

The News-Journal

If it happened, it's news to us

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SBI investigating DSS at request of DA

Red flags raised in Social Services audit, District Attorney requested probe

By VICTORIANA SUMMERS
Staff writer

The State Bureau of Investigation is on an apparent fact-finding mission, determining if any criminal wrongdoing has occurred in the Hoke Department of Social Services.

SBI Special Agent Janie Pinkston has been assigned to head the probe. Pinkston previously investigated the embezzlement case of former Hoke county manager Bernice McPhatter, who was convicted in November of embezzlement and forgery and uttering.

"This is not a preliminary inquiry," Pinkston said on Tuesday of DSS. "We are conducting a criminal investigation that may take some time."

"The investigation was requested by the District Attorney. I just entered the case yesterday."

Pinkston said she has not begun to review the DSS materials that are causing concerns.

"The financial records of Social Services have been impounded," Pinkston said. "They are secured."

However, one source said Pinkston has already interviewed some people regarding the matter. She declined to comment on that.

"I will be in Hoke County tomorrow," Pinkston said Tuesday. "The DA requested us to investigate because Social Services officials had received information about the possibility of improprieties."

"Whether irregularities may or may not exist has not been determined yet. I would be troubled to comment any further."

Pinkston said the case could involve only current employees or past employees, or it could focus on a "mixture" of both. She said it was premature to know

if evidence exists to support any questions of misconduct.

"It is too soon to tell at this point," she said.

A source, who asked to remain unnamed, said a number of checks drawn on DSS accounts in amounts of \$1,500 to \$2,000 were questioned by DSS offi-

cial. The checks were reportedly written from a DSS trust account and also allegedly involved the food stamp division. The source also alleged the locks on the doors of the DSS building had been changed as a precaution, but no verification of that could be obtained by press time.

"I want the public to know that a concerned employee tipped off DSS of the possible allegations of corruption," the source said.

Hoke District Attorney Kristy M. Newton, who was in conference, was unable to return a phone inquiry concerning the matter Tuesday. However, William Fields, chairman of the Hoke Board of Social Services, after questions by *The News-Journal*, said he coordinated a formal response with Millicent Diehl, DSS attorney, and issued a press release this morning.

"In November 2003, the Hoke County Department of Social Services requested an audit of records in its Adult Services and Children's Services Programs be undertaken through the Hoke finance department," Fields and Diehl said in their statement. "As a result of preliminary findings, the Department (DSS), in conjunction with the county finance department, has requested further inquiry through an independent accounting (firm)."

"The Department of Social Services and Hoke County contacted the District Attorney who in turn requested assistance from the State Bureau of Investigation."

Fields said the information caused sufficient concern to warrant an audit. He said a firm has not been selected yet. (See DSS PROBE, page 4A)



Time out... restless students from Richmond County peer out of a school activity bus window as N.C. Highway Patrol trooper Stevie Joe examines the scene of an accident that resulted in a few minor injuries at the Hoke-Moore counties border. (See story on page 6A.)

This Week



Asst. principal returns to Hoke High
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Eighteen apply for city manager
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Committee of 100 board chosen
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Storm winds damage homes
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Hoke's top stories are on the web; send us stories, subscribe
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Food Lion opens 'fabulous' store to fanfare

By VICTORIANA SUMMERS
Staff writer



It's a family affair at the Food Lion grand opening for Ariel Aponte and wife Kalita, who shop with their daughter, Lakiaya.

Cotton fields on the William McNeill farm once flourished around U.S. 401 and Club Pond Road, where Food Lion Corporation opened its first major grocery store chain last Wednesday in Hoke County.

While distinguished as the first in the county, Food Lion already operates a grocery store in Raeford's city limits.

"This is a great start for Hoke County," Commissioner James Leach said. "I am glad to see this shopping center open."

"We plan to continue supporting business in our county."

"We are looking forward to more businesses coming into Hoke."

From the front porch of the historic 1836 two-story McNeill family home, hundreds of people could be seen shopping across the highway at Hoke Landing last week, home of Food Lion. With the parking lot substantially filled and a searchlight beckoning people to the site adjacent to East Hoke Middle School, business was brisk, according to Jackie Robinson, store sales manager.

