

# The News - Banner

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## A Year in Review: The top local stories of 2023

By HOLLY GASKILL, SYDNEY KENT, DAVE SCHULTZ, and MARK MILLER

This year has been undoubtedly full for Wells County, with events and developments ranging far and wide in their nature. However, few have remained as long standing as the sudden changes occurring within the Wells County Health Department.

The ongoing matter came in No. 1 in the editorial staff's annual review of the year's top stories. Combing through this year's editions, 2023 held numerous stories of controversy and conflict, growing infrastructure and difficult changes, and moments that brought Wells County together.

It was a close vote for multiple stories on this compilation, as well as those that were just barely edged off. As evidence of this, two stories tied for the No. 2 spot.

The following is a recap of this year's top 10 stories, as voted on by the News-Banner staff:

1.) In June, two Wells County Health Department employees left in the same week, effectively leaving the department without half its full-time staff. The resignations followed a series of back-and-forth between elected officials and Health Department employees, specifically disputing a food inspection of Yergy's State Road BBQ.

At a special health board meeting, Marlene Hoag, former deputy administrator, was called out of her retirement from the position to fill the vacancy temporarily. Soon after, Wells County Commissioners threatened to remove a health board member should the board not use their authority to address issues.

The department continued to struggle to fill its vacancies, experiencing further turnover in its part-time staff and facing speculation and criticism. Citing these circumstances, the commissioners turned down funding available through Health First Indiana, becoming just one of six counties in the state to do so.



Firefighters stand in front of the burning 123 S. Marion St. in Bluffton building in July. The blaze was relentless for hours, and firefighters were on scene for over 10 hours. The structure was condemned and torn down in the months following the fire. (News-Banner file photo)

At the end of November, Hoag received the resignation of food environmental specialist Daniel Miller. On Dec. 6, the health board initiated the removal process for the department's health officer, Dr. Kay Johnson. A hearing on the matter has not yet been held.

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Pictured is Indiana Teacher of the Year Tara Cocanower at Space Camp in Huntsville, Alabama. (Photo provided)

## Lifted up to lift others

Cocanower shares highs, lows of leading as Indiana Teacher of the Year

By HOLLY GASKILL

Bluffton High School teacher Tara Cocanower was named Indiana's Teacher of the Year on Oct. 5, 2022, and hit the ground running with the new role of leadership.

A whirlwind of events and responsibilities have come with the honor, including discussing education needs at the White House and the equally coveted position of grand marshal of Bluffton's Street Fair. She's also ridden in the Indy 500 parade, spoken at Princeton University and visited Google's headquarters in California, among numerous other items.

In between once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, Cocanower has traveled across the state to speak with various groups about education and educators. She estimates she's given 26 keynote addresses, but has lost count of the speaking engagements.

Topics vary, but she often uses these speeches to rally and uplift educators.

"(INTOY is) not the perfect teacher award — it's not even the best teacher award," Cocanower said. "It's an award that gave me an opportunity to elevate other educators, and I took it seriously. I gave every-

(Continued on Page 2)

## 2 arrested for battery after reported shooting

By SYDNEY KENT

Two people were arrested in connection to a report of a shooting Friday afternoon at Valley Park Apartments.

Austin Kolkman, 22, and Alex Angus, 19, both of Fort Wayne, were each charged with one count of battery with a deadly weapon, a Level 5 felony. Both subjects were taken to the Wells County Jail.

According to a press release from Bluffton Chief of Police Kyle Randall, units were dispatched to the 300 block of West Dustman Road at approximately 3:31 p.m. in response to a possible gunshot wound.

Officers learned that the individual had not been shot, however, had suffered wounds from a beating that took place while in a truck on Dustman Road.

The victim reportedly ran to his apartment after the assault and heard gunshot

wounds from the area of the truck. He was treated by Wells County EMS before he was transported to a local hospital.

Multiple police agencies assisted in efforts to locate the vehicle, which was reported as a blue pickup truck with two men. Initial efforts were unsuccessful, however, Randall released an update at approximately 9:30 p.m.

The suspects were apprehended after law enforcement executed a search warrant on the truck in the Mill Road Estates mobile home park in Fort Wayne. Police reportedly recovered evidence related to the altercation such as firearms, drugs, and blood swabs.

The Bluffton Police Department, Wells County Sheriff's Office, Indiana State Police, Fort Wayne Police Department, and the Allen County Sheriff's Office participated in the search.

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## Economy energizes investors as markets end year up 24%

By DAMIAN J. TROISE  
AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The S&P 500 closed out 2023 with a gain of more than 24 percent and the Dow finished near a record high, as easing inflation, a resilient economy and the prospect of lower interest rates buoyed investors, particularly in the last two months of the year.

Stocks closed Friday with modest losses. The S&P 500 slipped 13.52 points, or 0.3 percent, to 4,769.83. The benchmark index still posted a rare ninth consecutive week of gains and is just 0.6 percent shy of an all-time high set in January of 2022.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 20.56 points, or 0.1 percent, to 37,689.54 after setting a record Thursday.

The Nasdaq slipped 83.78 points, or 0.6 percent, to 15,011.35, but that was barely a blemish on an annual gain of more than 43 percent, its best performance since 2020.

For most of the year, gains in the broader market were driven largely by seven stocks -- Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet, Amazon, Nvidia, Meta Platforms and Tesla. Dubbed

the Magnificent 7, they accounted for about two-thirds of the gains in the S&P 500 this year, according to S&P Dow Jones Indices. Nvidia lead the group with a gain of about 239 percent, driven by the mania surrounding artificial intelligence.


A strong rally in November and December marked a big psychological shift for investors, said Quincy Krosby, chief global strategist at LPL Financial, because it went beyond the big technology companies. The Russell 2000 index of smaller companies jumped more than 20 percent over the two months and finished 2023 with a 15.1 percent gain after falling 21.6 percent in 2022.

"It was broad participation in the market that reinforced and confirmed gains for smaller company stocks that were particularly important," Krosby said.

Investors in the U.S. came into this year bearing the bruises of sharp losses for both stocks and bonds in 2022. They expected inflation to ease further as the Federal Reserve pushed interest rates higher. The trade-off would be a weaker economy and

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**Outside**  
  
Snow makes an appearance for New Year's Eve  

Today	Sunday	Monday
High 41	High 37	High 37
Low 31	Low 28	Low 24

  
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SATURDAY  
December 30, 2023

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# Lifted up

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 thing that I had to it.”  
 This has all come on top of her already rigorous schedule, teaching Advanced Placement history and civics and coaching girls’ golf and track and field.  
 In short, life looks much different than what it once did.

“It’s a lot — teaching full-time in and of itself is a lot,” Cocanower said. “But I have people that see me, and they get it.”  
 Cocanower has always been driven to serve and uplift those around her. At times during this year, however, she found herself lost in the mix. It’s been hard to juggle all her responsibilities and opportunities, and even harder at times to say no to new ones. She knows the exact days of school she’s missed to be the INTOY.

Cocanower found herself in that space again with the opportunity to attend Space Camp, an immersive educational camp hosted by the Alabama Space Science Exhibit Commission. In the unrelenting heat of July in Huntsville, Alabama, Cocanower and other state Teachers of the Year gathered to complete the mock space missions.

The camp became a childhood dream come true but also became a further encouragement in her journey through this year.

As captain of her “mission” team, she was calling out directions, pumping up her team, guiding them through the mission, and following the last of her teammates out the door.

When it came to the water mission, Cocanower felt less confident. The team had to pull themselves from the lake onto a raft, and multiple members weren’t sure they could. “I told them, ‘I could just tread water here all day. I’m floating, it’s fine,’” Cocanower recalled. “They were like, ‘No, we all do this. We all do this

together.’”  
 The crew rallied together, lifting each other on their shoulders and pulling each other up to the platform. Cocanower smiled. “I remember laying on the bottom of that raft, like ‘I’m so glad they didn’t let me bail out. Because we do this together.’”

Similarly, the community around Cocanower has pulled her through this year as INTOY.

The year has undeniably come with amazing experiences, honors and opportunities Cocanower never expected to have, but it’s also been an incredible commitment. When speaking about the impossible balancing act to The News-Banner in February, Cocanower said she was glad she wasn’t on a sabbatical from teaching as some others have been. Now, she laughs — “At times, I wish I had been.”

Cocanower recalls one morning when she had forgotten about a staff meeting and arrived five minutes late. Overwhelmed and overtired, she sat at her desk and cried. “I felt like I had failed, like I let my people down,” she said.

Before school started, she sent a message apologizing to Principal Steve Baker and Assistant Principal Stacy Morrison. The two were in her classroom with listening ears and gentle encouragement before the second period of the day had passed. “That’s support,” Cocanower remembered with tears in her eyes.

Administration has also been by her side to help through the practical burdens. Superintendent Brad Yates, whom Cocanower called the “spreadsheet king,” helped organize Cocanower’s schedules, and Treasurer Anjie Hartman meets monthly to help organize travel expenses.

Cocanower also credits her husband, Geoff, as a major support in all regards, walking through over-

whelming emotions, helping her with speeches and sometimes traveling alongside her.

“I had a panic attack walking into church one Wednesday night,” Cocanower added. “(My friends) prayed over me, and they said, ‘Go home, rest’ ... I think I have loved people and built my tribe, and I tried to show up for people, and I tried to make sure that they know they’re important to me. I think I knew I did something right when people showed up for me.”

Leading from vulnerability, Cocanower has shared some of her feelings with her students, asking for grace when she’s been absent or hasn’t graded assignments promptly. In turn, they’ve reciprocated her openness with compassion and empathy.

“I hope they remember the vulnerability,” Cocanower added. “Because I’ve learned through this whole process that our vulnerabilities are our strengths, and students need to know I’m a real person. And if they don’t remember all the historical facts, hopefully, they’ve seen someone who didn’t back down from adversity and did their very best even in the midst of struggles.”

Looking back on that announcement day, Cocanower recalled the advice she had received from the former INTOYs. “There’s going to be high highs and low lows,” she said. “And it’s definitely held that.”

In October, Cocanower passed the baton to 2024 INTOY Eric Jenkins, an English teacher at Franklin Community High School in Johnson County. She’s given him the same advice she received, with her own specific experiences to add — order business cards as soon as you can, create a plan with school administration, and above all, never let

your sentences start with ‘I should have.’”

“I have no idea why I’ve been put in the positions and had the experiences that I’ve had,” Cocanower paused. “But I know they were for such a time as this.”

Cocanower’s still contracted for events and engagements until summer, but finds her tenure as INTOY is simply entering a new chapter. She hopes to continue speaking, growing, advocating, and teaching, as well as finish her master’s degree.

As the year comes to a close, Cocanower referenced a conversation with Sarah Brown Wessling, who works for the National Teacher of the Year program, where Cocanower had said she was glad to soon return to “normal.”

Cocanower smiled. “(Brown-Wessling) said, ‘You’re not going back to anything. You’re going forward to your classroom because you are different. You’re forever changed. You’re going forward to your classroom, and you’re going to create new experiences and have different relationships with new students. And you’re going to find a new way of doing things while still keeping what you were.’ That helped me process. It gave me perspective going forward.”

