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Deal made to open Memorial Stadium in time for Saints to host home games in the fall

BY BRAD FISHER & CINDY FISHER
Selma Sun Staff

As Selma High School's football team faced a second year with no home games, the Selma City Council struck a last-minute deal to get repairs made to Memorial Stadium to make the 2021 season happen.

In a special called meeting on Friday, the Selma City Council accepted bids for materials and labor to repair about 3,000 of the stadium's 7,200 seats, which were damaged in Hurricane Zeta last October and had not yet been repaired.

Selma City Schools Athletic Director Katasha Turner has

remained optimistic about finding a solution and having a successful athletic season.

"The community of Selma must come to the table and work together to build a sportsplex for all programs," she said.

Memorial Stadium, which is owned by the city of Selma, was closed to events in 2020 due to COVID-19. That forced Selma schools to play all football games away last year. This season, the city struggled to get paid from insurance claims to cover the storm damage at the stadium in time for games to be played there.

Selma Parks and Recreation Director Dr. Denisha



The last time the Selma High School Saints hosted home football games at Memorial Stadium was the 2019 season.

Hendricks said the bleachers that will be replaced are in the uncovered part of the stadium, but the seating is closest to the field and offers the best view of play.

The materials for the bleachers are made by Eovations, a local company "that ships their product all over the world," Hendricks said. She said Eovations offered the city a special price for the material, which looks like wood but is much stronger and more weather resistant than natural wood.

The labor will be provided by Cunningham Construction.

The \$24,000 labor cost and

\$24,876 material cost are under the amount required for a bid, so work can begin immediately, Hendricks said. "Our intent was to get started today (Monday), but the storms this morning prevented that," Hendricks said. "But we got some administrative things done."

The goal, she said, is to have the bleachers in the uncovered part of the stadium replaced in time for the Saints' first home game in August.

The city council approved the transfer of funds within the Parks and Recreation budget to cover the repairs at their work session last week.

St. James Hotel to be managed by New York hospitality firm

BY BRAD FISHER
Selma Sun Staff

The St. James Hotel will soon be under new management.

Jim Lewis, CEO of Rhaglan Hospitality, confirmed Friday that he has hired Rebel Hospitality to manage the 55-room Hotel on Water Avenue. Rebel Hospitality is the hotel management division of Manhattan-based Capstone Equities that specializes in boutique "lifestyle" hotels like the St. James and the other properties Rhaglan owns, Lewis said.

"This means great things for the St. James," Lewis said. "Rhaglan is good. They are a

lot better."

Lewis said Rebel has particular expertise in the food and beverage arena. "We feel strongly about the current leadership of the hotel," Lewis said. "I want the best to determine what they do every day."

The St. James, the only surviving antebellum riverfront hotel in the country, is part of the Tapestry Collection by Hilton. Rebel will manage all of Rhaglan's properties, including the Redmont Hotel in Birmingham.

Lewis said he hired Rebel to manage the day-to-day operations of his hotels so he could free himself up to focus on other development projects in

Selma. He has said he would like to develop a restaurant in Riverfront Park and multifamily housing in the former Byrd School and Good Samaritan Hospital.

Rebel CEO Brian Sparacino said in a release announcing the partnership that the deal gives Rebel "an opportunity to elevate a unique historic property that is not only located at the epicenter of the American Civil Rights movement but is poised to be a catalyst to the Selma community, its economy and the regional travel market."

The agreement was announced on the Hotel Business website.



The St. James Hotel has been renovated on Water Avenue.

Retired NFL star talks investing in Selma's kids and in downtown restaurant project

BY CINDY FISHER
Selma Sun Staff

Michael Johnson surprised many by returning to his hometown of Selma after retiring from playing football in the NFL.

While he's back, he told the Rotary Club of Selma on Monday that he wants to make a difference in Dallas County.

"This is home. I can go anywhere. Fly anywhere. But I can't recreate history, and we have that here," Johnson said. "People come from all over to see it. Now we need to get them to stay and eat and enjoy themselves while they're here. We need to support tourism. Help people see Selma the way I view Selma."

Johnson has watched redevelopment downtown and said he wants to throw his hat in the ring and open a restaurant or lounge where patrons can eat and watch sports and relax.

He likes the format of a

cigar bar like he has seen in Pensacola and Mobile that is situated like a den where patrons can socialize and enjoy fellowship.

"I want to provide a space like that where people feel safe and can relax," he said.

The plan is still developing, he said.

"We are sitting on a gold mine here," he added. "But we need to continue to work together. We can't be afraid to work together if we're going to make this place better overall good for everyone. You see what's going on in downtowns and the waterfronts and the positive energy it brings. Look at Mobile, New Orleans and even Prattville and Demopolis. They made theirs so appealing and we have waterfront too. We need to take advantage of it."

During his retirement, Johnson has become active at the YMCA of Selma-Dallas County and mentoring with youth there.

"Working with the YMCA has been cool and having a mentor role," he said. "This is where my heart is - where I can make a difference."

His nonprofit, Michael Johnson Foundation, is hosting a Family Fun Day/Back to School giveaway event on Saturday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the YMCA. It will feature two large water slides, face painting, bounce houses, a train ride, food vendors, games and more.

Michael's mother, Thomasene Johnson who runs the foundation, said to bring chairs and towels and "have fun getting wet."

"They say there's nothing to do in Selma, but we will keep them pretty busy," Thomasene Johnson said.

Rotary Club Co-President Jerria Martin said "we didn't think you'd come back" to Selma but the community is glad he did. Rotary gave a \$250 donation to the Michael Johnson Foundation.



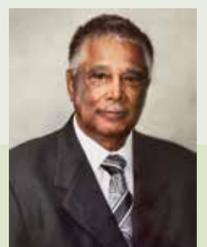
NFL star Michael Johnson and his mother, Thomasene, accept a donation from Rotary Club of Selma Co-Presidents Jerria Martin and James Steele for their foundation.



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