

Jefferson McDonald's employee injured in shooting

A Stone Mountain man has been arrested in connection with a shooting that injured an employee of the McDonald's in Jefferson.

Devonte Watts, 26, of Stone Mountain, was arrested on charges of aggravated battery, aggravated assault, possession of a firearm by a convicted felon and possession of a firearm during commission of a crime.

Officers with the Jefferson Police Department were called to the McDonald's on Hwy. 129 in Jefferson on June 10 shortly after 9 p.m.

"Officers were advised that a black male subject drove up to the drive-thru and ordered food," according to a JPD news release. "An argument with an employee then ensued at the pick-up window, and the customer was said to have spit on the employee through the pick-up window. The employee went outside to confront the customer."

The argument continued, and as the customer drove away he fired one shot towards the employee, the news release said. That bullet hit a second employee who had gone outside to try to defuse the situation.

The employee who was shot was taken to a hospital to be treated for a non-life-threatening injury.

"We'd like to thank all the agencies who assisted us with this incident including Jackson County Sheriff's Office, Georgia Bureau of Investigations, Gainesville Police Department and Hall County Sheriff's Office," the JPD said in a news release.

Developers defend proposed Commerce subdivision

Developers of a proposed large, and controversial, subdivision in Commerce met with citizens on June 14 in an effort to answer questions and tamp-down the pushback the project's gotten at recent planning board meetings.

The proposed 400+ home development would be the largest single residential project in Commerce's history. It would cover 181 acres off of Hwy. 441 South and White Hill Rd.

Action on the project has been tabled twice before the Commerce Planning Commission and it is expected to come back up at that board's June meeting later this month.

Many of the complaints aired at the June 14 meeting revolved around potential traffic and infrastructure problems. Several speakers said that White Hill Rd. is a popular "cut-through" route for people wanting to get to Hwy. 441. Adding a major subdivision off the road would cause a major traffic problem, they said, especially for those wanting to cross the southbound lane of Hwy. 441 to go north on the highway.

Shawn Jones pointed out that White Hill Rd. is a county route and Hwy. 441 is a state route, both outside of the City of Commerce's control.

Speakers also said Commerce doesn't have good enough water pressure in the area for a development of this size.



Keith Cook discussed his company's plans for a large residential development in Commerce at a June 14 meeting with area citizens.

One speaker said that if allowed, the development would become just one of many new residential projects to come to Commerce, something that would change the community.

Nate Johnson, a property appraiser who lives near the proposed development, said it would

See Commerce, page 2A

Ribbon cut at new high school

School facilities on the west side of Jackson County dominated the Jackson County School System's agenda over the last week.

Sunday afternoon, the system had its ribbon cutting ceremony for the new Jackson County High School on Skelton Rd. The school is a relocation of Jackson County Comprehensive High School from Jefferson and marks the first time the west side of the county has had a high school since 1979. The school will open this fall for grades 8-12.

On Monday night, the Jackson County Board of Education approved hiring Carroll Daniel Construction to build a new elementary/middle school facility near the new high school on Skelton Rd. Current plans are for the facility to be designed as a middle school, but will probably open as an elementary school to relieve overcrowding.

The west side of Jackson County has exploded with new students. During the past school year, the west side gained 420 new students into its schools while the east side of the county declined by 66 students.

Meanwhile, the existing JCCHS facility



Members of the public got a look inside the new Jackson County High School following the grand opening ceremony held June 13. (See more photos inside.)

in Jefferson is being converted to the Empower College & Career Center for students from all over the county to use for vocational and college classes. That center will open with the upcoming school year as its renovations are being completed this summer.

Also Monday night, the BOE approved designating the former West Jackson Primary School property as surplus and putting it up for sale. The facility is too old to be renovated for use and school leaders have been debating its future for the past several years. It is the third former school the system has surplus over the last decade. The system previously consolidated Benton Elementary School and South Jackson Elementary into newer facilities on the east side of the county.

County BOE looks at lower millage rate

The Jackson County School System has tentative plans to lower its millage rate this fall, but that didn't seem to satisfy a room full of red-shirted protestors at a recent school board meeting who want a bigger tax break for senior citizens.

