

The News-Journal

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RAEFORD & HOKE COUNTY N.C.

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Rush trial cut short as plea agreement reached

Former Hoke finance director pleads guilty to misdemeanor, avoids jail time

By VICTORIANA SUMMERS
Staff writer

Hoke assistant prosecutor Chris Rhue and defense attorney Glenn Adams spent two hours selecting a predominantly minority jury in the Robeson County

courthouse. However, the trial of fired Hoke finance director Shirley Rush never got off the ground on Monday.

Rush withdrew her plea of "not guilty" to a felony on Monday after — at her attorney's request — Rhue agreed to a reduced charge.

The trial was transferred from Hoke to Lumberton because Rush's case was well publicized in The News-Journal and other newspapers. A Hoke judge determined for Rush to receive a fair trial that the case should be prosecuted elsewhere.

Rush was initially charged with accessory after the fact in connection with the embezzlement case of former county manager Bernice McPhatter. Convicted of stealing \$269,000 of county money, McPhatter is serving a sentence of eight years in state prison.

Rush decided to plead guilty to a lesser criminal charge of violating auditors' rules as a county official when she "unlawfully and willfully" concealed information leading to a crime. She received a suspended sentence of 45 days in the (See RUSH TRIAL, page 6A)

County audit results mixed

Shortfalls cited in some areas

By VICTORIANA SUMMERS
Staff writer

After reviewing the Hoke audit for 2003-04, the state's treasury department commended Hoke commissioners and staff on March 3 for their efforts, but also chastised them for temporary budget shortfalls found in some departments.

The state officials sent a mixed message, praising the financial condition of the county's general fund as it "continues to improve." Yet state auditors indicated the county was required to keep its budget balanced throughout the year without acquiring any

deficits, but failed to do so.

"The county has one of the best reserve fund balances they have had in years," said Raeford CPA Frank Baker, annual county auditor. "I will be presenting the annual audit on Monday night to the commissioners."

Preliminary audit information previously supplied by the Hoke finance department indicated revenues for Hoke increased from \$16.7 million in 2003 to \$20.9 million in 2004. The available reserve fund balance also increased from \$4.3 million in 2002-03 to \$5.7 million in 2003-04 — almost a two percent jump.

However, the state treasurer's department expressed concern that the audit was received seven months late, leaving less time to identify any financial or operational problems so the county could take any effective action. State officials accepted the reason offered for the lateness that the new accounting system implemented two years ago requires more complex information from the auditors.

Discrepancies

More seriously, the state au- (See AUDIT, page 8A)



Clockwise from top left: Prior to her trial resuming, Shirley Rush spends a moment with husband Willie Rush in the Robeson County courtroom; Superior Judge Frank Lanier of Harnett County; After the brief trial, cousin Mary Roper (left) and Shirley Rush share a moment; District Attorney special investigator John Joseph talks with Sabrina Bauld, a former Hoke employee who was going to testify against Rush.

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No, construction on US 401 is not finished

By VICTORIANA SUMMERS
Staff writer

Even though Hoke County citizens are benefiting from almost \$5.3 million worth of road improvements on U.S. 401 from the N.C. Department of Transportation, some Hoke citizens wonder when the work will

be completed.

People have also complained that some newly installed turn lanes are missing directional arrows on the pavement. Other turn lanes have been eliminated, and pavement is frequently uneven in some lanes, creating potential hazardous driving conditions. Citizens are worried

the conditions are permanent.

"Not so," says DOT assistant engineer Marcus Jones at the Aberdeen division office. "The project is not completed.

"The resurfacing on U.S. 401 represents only the first layer of pavement, and the lines on the pavement are only temporary.

"Winter weather prevented the contractor from continuing with the project, but after today the paving season starts again. The contractor will soon continue finishing the improvements on U.S. 401."

Jones said pavement will be refined, all arrows drawn in, and appropriate. (See CONSTRUCTION, page 4A)

Hoke deputy killed in Fayetteville motorcycle accident

By VICTORIANA SUMMERS
Staff writer

Hoke County has lost one of its native sons in a two-vehicle accident. Deputy Larry Walker, a Hoke High School graduate and two-year veteran of the Hoke

Sheriff's Office, was killed Saturday in Fayetteville.

While operating a motorcycle he was test-driving, Walker was the victim of a collision with a Jeep sports utility vehicle on Bragg Boulevard. Although not on duty, Walker was found still wearing

his Hoke deputy's badge clipped to his belt after being pinned under the Jeep, according to Sheriff Hubert Peterkin.

"Deputy Walker always wanted to be a law enforcement officer his whole life," Peterkin said. "He loved serving his community, and he loved his family. "I was so shocked at his



Larry Walker

death. I never knew his hobby was riding motorcycles.

"We have draped his patrol vehicle in black cloth and also a black drape is arranged over the door of the Hoke Sheriff's Office in Raeford in tribute to him.

"Although he was not killed in the line of duty, Deputy Walker was the first (See ACCIDENT, page 4A)

The News-Journal

News

Other stuff

By KEN MACDONALD
Publisher

I have been helping a 7th grader with math lately. Okay, I admit the jury is still out on whether I'm helping. A few times I have felt like Jethro ciphering. Or maybe even Mister Ed.

Oh yeah, you laugh. How hard could seventh grade math be? Okay, mister smartypants, what's a "precision unit?" I didn't think so.

We tripped across that little one on a worksheet, as in, "What is the precision unit of a football field?"

I guessed JROTC when they march the flag out.

Fortunately, I had access to a teacher's handbook and discovered a precision unit is the smallest unit of measure on a scale — such as a sixteenth of an inch on most rulers, or a second on a clock.

Well, yes, now it makes sense, but I had (See OTHER STUFF, page 4A)

Progressive Energy's plan to move lineman from Raeford opposed by local officials

By VICTORIANA SUMMERS
Staff writer

Hoke County officials and Raeford city councilmen are concerned that Don Needham, the county's own lineman who resides in Raeford, may be pulled out of Hoke as its area service representative for Progress Energy utility company.

Based in Hoke for four years, Needham's position may be phased out within the next 30 to 60 days, according to Andy Honeycutt, public affairs spokesman for Progress Energy at the Aberdeen office.

Raeford City Manager Richard Douglas said the city council is discussing possibly signing a resolution, urging (See LINEMAN, page 4A)