



## Breaking ground, raising questions on NC History Center

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## Asheville could get Helene aid

### City Council scheduled to decide on whether to accept \$2.8M state loan

**Sarah Honosky**  
Asheville Citizen Times  
USA TODAY NETWORK

City Council will vote March 25 to accept a \$2.8 million loan from the state to aid in Tropical Storm Helene-related expenses.

The zero-interest loan is intended to help local governments bridge funding gaps as they await reimbursement from

the federal government for emergency and disaster response in the wake of the storm. The loan amounts, calculated based on damage assessments submitted to the N.C. Department of Emergency Management, are required to be paid back within five years.

State lawmakers appropriated \$100 million for the cashflow loan program in December. In February, the North Carolina Department of State Treasurer's of-

fice approved \$73 million in cashflow loans to local governments impacted by the historic storm. In total, 98 local governments were approved for loans, with some money set aside for others to apply at a later date.

Buncombe County received the largest loan offer of \$8.4 million, which it approved to accept March 4.

But at a budget retreat March 20, county staff said they are still exploring how to use the dollars.

"To be honest, the specific guidance from the state has not been as thorough as we might like," said Budget Director John Hudson.

County Manager Avril Pinder said they are pushing the legislature to write into law how the dollars can be spent. Some localities have not yet taken the dollars, she said, because of the "ambiguity" around how to spend it.

The county is also seeking guidance on possible distribution to schools.

N.C. Treasurer Brad Briner acknowledged to the Citizen Times in February that the loan program amount was not enough to meet the needs of highly impacted areas, but was hopeful that more relief would be on the way.

See **STATE AID**, Page 7A



A timber rattlesnake coils on a roadside. Reptile and amphibian surveys in Great Smoky Mountains National Park have found many of these slow-moving species dead along the roads. PROVIDED BY JEREMY CHAMBERLAIN

## Shedding some light on the nature of venomous snakes



**Word from the Smokies**  
Frances Figart  
Columnist

Southern Appalachia affords many opportunities to watch and learn more about our diverse species of wildlife.

At my home near the border of Western North Carolina and East Tennessee, I see migrating and breeding birds, wild turkeys rearing poults, white-tailed deer with their fawns, and the occasional black bear.

By far the most exhilarating sightings are of snakes.

A couple of years ago, between mid-July and mid-August, I saw four rattlesnakes and one copperhead on my property. Last year in late June, two rattlers passed through in one day.

Since this is the year of the snake, I'm excited to see what thrilling glimpses of snakes the warm season may afford me.

See **SNAKES**, Page 5A



Snakes are most often found where shelter, food, and water are available and the climate is warm enough for them to function. Park campgrounds, picnic areas, and visitor centers often meet these criteria. PROVIDED BY PETER PAPLANUS

## SBA to manage student loans

### Trump assigns relatively small agency to take over from Education Department

**Sarah D. Wire**  
USA TODAY

President Donald Trump said on Friday he has decided that the Small Business Administration will handle student loans, taking it out of the Education Department immediately.

"They are all set for it, they are waiting for it. It'll be serviced much better than it has in the past," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office.

On Thursday, Trump ordered his administration to dismantle the Department of Education, looking to achieve a top campaign promise.

But the White House acknowledged the agency can't – and won't – entirely be dissolved without an act of Congress.

Trump also announced that Health and Human Services will take over "handling special needs and all of the nutrition programs and everything else."

In 2024, student loan debt in the United States totaled \$1.77 trillion and was held by 42.7 million borrowers, according to the Education Data Initiative.

Trump's executive order instructed Education Secretary Linda McMahon "to the maximum extent appropriate and permitted by law, take all necessary steps to facilitate the closure of the Department of Education and return authority over education to the States and local communities."

The department has already laid off about half of its staff.

It is unclear when and how the relatively small agency will take over managing the country's massive student loan portfolio, and how much disruption borrowers might experience while the transition takes place.

Colleges and universities are already reporting a backlog after hundreds of employees in the department's Federal Student Aid office were laid off.

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# Snakes

Continued from Page 1A

But not everyone shares my enthusiasm for elongated, limbless reptiles.

In Great Smoky Mountains National Park, “visitors are afraid of venomous snakes” according to Bill Stiver, the park’s former supervisory wildlife biologist. He recalls being at a firearms training at the Mingus Mill range and “having a visitor approach us and tell us how he shot and killed a rattlesnake up the trail. He seriously thought he was doing us and other visitors a favor.”

That individual had to pay a fine. It is illegal to kill timber rattlesnakes not only in the national park but in the entire state of Tennessee. They’re also protected by the North Carolina Endangered Species Act.

During his tenure in the Smokies, Stiver was often called upon to remove venomous snakes from developed areas such as campgrounds, visitor centers and mills. “We generally do not move them very far,” he said, citing expert advice that “if you move them out of their home range, there is a good chance they will die.”

Helping to educate and protect visitors near Cades Cove Visitor Center is park volunteer, certified master herpetologist, and venomous snake handler Walt Peterson.

“Copperheads hang out around the millstones, and I tape off the area to keep the public safe, as people often sit on these stones,” he said. “The snakes are a great source of interpretation, and it seems people are as eager to see them as the mill.”

Peterson said the most common question he hears is, “Is it poisonous?” This provides an opportunity to educate visitors: “Quite simply, if you bite it and get sick, it’s poisonous. If it bites you, and you get sick, it’s venomous.”

