

OCS now has SROs in five of its 12 schools

BY LEE BECKER

Only a little more than a month after approval of an agreement setting up a School Resource Officer (SRO) program for Oconee County Schools, officers have been assigned to five of the system's 12 schools.

OCS Director of Student Services Kevin Yancey told the Oconee County Board of Education at its work session on Monday that, as of that day, the third officer had been assigned to the system's three middle schools.

Two officers were assigned, one to each of the high schools, back in September shortly after the Sept. 4 shooting at Apalachee High School in Barrow County that left two students and two teachers dead and seven others injured, Yancey reminded the Board.

Yancey said that Sheriff James Hale is continuing to recruit qualified deputies for SRO positions and that Yancey would keep the Board updated.

Yancey told the Board that Capt. Mark Smith has assumed leadership of the SRO Program

and that he will be based at Malcom Bridge Middle School.

Lt. Paul Maxey has been assigned as School Resource Officer at Dove Creek Middle School, Yancey said, and Cpl. Quinton NeSmith started on Monday at Oconee County Middle School.

"With these additions, the SRO team now consists of five officers, four assigned directly to schools, and Capt. Smith overseeing the program while maintaining a presence at Malcom Bridge Middle School," Yancey said.

Yancey said the next position to be filled will be a dedicated officer at Malcom Bridge Middle School. Smith may remain at that school or move to another location, Yancey said.

"I think it is really encouraging that you were able to place people so quickly," Board Member Adam Hammond said.

In an email, Hale said that all five of the SROs are current staff. The two at the high school are Sgt. Kenji Dorsey and Cpl. Johnny Richards.

Field lighting

OCS Director of Facilities Fred Ricketson told the Board the agenda for the regular board meeting on March 10 will include the request for the \$135,290 upgrade to the Oconee County High School practice field lighting.

"This is an upgrade of the lighting on the practice field from recreational lighting levels to competition levels," he said.

Board Member Hammond asked Ricketson to talk "about the importance, competitive wise, of having the lights. What does that necessarily mean to students?"

"That will allow us to host games on that field if we so desire," Ricketson said, "and also allows our athletes to practice under real-time conditions of what games are like."

Vehicles

OCS Chief Operations Officer Ryan White told the Board that he wants to maintain a replacement cycle "on our white fleet

vehicles that are used across Oconee County Schools" that parallels the cycle for the replacement of buses.

He said the system has five vehicles that have 200,000 miles on them "that will require replacement."

Three are for maintenance technicians, one is for the mechanics supervisor, and one is for the technology staff, he said.

He said he is expecting delivery in mid to late July at a cost, set by state contract, of \$266,851.

In an email, OCS Communications Director Steven Colquitt relayed information from White that there are 27 vehicles in the white fleet.

Lee Becker is a retired journalism professor and resident of Oconee County. A version of this story originally appeared on his blog, oconeecountyobservations.org. It has been edited for publication here.



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OCS Director of Student Services Kevin Yancey told the Board of Education Monday that there are now school resource officers in five schools. [Frame captures from video produced by Lee Becker]

Town of North High Shoals plans to host a park workday

BY SHWETA KRISHNAN

Patricia Sibley, a North High Shoals resident and communications committee member, is planning a workday at the town park after the park equipment installation is completed later this spring.

"It'll be from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m., and we'll have everybody come, bring shovels, and clean around the trails behind the park," Sibley said at the Feb. 24 council meeting. "We want to plant some flowers — just some projects that we can do that will get the park ready for everyone coming in."

She said the intention is to bring everyone together and have a sense of community.

The event will take place in April or May. She is also looking to make this event a "fluid thing" that is hopefully scheduled on the calendar for next year, sometime in March.

Sibley also spearheaded the town's involvement in celebrating the 150th anniversary of

Oconee County at the event on Feb. 22 at William Daniell House.

Mayor Stephen Goad noted the addition of the chain-link fence and a gate as a part of the park renovation process.

"What we've actually done is closed off the entire park so people cannot go down there with their cars," Sue Bishop, the town clerk, said after the meeting.

Councilmember Eric Wright indicated that he hopes to use Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) funds to help continue to improve the park in the future.

"For the treetop playscape out there, there's a smaller version of that for the younger kids called Sprig," Wright said.

He noted that the current one is close to the end of the service life, so he would like to bring in the Sprig at some point for an estimate of \$36,000. While the town council does not have that funding to spare currently,

there's a possibility that SPLOST funds might be able to help with that.

There are two sections of the SPLOST fund that are specifically for the park. One, 20% of the funds, can be used for green space. There's another 20% that is allocated for park equipment.

Additionally, the sidewalk project, intended to create a sidewalk from Rays Church Road to Ga. 186, did not receive a bid.

This was the second time that the project was up for bid and received nothing, Bishop clarified after the meeting.

She indicated that some people in town were opposed to the idea.

"Some people saw it as a sidewalk that wouldn't be used," she said

Shweta Krishnan is a Fink Fellow in the Cox Institute's Journalism Writing Lab at the University of Georgia.

Oconee County 4-H agent resigns

BY NATHALEE SIMONEAU

Effective Feb. 7, Daniel Queen resigned as the Oconee County 4-H & Youth Development agent.

A resignation letter signed by Queen was emailed to his superior, Joel Burnsed, on Jan. 27.

On Jan. 29, Queen sent an email to the Oconee 4-H community announcing his resignation. According to that email, Queen had worked at the Extension Office for the last four and a half years as both an educator and the agent.

"I can truly say that this office has been one of the best places I could have asked to work in, and I appreciate each one of you so much," Queen said in the email.

An email sent the following day to teachers in Oconee County Schools announced his resignation and laid out a plan for the rest of the school year. Queen said that fifth grade club meetings will be cancelled for the month of March but that

Burnsed and 4-H Educator Annie Stephenson will hold February and April meetings.

Stephenson declined to comment for this story. In a phone call with The Enterprise, Queen reiterated that he enjoyed his time there and that he will continue working toward his graduate degree. He has not provided a reason for his departure.

According to documents obtained in an Open Records Act request, Queen only had two job performance evaluations during his time at the Extension Office. His first was at the end of 2022, during his time as an educator. This performance evaluation signed by Queen is filled with mainly "3's," which demonstrate that he met expectations. There are also five "4's," or "exceeds expectations in most areas." The scale ranged from one to five.

The second was completed in January of last year while Queen was the agent. The per-

formance evaluation was not fully completed. Queen was not ranked individually on his performance in community involvement, resource generation, professionalism or professional development.

Queen was evaluated as meeting expectations for future goals and overall performance. An unknown evaluator described Queen's strengths as dedicated, building strong relationships with parents and students and offering a variety of in-school and out-of-school opportunities.

Weaknesses were defined in organization, procrastination and a need for improvement in reporting educational contacts. The evaluation also noted that Queen was a provisional hire, contingent on obtaining a master's degree. Queen's contract and separation notice were requested in the open records request but were not provided with the rest of the documentation.



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