While many things are uncertain, one thing is for sure — for Cocanower, this year has been a testament to community. Not only in representing the community she grew up in but also in the many ways others have rallied around her in those highs and lows.

“There’s zero chance that I’m Indiana Teacher of the Year, if, honestly, if I didn’t grow up in Bluffton, and I got called to return home ... I’ve gotten filled up so I can pour out,” Cocanower concluded. “It’s not about me at all.”

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# Closures listed for New Year’s Day

The offices of the City of Bluffton and Wells County governments plus the Ossian and Bluffton locations of the Wells County Public Library are closed Monday, Jan. 1.

There is no mail delivery and The News-Banner does not publish Monday. The office will not be open. Normal publication and office hours will resume Tuesday.

# Weather

**Saturday, December 30, 2023**  
 (24-hour observations at 7:40 p.m. Friday)  
**High:** 38; **Low:** 34; **Precipitation:** 0.02 inches of rain  
**Wabash River Level** (at the Main Street bridge): 1.29 feet at 9:45 p.m. Friday

# Wells County forecast

**Today:** Mostly cloudy, with a high near 41. Southwest wind around 10 mph.

**Tonight:** Mostly cloudy, with a low around 31. Southwest wind around 10 mph.

**Sunday:** Snow showers likely, mainly after 1 p.m. Cloudy, with a high near 37. Southwest wind around 10 mph. Chance of precipitation is 60 percent. New snow accumulation of less than a half inch possible.

**Sunday Night:** A 20 percent chance of snow showers before 1 a.m. Mostly cloudy, with a low around 28. West wind around 10 mph.

**New Year’s Day:** Mostly cloudy, with a high near 37.

**Monday Night:** Partly cloudy, with a low around 24.

**Tuesday:** Sunny, with a high near 41.

**Tuesday Night:** Mostly cloudy, with a low around 27.

**Wednesday:** Mostly cloudy, with a high near 40.

**Wednesday Night:** A chance of rain and snow showers. Mostly cloudy, with a low around 27.

Chance of precipitation is 30 percent.

**Thursday:** Partly sunny, with a high near 37.

**Thursday Night:** Mostly cloudy, with a low around 24.

**Friday:** Partly sunny, with a high near 37.



# Financial markets

(Continued from Page 1)  
 possibly a recession. But while inflation has come down to around 3 percent, the economy has chugged along thanks to solid consumer spending and a healthy job market.

The stock market is now betting the Fed can achieve a “soft landing,” where the economy slows just enough to snuff out high inflation, but not so much that it falls into a recession. As a result, investors now expect the Fed to begin cutting rates as early as March.

The Fed has signaled three quarter-point cuts to its benchmark interest rate next year. That rate is currently sitting between 5.25 percent and 5.50 percent, its highest level in two decades.

Lower rates could add more fuel to the broader market’s momentum in 2024. Wall Street is forecasting stronger earnings growth for companies next year after a largely lackluster 2023, when companies wrestled with higher input and labor costs and a shift in consumer spending.

Bond market investors appeared

headed for a third losing year in a row until things turned around starting in late October. Excitement about potential cuts to interest rates sent bond prices soaring and yields dropping. The yield on the 10-year Treasury, which hit 5 percent in October, stood at 3.88 percent Friday, up from 3.85 percent on Thursday.

The yield on the two-year Treasury, which more closely tracks expectations for the Fed, fell to 4.25 percent from 4.28 percent from late Thursday. It also surpassed 5 percent in October.

Many global markets also saw solid gains this year. Indexes in France and Germany made double-digit advances, while Britain’s has climbed just under 4 percent.

Tokyo’s Nikkei 225 gained 27 percent in 2023, its best year in a decade as the Japanese central bank inched toward ending its longstanding ultra-lax monetary policy after inflation finally exceeded its target of about 2 percent.

The Shanghai Composite index lost about 3 percent this year and the Hang

Seng index in Hong Kong fell nearly 14 percent. Weakness in the property sector and in global demand for China’s exports, as well as high debt levels and wavering consumer confidence have weighed on the country’s economy and the stock market.

U.S. and international crude oil prices were relatively stable on Friday. The price of oil tumbled by more than 10 percent this year, defying predictions from some experts that it could cross \$100 per barrel.

Despite production cuts from OPEC, a war involving energy exporter Russia and another in the Middle East, U.S. benchmark crude dropped nearly 11 percent in 2023, and a whopping 21 percent in the final three months of the year.

Increased production in the U.S., now the top oil producer in the world, as well as Canada, Brazil and Guyana offset the reduced output from OPEC. Not all OPEC members participated in the cuts and some countries like Iran and Venezuela are pumping more oil, energy analysts say.

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OBITUARIES

James L. Klosterman Jr., 71

James L. Klosterman Jr., 71, formally of Warren, passed away Tuesday evening, Dec. 26, 2023, at River Terrace Retirement Community in Bluffton.

James was born Nov. 13, 1952, in Lima, Ohio to James L. and Rose Mary (Roth) Klosterman Sr., both parents preceded him in death.

He worked for Franklin Electric in Bluffton for several years, later retiring from Dana Cooperation in Marion. James enjoyed playing cards, woodworking, camping spending time with his grandchildren and volunteering with the Red Cross, where he was involved with giving aid to the residents of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana.

Survivors include his children, Amanda (Robert) Rankin of Bluffton and James



"Jason" (Patricia) Klosterman of Bossier City, La.; four sisters, Kathy Metzger of Wapakoneta, Ohio, Linda Kuhn of Lima, Ohio, Barbara Kwiecinski of Lima, Ohio and Patty Kelley of Wapakoneta, Ohio; and four grandchildren.

Receiving of friends and family will be held Friday, Jan. 5, 2024, from 4:00 until 7:00 p.m. at the Goodwin - Cale & Harnish Memorial Chapel in Bluffton. Immediately following the visitation, a memorial service will be held at 7:00 p.m. at the funeral home. Pastor Clark Stoller will officiate. A private burial of cremains will take place at the Elm Grove Cemetery in Bluffton.

Memorials can be made in James' memory to the Red Cross.

Online condolences can be made at [www.goodwincaleharnish.com](http://www.goodwincaleharnish.com).

Kenneth D. Perry Jr., 57

Kenneth D. Perry Jr., 57, of Montpelier, passed away at 7:26 a.m. Thursday, Dec. 28, 2023 at Bluffton Regional Medical Center in Bluffton. He was born Saturday, Oct. 22, 1966, in Bluffton. He married Lori L. (Lancaster) Perry on Friday, March 13, 1992 in Hartford City.

Kenny was a 1985 graduate of Southern Wells High School. He worked in maintenance for 20 years at UTZ Inc. in Bluffton, and had also worked for Pretzels and at the Bluffton Sewage Dept. Kenny enjoyed bowling, golfing, tinkering in his garage, and spending time with family and friends.

Kenny will be sadly missed by his wife, Lori L. (Lancaster) Perry, Montpelier; son, Chase (Haley) Perry, Montpelier; daughter, Brittany (Wayne) Pontius, Denver, Colo.; father, Kenny Dale Perry, Sr., Keystone; sisters, Patty (William) Biddle, Ossian,



Jane (Bob) Henderson, Montpelier; grandchildren, Kennedy Perry, Montpelier, Cooper Perry, Montpelier; and several Nieces & Nephews.

He was preceded in death by his mother, Betty Jean (Bailey) Perry, and daughter, Brandi N. Feathers.

Family and friends may gather to share and remember at Walker & Glancy Funeral Home located at 109 W Windsor St Montpelier on Tuesday, January 2, 2024 from 1:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.

A service to celebrate Kenny's life will be at Walker & Glancy Funeral Home at 11:00 a.m. Wednesday, Jan. 3, 2024, with Pastor Jeremy Cowin officiating.

Arrangements are being handled by Walker & Glancy Funeral Home in Montpelier.

Online condolences may be made at [www.glancyfuneralhomes.com](http://www.glancyfuneralhomes.com)

Bluffton Parks & Rec News & Notes



By Brandy Fiechter

Destination Recreation

Happy New Year! It's crazy how fast time seems to fly by. As we review how this past year has gone, we are delighted with how much was accomplished. Over \$897,251.02 worth of improvements were made in 2023, maintaining the parks and developing Lancaster Park. Large projects require lots of financial resources, and we are thankful to have been blessed with over \$177,000 in local donations and \$25,490 in grants this year. Next year looks to be just as busy by adding pickleball courts, improving parking lots, renovating the pool house, and paving the last mile of the Inter-Urban Trail. We are so grateful for the continued community support; we truly could not do it without all of you.

Kick-off 2024 with the Wells Winter 100 Mile Virtual Challenge. Commit to run or walk 100 miles this winter: Jan. 1-March 19 (first day of spring). Whatever your fitness goals are for 2024, this challenge will help you build and maintain a solid base while reinforcing good habits and consistency through group accountability and motivation. All you need is an average of just under 10 miles a week. The price of the challenge is \$25.00. By registering, you receive access to our Strava group, where you can log your miles and view the leaderboard, a Wells 100 Challenge T-Shirt, a medal if you complete 100 miles by spring, and chances to win additional prizes and discounts by submitting photos and comments on Strava or the Wells Winter 100 Challenge Facebook Page.

City Gym Membership Sale — 2024 Gym Key forms are available online at <http://tinyurl.com/y53bbf6c>.

Please print off the form and bring it to the park office on the 2nd floor of City Hall with your payment (exact change preferred). The price is only \$95.00 per single membership or \$125.00 per family membership, which includes your spouse and dependent children still living in the home. Door locks to the facility will be changed by 10 a.m. on Jan. 2.

K9 Kommon's Dog Park Membership Keys

are on sale now, and they will also have locks changed starting Jan. 2. Download the form at <http://tinyurl.com/4h2jnjn8> and bring it to the park office on the 2nd floor of city hall to purchase a new key for 2024. The \$25 fee offers all the dogs in your household an opportunity to run, play, and socialize with other pets. The pouch playground includes a Rover Jump Over, Doggie Teeter Totter, Hoop Jump, King of the Hill, Doggie Crawl Tunnel, and a Fire Hydrant.

Pavilion Rentals — It's time to start thinking about your upcoming parties! We will be accepting rentals throughout all of 2024 starting on Jan. 2. Dates usually fill up quickly at the Washington Park indoor pavilion, so have alternative dates and times in mind when you reach out to us. Stop by our office or call 824-6069 to schedule your next event. Check available dates at <https://teamup.com/ksahp6rajmudh7k7m>. Rental forms for 2024 are online at <https://tinyurl.com/mrx99hnh>

The Wells County Trails group is working on a boat launch in Vera Cruz to increase access to the Wabash River for kayakers and they need your help. There are only two weeks left to raise the last \$13,000 and to take advantage of a \$1 for \$1 matching opportunity from the CreatINg Places Campaign, thanks to Indiana Housing and Community Development and AARP. This campaign is brought to you through Patronicity. A donation of any amount helps. Please help improve access to the Wabash River in Wells County. Mail or Drop off a donation to the Wells County Community Foundation at 222 W Washington St., Bluffton, Indiana 46714 (Make Checks Payable to Wells County Trails) by Jan. 12 or make an online contribution at [Patronicity.com/VCPadlesportsLaunch](http://Patronicity.com/VCPadlesportsLaunch).

