



70% Off Installation on a new bath or shower*

Zero Payments & Zero Interest for 18 Months!



Call Now! Limited Time Offer!
828-617-0481

Our team is ready to take your call 7 days a week.



*70% