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Investigation ongoing after man shot in Beaver Creek community

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BEAVER CREEK — The Ashe County Sheriff's Office is investigating an incident in the Beaver Creek community after a man was shot Monday evening.

According to the Ashe County Sheriff's Office, 911 dispatch received a call at approximately 9:16 p.m. from



a female subject, later identified as Jena Shalane Barajas. Barajas stated that she had

a male subject in her home with a gunshot wound. Officers from the West Jefferson Police Department arrived on the scene at 9:21 p.m. Deputies from the Ashe County Sheriff's Office arrived shortly after that. Law enforcement officers discovered a male with a gunshot wound to his chest area. The male was identified as Travis Kent Casimir. Ashe Medics worked with

Casimir and transported him to Ashe Memorial Hospital at 9:38 p.m. Casimir was then transported to Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center in Winston-Salem. According to ACSO, he will have multiple surgeries for treatment for his injuries.

Ashe County Sheriff's Office Detectives are currently investigating the incident and working the scene.

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Lady Huskies sweep Watauga



PHOTO BY PATRICK MCCORMACK

The Ashe County varsity volleyball team celebrates their first conference championship in school history after sweeping Watauga 3-0 on Monday evening.

Volleyball team wins first conference championship in school history

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WEST JEFFERSON — In a division-determining matchup, the Ashe County Huskies defeated the Watauga Pioneers, 3-0, securing Ashe's first volleyball conference championship

banner in program history. As Ashe continues on with its best season in program history, being able to secure a share of this championship is most certainly the biggest highlight of a season already filled with impressive wins.

"It means everything to this community — they've supported us all through the season. I've coached this crew in middle school growing up at 11 and 12 years old, and we were winning

our conference then. We wanted to continue the success that we started young, and everybody in the community came together for these girls, and these girls responded — there was no way that we were going to let them down tonight," said Ashe County Head Coach Dalton Lewis.

The victory on Monday, Oct. 16 lands the Ashe County Huskies in a tie with Watauga for first place

See **CHAMPS, A3**



PHOTO BY ERIN ISLEY

Amber Scott and Alex Church address the crowd at the opening ceremony before choosing the Christmas tree for the Blue Room of the White House.

White House chooses Cline Church Nursery Christmas tree for Blue Room

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FLEETWOOD — A team from the White House ventured to Cline Church Nursery in Ashe County on Oct. 9 to select this year's Christmas tree for the Blue Room.

On a rainy afternoon, members of the Ashe County Chamber of Commerce, North Carolina Christmas Tree Association, National Christmas Tree Association, North Carolina Cooperative Extension, local media outlets and Ashe

County locals gathered on a Christmas-tree-covered mountainside to watch as two representatives from the White House chose this year's Fraser Fir tree for the first family.

This year marks the 58th time the National Christmas Tree Association has presented a tree to the White House and the 15th North Carolina Christmas tree chosen for that honor, which is more than any other state in the country. Each of those North Carolina trees have been Fraser Firs, the tree native to

See **TREE, A2**

Ashe County Commissioners hear minimum housing standards proposal

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JEFFERSON — Down Home North Carolina's Ashe Chapter approached the Ashe County Commissioners on Oct. 16 to ask the board to commit to creating minimum housing standards in Ashe County.

Down Home NC in Ashe launched their Safe and

Stable Housing campaign at the end of April this year.

After canvassing Ashe County and speaking with the commissioners on various occasions since then, Down Home NC formally presented their suggestion for minimum housing standards in reaction to substandard housing issues in Ashe County.

One of the issues that Down Home acknowledged

people often bring up in relation to minimum housing standards is the idea that rental rates will often rise after their implementation.

"This is occurring already in drastic fashion, so what real impact would a minimum housing standard have on rental housing," said Down Home NC member Tanya Robinson.

Twenty-seven counties in North Carolina have

minimum housing standards, according to Down Home's research.

Down Home NC argued that minimum housing standards would clarify the housing codes already in place and provide greater legal recourse by providing tenants with a stronger case in court if the issue escalates to a civil suit.

"Ultimately the goal with minimum housing standards

is to keep housing from going to such an extreme, so at this point we would like to ensure that we're maintaining the stock of low income housing in Ashe County and to make sure that landlords are doing the repairs over time so that these houses don't meet such an extreme that they either had to be condemned or they're now no longer habitable," said Dolly Reaves of

Down Home NC.