He also hears — and attempts to dispel — a lot of “snake myths.” One involves a common misconception that people have been “chased by snakes.”

“From a snake’s point of view, people look like very large predators,” he said.

“Snakes will usually freeze, thinking you won’t see them, then slither away if possible. Sometimes that escape route is behind you, giving the impression that they are chasing you.”

University of North Carolina Asheville professor R. Graham Reynolds has



**Eastern copperheads are stocky snakes with a copper-colored head and keeled scales boldly marked by hourglass-shaped brown crossbands on the upper surfaces. Heat-sensing organs are located in facial pits on each side of the head between the eye and nostril.**

PROVIDED BY R. GRAHAM REYNOLDS

made a career of studying reptiles, even discovering some new snake species in tropical climates.

He said our region’s timber rattlesnake and eastern copperhead are both pit vipers, closely related members of the same family, *Viperidae*.

“They are ambush predators, which means they usually find a productive place to wait for their prey to come to them,” Reynolds said. “Timber rattlesnakes famously can stay put for quite some time — hours to days — waiting for a mouse to walk by. Mice are very warm relative to their environment, and the snake can detect this warmth using the pits in its snout to ‘see’ the infrared signature of the mouse.”

Copperheads, which are nocturnal and fantastically camouflaged, also have heat-sensing pits and eat warm-blooded mammals like mice and birds. Their diet includes amphibians like frogs as well as insects and other non-warm-blooded prey.

“The venom works to immobilize the prey quite quickly,” Reynolds said. “It is dangerous to the snake to grab a mouse or a bird and risk being bitten or pecked. So, these snakes generally bite, release, then track down their envenomated prey.”

Snakes in our region need to move between habitats seasonally. Our cold winters require them to find locations where temperatures stay relatively stable without getting too cold. Once the season changes, they make short migrations to habitats where they can feed and reproduce.

“Often these movements happen around the same time when the condi-

tions change,” Reynolds said. “So, you will sometimes observe several snakes in one day after not having seen any for a season. While snakes don’t follow trails the way many mammals do, they sometimes move along the same areas as other snakes if there are few obstructions and enough places to hide if needed.”

And hiding is something at which snakes excel. Peterson said humans see only about 10% of the snakes that are around, and Reynolds has repeatedly witnessed hikers walking right past a snake on a trail. He adds that copperheads are quite good at living near humans, often without being detected, and most bites occur because a person was provoking or handling the snake.

In fact, recent scientific studies show that vipers in general are loathe to strike. A 2020 article titled “Don’t Tread on Me” reveals the research of Adams et al. demonstrating that only two out of 69 copperheads attempted to bite when intentionally provoked. The paper cites herpetologist Clifford H. Pope, who wrote in 1958 that snakes are “first cowards, then bluffers, and last of all, warriors.”

“Both our venomous snakes are very reluctant to strike people and will do so only when they feel trapped or otherwise threatened,” said Reynolds. “I have stepped over several copperheads, for example, and they just lie there.”

Between 2008-2015, an average of 201 people died in the United States each year as a result of animal encounters, according to a 2018 research paper by Forrester et al., with 34 deaths attributed to dogs and fewer than half — 86 deaths — to venomous animals.

Insect stings were responsible for most of the deaths in this category at 71, with venomous snakes and lizards accounting for only six deaths.

Snakebite victims often have underlying medical conditions or fail to seek treatment, Peterson said, and in 25% of snake bites, no venom is even injected.

“The biggest threat from timber rattlers and copperheads in the park comes from people unknowingly placing hands or feet too close, especially around buildings, rocks and logs,” he said.

Why are snakes sometimes found near human dwellings and structures like the park’s visitor centers or my house in East Tennessee?

Reynolds said it’s often because that is simply where humans look.

“You might move a woodpile across your yard and discover a copperhead, but you probably do not move a woodpile out in the woods.

“It might also be said that humans are found close to snake dwellings, as sometimes the places that people like to live — sunny, south-facing slopes with creeks running nearby — are also preferred habitats of some snakes.”

Snakes exhibit preference for particular areas called “home ranges.”

So, they will often return if moved only a short distance.

Only certified snake handlers such as those mentioned in this article can legally relocate venomous snakes.

There are now social media groups that help people contact their nearest authorized snake handler.

Globally, the largest threat to snakes is, of course, humans, and a seemingly universal desire to destroy them based in a lack of education. Reynolds said this is leading to the likely extinction of multiple snake species.

“Snakes can only defend themselves within a body length or two of themselves and will only do so when directly threatened,” he said. “Since it is within the powers of each person to decide what they value and what they don’t value, we have the opportunity to reset how we interact with nature.”

Predators, snakes included, are important members of ecological webs that link living things together in communities. Disruptions like the killing of snakes ripple throughout the local biotic community, reducing overall biodiversity.

“Snakes, like other misunderstood species, have a right to existence that goes beyond their utility to humans,” said Reynolds. “If you don’t love snakes, that’s okay; just give them their space. But perhaps you might find a spark of the joy and excitement that comes with seeing a wild snake, the way that I and so many thousands of other people in this region do.”

*Frances Figart is the creative services director for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a partner supporting Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. For more information, visit SmokiesLife.org and reach the author at Frances@SmokiesLife.org to learn more and share tales of snake appreciation. An earlier version of this story appeared in the Asheville Citizen-Times on July 14, 2024.*

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