

# Highlands Newspaper

Happy Mother's Day!

FREE Every Thursday

Volume 23, Number 18

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Thurs., May 7, 2026

## FY '26-'27 budget still being massaged

*Insurance package, property tax increase and requests still being considered*

By Kim Lewicki

Last Thursday was supposed to be Highlands' last budget workshop for the FY '26-

'27 budget, but with fuel prices and health insurance costs on the rise, not to mention organizations coming to the town for

funds, commissioners decided another session was required before finalizing the budget.

• See BUDGET page 11

## Town awards \$69,500 in scholarships for 2026

By Kim Lewicki

As graduation approaches, graduates of Highlands School look forward to scholarship announcements that come in from numerous civic organizations and nonprofits, including the Town of Highlands.

At the April 30 budget workshop meeting, The amount of the Town of Highlands Scholarship awards were announced coming in at a total of \$69,500.

Highlands School graduating seniors, as well as those currently in college were awarded the funds.

Fifteen Class of 2026 graduates headed for college or trade schools were awarded a total of

• See SCHOLARSHIPS page 7

## King & Queen for the night



The Highlands School 2026 prom was held Friday, May 1 at OEI's The Farm. The theme was "The Golden Gala." Aiden Crook-Jenkins and Olivia Corbin were crowned King and Queen. See photos on page 18.

## •INSIDE THIS ISSUE•

Mayor on Duty .....	2	HS Sports.....	19
Weather .....	2	Spiritually Speaking .....	22
SnapShot.....	2	Police & Fire Report.....	23
Investing at 4118 Ft.....	6	Classifieds .....	25
Letters .....	9	Events.....	26
HS Prom.....	18		

## Commissioners weigh in on citizen's request to scrap the Town's 2022 Comprehensive Plan

By Kim Lewicki

Recently, Planning Board members received a letter from a resident regarding the town's Comprehensive Plan in which the writer penned his desire for it to be scrapped and redone.

According to his letter, seasonal resident James Worrell said he was concerned about development planning and wanted his concerns to be taken into consideration as the board fulfills its duties.

He said he was once a full-time resident, then a part-time resident and currently considers himself a seasonal resident who comes to Highlands a few months at a time during the year.

Worrell said he has been a member of the civic organiza-

tion Highlands Neighborhood Coalition since its inception and was writing to encourage the Planning Board and subsequently the Town Board to increase its planning efforts when it comes to development.

"I have been thinking about this for some time," he said. "I think the town should develop a new Comprehensive Plan, to replace the existing 2022 Plan."

He said new developments do not comply in full with the existing 2022 Comprehensive Plan and furthermore, he said changes to the use of any property from its current zoned use should be delayed - or denied - until a new Comprehensive Plan is created and adopted.

• See PLAN page 5



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# • THE PLATEAU'S POSITION •

## • MAYOR ON DUTY •

### Upcoming projects and more



Highlands Mayor  
Patrick Taylor

I have been at the NC League of Municipalities Annual meeting, City Vision, in Raleigh for most of this week. I do not look forward to traveling to Raleigh, staying in a hotel, and attending meetings for most of the week, but this meeting has been mostly an annual trek for the Town Manager and me.

While at the conference, we will attend meetings, workshops, meet with other municipal officials, and talk with potential town vendors. The talk of the conference is happening down the street as legislators are in a short session. I hope they drop the notion of controlling towns, cities, and counties' authority to raise property taxes. Their main focus should be on passing a biennial state budget. They were supposed to do that in the long session back in 2025.

Let me update everyone on several town projects that are still on the books and in the budget. Some of the infra-

structure and paving projects will be guided by weather patterns and seasonal traffic flows.

First, the state, to my dismay, recently repainted the center line on the hill on 4th Street. The board had directed our staff to ask DOT to move the line over a foot or so to the center of the road so the traffic lanes would be even, and safer passage would be improved. In fact, our Town Manager had again contacted DOT in March

about the status of our request. Again, after the new painting of the yellow lines, Josh called them again to ask what had happened. We have been assured that the line adjustment request is still on their project list and will be done. Stay tuned.

Second, in the current budget, we have funds for two new pedestrian crosswalks on US 64: one near the intersection of 64 and Foreman Road, and the other at Spruce and 64 near the ball field. The town's responsibility is to redo the sidewalks with ADA curb cuts, where the crosswalks will be installed. We have hired a contractor to do that work this spring. As soon as that is completed, the state will mark the crosswalks and install the proper signage.

Third, motorists can expect work to begin this spring on the sewer force main upgrade project and the electrical circuit upgrade, both of which will be installed on US 64 and Franklin Road, starting around the 1st Street intersection and going toward the Lake Sequoyah area. Hopefully, work on both projects will move extremely fast and be done early in the tourist season.

Finally, the construction plans for the dredging stages of Mirror Lake are nearing completion. If they are ready, representatives of McGill Engineering will share the plans with the board and the public at the May Town Board meeting. If they are not ready, I expect that presentation to occur in June. After permits, easement, and construction documents are completed, a request for bids will be sent to potential contractors. As I have said before, the dredging will be a major project involving a lot of equipment and activity.

## • SNAPSHOT •



Akira Nolan, Christina Craig, Valerie Olvera, Riley Brooks, Corena Dearth, Evelyn Ahrens, Emelina Hernandez, Yazmin Montalvo Espinoza, Penelope McRae, Valentina Gomez, Vlada Klymenko, Ariana Trejo, Annabelle Searles, Bella Batista, Valentina Gooch and Head Coach Brian Dearth, and Asst. Coach, Jair Batista

### Highlands Middle School Girls Soccer Team are Tri-State Champs!

The MS Girls Soccer team provided the week's most heart-stopping drama, capturing the Tri-State Conference Championship through sheer endurance. See story on page 19.

## • WEATHER •

Thu, 7-May	Fri, 8-May	Sat, 9-May	Sun, 10-May
67°F 38°F	61°F 43°F	70°F 48°F	69°F 53°F
Mostly cloudy, showers around	Partly sunny	Sunny and pleasant	A shower and thunderstorm
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High 71° Low: 54°	High 70° Low: 48°	High 76° Low: 51°	High 80° Low: 59°

Highlands NC 4-Day Forecast By AccuWeather.com

### Highlands Newspaper

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There is a 500-word limit. We reserve the right to reject or edit letters-to-the-editor. No anonymous letters will be accepted. Views expressed are not necessarily those of Highlands Newspaper.

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## ...PLAN continued from page 1

This was likely brought up due to the Town Board discussing the need to consider broader housing reform through zoning designations in town to allow for smaller lots, or areas where multi-family housing would be allowed.

In addition, he is concerned about the passage of NC's SB 382 which prohibits a municipality from down-zoning a person's property – reducing development density or restricting uses – without written consent by all affected property owners. This drastically changed municipalities' ability to prohibit short-term rentals and is one reason the town rescinded its ordinance prohibiting existing short-term rentals in the R1 and R2 zones.

There is also Senate Bill 497, which is pending in the 2025-2026 legislative session, which is seeking to expand middle housing (such as duplexes, triplexes, and accessory dwelling units) by allowing them by-right in residential zones and limiting local government authority to regulate them regarding parking requirements and restrictive covenants.

"Everything has changed since the

last Comprehensive Plan – which was flawed in many ways at inception," said Worrell. "Recent changes to state and local law have made it obsolete."

Worrell said state law SB 382 has ended a municipality's right to down-zone a property. "This is a huge change and problem," he said.

He also claimed that the Comprehensive Plan is supposed to be updated every five years.

"We are in the fourth year of this version so generating a new one now is prudent before any more zoning changes are approved that can never be undone," he said.

Following NC's unfunded mandate to adopt a Comprehensive Plan by June 2022, in June 2021 the town hired Stewart, Inc. to formulate a plan based on community input while taking into consideration current land uses and zoning in Highlands. The cost was \$94,953.99 and it was meant to see the town through 5-20 years.

From the start, the Comprehensive Plan was meant as a guide for land use, development, and community growth while focusing on protecting the natural envi-

ronment and mountain aesthetic; identifying a Future Land Use Map identifying character areas, including residential density levels and "neighborhood mixed-use" zones; improving parking, enhancing downtown, and upgrading utility infrastructure, as well as dealing with short-term rentals while acknowledging the need for housing.

To possibly accommodate more housing, lot size changes were suggested as were new zoning designations.

Though the town hasn't made any of the Comprehensive Plan suggestions policy, it has considered it and will be in the near future as commissioners grapple with workforce housing and ensuring Highlands stays an affordable, multi-generational community.

Unlike some towns in NC, Highlands has had a land use plan for years. In 2021, the state required all counties and municipalities with zoning to have a Comprehensive Plan when adopting NCGS 160D amendments which are outlined in the town's Unified Development Ordinance (UDO).