"The reaction from the Hoke community has been simply fabulous," Robinson said. "It is an overwhelming response."

"We have exceeded our goals of sales for the first week in terms of dollars and the amount of products we have sold. "In receiving a warm welcome from the community, people have supported us totally." Robinson credited local and corporate

staff for stocking and preparing for the opening. Food Lion is employing 15 full-time employees and 45-50 part-time workers at the store. Featuring a full-service deli/bakery, Food Lion also provides a florist, Western Union service and a Coinstar machine. More than 28,000 items are being sold, including international specialty items and prime meats, pork, seafood, and cheeses.

"We have only received positive comments from customers," Robinson said. "They love the new 'reinvented' decor of the store, including diagonal aisles and open beams."

Present for the grand opening were Hoke and Raeford dignitaries, Food Lion executives and employees, and performers. (See FOOD LION, page 6A)

Clinton officials tell Raeford council streetscape good idea

By PAT ALLEN WILSON
Editor

Clinton officials thought \$1 million was way too much money to spend on the revitalization of their downtown area.

"We stalled out and thought and thought — for three and one-half years," Clinton Planning Director Jeff Vreugdenhil told

the Raeford city council last night.

Now that the renovation of the town square is complete, he said, "I can say unequivocally this is the greatest economic development tool to take place in Clinton."

Vreugdenhil and Clinton City Planner Mary Rose spoke to councilmen at the request of the Redevelopment Commis-

sion of the City of Raeford at a called meeting.

"We wanted to invite them here so you could hear a success story," said Steve Connell, chairman of the Redevelopment Commission.

The commission unveiled a streetscape plan for Raeford last week and asked councilmen to tear down the vacant and

dilapidated former Raeford Hotel, authorize a design plan and implement Phase I of a three-phase project for downtown Raeford. The cost of the first phase is estimated at \$1.1 million although the city's expense would come to less than half that. The total project is estimated at \$2 million. (See STREETScape, page 10A)

Maynor-Bowen runs for school board

By PAT ALLEN WILSON
Editor



Maynor-Bowen

Della Maynor-Bowen has announced that she will be a candidate for the Hoke County Board of Education this year.

"I wish to be involved in the education, care and nurturing of all Hoke County students," Maynor-Bowen said.

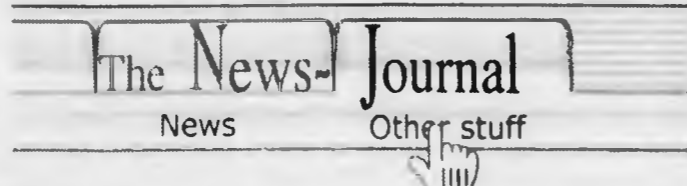
Maynor-Bowen said she believes she has the time to "get involved" since retir-

ing as the Hoke County Register of deeds in December 2002. She served in that capacity for 30 years.

"I believe I have a responsibility to the citizens of Hoke County for all their support through the years, and I would like to serve them again," Maynor-Bowen said.

Maynor-Bowen made her announcement Monday. "My vision is to work with the board of education, Hoke County commissioners and the state to obtain as much funding for the school system to benefit all students, staff and teachers."

Maynor-Bowen is a Lumbee-Cheraw Indian who is serving her third year as (See MAYNOR-BOWEN, page 8A)



By KEN MACDONALD
General Manager

PLEASANT GARDEN, NC — In 1876, Alexander Graham Bell spoke those famous first words by telephone to his assistant nearby: "Watson — come here — I want to see you." On Saturday, at my father-in-law's house, we traded emails via two laptop computers, connected wirelessly to a router and cable modem, and sent no doubt through countless miles of cable and untold numbers of main-

frame servers in who knows how many locations. Our emails said, "hi."

When we last tuned in to The Grand Experiment, we discovered learning to use a computer was one of two things my father-in-law wanted to do before he died. We did not learn what the other thing is and we are not going to ask.

Somehow, I got nominated to procure the computer and do the training.

"I spent \$1,100 to get an email from you that says 'hi'?" my father-in-law said (See OTHER STUFF, page 8A)