

# The News-Journal

If it happened, it's news to us

50¢

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RAEFORD & HOKE COUNTY N.C.

Wednesday, February 4, 2004



**Doggone good**  
Corporal Joseph Snowden and K-9 partner Aron of the Hoke Sheriff's Office captured third place in a Fayetteville Police Department regional competition. See page 3A for the story.

## Audit shows Hoke did well last year

### Attributed to one-time windfalls

By VICTORIANA SUMMERS  
Staff writer

Hoke County's finances looked especially good last year because of a one-time "windfall" of extra revenues, according to Raeford CPA Frank Baker, annual auditor.

Baker presented the preliminary audit finding for the fiscal year ending June 2003 — normally given in a final report in November — to Hoke commissioners at their annual retreat at Camp Rockfish yesterday. He announced to an elated board the county accrued approximately \$1.3 million in pure "profit," placing finances in sound shape.

"Half of the excess revenue came because of growth, and the other half resulted from good management," Baker said. "This additional revenue will not recur next year, however.

"I call it 'extraordinary money.'"

This good news came after former county auditors Cox, Gibbs and Thomas showed Hoke ending with a deficit of \$1.1 million in 2002.

Baker's final audit will be delivered to the board later this week. The county was granted a deadline on the extension required by the state. The late audit was due to the new requirements under GASB-34 governmental standards, rules similar to those used in a commercial financial report.

"In talking with the Local Government Commission — of the 25 counties the size of Hoke — only two audits have already been received by the state," Baker said of

the new, complicated auditing system.

Noted in the combined balance sheet for Hoke, the general fund balance is listed as \$7.2 million compared to \$6.1 million in 2002. Of those funds, \$4.7 million represented the available, undesignated fund balance in 2003, a significant increase. Only \$3.4 million represented funds not earmarked for projects or spending in 2002.

"That means the county has about 23.6 percent in reserve that would pay for three and one-half months of operating expenses," Baker said. "It is a healthy sum, but the state normally recommends a 35 to 40 percent percent for a county of Hoke to hold in reserve."

However, Baker said, the state requires only an eight percent reserve fund balance for an audit to be approved. He indicated Hoke's higher percent still earns it a financially solvent rating.

In spite of an increase in revenues, Baker cautioned the board that the county's "legal debt" totaled \$10.8 million in 2003. Hoke also accumulated \$4.4 million in total liabilities last year.

"The county did reduce its debt by \$749,000 last year, which is a good sign," Baker said. "Obviously, the county has to generate more profit to cover its debt."

In actuality, Hoke officials spent \$19.9 million in 2003, representing more than the total revenues collected of \$19.6 million. Despite the deficit, the \$347,748 in overspending was cancelled out because of the one-time revenues received, he added.

(See COUNTY AUDIT, page 4A)

## Nature Conservancy buys land rights from 2

### Deal prevents development on 689 acres adjacent to Fort Bragg, allows owners to keep land

By VICTORIANA SUMMERS  
Staff writer

The Nature Conservancy purchased two separate conservation easements totaling 689 acres on Monday. Owned by a county elected official and a prominent Hoke farmer, the properties will be retained by them with restrictions placed on future development.

Bordering Fort Bragg in northern Hoke, the easements will create a one-and-a-half mile military buffer and protect the natural habitat of the red-cockaded wood-

pecker, an endangered species, according to Rick Studenmund, program director of the non-profit, conservation organization.

Hoke commissioner Jean Powell and farmer Julian Johnson each relinquished the development rights to their tracts of land located off June Johnson Road. Johnson sold 543 acres, a portion of his agricultural land holdings. Powell sold all of her 146-acre tract, which is in a natural state, harboring long leaf pine forests, wild turkeys, deer, and red-cockaded woodpeckers.

"I think it is wonderful that we can use

this land for conservation purposes and still work with the landowner to manage and make a living off of it," Studenmund said. "By achieving this, we can assure that the land will never be developed."

Acquisition of these properties is part of a major plan by Fort Bragg and Pope

Air Force base officials to prevent high-density development around the perimeters of the military installations. "This is the first time in the Sandhills region we have ever purchased conservation easements rather than purchasing the entire

(See LAND RIGHTS, page 6A)

## Commissioner Wright opposes concept

By VICTORIANA SUMMERS  
Staff writer

Even though Hoke Commissioner Jean Powell and farmer Julian Johnson recently sold their development rights to The Nature Conservancy, Commission Chairman Bobby Wright said he personally opposes the concept.