"A Comprehensive Plan takes into

account all town/county functions – not just land use," said Town Manager Josh Ward. "The Plan is a guide to be followed by the Planning Board and Town Board when making decisions on specific functions carried out within their jurisdiction. It doesn't restrict a government entity from deviating from the plan but simply requires the consideration of the plan and what it says pertaining to specific functions."

Ward said the Town Board has addressed numerous items within the plan in the four years since it has been adopted and will continue to do so.

"The Town Board will be discussing additional items mentioned within the plan in the coming months," said Ward. "An amendment to the plan is typically conducted at the 10-year mark but could be sooner if the Board so chooses."

At a recent Town Board meeting Commissioner Amy Patterson said the plan didn't need to be scrapped and done over.

Instead, she suggested adding new zoning for smaller footprint homes and

• See PLAN page 20



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## Mother's Day, Memories, and the Meaning of Home

There's something about Mother's Day that makes us pause... and remember.

Not just the big moments—but the little ones that quietly shaped our lives.

The smell of coffee and breakfast in the kitchen opening our sleepy eyes, getting ready for the day ahead.

Laughter around the dinner table and excitement of plans and dreams of our future. And let's be honest... the occasional "Because I said so," which somehow ended every negotiation before it even began. Moms are like that, you know!

Because the truth is... a house is just walls and windows. But a home? That's where life happens.

And more often than not, it's the women in our lives—mothers, grandmothers, and the ones who stepped in when needed—who made those spaces feel warm, safe, and full of love.

I've walked through hundreds of beautiful homes over my 23 years as a real estate broker. While I certainly appreciate a stunning kitchen or a view that takes your breath away... what I notice most are the stories. There is one thing we have in common: it doesn't matter whether we have a massive Wolfe gas stove or an apartment size 4 burner or have private enclaves or share a bathroom down the hall: it's the feeling of genuine love that exists that truly matters in a home.

The kitchen where generations learned to cook—and occasionally burned—the family recipes. The living room where furniture was perfectly arranged for company... and then quickly rearranged for real life.

And the porch—oh, the porch—where advice was given freely, whether you asked for it or not.

Those are the moments that turn a house into something much more meaningful.

As a mother myself, I've learned that home isn't about perfection.

It's not about having everything just



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right... because if that were the case, none of us would qualify.

It's about showing up.

It's about love, consistency, and creating a place where people feel they belong—even when the laundry is piled high and dinner didn't go exactly as planned.

And as a real estate professional, I see it every day—people aren't just looking for square

footage or finishes. They're searching for a feeling.

A place where new memories will be made.

Where laughter will echo again.

Where life will unfold in ways they can't yet imagine.

And when they find it—you can see it in their eyes.

It's that quiet moment when they look at each other and just know. That gives me such gratification as their broker.

This Mother's Day, whether you're gathered around the table, calling someone you love, or simply reflecting on the homes, (whether small or extra-large) and people who shaped you... I hope you take a moment to appreciate it all.

Because long after the paint colors change and the furniture is gone... what remains is the love that lived there.

Because a home isn't measured by square footage... but all the footsteps that eventually lead you back ...even if only in your memory.

Wishing you a beautiful Mother's Day. Be grateful if you can still get a hug or make a phone call and hear a voice that remembers.

• Pat Allen is owner and Broker-in-Charge of Pat Allen Realty Group, a boutique and privately owned firm with 22 years' experience as an award-winning and top producer on the plateau. She and her daughter, Julie Osborn, remain in the top 1.5% of all agents and teams nationwide. She may be reached at [pat@patallenrealtygroup.com](mailto:pat@patallenrealtygroup.com) or 828-200-9179. Located at 295 Dillard Road

## ...SCHOLARSHIPS continued from page 1

\$38,750 in scholarships ranging from \$1,750 to \$3,500.

Traditionally, the Valedictorian and the Salutatorian are awarded the highest scholarship – this year it was \$3,500 to both Valedictorian Jaylin Brooke Raby and Salutatorian Hunter Nikole Conner.

Seventeen graduates from previous years who are currently in college received a total of \$30,750 ranging from \$2,250 to \$1,050.

The Town of Highlands Scholarship Fund was established in 1975 with the mission to provide financial aid to Highlands School graduates for higher education.

The 6-member scholarship committee made up of the Town Clerk (Gibby Shaheen), the Town Manager (Josh Ward), the Highlands School Principal (Sarah Holbrooks) the Highlands Board of Education representative (Hilary Wilkes) and two at-large people, (Allison Tate and Christine Murphy) awards funds based on academic achievement, character, citizenship, and financial need.

Money for the Scholarship Fund comes from proceeds from the annual golf tournament and fishing tournament as well as through fundraising resulting in donations from businesses and citizens.

“I am always impressed by the many community organizations and individual

citizens who support the town scholarship program each year,” said Mayor Pat Taylor. “The scholarship endowment and scholarship awards grow each year.”

All graduates of Highlands School who are pursuing higher education at colleges or vocational schools are eligible for scholarships.

The current balance in the Scholarship Endowment is \$1,424,868, which includes principal and interest.

In the past, the town has funded the scholarships from the interest earned on the principal, but Town of Highlands Finance Director Rebecca Shuler said she has been able to allocate scholarships without using the interest earned.

“Instead of funding with the interest, I have been using the amount from the fundraisers and a portion of a couple larger donations. It has ended up being a little more than the amount of the interest,” she said. “For example, interest last year was \$51,210.10. We gave away \$68,000. This year – with April, May and June yet accounted for – we are at \$39,044.08 in interest and this year we were able to award \$69,500.”

Applications for the Town Scholarship are on the town’s website. Those who are graduating or continuing their college education, must reapply each year.



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# • LETTERS •

## Say 'no' to amplified noise

Dear Editor,

Why is there a need to change the existing noise ordinance?

Normal business district noise is expected. Amplified sound to attract potential customers is prohibited in our current ordinance and should remain and be enforced.

Think what the town would be like if there were speakers outside every business. Definitely not normal operations of business activities in Highlands.

Please consider the consequences of allowing outside amplified sound as an everyday course of business.

Cherry Bittick  
Highlands

## No more Shrimp Boil but...

Dear Editor,

On behalf of Friends of Founders Park, we want to thank you for your ongoing support and commitment to preserving and enhancing Kelsey-Hutchinson Founders Park. Your generosity has helped us advocate for the park's continued vitality and ensure it remains a welcoming space for everyone in our community.

As dedicated stewards, we strive to maintain, improve, and beautify Founders Park for daily enjoyment and community events. With your partnership, we have been able to generate the financial and volunteer resources needed to keep the park accessible, sustainable, and vibrant.

This year, we are discontinuing our annual Shrimp Boil fundraiser as we are pursuing new opportunities that better reflect our updated vision for Founders Park. We invite you to continue to help with our 2026 initiatives and partner with us in advancing green space, fostering community engagement, and promoting environmentally responsible practices. Your support will have a direct and lasting impact on the park's maintenance and future enhancements, benefiting our community now and for generations to come.

Future improvements provided by Friends of Founders Park in 2026 will include: drainage improvements along Oak Lane at entrance points; installation of a new stepping stone walkway behind the restrooms; elevation of the low area near the monument steps with additional soil and grass sod; replacement of two dying poplar trees in the planters at the intersection of Pine and 5th Street; restoration of sod grass to bare spots in the stage seating area; again providing the plaza annual flowers; and enhancing shrub beds by adding perennial plants.

If you wish, you may direct your donation to support a specific initiative or contribute to our general fund at [foundersparkhighlands.com](http://foundersparkhighlands.com). Thank you for being a valued partner in our mission. Together, we can ensure Founders Park remains a treasured resource for everyone in our community. Friends of Founders Park is a 501(c)3 nonprofit. With gratitude ...

Board of Directors  
Friends of Founders Park

• See LETTERS page10

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...LETTERS continued from page 9

## Let's never stop asking questions

Dear Editor,

In a recent interview on 60 Minutes, journalist Norah O'Donnell read aloud a passage from a gunman's manifesto, words that were disturbing, direct, and impossible to ignore. "I'm no longer willing to permit a pedophile rapist, and traitor to coat my hands with his crimes." These are the words allegedly penned by Cole Thomas Allen, the accused assassin. She then asked the President for his response.

He didn't answer the substance of the question.

Instead, he criticized the act of asking it, telling the press, "You're horrible people."

Moments later, he reiterated: "I'm not a rapist. I didn't rape anybody." O'Donnell replied, simply: "Oh, you think he was referring to you?"

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That exchange is telling, not because it proves anything about the accusation itself (it doesn't), but because it shows something about how questions are handled.

When a question is met not with an answer, but with an attack on the person asking it, something shifts. The focus moves away from the issue and onto whether the question should have been asked at all.

That's not a new dynamic. During the Watergate scandal, Richard Nixon and his administration often dismissed investigative reporting as biased or politically motivated. The effect wasn't to resolve the allegations, it was to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the inquiry itself.