Have a great week and a Happy New Year!

Local Roundup

Bluffton Common Council to be sworn in Monday

The Bluffton Common Council will meet at noon Monday, Jan. 1, to be sworn into office. They will meet in the Council Chambers on the second floor of City Hall, 128 E. Market St.

County Drainage Board will meet Tuesday afternoon

The Wells County Drainage Board will meet at 4:30 p.m. Monday, Jan. 2, in Room 105, the multi-purpose room on the lower level of the Wells Carnegie Government Annex, 223 W. Washington St.

- Topics on the agenda will include:
- Reorganization of the board
  - Certification of 2024 drain collections
  - Project updates and miscellaneous drainage matters

Bluffton Board of Works to meet Tuesday afternoon

The Bluffton Board of Public Works and Safety will meet at 4:30 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 1, in the Council Chambers on the second floor of City Hall, 128 E. Market St.

- Topics on the agenda will include:
- Revisiting the water bill dispute from 427 W. Wabash on the Dec. 5 meeting.
  - A handicap request from Jennifer Nelson.
  - A personnel request from Michelle Simon.
  - Approval of 2023 purchase orders.
  - Purchase request from Dick Green.

County Commissioners will meet Tuesday evening

The Wells County Commissioners will meet at 5 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 2, in Room 105, the multi-purpose room on the lower level of the Wells Carnegie Government Annex, 223 W. Washington St.

- Topics on the agenda include:
- Reorganization of the board
  - Department updates from Sheriff Scott Holliday and Highway Supervisor Shawn Bonar.
  - Monthly reports and miscellaneous business.
  - Right-of-ways and utility agreements.
  - Board appointments for the Wells County Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development.
  - Annual certification of the Commissioner Contract Disclosure Policy
  - Approval of the 2024 Solid Waste Salary Contract
  - ARPA Funds
  - Appointment of an ADA Coordinator

Bluffton Common Council will meet Tuesday evening

The Bluffton Common Council will meet at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 2, in the Council Chambers on the second floor of City Hall, 128 E. Market St.

- Topics on the agenda will include:
- Approval of Wells County Zoning Ordinance Changes from Mike Lautzenheiser.
  - Approval of Resolution 2024-01- Invest Local Fund Deposits.

Wells County Council postpones first meeting

The Wells County Council will not meet 7 p.m. Jan. 2 as previously scheduled. Instead, they will meet at 7 p.m. Jan. 9. An agenda for that meeting will be available at later date.

Area Plan Commission will meet Thursday evening

The Wells County Area Plan Commission will meet at 7 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 4, in Room 105, the multi-purpose room on the lower level of the Wells Carnegie Government Annex, 223 W. Washington St.

Police Notebook

INCIDENTS

**City:**  
Thursday, 3:38 p.m., Capri Court and North Main Street. Caller reported vehicle with driver without a valid license possibly on drugs and transporting drugs.

Thursday, 5:53 p.m., North Union and West Market streets. Caller reported sound of fireworks for about an hour. No fireworks located.

Thursday, 8:04 p.m., 500 block of West Ohio Street. Caller reported car possibly signaling SOS with break lights.

**County:**  
Thursday, 2:24 p.m., Clark Avenue and South Ellingham Pike, Bluffton. Officer assisted detectives with traffic stop.

Friday, 1:06 a.m., 5100 East 300 South, Bluffton. Dispatch received a computerized call of a male who gave the name of Ethan Hall. Male stated he killed his family and gave an address. Subjects at address advised everything was fine and they did not know a person by that name.

ARRESTS

Kyle Aaron Davis, 32, Bluffton, domestic battery

with serious bodily injury, a Level 5 felony, domestic battery with moderate bodily injury and strangulation, both Level 6 felonies, domestic battery — simple assault, a Class A misdemeanor, and possession of marijuana, a Class B misdemeanor. No bond set.

Michaela Jane Horstmeyer, 21, Bluffton, theft, a Level 6 felony, and criminal trespassing, a Class A misdemeanor. Bond set at \$5,000.

**Iris E. Stultz**  
Calling: 2 – 7 pm,  
Tuesday, January 2.  
Funeral: 10:30 am  
Wednesday, January 3  
at the funeral home.  
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40th anniversary celebration concert

It will be a 40th anniversary celebration for the Mountain Dewe Boys as they play a concert on New Year's Eve (Dec. 31) at the Hideaway in Bluffton. Music will begin at 8 p.m. Left to right are Jimmy Randolph, Doug Huffman, Mike Huffman and Brian Huffman. (Photo provided)

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## A win-win New Year's Resolution

Here's a great New Year's resolution: get a pet.

As we wrap up a very inflationary 2023, pet shelters across the country are at maximum capacity and they don't have room to house the pets people are turning in.

ABC News reports that animals entering shelters began to climb in 2021.

During the covid pandemic, you see, many people adopted pets, but as they began to go back to the workplace, some decided they no longer wanted to care for a pet, so they turned them back in.

The past year was significantly worse for pets because adoptions are falling far short of the increase in sheltered pets.

"Shelter Animals Count, a national database of shelter statistics, estimates that the U.S. shelter population grew by nearly a quarter-million animals in 2023," reports ABC News.

Why?

Because the weak economy and high inflation have made it more costly to care for a pet, in particular large dogs and pets who are in need of costly medical care.

If you've not been to a veterinarian recently, you'd be surprised how much many of them charge — which is a good reason to get pet insurance, which I have for my 3-year-old Labrador, Thurber.

My puppy is very healthy and I feed him the best food I can get for him, but when he had a few minor seizures last year, I learned, after taking him to a dog neurologist, that he has epilepsy.

Just the initial examinations cost me about \$800. Had he needed an MRI, that could have been in the \$5,000 range. Thankfully, pet insurance, which only costs \$65 a month, covers about 90% of these costs.

I will pay any amount to get Thurber the care he needs, but fewer people are able to do this now as inflation has done significant damage to their finances and more people are downsizing or losing their homes, reports ABC News.

As a result, dog shelters are forced to house dogs in their offices or with foster volunteers. In some cases, they are being forced to euthanize some of the pets.

There is a win-win solution, however: adopt a pet or more than one.

Adopting a pet will help your local pet shelter get its population down to a manageable number, but you will be the one who benefits the most.

The U.S. Surgeon General reports that Americans are suffering a loneliness epidemic — and one way to ease loneliness is to invite a wonderful ball of fur into your house that will make you laugh out loud, in my case, at least five times a day.

Many Americans are struggling with mental health issues, such as depression — and PsychCentral reports that getting a pet is one of the best ways to relieve depression, as it is hard to not feel joy when your dog snuggles next to you on the couch.

Inviting a pet into your home is a big responsibility and your pet will demand your time and money, but the benefits far outweigh the costs.

Even when the costs include Thurber's favorite treat, a peanut-butter filled bone that costs \$7 and that I give him about 4 or 5 days every week.

Yup, I've spent over \$5,000 on these treats the past three years, but what can I say. I love my dog!

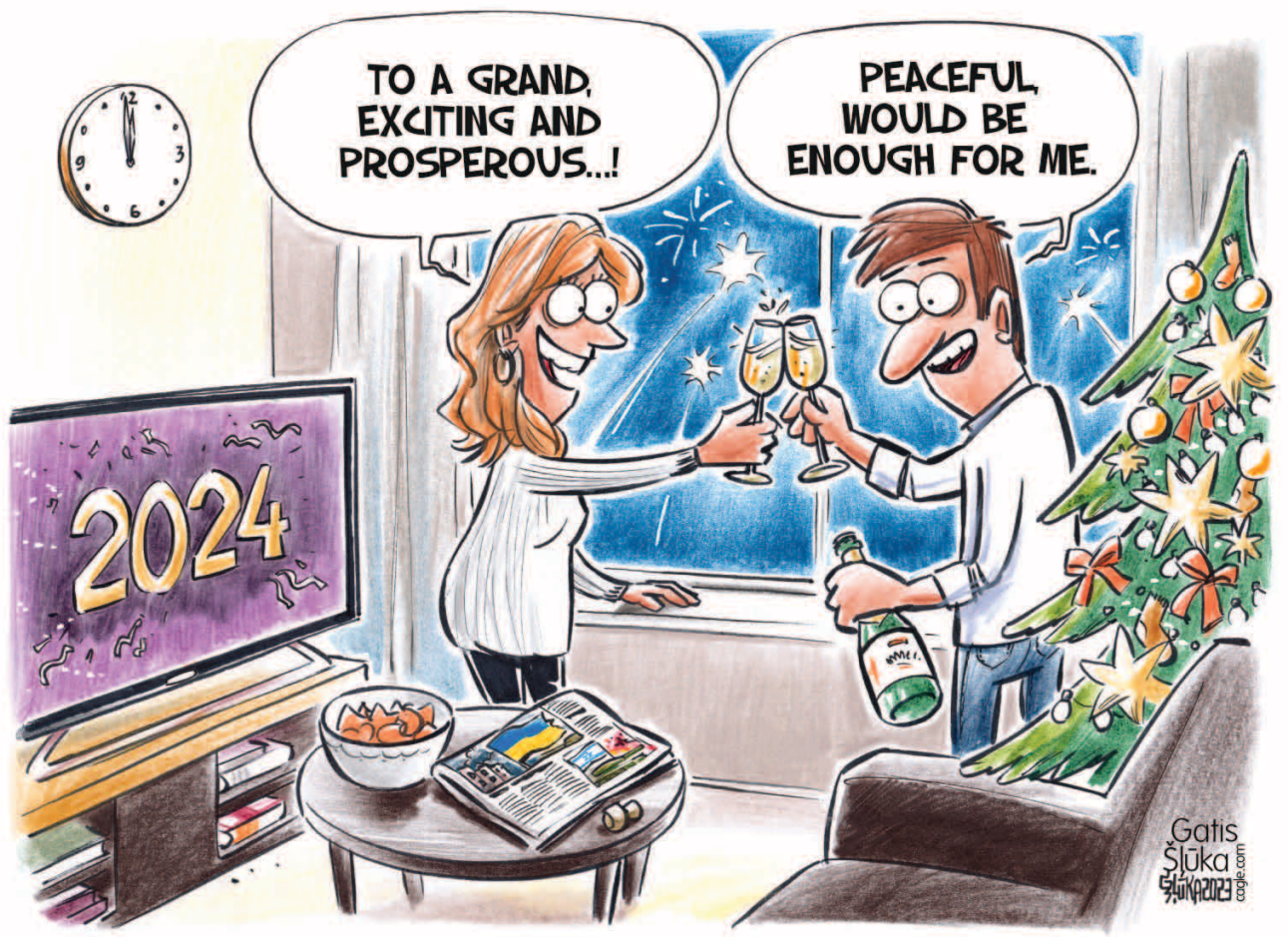
You will, too.