"I respect them for their decision because they both wanted their property to never be developed commercially," Wright said. "They will still be taxpayers and own their land."

"For them, I think it was the most beneficial route to take."

Wright sits on the board with Powell, and Johnson is his brother-in-law. The Wright family owns approximately one-fourteenth of the acreage proposed in

northern Hoke to be included in a one-mile military buffer around Fort Bragg — as proposed by a Joint Land Use Study.

The Joint Land Use plan is designed to promote compatible land use between the military bases and owners of property surrounding the installations at Fort Bragg and Pope Air Force Base. Devised under the leadership of the N.C. Department of Commerce, the plan is aimed at protecting military training exercises. Representatives from counties in the Cape Fear region approved the plan in May and June 2003, except for the City of Raeford, Hoke, and Cumberland County. They rejected the study, saying it severely restricted commercial and residential development.

According to Wright, The Nature Con-

(See WRIGHT, page 6A)

## Schools get good financial report card

By VICTORIANA SUMMERS  
Staff writer

A united Board of Education recently approved the findings of the annual independent audit report for Hoke County Schools' 2002-2003 fiscal year. The state has also approved the results of the audit, according to Hoke School Superintendent Allen Strickland.

"Our audit report was good," Strickland said. "Our school system is in good finan-

cial condition.

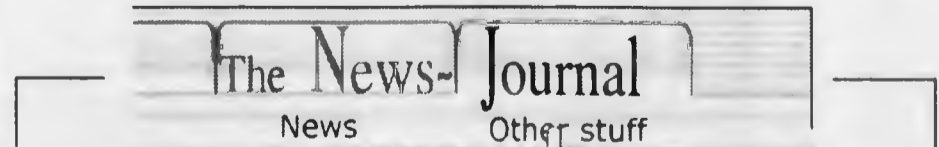
"Our new finance officer, Cathy Jacobs, is doing a fine job.

"I feel great that there were no material weaknesses found in the audit."

Strickland predicted the local school system would be in even better financial shape after next year's audit.

In an elaborate 63-page written report, Raeford CPA Frank Baker issued a satisfactory report card to the school board. It

(See SCHOOLS AUDIT, page 7A)



By KEN MACDONALD  
General Manager

It's time in our household to find a college, and this weekend we did some touring.

Some children like to stay near home, I've heard, near home-cooked food, washers and dryers, and in-house ATMs. Others seem to want to venture out a tad and experience life a few miles from home.

Our round-trip journey took us nearly 700 miles.

We visited a small college and a large one. When I say small, I mean a school that has roughly the same number of students as Upechurch Elementary.

"If you want everyone to know you on a first-name basis and to know your business, then this is the school for you," the president said in an introductory session.

"Well, time to go," our young student said, because that is NOT her goal.

But I was thinking, "Let's hear them out." There was, after all, to be two panels

(See OTHER STUFF, page 7A)

## NJ writer wins investigative reporting award

The News-Journal staff was honored with a top award in the annual N.C. Press Association's 2003 News, Editorial and Photojournalism Contest in Chapel Hill last Thursday. The local newspaper competed with more than 100 other community newspaper entrants.

Victoriana Summers, staff writer at The News-Journal, won first place in the category of Investigative Reporting for the second consecutive year. Summers won the top award in the division of community newspapers with circulations of 3,500 to 10,000.

"I do not think there are many community newspapers that have won investigative awards three years in a row like The

News-Journal," Robert Dickson, publisher of Dickson Press Inc., said.

Summers' series of articles was titled, "McPhatter to be tried in Cumberland County." The investigative stories centered on the embezzlement allegations against former Hoke county manager Bernice McPhatter. It was based on an internal inquiry launched by The News-Journal that spanned three years of examining county records. A Cumberland County jury convicted McPhatter of four counts of embezzling almost \$270,000 of county funds and on 63 counts of forgery and uttering in November 2003.

"The reporter clearly has a grasp of all

(See AWARD, page 7A)

### This Week Awareness



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