classroom sizes, quality, pre-kindergarten programs for low-income children who would otherwise be at risk of failure when they start school, and hiring of more certified teachers for all children.

Gov. Mike Easley and Attorney General Roy Cooper said the state would not order a stay on Manning's court rulings. The state will cooperate with Manning's order that the state file written reports every 90 days to advise him of its progress in improving educational opportunities for disadvantaged students.

Spearman said he will not give up the legal fight, remembering how former Hoke School Superintendent Mitch Tyler died just prior to the winning verdict being announced.

"It was a great pleasure to work with Mitch Tyler," Spearman said. "He was a wonderful, wonderful man and an integral part of the success of this lawsuit. His death was terribly tragic.

"If he had lived a little longer, he would have heard the good news."

Spearman also gave plaudits to Carolyn Olivarez, Hoke's finance officer, retired school superintendent Don Steed and former assistant school superintendent Jeff Moss, now school superintendent in Stanley County.

"I do not think this appeal will be real fast," Spearman said. "I think it will probably take a long time. The state had talked about taking the case directly to the State Supreme Court. However, it is going through the Court of Appeals.

"I have no firm prediction on if it could take a year or more."

Spearman said he thinks that Hoke will prevail in its legal battle to help all children in the state educationally.

"I am encouraged that Gov. Easley did not say the state would request a delay in following Mannings orders," Spearman (See LAWSUIT, page 9A)

Case goes next to Court of Appeals

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Mitch Tyler

At least in some ways, it pays to be a Hoke commissioner

Compensation package totals 19k for each

By VICTORIANA SUMMERS
Staff writer

Some think it pays to be a commissioner in Hoke County. With an average compensation package of approximately \$19,000 per part-time commissioner annually, everything from medical insurance to special fees for extra meetings is covered. It can also be an eyebrow-raiser

for taxpayers, who foot the bill for an annual \$54,500 travel budget for commissioners — a budget that has been depleted this fiscal year.

"They have already overspent their travel budget by almost \$10,000 for this year," said Scott Edwards, Hoke's assistant finance officer.

"Scotland County officials were stunned with our compensation for com-

missioners' travel because they only allocate \$18,000 for their board.

"There is no documentation or written policies to support some of the expenses paid to the commissioners."

Many citizens are also not aware about another perk paid beyond commissioners' salaries, which has resulted in the travel fund shortage. Commissioners are paid automatic \$500 monthly travel stipends whether they travel or not. With a month and half remaining in this fiscal

year, Hoke's finance office is in arrears for April and May in its payments of the boards' travel allotments. According to Edwards, the county does not have enough money appropriated to pay the commissioners' June expenses either. The discrepancy in funds could tally as high as \$18,000, he added.

"We are still trying to total up how much money is overspent," Edwards, who inherited the problem after he took over (See COMMISSIONERS, page 6A)

Twelve apply to replace Olivarez as schools finance officer

By VICTORIANA SUMMERS
Staff writer



Carolyn Olivarez

Interim Hoke School Superintendent Allen Strickland says he regrets the decision of Carolyn Olivarez, Hoke Schools finance officer, to accept a job offer with the Wilkes County school system in the North Carolina mountains. The Board of

Education has been seeking a replacement for Olivarez, closing the job position last Friday.

"We had responses from 12 applicants," Strickland said. "I am very encouraged by the healthy response. Hopefully, we will be able to pick one of those candidates."

Strickland said interviews will be scheduled for May 17 by Hoke Schools Human Resources Director Sharmaine Butler. Salary for the position could range from \$39,636 to \$71,700. The new finance officer will be operating a \$34 million budget and a construction budget of ap-

proximately \$23.5 million. The person chosen will be required to hold a bachelor's degree from an accredited four-year college with a concentration in a business related curriculum. A CPA license is not required.

Olivarez, who is a certified public accountant, interviewed for the job in Wilkes on March 20. The Wilkes school board accepted Olivarez with an unanimous vote shortly afterwards. She completed the budget that was submitted to Hoke commissioners for the next fiscal year as one of her final, major challenges for Hoke

Schools. "She is a special individual," Strickland said. "She is an outstanding finance officer, and she will really be missed by all of us."

Olivarez said her decision was difficult, citing her former close relationship with the late school superintendent Mitch Tyler. She has enjoyed the rural aspects of Hoke, residing in the Arabia community.

"You never really know what impact you have made until you are leaving," Olivarez said. "Then people stop and take (See FINANCE OFFICER, page 6A)