The concerns which brought about the need for minimum housing standards in Down Homes NC's eyes do not include United States Department of Housing and Urban Development housing provided by the federal government since the county commissioners do not have jurisdiction over the federal

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AppHealth Care to provide appointment availability for flu shots soon

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ASHE COUNTY — Flu shots are available to individuals six months and older and AppHealthCare will begin to schedule appointments for vaccines soon. Appointment availability

will be announced on their website and social media.

While flu season has just begun, COVID-19 and other similar illnesses are decreasing alongside subsequent hospitalizations and emergency visits, according to the North Carolina Department of Health and

Human Services.

According to the latest surveyed data from NCDHHS, 20 million COVID-19 virus particles per person were found in wastewater staples across the state which was a decrease from the previous week's 27 million particles per person.

Emergency visits revealing diagnoses of COVID-19, RSV, flu and all other acute respiratory illnesses showed a similar decrease from the previous week. The latest surveyed week showed 6.7% of all emergency room visits were related to a respiratory illness, while the week

before 7.2% of all visits were tied to respiratory illness.

In September, vibrio infection, Lyme disease and campylobacter infection were the three most common communicable disease cases in Ashe County.

Communicable diseases

can be spread from individuals or from environmental sources to individuals. Environmental sources such as animals, surfaces, food, water, bugs, respiratory droplets and bodily fluids can spread communicable diseases, according to AppHealthCare.

Tree From A1

the Western Appalachian Mountains.

In August, Amber Scott and Alex Church were named the 2023 Grand Champion Growers in the National Christmas Tree Association's Christmas Tree Contest in Minnesota and awarded the honor of providing one of their North Carolina Fraser Fir trees for the first family at the White House.

Before becoming National Grand Champion Growers, Scott and Church had to compete in and win both their regional Christmas tree competitions and the national Christmas tree competition.

On average, over 100 million people watch the presentation of the Christmas tree to the first lady through television, said Tim O'Connor, the Executive Director of the National Christmas Tree Association.

Scott and Church have placed in the national competition twice now. In 2022, they were named Reserve Champion Growers and presented with the honor of providing a Christmas tree to the Vice President's family in their residence.

This year, the pair also won the National Christmas Tree Association's Wreath Contest. These recent accomplishments will be added to Cline Church Nursery's resume which already included presenting a Christmas tree to the Lieutenant Governor of North Carolina in



PHOTO BY ERIN ISLEY

Left to right: Alex Church and Amber Scott from Cline Church Nursery, Dale Haney the White House grounds superintendent, and Blair Downing, the White House chief usher.

2021 and the Governor of North Carolina in 2022.

Scott and Church are second generation Christmas tree growers since they took over Cline Church Nursery from their parents, Cline and Ellen Church, who started the tradition in 1974.

After three years of planting and cultivating the land in Fleetwood, the Churches opened Cline Church Nursery. In 1981, the family began to harvest their first trees.

Today, Cline Church Nursery is a 700-acre tree

farm filled with Fraser Fir Christmas trees and other nursery plants and trees sold at their garden center.

During the opening ceremony before the Christmas tree picking began, guest speakers from the many groups present addressed the crowd.

"We are blessed to be an agricultural state," said Kaleb Rathbone, the Assistant Commissioner of the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

North Carolina is home to around 52 million



PHOTO BY ERIN ISLEY

The chosen tree measured in at 19 feet tall.

growing Fraser Firs across 34,757 acres, according to the North Carolina Christmas Tree Association. North Carolina is also the second largest Christmas tree producing state following Oregon.

This year, North Carolina crossed the \$100 billion threshold in agricultural economic activity, Rathbone said.

Ashe County is one of the top five Christmas tree producing counties in the state alongside Avery, Watauga, Alleghany, and Jackson counties. The Cline Church Nursery tree is the ninth tree chosen for the White House from

Ashe County.

"You can see the value and the resiliency that this industry adds to this county," said Ashe County Cooperative Extension Director, Travis Birdsell.

The trees in the field where the Cline Church Nursery brought the White House representatives were planted by Scott and Church when they were in high school. Today, many of them stand over 15 feet tall.

"Christmas begins with a real tree and that real tree begins here in Ashe County," Birdsell said.

Blair Downing and Dale Haney, the two White House representatives,

searched the mountain-side for the perfect tree. After being shown four different trees that fit the Blue Room's specifications, Haney and Downing chose the last one.