Contact your nearest animal shelter and bring a bundle of furry joy home in the New Year!

*Purcell, creator of the infotainment site ThurbersTail.com, which features pet advice he's learning from his beloved Labrador, Thurber, is a Pittsburgh Tribune-Review humor columnist. Email him at Tom@TomPurcell.com.*



Tom Purcell



## What strange things does 2024 have in store? Take my quiz to find out.

At the end of 2023, who wouldn't want to press the "reset" button — or maybe "fast forward," so we can just skip 2024? But take heart. "Never assume that the obvious is true," to quote New York Times columnist William Safire. So, in the spirit of Safire's annual year-end "Office Pool" quiz, place your bets for the year ahead. And remember, as Safire said, "Nobody stands taller than those willing to stand corrected."

As any crystal-ball gazer knows, there aren't "right" or "wrong" answers here. Your guesses about the "known unknowns" ahead might be better than mine. And beware, for some questions, I chose more than one answer or none at all.

### Ukraine

On Dec. 31, 2024, the status of the war in Ukraine will be:

1. Russian defeat, after the United States and Europe increase military assistance.
2. Ukrainian defeat, after House Republicans refuse to approve more U.S. military assistance.
3. A continued military stalemate, with Ukrainian partisans fighting a guerrilla war behind Russian lines.
4. A cease-fire, with a post-Zelensky Ukrainian government negotiating a new border that would divide Russian-controlled territory and Ukrainian-controlled territory.
5. A wider war that spreads to NATO territory after escalation by both Ukraine and Russia.
6. None of the above.

### Russia

Russian President Vladimir Putin will close 2024 as:

1. A reelected president of Russia.
2. A former president of Russia who has retired to pursue his passions for judo and bare-chested horseback riding.
3. A war criminal who has been convicted by the International Criminal Court.
4. An embattled leader struggling to suppress secession movements in Chechnya, Dagestan and Siberia.
5. Deceased, following an unexplained air crash.
6. None of the above.

### Saudi Arabia

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's biggest surprise in 2024 will be:

1. Nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize after his decision to normalize relations with Israel and champion a Palestinian state.
2. A massive cyberattack on Saudi Aramco that cripples the kingdom's oil industry for several weeks.
3. Growing internal dissent over normalization of relations with Israel that forces him to appoint a deputy crown prince and pardon political prisoners and exiles.
4. A Biden administration defense pact with Qatar to prevent MBS from seizing its vast gas reserves.
5. Jared Kushner and Greg Norman accept honorary Saudi citizenship.
6. The NFL decides to host the next Super Bowl in Riyadh.
7. None of the above.

### Gaza

The Gaza War will end with:

1. Benjamin Netanyahu's replacement as prime minister.
2. Civil unrest in the West Bank between the Israel Defense Forces and Israeli settlers.
3. Continuing violence in Gaza that can't be fully suppressed by Israel, the Palestinian Authority or the international peacekeeping force assigned to maintain order.
4. Wider conflicts in Lebanon and Iran as Israel seeks to preempt any future threat of ballistic missile or nuclear attack.
5. Reduced American military support for Israel.
6. None of the above.

### CIA

The CIA's biggest surprise in 2024 will be:

1. Recruiting another agent inside Chinese President Xi Jinping's inner circle.
2. Canada is caught interfering in the 2024 U.S. presidential election.
3. The director of national intelligence announces a reduction in ODNI staff to avoid overlap with the 18 intelligence agencies it oversees.
4. A string of truck bomb explosions in Latin America, Asia and Europe, with a previously unknown group called "Martyrs of Gaza" claiming responsibility.
5. Development of artificial intelligence "virtual case officers" to spot, develop and recruit spies overseas.
6. None of the above.

### North Korea

North Korea's Kim Jong Un will stun the world in 2024 by:



David Ignatius

1. Providing 155mm ammunition to Ukraine, beating out a rival offer by South Korea.
2. Launching a flotilla of balloons toward the United States, each carrying giant loudspeakers repeating the national slogan: "Let us build a fair-land for the people by dint of science!"
3. Naming his fourth child "Mar-a-Lago."
4. Testing a hypersonic cruise missile that could attack the United States, using technology obtained from Russia.
5. Announcing that he would be ready to negotiate a peace treaty with the United States if Donald Trump is reelected president.
6. None of the above.

### Technology

The most significant technology development of 2024 will be:

1. An AI-driven influence campaign to sway the 2024 presidential election, whose impact cannot be measured, leaving the outcome of the election permanently in question.
2. A quantum computer so powerful that it can use Shor's algorithm to break any encryption scheme and decode all secret intelligence cables and bank transactions.
3. A large-language model far more powerful than ChatGPT-4 that can communicate with other LLMs and create what scientists describe as "super-intelligence," whose powers aren't fully understood.
4. The United States and China conduct government-to-government dialogue about how to address security threats from powerful AIs.
5. None of the above.

### Economy

The biggest economic story of 2024 will be:

1. Huge federal deficits finally spook the bond market and make borrowing costs jump.
2. Inflation reaccelerates, the Fed raises interest rates (instead of cutting them), the stock market declines and the U.S. economy veers toward recession.
3. After China's Xi Jinping renews his focus on a market economy, the country's depressed stock market soars and investors rush back in.
4. Nobel Prize winning economist Paul Krugman launches a new CNN feature called "Paul's Charts" to compete with Steve Rattner on MSNBC's "Morning Joe."
5. Sabotage disrupts chip production in Taiwan, causing a sudden shortage of high-performance computer chips and a crash in tech stocks.
6. Oil demand reaccelerates as the global economy rebounds and prices soar above \$100 a barrel.
7. None of the above.

### Military

The most destabilizing and potentially dangerous military trend of 2024 will be:

1. Attacks by armed drones, whose origin is unknown, on civilian areas outside combat zones.
2. The development of small, high-powered micro-waves to inject malware from a distance, using satellites, drones and other autonomous systems.
3. U.S. intelligence concerns that a future Chinese research station on the moon will serve as a military base.
4. The proliferation of orbital bombardment weapons, pioneered by China, that can suddenly descend from space and destroy cities by sheer kinetic force, without a nuclear explosion.
5. A rush by all major cyber powers to "prepare the battlefield" for future conflict by inserting malware that, when activated, could cripple transportation, energy and communications systems around the world.
6. None of the above.

### Journalism

The news-business shocker of the year will be:

1. Substack launches a creator-driven television news site that quickly overtakes CNN.
2. Jeff Bezos, owner of The Washington Post, buys TikTok and creates an iconoclastic 21st-century news product to attract a younger audience.
3. The International Herald Tribune, bought in 2002 by the New York Times and rebranded as its International Edition, makes a comeback as an independent online newspaper publishing simultaneously in 10 languages.
4. Elon Musk sells X for \$1 to his biographer Walter Isaacson, who reinvents it as a global news site "X-tra."
5. Local news stages a comeback as communities across the United States support high-quality online local news sites.
6. None of the above.

My predictions: Ukraine: 3; Russia: 1, 3; Saudi Arabia: 7; Gaza: 1, 2, 3, 4; CIA: 5; North Korea: 5; Technology: 3, 4; Economy: 2, 3, 6; Military: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5; Journalism: 5.

Follow David Ignatius @IgnatiusPost on X (formerly Twitter).



## Today in History

### By The Associated Press

Today is Saturday, Dec. 30, the 364th day of 2023. There is one day left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History: On Dec. 30, 1922, Vladimir Lenin proclaimed the establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which lasted nearly seven decades before dissolving in December 1991.

On this date:

In 1813, British troops burned Buffalo, New York, during the War of 1812.

In 1853, the United States and Mexico signed a treaty under which the U.S. agreed to buy some 45,000 square miles of land from Mexico for \$10 million in a deal known as the Gadsden Purchase.

In 1860, 10 days after South Carolina seceded from the Union, the state militia seized the United States Arsenal in Charleston.

In 1903, about 600 people died when fire broke out

at the recently opened Iroquois Theater in Chicago.

In 1954, Olympic gold medal runner Malvin G. Whitfield became the first Black recipient of the James E. Sullivan Award for amateur athletes.

In 1972, the United States halted its heavy bombing of North Vietnam.

In 1994, a gunman walked into a pair of suburban Boston abortion clinics and opened fire, killing two employees. (John C. Salvi III was later convicted of murder; he died in prison, an apparent suicide.)

In 2004, a fire broke out during a rock concert at a nightclub in Buenos Aires, Argentina, killing 194 people.

In 2006, a state funeral service was held in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda for former President Gerald R. Ford.

In 2009, seven CIA employees and a Jordanian intelligence officer were killed by a suicide bomber at a U.S. base in Khost, Afghanistan.

## The News-Banner

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Mark Miller, Opinion Page Editor





# Call to Worship

This page is dedicated to the building of a more spiritual and greater church-going people and is made possible by the Advertisers on this page who want as their return to see more people go to church.



**A CITY ON A HILL CHURCH**  
705 W.-900 N., Uniondale  
10 a.m. - Worship.

**APOSTOLIC CHRISTIAN CHURCH - COUNTRY**  
1970 S.-800E., Bluffton  
9:45 & 11:45 a.m. - Worship.

**APOSTOLIC CHRISTIAN CHURCH - NORTH**  
630 E. Dustman Rd.  
9:45 & 11:45 a.m. - Worship.

**ASBURY CHAPEL UNITED METHODIST**  
8013 W.-1100S.-90, Montpelier  
9:30 a.m. - Sunday School. 10:30 - Worship.

**BETHEL**  
(Independent Bible)  
4500E-300S, Bluffton  
9 a.m. - Sunday School. 10 a.m. - Worship.

**BETHEHEM LUTHERAN CHURCH LCMS**  
6114E-750N, Ossian  
bethlehemossian.org  
9 a.m. - Divine Service. 10:15 - Adult Bible Class, Youth Bible Class & Sunday School. 11:30 - Voice of Bethlehem on 92.7 FM.

**BLUFFTON CHURCH OF GOD**  
327 W. Cherry St.  
10 a.m. - Sunday School. 11 a.m. - Worship. 6 p.m. - Service.

**DILLMAN UNITED BRETHREN**  
8888S-1100W-90, Warren  
9 a.m. - Worship. 10 a.m. - Sunday School.

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**Cupp Real Estate**  
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824-1588

**BLUFFTON WESLEYAN CHAPEL**  
(Independent Holiness Church)  
1309 W. Washington St.  
blufftonwesleyan.net  
9:30 a.m. - Sunday School. 10:30 & 6:30 p.m. - Worship.

**BOEHMER UNITED METHODIST**  
3467 S 600 W, Liberty Center  
boehmerumc.org  
9:30 a.m. - Worship. 10:45 - Sunday School.