In a healthy system, journalists bring forward claims, sometimes proven, sometimes not, to see how those in power respond. The expectation isn't that every accusation is true. It's that leaders can tell the difference between being asked a question and being declared guilty.

When that line blurs, asking questions starts to feel like crossing a boundary.

We can see a similar tension in how institutions handle transparency. The Department of Justice has released millions of pages tied to the Epstein case. But more information doesn't always mean more clarity. Sometimes it leaves people with the sense that answers are still out of reach.

Put together, these moments raise a question, one as important in a small town as it is in Washington:

Are people still expected to answer reasonable questions?

Around here, that standard is simple. If something doesn't make sense, you ask. And if you're in a position of responsibility, you had better answer as plainly as you can.

That's not politics. That's demanding facts. That's just how trust works.

If we lose that, if asking a question becomes the problem instead of answering it, then accountability doesn't disappear all at once. It fades, one interaction at a time.

And without it, even the strongest institutions become less certain, and further away from us, the people they're meant to serve.

**David Baumgarten**  
Highlands

## ...BUDGET continued from page 1

On the table left for discussion is which health insurance company to go with, figuring out if the town can fund some or all of the Hudson Library's request of \$350,000, and whether to increase property taxes.

Everyone knows health insurance rates have soared and that goes for the town, too. As one of its perks, the town pays health insurance for employees – employees pay for their family members if they need insurance.

For FY '25-'26 the cost of health insurance through Blue Cross Blue Shield (BCBS) was \$658,106. For FY '26-'27 the same plan with BCBS increased \$329,166 (a 49.5% increase) for a total of \$987,272.

Consequently, the town is shopping around.

The next company considered was Angle with Cigna – offering the same plan as BCBS. It came in 47.4% higher than the current BCBS plan at \$970,117 – a \$312,010 increase for the town

Though there are minor changes regarding individual and family co-pays, United Healthcare's Open Access Direct plan came in 35.1% higher than the current BCBS plan at \$889,308 – \$231,202 more than the current plan.

Town Manager Josh Ward said it's the best scenario to date so it looks like that's the plan the town will pick but a final decision hasn't been made.

For now, the only utility fees increasing for FY '26-'27 are water and sewer. Based on the recent auditor's report that said the water and sewer departments must become self-sufficient, it was suggested the town raise water/sewer rates 4% annually from now on.

The fact that the department's fund balance is low, commissioners agreed to raise the water/sewer rates 10% for FY '26-'27 and then 4% each year thereafter.

"We need to build up the fund balance and to do that we have to increase rates," said Town Manager Josh Ward.

As discussed in the previous budget workshop, commissioners agreed to increase land use fees – zoning board hearings, administrative appeals, Special Use Permit and variance requests – to match what other like-towns in the state charge.

The Hudson Library request of \$350,000 to supplement donations raised to renovate the interior of the building took the conversation in a new direction.

"I really want to give them something," said Commissioner Bill Grubb. "Maybe not all of it, but something."

Though other commissioners agreed, Town Manager Ward asked if the request could be brought back next year.

"The budget is really tight, and I would feel better if we could hold off a year," he said.

The library board is currently overseeing the completion of the exterior and grounds which has been fully funded with private donations. It was hoping to renovate the interior within three months with help from the town and county which are both being asked for \$350,000.

That's when a minimal increase to the town's property tax was brought up.

Commissioners asked Town Manager Ward and Finance Director Rebecca Shuler to return with some scenarios regarding an increase.

"We're not saying we are raising taxes, we just want to know what our options are and how much an increase would generate," said Commissioner Amy Patterson.

Mayor Pat Taylor was quick to remind everyone that the town hasn't raised property taxes in 10 years and when they were raised it was a revenue neutral increase.

At this point, the budget for FY '26-'27 is \$45,584,075.

At least one more budget workshop will be scheduled before the budget is presented and subsequently adopted by June 30, 2026.

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## National Nurses Week:

### Honoring nurses at Highlands-Cashiers Hospital and Eckerd Living Center

Highlands-Cashiers Hospital and Eckerd Living Center are proud to celebrate National Nurses Week by recognizing the dedication, compassion and expertise of nurses who care for patients and residents across the Highlands-Cashiers community. As part of Mission Health and HCA Healthcare, nurses at both facilities are supported by a broader network committed to investing in colleagues through education, resources and a culture that prioritizes both professional growth and well-being. That commitment to excellence is reflected in recent recognition, including the Highlands-Cashiers Hospital Emergency Department earning the 2025 Press Ganey Guardian of Excellence Award®, placing it among the



Andrea Audese, RN  
HC Hospital

top-performing hospitals nationwide for patient experience.

While we are highlighting two nurses whose stories reflect the impact of this work, this week is an opportunity to recognize and thank every nurse and care team member who contributes to the high-quality, compassionate care delivered each day at both Highlands-Cashiers Hospital and Eckerd Living Center.

“Our nurses are at the heart of the care we provide, both at Highlands-Cashiers Hospital and at Eckerd Living Center,” said Tom Neal, CEO of Highlands-Cashiers Hospital. “Whether caring for patients in the hospital or supporting residents in long-term care, it takes a dedicated and connected team to meet the needs of our community. I’m in-

credibly proud of the compassion, professionalism and teamwork our nurses demonstrate every day.”

In recognition of National Nurses Week, we highlight two nurses whose experiences represent the strength and heart of the entire team.

Andrea Audese, RN, a Clinical Nurse Coordinator at Highlands-Cashiers Hospital, has spent nearly 30 years in nursing, with a career that has taken her across the country working in hospitals of all sizes. Yet for the past six years, she has found a home in Highlands—drawn not only to the work, but to the community she serves.

“The people here are incredibly respectful of nurses,” Andrea says. “They’re kind, understanding and appreciative, which makes a difference in the work we do every day.” That connection fuels her passion for patient education, one of the aspects of nursing she values most. “I want patients to leave feeling like they understand what’s happening and how to take care of themselves,” she says. “I want them to measure every nurse they meet after me by the care they received from me.”

For Andrea, the “power of nursing” is often found in the smallest moments. “Sometimes it’s just hearing ‘thank you for not judging me’ or ‘thank you for taking the time to explain,’” she says. “Being kind when someone is having a hard day—that’s what matters.”

She also knows the work comes with emotional weight. Nurses show up for patients during some of life’s most difficult moments, even while carrying their own challenges. “It’s important to remember that nurses are people, too,” she says.

What has kept Andrea at Highlands-Cashiers Hospital longer than any other stop in her traveling career is the team around her. “The night shift team I work with is amazing,” she says. “We help each other, we communicate, and we make sure our patients are taken care of.” That sense of trust and collaboration, she says, is rare. “I can rely on my team completely. It’s hard to leave a place where that kind of teamwork exists—it’s ir-



Robbin Houston, RN  
Eckerd Living Center.

replaceable.”

Robbin Houston, LPN, has spent more than three decades caring for residents at Eckerd Living Center, part of Highlands-Cashiers Hospital, and plans to retire at the end of 2026 after 31 years of service. Over the years, she has worn many hats, but says her favorite role is the one she has now as a floor nurse, building meaningful relationships with the residents she cares for each day.

For Robbin, the “power of nursing” is seen in both critical moments and lasting connections. She recalls a patient who experienced a medical emergency while bathing that required immediate CPR. “We worked together as a team, got her back, and she was able to return home,” Robbin says. Years later, that same patient returned for end-of-life care. “Having saved her life, the being able to care for her again—it was a full-circle moment I’ll never forget.”

Still, it’s often the small moments that matter most. “When a resident says, ‘I’m so glad it’s you working tonight,’ that touches my heart,” she says.

Working in geriatric care requires constant awareness and creativity, especially for patients living with dementia. Robbin focuses on getting to know each resident as a person. “Sometimes it’s not about medicine,” she says. “Sometimes it’s sitting down, playing cards or listening to their stories.”

She remembers one younger, bed-bound patient who found joy in playing cards. “She would light up when I came in to play cards or just sit and talk with her,” Robbin says. “That meant everything to me.”

After 31 years, Robbin says it’s the people, patients and colleagues, who keep her coming back. “Our residents depend on us, and they give us joy every day,” she says. “And we have a great team here. Our leadership checks in, asks what we need, and we support each other. It makes all the difference.”

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## • UPCOMING EVENTS •

### Balsam Range concert at PAC Sunday, May 17

The first concert of PAC's 2026 Concert Series features Balsam Range on Sunday, May 17 at 4 p.m.

Celebrating its 18th year together, bluegrass juggernaut Balsam Range is charging headlong as the group enters a new, promising chapter of its vast, ever-evolving musical career.

The group: Caleb Smith (guitar, vocals), Tim Surrent (bass, dobro, vocals) Alan Bibey (mandolin, vocals) and banjoist Marc Pruett – is not only releasing new music, but once again are hitting the road, touring majestic theaters and backwoods gather-

ings – all in the name of bluegrass music.

2026 also brings a special guest on board to many shows across the nation, Kentucky native Don Rigsby. On fiddle and vocals, Rigsby brings that familiar “high lonesome sound” to the mix and is backed by an impressive resume, making him a seamless addition to the group. Formed in 2007 by mere happenstance, Balsam Range came together during an informal kitchen jam session in the rural depths of Western North Carolina.

For tickets go to [highlandsp PerformingArts.com](http://highlandsp PerformingArts.com)

### 1st Annual SPOTFIN art and nature gathering at Cowee School, May 15th

The Cowee School Arts and Heritage Center welcomes the public to its first ever SPOTFIN Art and Nature Gathering on Friday, May 15th.

The day includes a wide variety of nature-based outings and workshops that will appeal to anyone that has an interest in nature and art – botanical illustration,

nature journaling, ecology, kayaking, hiking, and much more.

All workshops and outings will be held or launch from the Cowee School. For more information and to register, visit [www.coweeschool.org/spotfin](http://www.coweeschool.org/spotfin) Events are free unless noted otherwise.



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# • BUSINESS / ORGANIZATION NEWS •



Family, friends and previous owners, Leon Hananel and Susan Cox, celebrated the ribbon cutting for Don Leon's with new owners Juan and Ivanet Avila.

## Don Leon's changes hands!

The Highlands Chamber of Commerce/Visit Highlands, NC was proud to celebrate a new beginning at Don Leon's with a ribbon cutting on Thursday, April 30.

New owners Juan and Ivanet

Avila, already a familiar part of the Highlands community, are embracing this next chapter with energy and vision.

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## • CHHS NEWS •



Photo by Martha Boone

One-year-old Justine's golden eyes reflect her tender spirit. They are full of quiet hope for a forever home. Justine loves other cats, and she is looking for a gentle human who understands that love doesn't always happen instantly... sometimes it grows slowly, in soft moments and small steps. Visit [chhhumanesociety.org](http://chhhumanesociety.org) or call (828)743-5752 for more information.

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# • UPCOMING EVENTS •

## HC CLE welcomes NC Poet Laureate Jaki Shelton Green for 'Creativity Salon'

The Highlands-Cashiers Center for Life Enrichment (CLE) is honored to announce that Jaki Shelton Green, North Carolina Poet Laureate, will host her creativity salon "What We Keep Keeps Us" at CLE on Friday, June 5th from 10am to 5pm. This event is made possible thanks to support from the Cullasaja Women's Outreach Grant.

Jaki Shelton Green, ninth Poet Laureate of North Carolina, is the first African American and third woman to be appointed as the North Carolina Poet Laureate. She is a 2019 Academy of American Poet Laureate Fellow, 2014 NC Literary Hall of Fame Inductee, 2009 NC Piedmont Laureate appointee, and 2003 recipient of

the North Carolina Award for Literature. She teaches Documentary Poetry at Duke University Center for Documentary Studies and was appointed the 2021 Frank B. Hanes Writer in Residence at UNC Chapel Hill. Green is also the owner of SistaWRITE, providing writing retreats for women writers in Sedona Arizona, Martha's Vineyard, Ocracoke North Carolina,

Northern Morocco, and Tullamore, Ireland. This will be her first time presenting in Highlands, NC.

Green's creativity salon "What We Keep Keeps Us: Exploring Our Human Museums" centers around the excavation of our human museums — i.e. the lived experiences, memories, and inner landscapes that shape who we are and how we create. Green's work bridges the personal and the communal, inviting participants to explore how creativity and identity emerge from our deepest interior spaces and shared stories. Guided by Green, participants at CLE will explore how language, voice, and creative expression can be reclaimed and shaped by lived experience rather than inherited limitations. Through dialogue, reflection, and poetic inquiry, participants will be invited to deepen their creative practice and embrace the alchemy of self and collective transformation.

"We are truly honored and excited to welcome North Carolina Poet Laureate Jaki Shelton Green to the Plateau for this special workshop," said Meg Stevens, CLE's Executive Director. "Her work opens the door to a powerful and deeply personal exploration of creativity—drawing on lived experiences, memory, and the inner landscapes that shape who we are. With remarkable energy, insight, and compassion, she brings these ideas to life, inviting participants to reflect on their own 'personal museums' and discover new pathways for creative expression. We are especially grateful to the Cullasaja Women's Outreach for making this meaningful opportunity possible through their generous grant support."

"What We Keep Keeps Us" will take place at the CLE Lecture Hall on Friday, June 5th from 10am to 5pm, with a one-hour break for lunch. The cost to attend this exclusive creativity experience is \$125 for CLE members, and \$140 for non-members. To register, please call (828) 526-8811 or visit [www.clehighlands.com](http://www.clehighlands.com).



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# • UPCOMING EVENTS •



Marsha Shmalo, Diandra Mundy and Berney Kirkland rehearse a scene from *Blithe Spirit*

## Highlands Cashiers Players present *Blithe Spirit*

Highlands Cashiers Players will present *Blithe Spirit*, a classic comedy by Noel Coward, May 14 through May 24 at the Martin Lipscomb Theater at Highlands Performing Arts Center.

The play, which first premiered in 1941, is a witty, supernatural farce that explores the intersection of love, the after-life, and a bit of mischievous humor.

The HCP production is directed by Michael Lanzilotta. Jayne Pleasants is the assistant director and Cathy Myers is the stage manager and set designer.

The play is set in the 1940s at the home of Charles Condomine, a successful author, and his second wife, Ruth. Charles is writing a book about spiritualism and invites a medium named Madame Arcati to conduct a séance as part of research for his next book. His research has unexpected results, however, when the séance summons the ghost of Charles' first wife, Elvira.

Elvira's reappearance causes chaos and comedy as her playful and sometimes jealous presence invades Ruth and Charles' lives. Throughout the play, the eccentric Madame Arcati tries to help resolve the ghostly mishaps and misunderstandings, though she never fully understands the extent of what she has unleashed.

The cast features Todd Lipphardt and Berney Kirkland as Charles and Ruth Condomine, Diandra Mundy as Elvira, and Julie Harris as Madame Arcati. Dr.

Bradman and his wife Felicity, friends of the Condomines who witness the séance, are played by Matthew Eberz and Emily Wright. Marsha Shmalo is the Condomine's maid, Edith.

Thursday and Friday performances are at 7 pm, Saturday shows begin at 5 pm and Sunday matinees are at 2 pm. Tickets are available at

HighlandsCashiersPlayers.com, or by calling the PAC Box Office at 828-526-9047. The Highlands Performing Arts Center is located at 507 Chestnut Street, Highlands, NC.



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# Highlands School Prom – The Golden Gala – May 1 at The Farm



Photos by the Sunset Staff

*Graduation Day for the  
Class of 2026 is  
Saturday, May 30 at 10a  
in the new gym.*

# • HS SPORTS •

## Highlands Athletics Weekly Recap: Championships and Playoff Pushes

It was a week defined by grit and hardware for Highlands athletics. From a dominant shutout on the pitch to All-Conference honors on the links, the Highlanders are making their presence felt as the 2026-2027 spring season reaches its climax.

### Middle School Soccer: A Marathon to the Title

The MS Girls Soccer team provided the week's most heart-stopping drama, capturing the Tri-State Conference Championship through sheer endurance.

Their journey began Monday against top-seeded Rabun Gap. After a scoreless regulation and two five-minute overtimes, the match went to penalty kicks. Valentina Gomez and Vicky Ahrens found the back of the net to pull off the upset.

Friday's championship game at Talulah Falls was even more intense. Again, the teams remained deadlocked through overtime. It took two full rounds of penalty kicks before the Lady Highlanders finally prevailed. Clutch goals by Akira Nolan, Tine Gomez, Corena Dearth, Bella Batista, and Ariana Trejo sealed the victory and the trophy.

### High School Soccer: Highs and Lows

The Lady Highlanders varsity squad started the week with a statement, crushing Blue Ridge 9-0 on Monday. Anabelle

Hays set the tone immediately, scoring unassisted just 39 seconds into the match.

The scoring onslaught included: Jordyn Borino: 2 goals, Aubree Brooks: 2 goals, Anabelle Hays: 2 goals (total), Letic Campos & Nani Campos: 1 goal each, Miley Zagal-Damian: 1 goal (The first of her career, scored on a direct kick to end the game).

On Thursday, the momentum hit a snag against a stout Swain defense. After a 0-0 first half, Swain broke through for three goals to take the match 3-0. The Lady Highlanders travel to Murphy this Tuesday for the regular-season finale before the state playoffs begin.

### Golf & Track: Conference Honors Varsity Golf

The HS Golf team saved their best for the SMC Championship at Mountain Harbor, shooting a season-low 356 to finish 3rd overall. Sam Conner: The freshman led the way with an individual 3rd-place finish, earning All-Conference honors. Rowen Carnes: Tied for 10th and received Honorable Mention All-Conference.