"We like to imagine the families who convene around each of our Fraser Firs every Christmas, and how we will now get to see how one of our trees will help the first family celebrate the birth of our Savior," Scott said.

The 19-foot tree will be trimmed to the needed 18.5 feet for the Blue Room. It has a full top and bright green leaves. The tree has no holes or patches and a strong trunk.

"A Fraser Fir seed is so small you can barely see it," Scott said. "If God cares to design this small seed into a fully grown Fraser Fir tree, how much more does he care about us?"

With a final nod of approval, the red, white and blue ribbon was placed in the boughs of the chosen Fraser Fir for all to see. Friends and family who have supported the Scotts and the Churches throughout this process gathered around to take pictures with the tree. One of the family pastors called those gathered around the tree to pray and blessed the tree in God's name.

"Each one of us and each of these trees are by God's design," Scott said.

The White House team will revisit North Carolina on Nov. 15 to harvest the tree and begin its transportation to the Blue Room.

Housing From A1

program. "The county needs to take accountability in this matter," Robinson said.

After hearing the presentation, the commissioners thanked Down Home for coming to the meeting, but did not wish to commit to creating minimum housing standards.

Ashe County Commissioner Chairman Todd McNeill said that the commissioners and Down Home all care about the housing issues in Ashe County, but that they had a difference of opinion about the methods that would solve the issue.

"Interaction and participation makes good government, so thank you all for

being here," McNeill said.

Commissioner Mike Eldreth voiced concerns about when repairs were made, how tenants would be temporarily housed until the repairs were finished.

"If they don't have anywhere to go, they're going to be homeless," Eldreth said.

Reaves explained that DSS has a program for temporary financial rental support, which the commissioners would have to consider if forming the minimum housing standards.

"I agree we need better housing, it's just a complex problem to fix it without kicking people out of their homes," Eldreth said.

"We may not agree on a solution or a way to a solution, but my door is always

open to talk about this," County Commissioner Vice Chair, Chuck Olive, said.

"Me, personally, I'm still considering it," Olive added.

Since no motion was made to begin drafting or commit to drafting minimum housing standards, no action was taken in regards to the presentation.

The Executive Director of the Department of Social Services, Tracie McMillan, announced at the meeting that the Medicaid Expansion Plan will be in effect starting Dec. 1, but individuals who want to apply for the expansion can start applying now.

"The program is geared toward encouraging people to work by expanding the qualifications for receiving Medicaid," McMillan said.

Because this program will allow more individuals without insurance to be covered for medical expenses under Medicaid, the program may help the hospital in Ashe County. Ashe Memorial Hospital currently relies on its charity care program to fund uninsured individuals who cannot afford medical care costs.

Laura McPherson, the Ashe County Librarian, approached the county

commissioners with news that the Ashe County Public Library will be the first library in North Carolina to have a designated breastfeeding space for mothers. Mothers are encouraged to breastfeed how and where they wish, but the breastfeeding space will provide privacy for those who want it within the library.

Near the end of the meeting, Devon Houck approached the commissioners with an update on the elections process since the North Carolina state voter ID law.

The voter ID law will go into effect with this year's municipal elections in September, October and November. Ninety-nine types of IDs were approved for the voter ID law. However, those that need a Voter ID can apply for one through the NC DMV or the board of elections for no cost.

If a voter goes to cast a ballot without a photo ID, they will still be able to do so on a probationary ballot and an ID exception form. Voters who forgot their ID may also use a probationary ballot and return to their county board of elections the



PHOTO BY ERIN ISLEY

Left to right: Commissioner William Sands, County Manager Adam Stumb, Commissioner Jerry Powers, Commissioner Chairman Todd McNeill, Sammy Whicker, Commissioner Vice Chair Chuck Olive and Commissioner Mike Eldreth.

day before the county canvass with their photo ID. For municipal elections, the deadline for returning to the board of elections with your photo ID is the Monday following election day.

There will also be a free photo voter ID drive at the Ashe County Library on Oct. 24 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

The last day to register to vote in the upcoming municipal election was Oct. 13, and Election Day is

Nov. 7.

The meeting concluded with the announcement of two Ashe County government retirees.

Sammy Whicker is retiring at the end of October after 28 years and six months of service to Ashe County as the Maintenance Supervisor.

Judy Miller is retiring at the end of October after 13 years and four months of service to Ashe County in the Department of Social Services.

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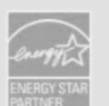
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