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CITIZEN TIMES

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PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

Asheville OKs \$10M bond funds

Sarah Honosky
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE – City Council allocated half its affordable housing bond funding to the Western North Carolina Affordable Housing Loan Fund, run by nonprofit Self-Help, which will use the dollars to create rental housing within city limits. Staff hopes it will “dramatically increase” projects supported by the fund, ensuring public dollars go further in ad-

ressing “critical community needs,” according to a Sept. 9 presentation. The loan fund is a program of Durham-based nonprofit Self-Help Ventures Fund, which provides low-cost, flexible financing to help affordable housing developers and owners compete with market-rate developers for available property, and fill financing gaps for affordable housing development projects. Council unanimously approved the \$10 million allocation Sept. 9, and autho-

rized the city manager to execute a service agreement with Self-Help for the loan administration, underwriting and servicing. This is the first step in deploying the \$20 million approved by voters for housing as part of an \$80 million general obligation bond package in November. The city’s Affordable Housing Officer Sasha Vrtunski said staff are aware of at least eight affordable rental developments in the planning stages that will need gap financing from various

sources. According to a recent Housing Needs Assessment, Asheville has an overall five-year housing gap of 11,658 units, with a majority being rental housing, serving lower income households — meaning those making below 80% of the area median income. That’s \$52,150 for one person, and less than \$74,500 for a four-person household. Asheville’s area median income is \$65,188. **See FUNDS, Page 9A**



Campground host Nancy Furlow helps a couple visiting from Tennessee decide where to hike during their trip to the North Carolina side of the park. PHOTOS BY HOLLY KAYS/SPECIAL TO THE CITIZEN TIMES

‘This is the way to go’

For some Smokies volunteers, campground hosting is the ideal lifestyle

Word from the Smokies
Holly Kays
Special to the Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

Before they retired, Bob and Nancy Furlow owned and managed apartment buildings for a living. Now, they don’t even own a home—at least, not one without wheels. Since selling their house seven years ago, the couple, both in their late 60s, has resided in a 160-square-foot Boles Aero trailer, which Bob painstakingly rebuilt to feature cedar-paneled walls, a king-sized bed, and a full bathroom and kitchen. Four years into their new life as full-time RVers, they joined the ranks of the five dozen people who serve as campground hosts every year in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. “This is the way to go when you retire,” said Nancy. “It’s fantastic.” Taking up temporary residence at one of the park’s ten frontcountry campgrounds, campground hosts perform a variety of tasks aimed at making the camping experience as safe and enjoyable as possible. A friendly and welcoming presence for campers, hosts offer guidance on camp-



Nancy and Bob Furlow have been coming to the Smokies as campground hosts ever since they first stumbled upon the opportunity in 2023.

ground rules, local wildlife, and outdoor safety. These volunteers are a critical link between campers and park staff, and they are “essential” to park operations and visitor experience, said Andy Sinclair, campground program coordinator for Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

See LIFESTYLE, Page 2A

Suspect caught in Kirk’s murder

Robinson charged with 3 felonies in the killing

Joey Garrison, Davis Winkie, David DeMille and Christopher Cann
USA TODAY NETWORK

“Ladies and gentlemen, we got him,” Utah Gov. Spencer Cox said at a press conference the morning of Sept. 12. By “him,” he meant the person suspected of killing conservative activist Charlie Kirk at a college speaking event Sept. 10. The suspect was identified as Tyler Robinson, Cox said. A family member contacted a family friend, who told authorities Robinson “confessed to them or implied that he committed the incident.”

The suspect was taken into custody at 10 p.m. local time Sept. 11, FBI Director Kash Patel said. President Donald Trump said earlier Sept. 12 on “Fox and Friends” that the family friend was “a person of faith, a minister.” According to court records obtained by USA TODAY, the suspect was charged with three felonies: aggravated murder, felony discharge of a firearm and obstruction of justice. He was being held without bail at Utah County Jail, according to an order from Judge Shawn R. Howell. Court documents confirm Robinson has no felony or misdemeanor convictions.