**CALVARY LUTHERAN, ELCA**  
1532 N. Main St.  
9 a.m. - Worship.

**CHESTER CENTER**  
900S-300W, Poneto  
9:30 a.m. - Sunday School. 10:30 - Worship.

**CHRISTIAN NEW LIGHT**  
1011 W. Washington St.  
9:45 a.m. - Sunday School. 10:30 - Worship. 6 p.m. - Praise & worship.

**CHURCH OF CHRIST**  
735 S. Marion St.  
10 a.m. - Bible Study. 10:45 - Worship.

**COVENANT CHAPEL**  
3550 S. SR 1  
mycovenantchapel.org  
9:15 a.m. - Sunday School. 10:15 - Worship. (Children's Church for ages 6-12).

**DOMESTIC CHURCH OF CHRIST**  
9 a.m. - Sunday school. 10 a.m. - Church service.

**EPWORTH UNITED METHODIST**  
1204 W. Cherry St.  
9:30 a.m. - Worship. 10:40 a.m. - Sunday School.

**FAIRVIEW CHURCH OF GOD**  
5511 W. Yoder Rd., Yoder  
fairviewlife.com  
9 a.m. - Sunday School. 10 a.m. - Worship.

**FELLOWSHIP BAPTIST**  
210 W. Townley  
fbc-bluffton.com  
10 a.m. - Worship. 11 a.m. - Discipleship.

**FIRST BAPTIST**  
202 W. Cherry St.  
fbcbuffton.com  
10:15 - Worship.

**FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF OSSIAN**  
1001 Dehner Dr.  
9:30 a.m. - Sunday School. 10:30 a.m. - Worship. 6:30 - Service.

**FIRST CHURCH OF CHRIST**  
909 W. Spring St.  
FCCfamily.com  
9:30 & 11 a.m. - Worship.

**FIRST CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE**  
1515 Clark Ave.  
blufftonnazarene.org  
9 a.m. - Sunday School. 9-10 a.m. - Free ESL classes. 10:15 - Worship. 6 p.m. - Service.

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN**  
215 E. Dustman Rd.  
firstpcbuffton.org  
9:30 a.m. - Children/youth & Adult Sunday School. 10:30 - Worship.

**FIRST UNITED METHODIST**  
325 W. Washington St.  
blufftonfirstumc.com  
9:30 a.m. - Worship. 10:45 - Sunday School.

**FORGIVEN CHURCH**  
1409 S. Main St.  
forgivenonline.org  
9 a.m. - Worship.

## Time to Take a Devotional Break

**BETWEEN TWO SEASONS**  
December 26th through January 1st is a strange time of year.

The frenzy of Christmas preparations, travel, and celebrations has climaxed and most of us are ready to get back to our typical schedules. But the glimmer of approaching New Year festivities and another 3-day weekend ensures that normalcy will very likely not return until the final notes of Auld Lang Syne fade into the midnight air.

Children are not quite half way through a 2-week winter break, store exchange or return lines have dwindled, most of us have settled down to watch sappy movies and contentedly nibble on leftover culinary treats, while the weather lulls us into believing that 50 degrees is normal!

It's easy to succumb to the stupor of between-holiday emotions. Much like the groggy feeling after indulging in too many servings of decadent holiday foods, we allow ourselves to imagine that nothing between Christmas and New Years Eve impacts us. After all, isn't January 1 the official start of all our new changes?

Life will always be filled

with countless "seasons". Whether waiting in hopeful anticipation of a promised raise, waiting in dread for test results, waiting in eagerness for a long-planned vacation, everyone experiences times of "living in limbo" — seasons when all we can do is WAIT.

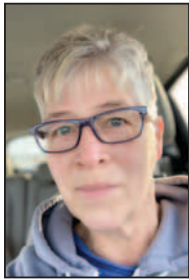
The good news is that, when we invite Him to do so, Jesus enters those periods of waiting and offers purpose and meaning to our expectation. Rather than passing the time in fear, worry, or frustration, a relationship with Him provides guidance and energy for each day.

The waiting provides time to consider the previous AND coming year.

What lessons did I learn? How did God provide specific answers to prayers? What part have I played in advancing His Kingdom?

What am I eager to learn in the next 366 days offered to me? How can I grow and share my faith in 2024?

During this "season of in-between", reflect on your hopes, fears, dreams, and needs. Invite God to work IN and THROUGH your life to bring about His honor, glory, and purpose, then prepare for the best year ever.



by Martha Paxson



**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN (EVANGELICAL)**  
123 S. Jefferson St., Ossian  
www.OssianChurch.com  
8:45 a.m. - Adult Sunday school. 10 a.m. - Worship.

**FIRST REFORMED CHURCH OF BLUFFTON**  
301 W. Cherry St.  
9:15 a.m. - Sunday School. 10:30 - Worship.

**GRACE BAPTIST**  
1621 S. 350 E. Stogdill Rd. Ext.  
gbcbluffton.com  
9 a.m. - Sunday School. 10 a.m. & 6 p.m. - Worship.

**HARVEST TIME BIBLE**  
11015S-600E, Keystone  
9:10 a.m. - Prayer. 10 a.m. - Worship.

**HOPE MISSIONARY**  
429 E. Dustman Rd.  
hope4thefamily.com  
8 a.m., 9:30 & 11 a.m. - Service at Main Campus. 9:30 & 11 a.m. - Service, north campus, Ossian.

**KEYSTONE CHURCH**  
10556S-200W  
9:30 a.m. - Worship. 10:30 - Sunday School.

**LANCASTER CHAPEL UNITED METHODIST**  
4510 E 400N, Craigville  
9 a.m. - Sunday School. 9:40 - Fellowship. 10 a.m. - Worship.

**LIBERTY CENTER BAPTIST**  
3071 W. Cherry St.  
8:30 a.m. - Pastor/Deacon's Prayer. 9 - Sunday School. 9:55 - Fellowship. 10:15 - Worship.

**LIFE COMMUNITY**  
428 S. Oak St.  
lifecommunity.net  
10:30 a.m. - Service (Children's programs available).

**LIBERTY CENTER COMMUNITY CHURCH**  
8:45 a.m. - Choir practice. 9 a.m. - Coffee, donuts, conversation. 9:30 - Worship w/infant nursery & children's church. 10:45 - Sunday School.

**LIVING FAITH MISSIONARY**  
17718 Bluffton Rd., Yoder  
10 a.m. - Worship. 11:30 - Sunday School.

**LIVING WATER UNITED CHURCH**  
6486 S 700E, Bluffton  
8:45-9 a.m. - Prayer. 9 a.m. - Sunday School. 10 a.m. - Worship.

**MARKLE CHAPEL HILL SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST**  
470 E. Morse St.  
Saturday: 9:30 a.m. - Worship. 10:45 - Sabbath School (Bible study).

**MARKLE CHURCH OF CHRIST**  
455 E. Morse St.  
marklechurch.org  
9 a.m. - Adult Bible study groups. 10:30 - Worship. Children's & student programming both hours.

**MARKLE RIVERSIDE 316**  
145 W. Morse St.  
10 a.m. - Worship.

**MURRAY MISSIONARY**  
1117 N. Washington St., Murray  
murraymc.org  
9:30 a.m. - Worship. 11 a.m. - Sunday School.

**NEW BEGINNING**  
2187 W. SR 218  
10 a.m. - Sunday School. 10:30 - Worship.

**PARK COMMUNITY**  
617 S. Bennett St.  
blog.parkumc.org  
10 a.m. - Connection. 11 a.m. - Worship.

**NEW HOPE LUTHERAN**  
(Missouri Synod)  
8824 N. SR 1, Ossian  
newhopelutheran-ossian.webs.com  
9 a.m. - Sunday School & Adult Bible study. 10 a.m. - Worship.

**NOTTINGHAM**  
1100 S. SR 1  
9:30 - Sunday School. 10:30 & 6 p.m. - Worship.

**OSSIAN CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE**  
302 N. Metts St.  
ossiannaz.org  
9:15 a.m. - Bible study. 10:30 - Service.

**OSSIAN UNITED METHODIST**  
201 W. Mill St.  
ossianumc.org  
9 a.m. - Worship, Worship child care nurse. 10 a.m. - Fellowship. 10:15 - Adult Sunday School.

**PETROLEUM COMMUNITY CHURCH**  
3625 E. 2nd St.  
9 a.m. - Worship. 10:30 - Sunday School.

**PONETO BAPTIST**  
Grape Street  
8:30 a.m. - Sunday School. 9 a.m. - Worship.

**PONETO FAITH COMMUNITY CHURCH**  
36 E. Walnut St.  
9 a.m. - Worship. 10 a.m. - Fellowship. 10:15 - Sunday School.

**RIVER OF HOPE**  
1224 W. Central  
11 a.m. - Worship & the Word.

**RIVER OF LIFE**  
927 N. Main St.  
10:30 a.m. - Worship.

**SIX MILE**  
4790 SE SR 116  
9 a.m. - Sunday School. 10 a.m. - Worship.

**SONLIGHT WESLEYAN**  
2350 S. SR 1  
sonlightwesleyan.org  
9:30 a.m. - Sunday School. 10:30 - Worship. Nursery & Children's classes available during Sunday School & Worship.

**SOUTHERN WELLS COMMUNITY CHURCH**  
9450 S 300 W, Poneto  
9 & 10:45 a.m. - Worship.

**ST. JOSEPH CATHOLIC**  
1300 N. Main St.  
Saturday: 7:45 a.m. - Prayer. 8 a.m. - Mass. 8:30 - Rosary. 4 p.m. or by appointment - Confessions. 5 p.m. - Mass. Sunday: 7:30 & 10 a.m. - Mass.

**ST. LUKE CHURCH**  
4960W-100N, Decatur  
stlukechurch.in  
9 a.m. - Worship. 10:15 - Sunday School.

**ST. MARK EV. LUTHERAN**  
16933 Thiele Rd.  
stmarkfw.org  
8:45 a.m. - Sunday School. 10 a.m. - Worship.

**THE CHURCH AT MCNATT**  
9221 W 800 S-90, Montpelier  
8:30 a.m. - Coffee fellowship. 9:15 - Worship.

**THE MEETING PLACE**  
115 E. Market St.  
6:30 p.m. - Bible study.

**TOWER LIFE CENTER**  
11811 N. Wayne St., Zanesville  
towerlifecenter.com  
9:30 a.m. - TLC Groups. 10:30 - Worship.

**ST. MARK'S LUTHERAN (NALC)**  
5912 N. Sugar St., Uniondale  
10 a.m. - Worship. 10:15 - Children's Sunday School.

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# Raiders, Oswalt catch fire to stomp Rebels in tournament

By RYAN WALKER

UNION CITY — To say Southern Wells got red hot in the second half is an understatement.

The Raiders (2-7) picked up their lone win of the Union City Holiday Tournament in the fifth-place game by simply thrashing Randolph Southern (1-8) in the second half to win 79-53.

Believe it or not, Southern Wells needed a Chandler Oswalt three with 50 seconds to go to regain the lead before halftime at 26-25.

But what happened after halftime was unthinkable — nine made threes and 62 percent from the floor converted into a 53-28 second half for the Raiders.