The team heads to Meadowbrook Golf Course in Rutherfordton for Regionals this Tuesday.

### Track and Field

At the SMC Conference Champion-



**Brett Lamb**  
Highlands School  
Athletic Director

ship in Cherokee, Anabelle Hays proved her versatility, securing 5th-place finishes in both the 100 meters and the 110 hurdles. The team will travel to Montreat College on Friday for the 1A regional meet. On the Middle School side, the team concluded their season at the Tri-State Conference Meet; Both the boys and girls finished 3rd place. Fans are encouraged to check the full results for top-three podium finishers.

### Celebrating Excellence: Athletic Banquets

As the middle school season concludes, Athletic Director Kaitlin Bishop and the coaching staff invite families to celebrate a successful year.

### Tues., May 12

At Highlands Rec Park, the Highlands School Middle School Athletic Banquet at 6 p.m. Each athlete is permitted to bring two parents or guardians. No siblings please.

### Wed., May 13

At Highlands Rec Park, the Highlands School High School Athletic Banquet. Each athlete is permitted to bring two parents or guardians. No siblings please.

## • BIZ/ORG NEWS •

### Highlands Performing Arts Center announces cancellation of Oct 30 concert

The Highlands Performing Arts Center (PAC) regrets to announce that the October 30, 2026, performance by Damn Tall Buildings has been cancelled.

The agency representing the band has informed the PAC that all Fall 2026 tour dates are being cancelled due to a member of the band expecting a child, with travel no longer feasible so close to the anticipated due date. We extend our warmest congratulations to the band during this special time.

While we are disappointed to miss this performance, we fully support the band's decision and appreciate our patrons' understanding. PAC is pleased to share that the performance will be re-

scheduled for Fall 2027, with additional details to be announced at a later date.

Patrons who have purchased tickets for the October 30 performance will be contacted directly by the PAC Box Office regarding refunds.

The 2026 Concert Series remains full of exciting performances across a wide range of genres, and we look forward to welcoming audiences for an outstanding season.

For more information, please contact Jeanne Piazza, Executive Director at the Highlands Performing Arts Center 828-526-9047 ext. 5 or visit [www.highlandperformingarts.com](http://www.highlandperformingarts.com).

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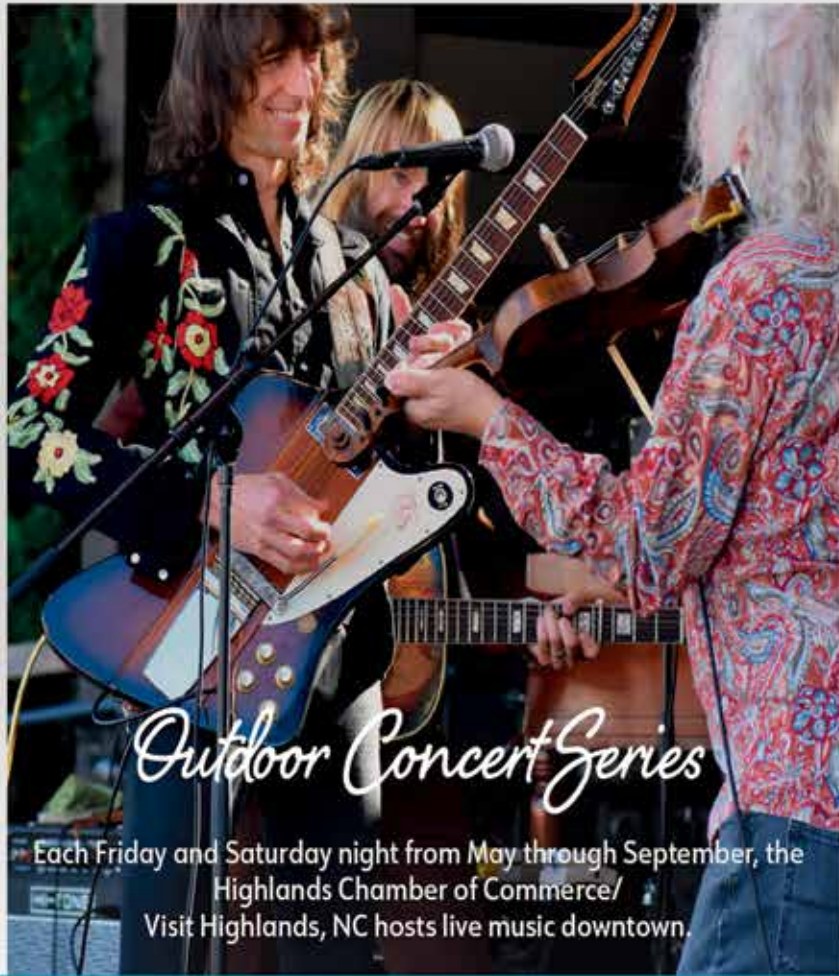
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## Outdoor Concert Series

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## Music to massage



Dr. Kristin Lander with MountainTop Rotary president Bill Kirkman.

MountainTop Rotarians heard from Dr. Kristin Lander. Kristen's path from music major and massage therapist to chiropractor is a testament to following both passion and purpose. While pursuing massage therapy, she discovered a deeper calling in helping others feel their best. Blending dedication and a genuine desire to make a difference, Kristen transitioned into chiropractic care, where she now uses her skills to support healing and wellness — improving lives one patient at a time.

## ...PLAN continued from page 5

smaller lots.

"I think we should look at the zoning map to possibly add some higher density areas. I know it is unusual for me to have this change of mindset but I want people to have the ability to build a smaller footprint home on a smaller lot – even discuss things like duplexes for the sake of the economy and allowing other income tax brackets to live here," she said.

This mirrored Commissioner Bill Grubb's thoughts about making sure Highlands stays a multi-generational community – thoughts he voiced during his interview when applying for the vacated board seat – which he got.

"I am in favor of using the Comprehensive Plan and design guidelines we have in the UDO and seeking public input to update it — not starting over. The existing plan had good input and is a good starting point," he said.

However, Grubb said he isn't in favor of increasing the density to allow additional dwelling units in areas that are already very dense like the Mirror Lake area.

The board is just at the beginning stages of contemplating zoning density changes and where that would be and how it would look isn't clear yet.

Grubb suggested the town support

workforce housing by using a narrowly constructed Special Use Permit process to support a non-profit or development with specific covenant requirements for workforce housing starting with teachers, health care, police, fire, and finally general workers.

Commissioner Jeff Weller said he didn't think it was time to redo the Comprehensive Plan, either.

"Typically, the Plan ranges anywhere from five to 10 years and most experts say that the only time you do it in five years is when you have a town or city that is growing in leaps and bounds. That is not the case for Highlands," he said. "And I am not in favor of redoing it for at least another two to three years and we need between eight and 10 years between examinations."

Though the document isn't policy, but rather a document of suggestions, Weller said he thinks the town should be more diligent in its use and explore what elements need to be pulled out, adopted, or modified.

"I don't think there's an appetite for a complete redo on the board at this point by anyone that I'm aware of," he said. "Also, it should be remembered that the Planning Board is an advisory board

• See PLAN page 25

# • BIZ/ORG NEWS •



Josh Bryson, President, Rotary Club of Highlands and Todd Holder, Rotary Club Member and Speaker

## Rotary Club of Highlands member shares passion for coffee roasting

At its Tuesday, April 28 meeting, the Rotary Club of Highlands welcomed member Todd Holder, who delivered an engaging presentation titled “Coffee Culture: A Simple Guide to a Master Craft.”

Over more than 30 years, Holder has pursued a deep interest in producing superior roasted coffee — both for his own enjoyment and to share with others. His journey has involved extensive research into bean sourcing and roasting techniques, along with plenty of hands-on experimentation. The result: the ability to craft both caffeinated and decaffeinated brews perfectly suited to his and his wife Ann’s tastes.

Along the way, Holder’s roasting

toolkit has evolved from stovetop popcorn poppers and cast iron skillets to conventional and specialty ovens, and finally to roasters purpose-built for small-batch home use.

His presentation offered several surprises for coffee lovers in the audience. Among them: light roast coffee actually contains more caffeine by volume than dark roast — a fact that caught many listeners off guard. Holder also walked members through the various ways coffee is professionally evaluated, touching on taste, aroma, and acidity.

The presentation was well-received, wrapping up with a lively round of questions from fellow Rotary members.



On May 1, plateau Rotarians attended the Rotary District Conference at the Tryon International Equestrian Center. From left: A member of the Cashiers Rotary, John Baumrucker, Mtntop Rotary; Mary Adair Trumbly, Mtntop Rotary; John Martin, Mtntop Rotary, Acting President; Josh Bryson, Highlands Rotary President-Elect; and Randy Foster, Highlands Rotary President.



