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PEAKS TO THE CANVAS



Oil painter Olena Babak contemplates the scene before her along Little River in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. PROVIDED BY HOLLY KAYS AND SMOKIES LIFE

With each brushstroke, plein air painters capture the mountains' magic

Holly Kays
Guest Column

On a piece of rocky ground at the base of a steep bank along the mist-shrouded Little River, oil painter Olena Babak sets up her easel. It's late in the day to be starting a new piece—less than three hours of sunlight remain—and Babak is fresh from an hours-long painting session in the Elkmont area of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. But something about the scene compels

her. "Sometimes it's like an impulse," she said. "Sometimes it's contemplated. Sometimes, a scene sort of drags you in, and you need to figure out why." The Great Smokies offer a markedly different landscape than her home state of Maine. But Babak, like the 18 other artists participating in the fourth annual Plein Air Smokies event—this year hosted by the Great Smoky Mountains

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Featured artist Charles Newman works to translate the scene before him onto canvas. PROVIDED BY ERIN ROSOLINA AND THE GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS INSTITUTE AT TREMONT



Aerial scenes of downtown Asheville on Nov. 18, 2024. MICHAEL CLEVENGER AND MAX GERSH/USA TODAY NETWORK

Asheville population nears 100K since COVID

Ryley Ober
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE - The mountain city has grown ever-closer to a population of 100,000 since 2020 and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, an October report from the Office of State Budget and Management shows. Asheville's population grew by over 3,500 between April 1, 2020, and July 1, 2024, reaching over 98,000 people by 2024, according to population estimates from the state demographer. With the nearly 4% population increase, the city held tight as the state's 11th largest municipality. Michael Cline, a state demographer, told the Citizen Times that Western North Carolina benefits from the area's natural resources, national parks and forests, which attract people to the area. Many of those are retirees or folks nearing retirement, he said via email Oct. 16. As more of the baby boom generation entered these ages, more people migrated to WNC. "The area — particularly Asheville — also benefited from post-pandemic migration with people moving to areas where they want to live while working remotely," Cline wrote. Nearby cities and towns in Western North Carolina also saw growth

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Trump seeking charges for more political foes

3 already indicted but others on president's list

Josh Meyer
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – President Donald Trump's former national security adviser John Bolton on Oct. 16 became the third high-profile Trump critic to be criminally charged after the president repeatedly attacked him publicly. All three maintain their innocence and plan to contest the charges. The day before, Trump rattled off other names of people to be "looked into" as Attorney General Pam Bondi, Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche and FBI Director Kash Patel stood beside him at a news conference, smiling. "I hope they're looking at all of these people," Trump said of former Justice Department Special Counsel Jack Smith, former Justice Department sen-

ior prosecutor Andrew Weissmann and Sen. Adam Schiff, D-California. "And I'm allowed to find out. I'm allowed, you know, I'm in theory chief law enforcement officer." This presidential interference represents a major breach in the once-firm firewall between the White House and the Justice Department. Former President Bill Clinton created a scandal merely by having a mundane conversation with former Attorney General Loretta Lynch at an airport in 2016, when DOJ was investigating Clinton's wife, Hillary, for her use of a private email server while secretary of state. That recent history seems quaint today. Trump's appointees have indicated that more indictments against Trump's personal and political adversaries will be forthcoming. Trump told reporters Sept. 26 he expects more charges against people who

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President Donald Trump has publicly listed a number of his political opponents he thinks should be "looked into." KEVIN DIETSCH/GETTY IMAGES