“I think it’s just a matter of seeing the ball go through the basket,” Southern Wells head coach Joel Roush said after the game.



Chandler Oswalt (right) dishes out a pass to teammate Andrew Aker (bottom left). The two combined for 13 three-pointers in the game.

“Confidence builds confidence and it just continued to build on itself. Things just really, really kind of snowballed.”

Oswalt’s three to lead his team into the half was just one of many. The senior guard splashed three of them in the first half, then caught fire and nailed five more in the second.

His eight was hit for the third time in a row, all within the first four minutes of the fourth quarter. He was met at half-court by teammate Evan Pennington with a grin on his face and an emphatic high-five.

Oswalt finished with a game-high 29 points and went 8-14 from beyond the arc. He hit from deep territory and contested looks, drawing some attention toward him. That allowed Andrew Aker to find space in the corner and knock down five of his own.

“It’s not like (Oswalt’s) forcing bad shots. These are rhythm shots that his teammates got,” Roush said. “My favorite part is that he was able to return the favor and get Andrew a couple of wide-open threes too when he would shot fake (then) they would fly at him and he pitched it to Andrew. And Andrew was able to knock down some threes too.”

On the defensive side, it wasn’t the team’s best effort, but enough to hold its streak. Roush shared that it was apart of the halftime speech to clean some things up on that end of the floor.

The Rebels still only went 9-30 in the first half, but the Raiders gave them 20 chances at points from the charity stripe with 16 fouls.

In Southern Wells’ first game, the team fell by five in overtime to Elwood. Roush felt like there was an opportunity missed with that game to play in the 3rd place contest, which would have set up another shot at Bluffton before their other game in the ACAC Tournament.

Even though Southern Wells went 1-2 in the tournament, it had reaped some benefits and hit on a goal Roush was looking for.

Last season, Roush’s squad was playing their best basketball around the same time, winning three out of four before Christmas.



Southern Wells guard Evan Pennington (left) tries to blow past Randolph Southern’s Noah Allen during the 5th place game in the Union City Holiday Tournament Friday night. The Raiders’ big second half propelled them to a 79-53 win. (Photos by Ryan Walker)

The team didn’t play in a tournament that season and took an 18-day break in between which perhaps ended up costing them. The Raiders lost six in a row after that.

But the win over Randolph Southern at least sets them up for success in the new year instead of an almost three-week absence.

“I think we developed some confidence,” Roush said.

“We felt like we maybe should have beat Elwood. We missed a lot of shots around the basket missing a bunch of free throws. I think what we learned too, is that if we continue to plug away, good things will happen for us and we’ll continue to improve and I think you saw that tonight.”

Southern Wells will wait eight days for its next game at Heritage in ACAC play

starting at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 6.

sports@news-banner.com

**SOUTHERN WELLS 79, RANDOLPH SOUTHERN 53**  
At Union City High School

**SOUTHERN WELLS (2-7):** Chandler Oswalt 9-16 3-4 29, Andrew Aker 6-10 0-0 17, Perrin Gates 4-5 2-2 10, Evan Pennington 3-5 2-2 8, CJ Reber 2-5 2-2 6, Caleb Johnson 2-2 1-2 5, Landon Johnson 1-3 0-0 3, Trey Slusher 0-1 0-0 0, Joshua Aulbach 0-0 0-0 0. TOTALS: 27-47 10-14 79.

**RANDOLPH SOUTHERN (1-8):** Noah Allen 5-12 8-11 20, Ronnie Dotson 3-13 1-2 9, Brody Mills 3-9 0-0 8, Taysen Stewart 2-3 2-3 6, Brody Sullivan 2-5 1-2 5, Ian Vance 1-3 0-0 2, Bryson Grimes 0-3 0-2 0, Beau Atkins 0-1 0-0 0. TOTALS: 16-51 12-20 53.

**So. Wells 15 11 29 24 — 79**  
**Randolph 13 12 11 17 — 53**

**Three-point FG:** Southern Wells: 15-29 (Oswalt 8-14, Aker 5-9, L. Johnson 1-2, Reber 0-2), Randolph Southern: 8-25 (Allen 4-6, Dotson 2-10, Mills 2-5, Jefferies 0-1, Vance 0-1). Rebounds: Southern Wells: 24 (Pennington 5, Gates 5, Reber 4, Aker 4, Oswalt 3, C. Johnson 1, L. Johnson 1, Aulbach 1), Randolph Southern: 18 (Mills 8, Allen 7, Stewart 6, Dotson 1, Jefferies 1, Sullivan 1, Grimes 1, Vance 1, Atkins 1). Turnovers: Southern Wells: 7, Randolph Southern: 10. Fouls: Southern Wells: 16, Randolph Southern: 12. Fouled Out: None. Technicals: None.

## Tiger defense shuts down Panthers to earn third at Union City Tournament

By RYAN WALKER

UNION CITY — Kaleb Green got the game’s first basket and take a 2-0 lead for Bluffton at the 7:39 mark. The Tigers never trailed or tied beyond that point.

The Tigers (5-4) finished the Union City Holiday Tournament with a 2-1 record with a 49-19 rout over Elwood (4-7) in the 3rd place contest.

Bluffton suffocated the Panthers’ offense in under 20 points, no more than seven points per quarter, and only eight made baskets.

Elwood’s first points didn’t come until the 1:02 mark when Jayden Mullins hit a free throw, and its first bucket was with under three minutes to go in the half. Three minutes later, and the Panthers got its second and only made shot of the half.

Meanwhile, Bluffton’s Green made the team’s first eight shots in the paint. Axton Beste hit a baseline jumper as the horn sounded to make it 10-1 at the end of the first quarter.

The Tigers stretched into a 27-5 advantage at the break with the help of

four made triples, two from Declan Grieser and one each by Cameron Williams and Axton Beste.

Elwood made just two shots by the break, and Bluffton made five threes.

As the season rolls along, Tiger head coach Craig Teagle is seeing improvements in a once quiet-in-nature team into one that’s talking all over the floor.

“I thought instead of just knowing what the other team was doing, we did a better job of taking away what they were trying to do,” Teagle said after the game. “Our guys communicated well, and they’re getting better every day. I feel like we get some improvements defensively. We’re not where we need to be, but we’re getting better all the time.”

On offense, Teagle’s bunch did what it needed to, and did even more so from downtown. Their 8-15 shooting mark was the same number as Elwood made shots in total, including 2-pointers.

Grieser had three of them, including buzzer-beaters in the second and

third quarters. He finished with a game-high 11 points and Green with 10.

Bluffton also dominated the boards with a 24-10 clip.

In holiday tournaments, teams get to play multiple games in a day or two without worrying about school activities. That gave Bluffton an opportunity to try some new rotations and test the toughness of the group.

For example Andrew Hunt started in place of Eli Garrett. Hunt nailed a pair of threes in the games and finished with eight points overall, all while Garrett still played in his three-and-D role with a made shot from deep in the game.

Teagle said it was productive to see the result and liked what he saw from his group.

“I think it helps out depth a little bit we got to play some kids that weren’t really in the seven or eight-man rotation,” Teagle said. “I think that gives you some depth people you know you can rely on bringing in certain spots. I think it says a little bit about your toughness having three games in a 24-hour period with inten-



Bluffton’s Kaleb Green (right) swats at Elwood’s Jackson Blackford in the third-place game of the Union City Holiday Tournament Friday night. The Tigers defeated the Panthers 49-19 to finish in third place with a 2-1 record. (Photo by Ryan Walker)

sity level stuff and then just going on the road.”

Bluffton’s next game will be in conference play as it hosts Woodlan at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Jan 6.

sports@news-banner.com

**BLUFFTON 49, ELWOOD 19**  
At Union City High School

**BLUFFTON (0-0):** Declan Grieser 4-6 0-0 11, Kaleb Green 5-5 0-0 10, Andrew Hunt 3-6 0-2 8, Tucker Jen-

kins 2-5 1-2 5, Axton Beste 2-5 0-0 5, Eli Garrett 1-3 0-0 3, Ben Maggard 1-1 0-0 3, Cameron Williams 1-1 0-0 3, Hunter Wenger 0-1 1-2 1, Nolan Lambert 0-1 0-0 0, Jude Baumgartner 0-0 0-0 0. TOTALS: 19-34 2-5 49.

**ELWOOD (0-0):** Beau Brandon 2-4 0-0 5, Caam Gallegos 1-3 1-1 3, James Ward 1-6 0-0 2, Xavier Davenport 1-3 0-0 2, Braden Etchison 1-4 0-0 2, Kaden Sullivan 0-1 2-2 2, Jackson Blackford 1-7 0-0 2, Jayden Mullins 0-1 1-2 1, Brice Shuler 0-2 0-0 0, Isaac Casas 0-0 0-0 0, TEAM 0-1 0-0 0. TOTALS: 8-32 4-5 19.

**Bluffton 10 17 8 14 — 49**

**Elwood 1 4 7 7 — 19**

**Three-point FG:** Bluffton: 8-15 (Grieser 3-4, Hunt 2-3, Williams 1-1, Beste 1-2, Garrett 1-3, Maggard 1-1, Williams 1-1), Elwood: 1-10 (Brandon 1-2, Davenport 0-2, Blackford 0-2, Ward 0-1, Shuler 0-1, Etchison 0-1, TEAM 0-1). Rebounds: Bluffton: 24 (Jenkins 7, Williams 4, Green 3, Hunt 3, Beste 2, Grieser 2, Wenger 2, Garrett 1), Elwood: 10 (Ward 3, Mullins 2, Gallegos 2, Etchison 1, Davenport 1, Blackford 1). Turnovers: Bluffton: 8, Elwood: 9. Fouls: Bluffton: 11, Elwood: 4. Fouled Out: None. Technicals: None.

## High School Calendar

**SATURDAY, DEC 30**

**BOYS BASKETBALL:** Norwell at Adams Central, 7:45 p.m.

**GIRLS BASKETBALL:** Belmont at Bluffton, 7:30 p.m.

**MONDAY, JAN 1**

No events scheduled

**TUESDAY, JAN 2**

**GIRLS BASKETBALL:** Norwell at Carroll, 7:30 p.m.; Southern Wells at Daleville, 7 p.m.

**WEDNESDAY, JAN 3**

**GIRLS BASKETBALL:** Bluffton at North Miami, 7:30 p.m.

**WRESTLING:** Bluffton at Norwell, 6:30 p.m.

**THURSDAY, JAN 4**

**SWIMMING & DIVING (CO-ED):** Norwell at East Noble, 6 p.m.; Bluffton at South Adams, 5:30 p.m.

**FRIDAY, JAN 5**

**GIRLS BASKETBALL:** Bluffton at Jay County, 7:30 p.m.; South Adams at Southern Wells, 7:30 p.m.

**SWIMMING & DIVING (CO-ED):** Norwell, Bluffton at Jay County Dive Invite, 6 p.m.

**SATURDAY, JAN 6**

**BOYS BASKETBALL:** Woodlan at Bluffton, 7:30 p.m.; Southern Wells at Heritage, 7:30 p.m.

**GIRLS BASKETBALL:** Norwell at Leo, 7:30 p.m.

**WRESTLING:** Norwell at Bill Kerbel Invitational (New Haven High School), 9 a.m.; Bluffton at IHSWCA Team State (Manchester High School), 6 p.m.

