



MEMORIAL DAY
Special American flag insert inside
in remembrance of Memorial Day, **7A**

SPORTS
Springing toward
football season, **1B**



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Hitting the road



Gas prices in Aiken County average \$3.170 for regular at the pump, whereas the state sits at \$3.225 and \$3.611 nationally, according to AAA.

AAA predicts busy weekend for Memorial Day travel

BY WIN HAMMOND
whammond@aikenstandard.com

Aiken travelers are in luck this Memorial Day weekend with gas prices lower than national and state averages. Memorial Day season is projected to be busier nationally than last year, according to the American Automobile Association or AAA. “American travelers are forecast to surpass pre-pandemic levels,” Debbie Haas, Vice President of Travel for AAA — The Auto Club Group, said in a news release. “Making this the busiest Memorial Day holiday weekend in nearly two decades.”

Aiken County averages \$3.170 for regular at the pump, whereas the state sits at \$3.225 and \$3.611 nationally, according to AAA as of May 22.

“Drivers should expect continued volatility at the pump as the summer driving season gets underway,” AAA Spokesperson Tiffany Wright said in a news release. “The wildcard remains the cost of oil, and unlike last year, there are now two wars — in the Middle East and Ukraine — that could roil the oil market.”

Lance Cpl. Brittany Glover with the South Carolina Highway Patrol advised drivers to obey the speed limit, wear seat belts and avoid driving tired or



Aiken Visitors Center and Train Museum provided free popcorn and water to visitors May 22.

after drinking. Aiken is expected to be busy during Memorial Day weekend with warm weather and plenty of events throughout the weekend. It's a high traffic time for Aiken, Casey Lozon of the Aiken Visitors Center said.

Hundreds of people will gather to downtown for the Memorial Day parade and trolley tours while visiting Aiken as the visitors center celebrates National Travel & Tourism Week, Lozon said.

The visitors center will put on a “Life is SWEET when you Visit Aiken!” event, serving free milk and cookies, Saturday. It's part of a weeklong celebration with treats offered each day since Wednesday.

Nationally, AAA said 43.8 million people are expected to travel at least 50 miles from home between Thursday and Monday. The Transportation Security Administration says up to 3 million might pass through airport checkpoints

on Friday alone. And that is just a sample of what is to come. U.S. airlines expect to carry a record number of passengers this summer. Their trade group estimates that 271 million travelers will fly between June 1 and Aug. 31, breaking the record of 255 million set last summer.

This annual expression of wanderlust is happening at a time when Americans tell

Please see **TRAVEL**, page 4A



FILE/CHRISTIAN BOSCHULT/POST AND COURIER

The city of Spartanburg received \$34 million in earmarks for downtown development through the South Carolina budget over the past three years.

Lawmakers add pet project requests to state budget

BY NICK REYNOLDS
nreynolds@postandcourier.com

COLUMBIA — One lawmaker wants state money to help move a historic Beaufort County church out of the way of an adjacent airfield.

Another wants to add \$1 million for dredging popular Shem Creek in Mount Pleasant. Still others want to improve all sorts of local recreation offerings in rural parts of the state.

South Carolina lawmakers have submitted more than \$435 million in one-time spending requests to the yet-to-be-adopted 2024-25 state budget that lawmakers will return to Columbia next month to hash out before the new fiscal year begins July 1.

While most state funds are doled out to agencies for the everyday cost of doing business — salaries and benefits, government programming or infrastructure — a key part of South Carolina's budget process includes the handing out of budget earmarks, which are one-time appropriations legislators ask for to fund things at home within their district.

These earmarks can cover a litany of purposes, ranging from funding long-desired road improvements and high school football all-star games to beach restorations and local obscurities like a one multimillion-dollar earmark requested by Beaufort Republican Sen. Tom Davis to physically move an at-risk historic church from one location to another.

Here's some of what's on the table.

Which lawmakers asked for the most?

Members of the House of Representatives asked for the most, with \$274.5 million in earmarks across 339 separate requests.

The Senate asked for a little over \$180 million across 187 requests, while a handful of Statehouse committees requested a little more than \$10.6 million in funds for projects ranging from a prostate cancer awareness campaign to rectifying reported discrepancies in the city of Edgefield's population count in the 2020 U.S. Census.

While many lawmakers asked for nothing in this year's budget, some submitted several requests.

Senate President Thomas Alexander, R-Wallhalla, submitted nearly \$7.4 million in one-time spending requests for his district, headlined by nearly \$1.9 million for what were termed unspecified “community investments” across Oconee County.

Senate Finance Committee Chairman Harvey Peeler, R-Gaffney, had more than \$10.2 million in requests for his district, including \$4 million for the construction of an indoor recreational space in the town of Clover.

Please see **BUDGET**, page 4A



ERIN WEEKS/STAFF

Amber Bolen, left, is pictured with daughter Megyn Bolen, 12. Megyn, a recent homeschool graduate, is enrolled at Aiken Tech pursuing an associate's degree.

12-year-old girl enrolled in Aiken Tech

BY ERIN WEEKS
eweeks@aikenstandard.com

Megyn Bolen, who recently celebrated her 12th birthday, has just graduated from high school as a homeschooled student and is attending classes at Aiken Technical College. Her ultimate goal is to become an orthodontist.

Bolen said that she plans to earn her associate degree from Aiken Tech by May 2025. She has been taking Aiken Tech classes through the Early Start dual enrollment program since August 2023.

After Aiken Tech, she plans to receive a degree in public health from Lander University, earn her master's degree and then attend dental school. She is projected to be completed with all her educational pursuits by age 23, and possibly sooner, her mother said.

Bolen was placed on an accelerated learning schedule when she was 6.

“We decided to try to do two grades a year. We figured at middle school it would have to slow down but I just kept going,” Bolen said.

Bolen's mother, Amber, talked about her daughter's quick learning pace.

“It just seemed like the faster we moved, the faster she wanted to go,” she said. “It just fed itself.”

In her third semester at Aiken Tech, Bolen said her favorite part of being a college student is “seeing people's faces” when she tells them about her educational journey.

Bolen, who has a 4.0 grade point average and is on the dean's list at Aiken Tech, said that Western Civilization has been her most challenging college subject overall, while biology has been her favorite.

Amber talked about Bolen's non-traditional learning path, and how they deal with facing occasional criticism.

“We are different, and that's OK... there's nothing wrong with being different, but we also don't pass judgment on other people,” she said. “It confuses me sometimes really when people do have negative things to say. It's hard for me to relate to that.”

“She's still a kid, and I think people have sort of a preconceived notion that I'm going to put her in a suitcase and ship her off to a college and make her live a life with college students, and that's not what we're doing.”

Amber said that her daughter interacts very little with her college-aged peers, as she is able to take classes fully online.

Her mother added that Bolen still finds time to do some of her favorite activities, like playing outside or with her American Girl dolls.

“It's still very much a childhood, just with an accelerated education,”

Please see **ENROLLED**, page 4A



Index

Classifieds.....7B
Crossword.....6B

Comics.....5B
Obituaries.....4A

Opinions.....9A
Sports.....1B

Television.....4B
Weather.....10B

Contact Us

General offices 803-648-2311
Newsroom.....803-644-2401