Kirk, 31, was killed by a single gunshot while speaking in front of some 3,000 people at Utah Valley University in Orem, Utah. Authorities tied Robinson to the crime through online messages, surveillance video, and interviews with his family and friends. Ammunition and shell casings recovered from the shooting scene included anti-fascist and taunting messages, Cox said. One casing read: “Hey fascist! Catch!” Another quoted “Bella Ciao,” an Italian song dedicated to resistance fighters against Nazi occupiers; it is a rallying cry for anti-fascists. Another was inscribed with terms

See MURDER, Page 11A



MOUNTAINS

Stearns announces bid for Buncombe County Commission

Jacob Biba
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE – Anna Stearns, a Black Mountain attorney and small business owner, has announced her bid for a seat on the Buncombe County Board of Commissioners, according to a Sept. 9 news release.

In a statement, Stearns, a Democrat and lifelong Buncombe County resident, said she’s running because she has “a deep commitment” to the county and its residents.

“I know that we can come together to support our neighbors, not just through short-term recovery, but for the long haul, with solutions that ensure everyone has a safe place to call home, a good paying job that supports their family, and the chance to truly thrive right here in Buncombe County,” Stearns said.

Stearns, 43, started her career as a high school intern at the Black Mountain law firm she now owns, Sneed & Stearns, P.A., according to the release. She graduated from Owen High School, Asheville-Buncombe Technical Com-

munity College and UNC Asheville before attending law school at Campbell University School of Law in Raleigh.

Before returning to Western North Carolina to practice law, Stearns worked at the North Carolina General Assembly with Rep. Brian Turner, a Democrat, and served as general counsel to former-North Carolina Supreme Court Chief Justice Cheri Beasley. In 2020, Beasley, a Democrat, lost her seat on the state supreme court to Republican Paul Newby by 401 votes.

After Tropical Storm Helene pummeled Buncombe County last September, Stearns converted her law practice into a hub for disaster recovery, according to the release. There, she hosted legal clinics to support residents and business owners, an effort that earned her recognition from the American Bar Association, according to the release.

Stearns, according to the release, has served on local nonprofit boards, like Bounty & Soul, focused on food security, small business support and long-term recovery efforts in eastern Buncombe County. Her campaign platform includes expanding affordable housing, investing in mental health and addiction services, strengthening public schools, and building infrastructure for all county residents.

“I’ve spent my career speaking up for folks whose voices don’t always get heard,” Stearns said in a statement. “I know what it feels like to face obstacles that feel insurmountable, and I know how valuable it is to have someone standing in your corner. I want to be that voice for the people of Buncombe County.”

District 1 is currently represented by Democrats Jennifer Horton, who was elected in 2024, and Al Whitesides, who was elected to his second full four-year commission term in 2022. After redistricting in 2023, Whitesides no longer lives in District 1.

Stearns’ announcement comes after Commissioner Martin Moore, a Democrat who represents District 2, announced his bid for district attorney, a seat currently held by long-time district attorney and Democrat, Todd Williams.

Moore, 37, was elected to a four-year term on the County Commission in 2022 and is now the board’s vice-chair.



Anna Stearns PROVIDED BY ANNA STEARNS COUNTY COMMISSION

In 2024, Moore ran for a seat on the state’s Court of Appeals, losing to Republican Christopher Freeman in the November general election.

Jacob Biba is the Helene recovery reporter at the Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA TODAY Network. Email him at jbiba@citizentimes.com.

Lifestyle

Continued from Page 1

“By supplementing the efforts of permanent and seasonal staff, camp hosts effectively multiply the park’s capacity to serve the public and ensure that our campgrounds are preserved for the enjoyment of future generations,” he said.

The Furlows got involved with camp hosting “quite by accident,” Nancy said. Originally from Florida, the couple visited the Smokies for the first time in 2023, when they pulled into Smoke-mont Campground for the same two-week stay they planned at every campground they visited. They quickly noticed two things: the abundance of rhododendron bushes about to bloom and the absence of a host at the campground. The next day, Nancy visited the ranger office and asked if the park was recruiting. Before they knew it, the Furlows were onboarded as volunteers and scheduled to stay in the Smokies for more than enough time to see the rhododendrons blossom.

“Normally a campground host will only stay a month, and what happened that year was, every month the campground host would cancel,” said Nancy. “Being full-time RVers, we have complete freedom in our lives, so I’d just say, ‘I’ll stay.’”

The Furlows spent seven months in the Smokies that year, and they loved it so much they kept coming back: seven months in 2024, seven in 2025, and, if all goes as planned, seven in 2026 as well. Though their first post was at Smokemont, they quickly developed an affinity for Deep Creek, and that’s where they’ve been stationed ever since. For the past two years, it’s just been Nancy donning the brown camp host uniform, but Bob is never far away, her unofficial backup.