**SWIMMING & DIVING (CO-ED):** Norwell, Bluffton at Jay County Invite, 9 a.m.

**WRESTLING:** Southern Wells at Huntington North Invite, 9 a.m.

## Raiders place 24/30 in Spartan Classic wrestling tournament

Southern Wells placed 24th in the Spartan Classic down in Connersville Friday night.

Peyton Long was the top man for the Raiders, finishing second in the 285-pound weight class. He fell to Levi DeGroat of Connersville by decision 5-0 in the title match.

Jarin Frauhiger finished in seventh place, defeating Cayden Ramos of Jasper by fall.

Greenfield Central was took home first place, followed by New Palestine and East Noble.

Southern Wells will be at the Huntington North Invitational at 9 a.m. Saturday, Jan. 6.

## No. 9 Missouri shuts down No. 7 Ohio State in Cotton Bowl

By STEPHEN HAWKINS AP Sports Writer

ARLINGTON, Texas (AP) — All-America running back Cody Schrader rushed for 128 yards and bulled into the end zone for a 7-yard touchdown to open the fourth quarter with Missouri’s first score, and the ninth-ranked Tigers capped an 11-win season with a 14-3 win over No. 7 Ohio State in the Cotton Bowl on Friday night.

In a game with almost as many total punts (16) as points, the Tigers (11-2) suddenly scored touchdowns on consecutive drives after punting eight times before that. Brady Cook threw a 7-yard TD to Luther Burden III with 5:12 left in the game.

Ohio State (11-2), which was undefeated before losing its regular-season finale to Michigan, played without two-time All-America receiver Marvin Harrison Jr. The standout junior was on the sideline, but opted out of playing. He hasn’t announced yet if he will enter the NFL draft.

The Buckeyes were already without starting quarterback Kyle McCord, who left the program earlier this month to transfer to Syracuse. Devin Brown, who took over as the starter, left the game in the middle of the second quarter with an apparent left ankle injury. They finished with only 203 total

yards.

After finishing 6-7 with bowl losses each of the past two years, Missouri wrapped up coach Eliah Drinkwitz’s fourth season by winning 11 games for the first time since 2014.

Missouri had only 120 total yards before the eight-play, 95-yard drive that ended with Schrader, the former NCAA Division II standout and walk-on, running through two defenders for his 14th TD — and 10th consecutive game with a score. Cook had a 15-yard run before a 50-yard pass to a wide-open Marquis Johnson.

The Tigers then went 91 yards in 13 plays, including Cook converting fourth-and-1 with a 2-yard plunge, for Burden’s score.

Brown appeared to get hurt when he was sacked on a third-down play late in the first quarter. He returned when the Buckeyes got the ball back, but true freshman Lincoln Kienholz took over midway through the second quarter and finished the game.

With McCord gone, Brown took over as the starter after not playing since Oct. 21, and was 4-of-6 passing for 20 yards while getting sacked three times. Kienholz was finished 6 of 17 for 86 yards and lost a fumble while being sacked with 3:13 left.











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					6	7		
		4	8	1		5	2	
		3	1	5			6	7
		7	9				5	4
		1			6			
4						3		
		6			2			8
	9			8	1			

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12/30

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Daily Three-Midday — 00-00-05, SB: 09  
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Daily Four-Midday — 07-07-05-08, SB: 09  
Daily Four-Evening — 08-05-01-05, SB: 08  
Quick Draw Evening — 02-05-09-15-16-20-29-32-37-45-48-50-51-54-60-68-72-77-78-80, BE: 54  
Hoosier Lotto — Estimated jackpot (for Saturday): \$2 million  
MEGA MILLIONS 11-27-30-62-70, Mega Ball: 10, Megaplier: 3X  
POWERBALL Estimated jackpot (for Saturday): \$760 million

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## Public Sale Calendar

**DECEMBER 31-JANUARY 7 - Estate of Mary Lynn Lautzenheiser, seller.** Personal property online only auction. John Deere mower, lawn & garden, furniture, Christmas, books, household. Open houses: Jan. 4 from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. and Jan. 6 from 10 a.m. to noon, 4917 E 100 N., Bluffton, IN. Isaac Stoller, sale manager, The Steffen Group Inc., <http://www.steffengrp.com>, 260-824-3006.  
**BIDDING ENDS JANUARY 1 - Online only auction - Various consignors, seller.** Modeline MCM floor & table lamps and Art Nuevo, Presidential collection, advertising, toys, early Moxie thermometer, 25+ Nativity scenes, antiques, vintage primitives, artifacts, trains, Fenton, Haviland & Franciscan china, antique furniture, military items, salesman samples and miniatures, coins & currency. Sale manager, Rod Fetters, The Steffen Group Inc., [www.steffengrp.com](http://www.steffengrp.com), 260-824-3006.  
**JANUARY 11 - 6 p.m. - Estate of Mary Lynn Lautzenheiser, seller.** 4917 E. 100 N., Bluffton, IN. One-of-a-kind property w/quick access to Bluffton, Decatur, Fort Wayne. Main home was once township school building, and has covered porch walk through to previous dance studio that has potential to be fourth living unit. Property also offers detached two car garage and two-unit apartment building. Open houses: Jan. 4 from 4-6 p.m., Jan. 6 from 10 a.m.-noon. Isaac Stoller, sale manager, The Steffen Group Inc., <http://www.steffengrp.com>, 260-824-3006.  
**JANUARY 12 - 10 a.m. - Secured creditors & various consignors, owners.** 815 Adams St., Decatur. Online only truck and equipment auction. Online bidding only. Offering 500+ lots! 2012-2014 Freightliner M2106 box trucks, dump trucks, day cabs, sleepers, utility trucks, bucket trucks, utility & semi trailers, SUV's, pickup trucks, 250+ various skid steer attachments, various truck parts, fencing, work benches, tool boxes and much more! Accepting consignments! **Krueckberg Auction & Realty LLC**, 260-724-7402, [Kjauction.com](http://Kjauction.com).  
**BIDDING NOW OPEN AND**

**STARTS CLOSING JANUARY 16 - 10 a.m. EST - Carmel Wellness and secured creditors, owner.** Liquidation of Carmel Wellness featuring decompression table w/tension machine, body and therapy tables, hydraulic tables, washer and dryer, folding tables, chairs, desks, office supplies, and much more! Auction pick up Jan. 17, 9 a.m. - 3 p.m. **Krueckberg Auction & Realty LLC**, 260-724-7402, [Kjauction.com](http://Kjauction.com).  
**BIDDING NOW OPEN AND STARTS CLOSING JANUARY 17 - 6 p.m. EST. - Gary Meyer, owner.** Online only commercial real estate auction: 1,376 sq. feet building, 2 bay service area, 15'x16' office space, paved parking lot, .46 acre triangle lot located on N. Main Street, (Hwy. 27)! Zoned: Commercial. Year built: 1950. Wabash Township, Section 29, Adams County, Indiana. South Adams School Corp. Auction preview Jan. 8, 4-5 p.m. or by appointment, 617 N. Main St., Geneva. **Krueckberg Auction & Realty LLC**, 260-724-7402, [Kjauction.com](http://Kjauction.com).  
**JANUARY 23 - 2-6 p.m. ET - Online - Farm: Susan Dunn Estate.** Property Location: Three miles southeast of Markle, IN and Wells Co., Rockcreek Twp. 207.3+/- total acres, high quality farmland, mostly tillable. Tracts 1 & 2: Located on both sides of 200 N between 200 W and 300 W. Tract 3: Located at intersection of 300 N and 500 W. Tract 1: 19.83+/- acres. Tract 2: 110+/- acres. Tract 3: 77.47+/- acres. **Halderman Real Estate & Farm Management**, 800-424-2324, [halderman.com](http://halderman.com), Rick Johnloz, 260-827-8181.

### SUDOKU ANSWER

9	7	1	8	5	9	6	4	2
8	6	2	7	9	1	5	3	4
5	1	5	6	9	2	8	7	3
2	5	8	9	2	7	1	5	6
7	9	1	5	7	6	2	9	8
2	9	6	8	9	1	5	7	3
6	7	9	2	1	8	7	5	9
1	2	9	7	5	2	6	8	9
5	8	7	9	6	9	2	1	4



# Year in Review

(Continued from Page 1)

Most recently, Sahara Wall has been brought on full-time as deputy administrator. The Wells County Council has also approved funding for an increased salary for one environmental specialist, intending to bring back Ryan Bennett, who left the position in June. Wall confirmed Bennett's transition has not yet occurred but is still the department's intention.

2.) In responding to what appeared to be a normal house fire in downtown Bluffton on July 6, the Bluffton Fire Department sent out a distress signal as flames quickly turned into an overwhelming inferno.

The fire at 123 S. Marion St. in Bluffton was reported in the morning and continued to rage uncontrollably for multiple hours. The incident wasn't terminated until 8 p.m. that night and required assistance from several fire departments from Wells, Adams and Allen counties.

The source of the fire was later determined to be an electrical issue stemming from equipment in the basement.

James Thompson, the property owner, his wife, and their four young children were all asleep in the building when neighbors knocked on the door and alerted them of the smoke. Thompson had purchased the building, built in the 1880s, at the beginning of the year and planned to renovate part of the building for office use and part as a mental health facility.

The building was ultimately condemned and demolished. Barkley Properties LLC has since purchased the property.

2.) On several occasions this year, the Wells County Public Library became subject to controversy regarding LGBTQ matters. The first of these conversations began with the library's display policy, specifically regarding their annual Pride Month display.

The item had been brought to attention by library board member Matt Yergler, and, pending discussion, the library forewent a display in June. However, a summer reading program prize sparked criticism that the library was still participating in Pride Month. Each child who signed up for the reading program was offered a rainbow-colored bracelet that read, "Working as One."

People on either side of the issue then showed up to voice their concerns at a Wells County Commissioner meeting, where Children Services Director Cynthia Burchell expressed it had not been her intention to signal Pride. She had purchased the bracelets through a library vendor six months before the issues were discussed and had liked the bracelet's statement of community. As for the color, Burchell said she preferred a multi-colored option because it appealed to more color preferences.

The following month, the library's board approved a policy outlining expectations that book displays include multiple viewpoints on controversial issues.

LGBTQ issues again became a center of discussion as the library came to review its

annual membership in the American Library Association in September. Library Director Sarah MacNeill explained that the ALA, a nonprofit that lobbies for library funding, had increasingly favored one political ideology. While these political matters included more than LGBTQ issues, they again became the forefront of the conversation.

The board ultimately agreed to look at the practical benefits of the membership. Finding few, the board voted not to renew the library's membership.

4.) On the cusp of the New Year, it was discovered a Fort Wayne woman — Celeste Cuthbert, 48 — had walked away from Praxis by Landmark Recovery in Bluffton and was missing. A month later, her body was found at a vacant property around 150 ft. east of the facility.

The property's neighbors approached the city with their concerns, claiming Praxis frequently let individuals walk off without their belongings or coats.

CEO Matt Boyle promised to implement changes with new leadership cited as one of the modifications. Praxis also hosted a community event at Roush Park to rebuild trust. A new team was hired, and the facility was operational.

By May, however, the licenses for the Bluffton facility, along with two other Indiana locations, were suddenly revoked due to misconduct that led to drug-related deaths at other facilities. The Wells County location officially closed its doors on Aug. 3.

5.) A Markle man wanted for the murder of his grandmother was apprehended in Georgia on Christmas Day. He had been on the lam for over one month.

Markle resident Bernice "Dianna" Eubank, 72, was found dead at her home on Nov. 12 in an apparent gruesome homicide. Law enforcement issued a warrant for her grandson, Anthony Castleman, 37, who had been living with her at the time. Castleman carries an extensive history of violent crime in multiple counties, including Wells. Family members reported he had allegedly fled the area.

After a week, a \$1,000 reward for his arrest was offered by the Huntington County Sheriff's Office. Castleman was apprehended this week by U.S. Marshals in Georgia. This is an ongoing story.

6.) Local property tax issues have been on the News-Banner's front pages for the past couple of years as homeowners' property taxes have seen significant increases.

When the 2023 tax billings were posted on the county's GIS website in early February, a News-Banner survey of about 150 residential properties in the county showed that many homeowners experienced a double-digit percentage increase.

Meanwhile, data revealed the continued trend of single-family residential properties picking up a larger share of the total property tax bill: In 2018, single-family properties accounted for 18.78 percent of the total tax levy; by 2023 that percentage has grown

to 31.06 percent.

When the 2023 assessments for 2024 property taxes were mailed out mid-year, another round of protests arose. The result was a more than doubling of formal appeals of those assessments filed in the County Assessor's office.

Those appeals were heard by the Property Tax Assessment Board of Appeals, a group that had been in the news during 2023, dealing with criticisms and a shake-up in its members in 2022.

In the first of two hearings held Oct. 16, the PTABOA board utilized the services of Andrew Smethers, a regional vice-president of the Nexus Group, a company that works with a majority of Indiana's counties in property tax issues. He performed an independent review of each appealed property and gave the board his opinion after the appealing homeowner had made their case.

Of the 13 decisions made by the board, six were essentially "won" by the homeowners, as Smethers either agreed with their position or told the board he would not object if they ruled in the taxpayer's favor. Three other appeals resulted in a partial adjustment to their assessment.

Meanwhile, the state legislature enacted a number of property tax relief measures that will take effect for the 2023-pay 2024 cycle.

Local State Senator Travis Holdman chaired an interim study committee — the State and Local Tax Review task force — which will look further into possible changes in the state's property tax system.

The Wells County Council also voted in September to reduce the local property tax credits beginning next year, although that will not impact assessments.

County Assessor Laura Roberts is unsure about how all that will impact assessments and tax rates in the coming years.

Thus, it is likely to see property taxes in the news throughout 2024 as well.

7.) Efforts to increase access to quality childcare access came into focus this year, including the creation of Imagine Early, a nonprofit that aims to address childcare needs in Adams and Wells counties. The organization was formed out of the Adams-Wells Early Learning Coalition.

With the boots on the ground, Southern Wells Community Schools opened its preschool in the fall, now serving 22 students. The preschool is housed within the Junior-Senior High School building and partners with a class, hoping to encourage the next generation of educators.

Additionally, Norwell Community Schools doubled their preschool offerings in the new school year. Bluffton-Harrison Elementary School also opened its first "experiential learning" classroom, which includes farming decor and interactive elements to promote learning through play. The school hopes to renovate a second classroom focused on construction.

8.) The city of Bluffton is getting a significant — and needed — upgrade on its

wastewater treatment plant.

Huge mounds of dirt have been the order of the day at the plant on North Main Street. The \$31.9 million project, formally approved by the city's Board of Works and Public Safety and the members of the Bluffton Common Council on June 7, was made possible by a combination of grants and loans from the Indiana Finance Authority's Revolving Loan Fund.

The project includes revamping the oldest section of the plant and the sewer main lining and manholes to prevent groundwater from entering the sanitary sewer system. The cost of the required improvements has brought the average sewer rates for the city's residential customers from \$37 to \$62 a month.

Mayor John Whicker said the work is ahead of schedule. "We've been blessed to have a great local contractor on the project, and they've had great subs (subcontractors) on it, too."

Completion of the upgrade is slated for 2025.

9.) A myriad of men and two women were arrested under sting operations facilitated by the nonprofit predator catcher group, Predator Catchers Indianapolis.

Three of these cases have reached conviction thus far, with at least one case currently set for trial. Of the arrests, five suspects met the decoy at Walmart. Two of the individuals were Wells County residents, and three traveled from neighboring states to meet who they believed to be a 13-year-old child.

The organization has not responded to multiple requests for comment, however, it is suspected that Wells County is the chosen location for suspects to meet the group due to the county's willingness to file charges.

10.) Northern Wells Community Schools embarked on a marketing mission this year and, in doing so, took on a new name — Norwell Community Schools.

Not only did the district take the middle and high school's name, but the schools' colors were also adopted by Ossian and Lancaster elementary schools. Either elementary school retained its mascot but received a "refreshed" logo version.

However, the district received a vocal pushback in consideration of these changes, particularly in communication about the matter. The changes were passed in a split vote 3-2 by the school board, with members Angie Topp, Chad Kline and Corey Krug in favor and Gene Donaghy and Traci Neuen-schwander opposed.

Doug Stitt of Sensible Solutions presented new marketing assets for the district as part of its "Norwell Next" vision. Superintendent Mike Springer considered it an appropriate time to do so with middle school construction, which presented a blank slate. New signs, marketing materials and school merchandise have continued to roll out throughout the district.

newsroom@news-banner.com

## 'Swatting' calls targeting officials may prompt heavier penalties

By JEFF AMY  
Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — A spate of false reports of shootings at the homes of public officials in recent days could be setting the stage for stricter penalties against so-called swatting in more states.

U.S. Sen. Rick Scott of Florida, Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, Georgia U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene and Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost have been among the victims.

Several Georgia lawmakers targeted say they want increased penalties for swatting, like laws enacted this year in Ohio and Virginia. Similar bills are pending in other states and Congress.

Here's a look at the issue and what could be done about it:

### WHAT IS 'SWATTING'?

Swatting is the act of making a prank call to emergency services to prompt a response at a particular address. The goal is to get authorities, particularly a SWAT team, to show up.

Calls in multiple states in recent days featured the voice of a man calling himself "Jamal," claiming he had shot his wife because she was sleeping with another man and saying he was holding the boyfriend hostage, demanding \$10,000.

Two Ohio lawmakers said they thought they were targeted recently for helping pass a law making swatting a felony in the state.

Georgia state Sen. Clint Dixon said the incident at his house in Buford on Christmas evening was "quite startling" for himself, his wife and three children.

"I was watching a little football and my wife was upstairs packing for a trip, and all of a sudden, I heard her, you know, start yelling, 'There's police running at the door.' She saw on our Ring doorbell," he told WABE.

### WHO'S BEEN TARGETED RECENTLY?

A man in New York called the Georgia suicide hotline just before 11 a.m. Monday, claiming that he had shot his girlfriend at Greene's home in Rome, Georgia, and was going to kill himself next, said Kelly Madden, the Rome police spokesperson. The call was quickly transferred to police when suicide hotline responders recognized the congresswoman's address.

The department said it contacted Greene's private security detail to confirm she was safe

and that there was no emergency. The call was then determined to be a swatting attempt so the response was canceled while police were on the way. Greene has been the subject of multiple swatting attempts.

Scott wrote on X that police were sent to his home in Naples, Florida, while he and his wife were out at dinner on Wednesday night. Police said they met Scott's private security service at the home, but didn't find anything out of place.

"These criminals wasted the time & resources of our law enforcement in a sick attempt to terrorize my family," Scott wrote.

In Boston, a male caller claimed on Monday that he had shot his wife and had tied her and another man up at Wu's home. The

Democratic mayor said she was surprised to open the door and see flashing lights, but said her home has been targeted by multiple swatting calls since she took office in 2021.

"For better or worse, my family are a bit used to it by now, and we have a good system with the department," Wu told WBUR.

Also targeted have been a Republican congressman from New York, Georgia Lt. Gov. Burt Jones and a former state senator in Nebraska. Dixon was among four Georgia state senators who were recently swatted. In Ohio, a total of three current or former state lawmakers were affected.

Jones said his home in a small town south of Atlanta was swatted on Wednesday, only to have a bomb threat called in on Thursday.

## The Air Force said nuclear missile capsules were safe, but toxic dangers lurked

By TARA COPP  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A large pool of dark liquid festering on the floor. No fresh air. Computer displays that would overheat and ooze out a fishy-smelling gel that nauseated the crew. Asbestos readings 50 times higher than the Environmental Protection Agency's safety standards.

These are just some of the past toxic risks that were in the underground capsules and silos where Air Force nuclear missile crews have worked since the 1960s. Now many of those service members have cancer.

The toxic dangers were recorded in hundreds of pages of documents dating back to the 1980s that were obtained by The Associated Press through Freedom of Information Act requests. They tell a far different story from what Air Force leadership told the nuclear missile community decades ago, when the first reports of cancer among service members began to surface: "The workplace is free of health hazards," a Dec. 30,

2001, Air Force investigation found.

"Sometimes, illnesses tend to occur by chance alone," a follow-up 2005 Air Force review found.

The capsules are again under scrutiny.

The AP reported in January that at least nine current or former nuclear missile officers, or missileers, had been diagnosed with the blood cancer non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Then hundreds more came forward self-reporting cancer diagnoses. In response the Air Force launched its most sweeping review to date and tested thousands of air, water, soil and surface samples in all of the facilities where the service members worked. Four current samples have come back with unsafe levels of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, a known carcinogen used in electrical wiring.

In early 2024, more data is expected, and the Air Force is working on an official count of how many current or former missile community service members have cancer. Some current missileers

told the AP they were concerned by the new reports but believe the Air Force is being transparent in its current search for toxic dangers. Many of them take some of the same precautions missileers have for generations, such as having "capsule clothes," the civil-

ian attire they change into once inside the capsule to work the 24-hour shift. The clothes go straight into the laundry after a shift because they end up smelling metallic.

"Whenever you hear 'cancer' it's a little concerning," said Lt. Joy Hawkins,

23, a missileer at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana. To Hawkins and fellow missileer Lt. Samantha McGlinchey, who spoke to a visiting AP reporter as they completed an underground shift at launch control capsule Charlie, the news meant they would

need to be diligent about medical checkups. "There's more testing, things to come, cleanup efforts," McGlinchey, 28, said. "For us early in our careers, it's better to be caught so early."

Others worry the dangers will again be played down.

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