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June

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# SPIRITUALLY SPEAKING



## Remember the person who was your mother

**Ken Langsdorf**  
Lutheran Church of the  
Holy Family

This coming Sunday we will celebrate Mothers' Day. For many of us Mothers' Day brings a mix of emotions. Mothers' Day may be a great occasion to give thanks for our moms who wonderfully nurtured us, cared for us, and loved us with a deep and self-giving love. For many of us our first experience of what God's love is like came through the love of our mothers. Mothers can show us a love that is devoted, forgiving, and even sacrificing. Most of us learn how to love from our mother's example. Mothers' Day can be a great opportunity for us to express our appreciation and love for our moms.

Even though our mothers were not perfect people, they had their flaws and failings; they did the best they could to be the kind of mother we needed. Most of us, I hope, are grateful for our mothers.

Mothers' Day can also be a very sad day as we miss our mothers who have died. We miss that connection to who we are. We miss sharing the joys and struggles of life with her. We miss her hugs and listening ear. We miss this great mentor and role model for our lives. Many of us miss our mom, but still on Mothers' Day we pause to remember and give thanks for this dear one who not only gave birth to us but also gave us a life enveloped by her love.

For some women, Mothers' Day brings a painful reminder that, for one reason or another, they were not able to be a mother. This can be a deep and lifelong grief. Mothers' Day can have hurt attached to it. Many women ease this grief by "mothering" other people's children and become a great blessing to them.

On this Mothers' Day I encourage you to intentionally express to your mom the gratitude you have for her. It may also be an occasion to share forgiveness with one another and move forward in peace. And if your mom has passed, today may be a good time to write her a letter sharing your feelings of gratitude and grief with her.

And to all the mothers out there, as you look forward to Mothers' Day, be careful not to set your expectations too high. The celebration might fall short of what you deserve. Know to the depth of your spirit that you are loved by God with a steadfast and eternal love.

May all mothers be filled with God's mercy, grace, peace, and steadfast love; and may all the goodness of God flow from them as they care for His precious children entrusted to their care.

A beautiful prayer for each mother (all of us) to pray is the prayer of Jesus' mother, Mary. She prayed, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38)

# PLACES TO WORSHIP

## BLUEVALLEY BAPTIST CHURCH

Rev. Oliver Rice. Pastor 706-782-3965

Sundays: School: 10 a.m., Worship: 11

Sunday night services every 2nd & 4th Sunday at 7

Wednesdays: Mid-week prayer meeting: 7 p.m.

## BUCK CREEK BAPTIST CHURCH

828-269-3546 • Rev. Jamie Passmore. Pastor

Sundays: School: 10 a.m.; Worship: 11

## CASHIERS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Rev. Aryn Williams-Reubel. Pastor 828-743-5298

Sundays: School at 9:30; Worship 10:30

## GRACE CHAPEL ON HIGH HOLLY

9615 Dillard Rd Scaly Mountain, N.C.

Pastor Steve Kerhoulas. <http://www.Graceonhighholly.com>

Sunday School 9:45; Worship 11; Prayer Service Wed 5:30p

Men's and Women's Bible Study throughout the week

## CHRIST ANGLICAN CHURCH

The Rev'd Dr. Marc Robertson & Rev. Nick McGee

464 U.S. Hwy. 64E, Cashiers, NC

CAC@christanglicancashiers.org • 828-743-1701

Sunday: Adult Christian Ed, 9:15a; Holy Eucharist, 10:30a;

Fellowship 11:45a; Wed: Bible Study/Contemplative Prayer, 5p

## CHRIST CHURCH OF THE VALLEY. CASHIERS

Pastor Jacob Tedder • [jacob@cashiers.church](mailto:jacob@cashiers.church) • 743-5470

[www.cashiers.church](http://www.cashiers.church)

Sun. 10:45a; Wed Study 5:15p supper and childcare.

## CLEAR CREEK BAPTIST CHURCH

Pastor Jim Kinar

Sundays: School: 10 a.m.; Worship: 11 a.m.

1st & 3rd Sunday night Service: 7 p.m.

Wednesdays - Supper at 6 p.m.

## COMMUNITY BIBLE CHURCH

[www.cbchighlands.com](http://www.cbchighlands.com) • 526-4685

3645 Cashiers Rd. Highlands, NC • Sr. Pastor Gary Hewins

Sun: Service 10:45am, Children's 10:30am

Wed.: Youth 5:30-7pm; Women's Bible Study: Mon. 4:30pm, Tues.

10am; Men's Bible Study: Wed. & Thurs. 7am @ Zookeeper

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## EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF THE INCARNATION

Rev. W. Bentley Manning, Rector • 526-2968

5th and Main streets • [www.incarnationwnc.org](http://www.incarnationwnc.org)

Sunday: Rite I, spoken, 8 am in Chapel, Rite II with Choir 10:30

am in Sanctuary, Wed: Healing Eucharist 12 pm in Chapel,

Morning Prayer: Mon-Thurs 8:30 am in Chapel

## FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH HIGHLANDS

828-526-4153 • [www.fbchighlands.org](http://www.fbchighlands.org)

Dr. Mark Ford, Pastor • 220 Main Street, Highlands

Sun.: Worship 10:45 am; Sun.: Bible Study 9:30 am

Wed.: Men's Bible Study 8:30 am; Women's 10:30 am

## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Rev. Emily Wilmarth, pastor; Rev. Kelley Connelly Asso. Pastor

828-526-3175 • [fphighlands.org](http://fphighlands.org)

Sun.: Adult Ed.: 10a; Worship 11a.; Tues: Men's Group 10a;

Wed: Bell Choir 4p. Chancel Choir: 5:30p

## GOLDMINE BAPTIST CHURCH

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Sunday School: 10 am. Worship Service: 11 am

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Sunday: School 9:45a. Worship 11a & 7p. Bible Study 6p

Wed. Kidsquest 6p.; Worship 7p.

## HIGHLANDS ASSEMBLY OF GOD

Randy Reed. Pastor 828-421-9172 • 165 S. Sixth Street

Wed. Bible Study: 6 p.m.; Sundays: Worship: 11

## HIGHLANDS CENTRAL BAPTIST CHURCH

Pastor Dan Robinson • 11339 Buck Creek Road

The Highlands Central Baptist Church is temporarily

sharing the facilities of the Shortoff Baptist Church.

Sunday Worship is at 9a. & 6p. Wednesday Worship is 6p

## HIGHLANDS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Rev. Dr. Randy Lucas. Pastor 526-3376

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[www.highlandsmethodist.org](http://www.highlandsmethodist.org)

## HOLY FAMILY LUTHERAN CHURCH: ELCA

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Rev. Ken Langsdorf

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## MACEDONIA BAPTIST CHURCH

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Pastor Zane Talley

Sundays: School: 10 a.m.; Worship: 11. Choir: 6 p.m.

Wed: Bible Study and Youth Mtg.: 7 p.m.

## MOUNTAIN SYNAGOGUE

Franklin • 828-634-1312 • [mountainsynagoguenc.com](http://mountainsynagoguenc.com).

Services: 1st Fri. and 3rd Sat. and Rosh Hashanah & Yom

Kippur.

## MOUNTAIN BIBLE CHURCH

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Sun: 10:30 a.m. at Big Ridge Baptist Church. 4224 Big Ridge

(4.5 miles from NC 107)

Wed: Youth Group 6 p.m.; Bible Study 6:30 p.m.;

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## SCALY MOUNTAIN BAPTIST CHURCH

Rev. Marty Kilby

Sundays: School - 10 a.m.; Worship - 11 a.m. & 7

Wednesdays: Prayer Mtg.: 7 p.m.

## SCALY MOUNTAIN CHURCH OF GOD

290 Buck Knob Road; Pastor Donald G. Bates • 526-3212

Sun.: School: 10 a.m.; Worship: 10:45 a.m.; Worship: 6 p.m.

## SHORTOFF BAPTIST CHURCH

Pastor Rev. Richard Salmonson

Sundays: School: 10 a.m.; Worship: 11 a.m.

## ST. JUDE'S CATHOLIC CHURCH

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7p (Spanish); Wed., 9:30a (English)

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## WHITESIDE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Rev. Sam Forrester/Cashiers • 828-743-2122

Sunday School: 10 am. Worship Service: 11 am

# • POLICE & FIRE REPORTS •

**Highlands Police entries from April 28. Only the names of persons arrested, issued a summons/citation, issued a Class-3 misdemeanor or those of public officials have been used.**

## Accidents

### April 28

• Vehicle 1 was parked in the center parking facing north on US 64. Vehicle 2 was parked in the parking area to the right of US 64 facing north. Driver of vehicle 1 got out of her vehicle without putting it in park. Vehicle 1 rolled and hit vehicle 2 and both vehicles came to rest in the roadway.

### April 29

• Vehicle 1 was pulling into the ABC parking lot. Vehicle 2 was parked facing East in the ABC parking lot. Vehicle 1 attempted to pull into a parking spot and struck vehicle #2 in rear left corner.