The Jackson County Board of Education approved a tentative FY22 budget of \$96.5 million during its June 14 meeting. That's up from its FY21 budget of \$89.8 million. About \$40 million of the total will come from local property taxes.

Much of the budget's growth is linked to a rapidly expanding student population and the hiring of additional teachers and other staff.

The budget calls for a millage rate of 18.00 mills, down from 18.39 mills last year. If approved in September, that rate will mark the fourth year in a row the system has lowered its millage rate.

The BOE will hold two public hearings on the final budget and millage rate on Aug. 5, and Sept. 9, and take action on Sept. 13.

The decision is pending the system getting the county's tax digest data, which is currently undergoing appeals and corrections.

Related to that, large reassessments of property across the county has sparked complaints from taxpayers in recent weeks. At a recent meeting of the Jackson County Board of Commissioners, citizens complained about the reassessments having gone up, in some cases by double-digits.

At the June 14 Jackson BOE meeting, a crowd of citizens wearing red protest shirts were on hand. Dick Crosby spoke on behalf of the group, calling for the BOE to pressure the board of commissioners to eliminate all property taxes in the county for those over age 65. He said it would "be very simple to get done."

Crosby said the county doesn't give school property tax breaks to senior citizens. However, various homestead exemptions are available to those over age 62, but with income caps to qualify.

Although county officials have tweaked senior citizens exemptions in recent years, they have not greatly expanded the pool of those eligible for the tax breaks. At previous meetings, officials have said the county needs a larger commercial and industrial tax base before it can begin to lower residential taxes for older citizens.

That's especially complex for the Jackson County school system. Much of the county's industrial and commercial growth over the last two decades has been in Jefferson and Commerce where city school systems get those tax dollars.

The county school system has a smaller commercial and industrial tax base and is more reliant on residential and agricultural property for its property tax income. Proportionally, exempting senior citizens from school taxes would harm the county school system more than it would the two city school systems.

Jefferson council reviews truck parking amendment as it battles littering issues

By Ben Munro
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Jefferson leaders could gain more oversight on off-site truck and tractor trailer parking locations as they attempt to remedy trash problems being generated by them.

Trucks and tractor trailers parked along an access road behind McDonald's near I-85, and the resulting litter, have drawn considerable attention from the council over the past few months. But proposed amendment to the city's land use management code would make off-site truck and trailer parking a conditional use on C-2-zoned property — requiring a city council vote. The use is permitted under the current code, requiring no vote.

"The change is to make it a conditional use where someone would have to come before the council to provide (a) parking lot off-site for trucks and tractor trailers," said city manager Priscilla Murphy.

The council reviewed the amendment at its June 14 meeting a week after the Jef-

erson-Talmo Planning Commission voted to recommend it on June 7.

Councilman Mark Mobley said the amendment stems from a request made by the council's interstate exit beautification committee, of which Mobley is a member.

"We would recommend approval of this," Mobley said. "It's going to give us more control as a city about where we want truck and trailer parking."

The city council will vote on the amendment at its June 21 meeting.

SPEED CAMERA REVENUE

A total of \$78,000 of speed camera revenue could be applied toward public safety measures, if approved by the council next week.

The Jefferson City Council, at its June 14 meeting, reviewed a budget adjustment to apply \$40,000 of the revenue toward the purchase of a new police vehicle and \$38,000 to purchasing school bus cameras and safety signage around Jefferson Memorial Stadium.

The council will vote on the budget adjustment at its June 21 meeting.

Automated speed zone cameras in school zones were installed earlier this year to detect and ticket speeders. All motorists exceeding speed limit by 11 mph or more while school is in session receive a citation.

The devices have generated \$148,000 in revenue since their installation.

PROPERTY

A man whose property the city is attempting to condemn asked the council, just before it adjourned for closed session, if it planned to discuss acquiring his land. The council had voted to enter closed session to discuss property acquisition and potential legal action.

"I don't have any information about what property y'all may or may not be acquiring," Daniel Willson said. "So that's why I'm here tonight to see if it impacts me, and if you are going to acquire the property I'd like

See Jefferson, page 2A

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