Though stationed at a camp chair she’d set up outside the office while on duty one sunny summer Wednesday morning, Nancy never sat down for long. She popped up to help a couple from Tennessee plot out their day hike, chat with two locals who walk the campground loop daily, check in a late arrival from the previous night, and direct multiple carfuls of disoriented visitors to the trailhead parking area. These constant opportunities to help others are a source of joy for Nancy, who explained that service has always been an important part of her life.



Camp hosting is a way of life for Mark and Cathy Ault, who have served at locations in 25 states over the past ten years PHOTO PROVIDED BY MARK AND CATHY AULT

“I love the weather and the wildflowers,” Nancy said. “I love hearing the families in the background—tubing, having a good time. I love to make everyone’s visit here a good experience. I like being that person who knows everything. It’s like being a concierge at a hotel.”

Instead of directing guests to five-star restaurants or sketching out metro routes, Nancy dispenses knowledge on bear safety, offers input on hiking itineraries, and answers questions about sites of outstanding natural beauty nestled within the 816-square-mile national park. She hangs the American flag in the morning, takes it down at night, cleans the camp office, and ensures campers are following food storage requirements—whatever there is to be done.

“I meet a lot of great people,” Nancy said. “I’ve met some really good friends here. It’s nice to be known and loved.”

Camp hosting is now a way of life for Bob and Nancy, and the same is true for Mark and Cathy Ault, who spent three months this summer stationed at Cosby Campground. This is the tenth year since they took on their first camp hosting assignment, at Shenandoah National Park in Virginia. Since then, they’ve hosted campgrounds for the National Park Service, US Forest Service, and North Carolina state parks, traveling across 25 states. Though it’s only their second year hosting in the Smokies, their connection to the place is deep—they’ve visited the park throughout



Tents fill the group camping area at Deep Creek Campground on a sunny morning ahead of the July 4 weekend. PROVIDED BY HOLLY KAYS/SMOKIES LIFE

their lives, and 14 years ago they even got married in Gatlinburg.

“What keeps Cathy and I going is just helping people out,” Mark said.

Maintaining a home in the coastal town of Swansboro, North Carolina, the Aults, in a similar age bracket to the Furlows, aren’t full-time RVers like Bob and Nancy—who live solely out of their trailer, forgoing even a storage unit—but they come about as close as it gets. For ten months out of the year, the Aults travel from campground to campground with their Silverado truck and 33-foot trailer, respectively named the White Stallion and the Covered Wagon. They go home in April to do taxes and again in December to celebrate Christmas.

“We’re 70ish, and hopefully we have

about another good ten years doing this,” said Mark.

Retired from the intelligence community, Mark also spent 23 years serving in the Marine Corps, while Cathy has led a multifaceted life as the owner of cosmetic and cleaning businesses, a professional painter, a secretary, and caretaker for her three children. The demands of work and family during those busy years often made it hard to slow down and appreciate the things that really matter.

“You’re not thinking about all the other elements that go into a good life—getting out in nature, exercising, building relationships, things like that. That’s what makes hosting great,” Cathy said. “You’re helping your country. You’re helping the campers. You learn a lot about how things work, and you realize that if it weren’t for volunteers in America, America would be in a very difficult situation.”

So would the park. Every year, more than 1,600 people give their time as Volunteers in Park to fill more than 2,600 volunteer positions. Areas of service range from litter patrol and trail maintenance to resource education and data collection. During the last fiscal year, which ended September 30, 2024, the park recorded 113,448 volunteer service hours valued at nearly \$3.8 million.

Campground hosts are integral members of this volunteer force. The Smokies records more than 300,000 overnight stays in its campgrounds each year—382,00 in 2024, despite closures from Hurricane Helene reducing fall visitation—and 12 million visits overall. As the park works to serve these visitors while protecting the Smokies for future generations, volunteers like the Aults and the Furlows are more important than ever.

“It’s an awesome feeling that everybody has the confidence in Cathy and I performing our duties here,” Mark said. “It’s just an honor.”

To apply to become a campground host or to view other volunteer opportunities in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, visit nps.gov/grsm/getinvolved/volunteer.htm. Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting the scientific, historical, and interpretive activities of Great Smoky Mountains National Park by providing educational products and services such as this column. Learn more at SmokiesLife.org or reach the author at hollyk@smokieslife.org.

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