### April 30

• Vehicle 1 was traveling east on Oak St. Vehicle 2 was pulling out of driveway to travel east on Oak St and pulled into

the intersection and hit vehicle 2.

### May 1

Vehicle 1 was parked in the First Citizens Bank parking lot facing south. An unknown vehicle 2 crashed into the rear back left of vehicle 1 and left the scene.

• During the week officers issued 4 Citations and 8 Warning Tickets

### April 29

• At 11:30 a.m., officers were called to 429 Hardscrabble Ridge Road regarding the murder of a worker by assaulting the victim with a cutting instrument, a blunt object and fists resulting in death.

• At 4:30 p.m., officers responded to a call of shoplifting at Potpourri on Main Street in Highlands where about \$40 worth of jewelry was taken.

### April 30

At 3:10 a.m., Rene Pena Diaz, 41, of Greenville, SC, was arrested for the murder of Jose Antonio Pena Diaz, 49, at a jobsite at 429 Hardscrabble Ridge Road in Highlands. He is in the Jackson County Detention Center without bond.

## The Highlands Fire &

## Homicide investigation leads to arrest

On April 29, at approximately 11:30 a.m., the Highlands Police Department responded to a report of a missing person at a residence under construction at 429 Hardscrabble Ridge Road. The call indicated that blood had been discovered at the site and that one of the workers was unaccounted for.

Upon arrival, officers encountered three adult males outside the residence. One of the individuals, identified as Jose Antonia Pena-Diaz, was found deceased as a result of assault wounds.

The North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation and the 43rd Prosecutorial District Attorney's Office were requested and responded to assist with the investigation.



Rene Pena-Diaz

As a result of the investigation, Rene Pena Diaz, 41, of Greenville, SC, was arrested and charged with murder. He is being held in the Jackson County Detention center on no bond.

Police removed several items from the scene containing suspected blood and hair including white rags, a white T-shirt, a box cutter, a paint scraper, a screwdriver in pine straw, a blue, long-sleeved shirt, and a power

## Rescue log from April 28.

### April 28

• At 11:56 p.m., the dept. responded to a structure fire on Zachary Road.

### April 29

• At 11:23 a.m., the dept. was first-responders to a home site on Hardscrabble Ridge Road. It was cancelled en route.

### April 30

• At 12:57 p.m., the dept. responded to a fire alarm at a location on Oak Street.

### May 1

• At 9:24 p.m., the dept. was first-responders to a location on Main Street.

### May 3

• At 4:36 p.m., the dept. investigated the source of an odor at a location on NC 106 (Dillard Road).

### May 4

• At 12:31 p.m., the dept. responded to a motor vehicle accident on Wilson Road.

• At 9:06 p.m., the dept. was first-responders to a residence on Pinewood Lane.

• At 9:31 p.m., the dept. was first-responders to a residence on Old Walhalla Road.

drill. Also retrieved was a wooden-handled paint brush as well as a swab from a red stain on the floor of a bedroom which was marked by K9.

Due to the location of the incident, the case will be prosecuted in Jackson County, NC, as the residence is located within Jackson County while also falling inside the corporate limits of Highlands, NC.

The Highlands Police Department extends its heartfelt condolences to the family and loved ones of the victim.

The Department also expresses its appreciation to the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation, the District Attorney's Office, and Macon County EMS for their assistance.

This remains an active investigation.

– Submitted by HPD



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# • CLASSIFIEDS •

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## Biz Card Ads

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## Classifieds

\$10 first 10 words - 30 cents each additional word  
color highlight - \$2  
graphic - \$5

## ...PLAN continued from page 20

to the Town Board, so they can discuss it if they'd like, but I would be surprised if the Town or even the Planning Board would be interested in pursuing a redo at this time."

In a recent Zoning Board meeting regarding the hotel on the old Bank of America property, board members' discussion centered around using the Comprehensive Plan for guidance in their decision. But the suggestions outlined in the Comprehensive Plan are just that – not regulations or "laws" to abide.

"The Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) is the actual ordinance that is enforced and which the Zoning Board is to go by," said Town Manager Ward. "The Comprehensive Plan is a guide that is to be consulted when the Planning Board is making recommendations on applications that are before them such as special use permits."

Furthermore, he said the UDO is not changed by changing the Comprehensive Plan.

"The Town Board would still have to amend the UDO to enforce something that comes out of the Comprehensive Plan. The Planning or Zoning boards can ask the Town Board to change the UDO, but the Town Board doesn't have to act," he said.



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# • HIGHLANDS AREA EVENTS •

## NOTE:

• Highlands Pharmacy is closed on Saturdays until May. Hours are Mon.-Fri. 9a to 5:30p.

## POOL SCHEDULE

• Lap Swim: Mon.-Fri. 6am-9:45am, and Saturday 10am-11pm - 6 lanes. Water Aerobics: 18 y+ Mon.-Fri. 10-11am with Karen Chambers. Adult Swim: 18y+ Mon.-Thurs. 11am-3:30pm, Friday 11am-1:30pm. Public Swim: Mon. thru Thurs.. 3:30-7pm, Saturday 11am-6pm and Sunday 1-6pm

## PICKLE BALL

• At the Recreation Dept. every Monday - Friday 10am-1pm indoors for the winter (notice the days and time has changed),

## MOUNTAIN FINDINGS

• **Spring Hours:** Friday & Saturdays. Open: 10 am - 1 pm. May 1-2, 8-9, 15-16; Thurs., Fri, Sat.: May 21-23, May 28-30. Spruce Street. [www.mountainfindings.org](http://www.mountainfindings.org)

• Fibber Magee's Store on Laurel Street Hours. Wed. & Fri. - 10a too 4p. Sat. - 10a to 2p.

## ALL WEEK

• Scaly Mountain/Highlands/Cashiers Alcoholics Anonymous "Open Meetings" are for anyone who thinks they may have a drinking problem or for anyone interested in the A.A. recovery program. Open meetings are held at Scaly Mountain @ Grace Chapel, 9915 Dillard Rd., Scaly Mountain each Tues at 5:30 pm and Highlands @ the 1st Presbyterian Church, 471 Main St., on Monday at 5:30 p.m. and on Wednesday & Fridays @ 12:00 noon. Open in-person meetings are also held in Cashiers @ the Albert Carlton Cashiers Community Library, 249 Frank Allen Rd. on Sunday at 5pm, on Tuesday @ 7 pm, on Friday at 5 pm and on Saturday at 9 am. For more information please visit our website [www.aawnc80.org](http://www.aawnc80.org) or to speak with a member of A.A. 24/7 call our HELP Line 828 349-4357

## Mon.Thurs.

• At First Presbyterian Church, ArtSpace is open from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. The next exhibit will start in mid-August. For information contact [fpchkelley@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkelley@gmail.com)

## Mon., Tues., Wed, Fri.

• EnerChi: Connect mind, body, and breath using Tai Chi in a meditative movement practice. Call or email if interested in these classes 828-634-1404 or [Wellspring-Classes@gmail.com](mailto:Wellspring-Classes@gmail.com). Mon. 5:30-6:30pm, Tues. 4-5pm, Wed. 6:30-7:30pm and Fri. 4-5pm and 5:30-6:30pm.

## Mon-Wed-Fri

• Aerobics with Tina Rogers 8-9am at the Rec Park.

• Balance, Stretch & Strengthen Class at the Rec Park 8:30-9:30am. The cost for the class is \$30 a month and is led by Vivian Brewer. Call the Recreation Department at 828-526-3556 for more information.

## Mon., Tues., Thurs.

• The Food Pantry behind the Methodist Church on Spring Street is open from 10a-6p.  
• Exercise Class with Michelle Lane at the Rec Park at 5:30. A combo class with different types of exercise. 828-526-3556

## Second Mondays

• The local chapter of PEO, an off-campus sorority founded in the 1800s that provides grants and loans to women with financial need who want to return to school or further their education meets at 10 a.m. For more info call president Paula McDonald at 706-372-3004

## Tuesdays

• Strength Training at the Rec Park 8:15-9:15 am.

• At Wayfarers Chapel, Workshop for Writers - from 5-6:30 PM

• ESL classes at The Literacy & Learning Center, 6-7 p.m. 675 S 4th St.

## 2nd Tuesdays

• Highlands Writers Group meets on alternate Tuesday afternoons at 3pm. Writers still uncomfortable with in-person gatherings may participate via Zoom meetings For more info contact Bud Katz at either 828-526-3190 or at [budandlynn@me.com](mailto:budandlynn@me.com)

## Wednesdays

• The Literacy & Learning Center offers a FREE weekly Citizenship Class led by Favola Olvera from 5:30 to 7 pm at 675 S 4th St in Highlands, this program is designed to help students navigate the complexities of the U.S. naturalization exam.

• Digital Navigators will be at the Hudson Library from 1-3 PM, digital navigators will host a Tech Time drop-in time at Hudson Library with the goal to assist attendees with basic smartphone, laptop, iPad and tablet skills. For more information, call the Library at 828-526-3031. This program is free and open to the public.

## Thursdays

• Kickboxing 8:15-9:15a. at the Rec Park. No martial arts background necessary Contact the Rec Dept. at 828-526-3556 for more info.

• At First Presbyterian Church a free concert "Music for Prayer" at noon. These casual concerts are almost entirely improvised and last 30-45 minutes.

• At Hudson Library, special children's events will be on tap on Thursday afternoons at 3:30 Kids Zone programs.

## 3rd Saturdays

• The American Legion Post 370 meets at the First Methodist Church at 315 Main St. in their community room/909 chapel. Breakfast at 9a; meeting is at 10a. Email [ncpost370@gmail.com](mailto:ncpost370@gmail.com) or just join us at 9am.

## May 6-13

• The Highlands Rec Park gym will be CLOSED for Mother's Day Bridge Tournament and HS Athletic Banquets.

## Thurs.-Sat., May 7-9

• Highlands Mother's Day Bridge Sec-

tional at the Highlands Recreation Center, 600 North 4th Street Highlands, NC. \$30/pair Thurs. and Fri. \$180/Team of 4, Sat. Robert Todd Lessons-Free. For more information, call 828-526-3556

## Fri., May 8

• Headwaters Bird Alliance outing - Wetlands Birding with Jason Love. For more information or to reserve a spot for any of the outings, please email [hello@headwatersbirdalliance.org](mailto:hello@headwatersbirdalliance.org) or go to our website at [headwatersbirdalliance.org/events](http://headwatersbirdalliance.org/events).

## Sun., May 10

• Headwaters Bird Alliance outing at Jones Gap with Brent Martin, Highlands, NC. For more information or to reserve a spot for any of the outings, please email [hello@headwatersbirdalliance.org](mailto:hello@headwatersbirdalliance.org) or go to our website at [headwatersbirdalliance.org/events](http://headwatersbirdalliance.org/events).

## Tues., May 12

• At Highlands Rec Park, the Highlands School Middle School Athletic Banquet at 6 p.m. Each athlete is permitted to bring two parents or guardians. No siblings please.

## Wed., May 13

• At Highlands Rec Park, the Highlands School High School Athletic Banquet. Each athlete is permitted to bring two parents or guardians. No siblings please.

## May 14-24

• Highlands Cashiers Players present Blithe Spirit.

## May 15-19

• The Highlands Rec Park gm will be CLOSED to refinish the gym floor.

## Fri., May 15

• Friday Night Live in Town Square 6-8:30p featuring The Foxfire Boys.

• Headwaters Bird Alliance local chapter of the National Audubon Society outing at Alarka Laurel with Brent Martin, Franklin, NC. For more information or to reserve a spot for any of the outings, please email [hello@headwatersbirdalliance.org](mailto:hello@headwatersbirdalliance.org) or go to our website at [headwatersbirdalliance.org/events](http://headwatersbirdalliance.org/events).

## May 16-July 25

• At The Bascom, "Connecting to Place: Blue Ridge Craft Trails Invitational 2026" in the Thompson Gallery. Curated by M. Anna Fariello, a former Smithsonian Renwick Fellow and Fulbright Scholar, the exhibition brings together 20 craft artists from communities across WNC, including Franklin, Waynesville, Dillsboro, Bryson City, Cullowhee, Canton, Cherokee, Maggie Valley, and Brasstown. It's presented in partnership with the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, which operates the Blue Ridge Craft Trails program. Admission is free.

## Sat. & Sun., May 16 & 17

• A weekend of live music, food & fun in the Secret Garden Sandwich Shop courtyard. (208 N. 5th Street in Village Square) On Saturday, Marc Hudson is performing progressive blue grass 12-3p. Food and drinks available for purchase. On Sunday, a Wine Tasting to the

tunes of Highlands' own Katie & Ezra from 2-4p. \$40 per person. Food available for purchase.

## Sat., May 16

• High Style -- A Celebration of Art, Cuisine, Fashion & Music 9:30a to 4p at various locations around town.

• Saturdays on Pine in KH Founders Park 6-8:30p featuring Lazlruv.

## Sun., May 17

• At PAC, Balsam Range at 4 pm. [boxoffice@highlandsp Performingarts.com](mailto:boxoffice@highlandsp Performingarts.com). 828-526-9047

## Fri., May 22

• At Hudson Library, Community Coffee with Mayor Pat Taylor at 11a in the Meeting Room Subject: "Highlights for the Proposed Town Budget."

• Friday Night Live in Town Square from 6-8:30p, Silly Ridge.

## Sat., May 23

• Highlands Historical Society Season Opening Celebration on Saturday from 11 a.m. to p.m. at the Historical Village in Highlands. Music, free food and a dramatic reading of the Declaration of Independence to celebrate the United States Semi-quincentennial, and the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

• Saturday on Pine at KH Founders Park 6-8:30p, The Parks Brothers.

• Headwaters Bird Alliance outing at Tesentee Bottomland Preserve with Melanie and Keith Vickers, Otto, NC. To reserve a spot, please email [hello@headwatersbirdalliance.org](mailto:hello@headwatersbirdalliance.org)

## Fri., May 29

• Friday Night Live in Town Square from 6-8:30p, Andrew Wakefield & Friends.

## Sat., May 30

• Saturday on Pine at KH Founders Park 6-8:30p, Snap.

• Highlands School graduation, 10 am in new gym.

• At PAC, The Texas Tenors, 7:30 pm. [boxoffice@highlandsp Performingarts.com](mailto:boxoffice@highlandsp Performingarts.com). 828-526-9047

• At The Bascom, From Tuber to Trophy: A Dahlia Growers' Talk, 11 am - 12 pm, Free.

## June 1-5

• Vacation Bible School "Camp Yahweh" at Community Bible Church. Rising Kindergarten through rising 6th graders. Register at [cbchighlands.com](http://cbchighlands.com).

## June 6

• Pop-Up Pipers

## Thurs.-Sat., June 11-13

• Highlands Motoring festival.

## Sat & Sun, June 27-28

• Mountaintop Rotary Club's Art and Craft show in KH-Founders Park.

## July 14

• Chef Dinners at OEI's The Farm. Annual Champagne Dinner featuring Pol Roger. Tickets start at \$234. Includes dinner drinks, shuttle and gratuity. Book online.

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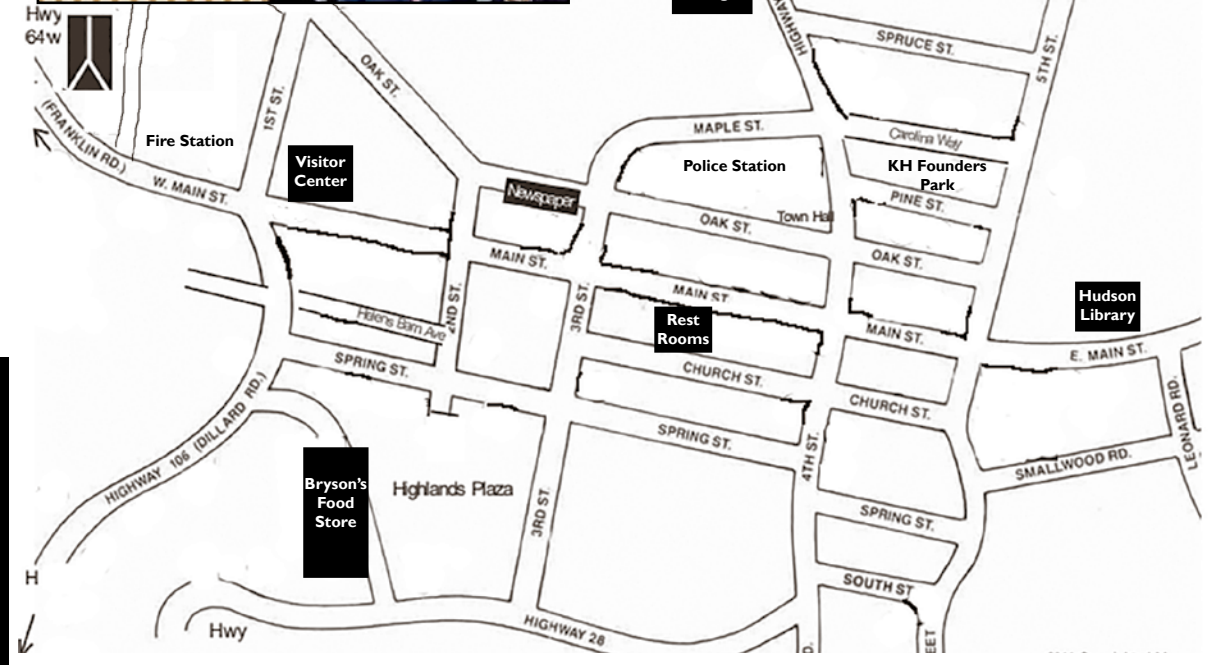
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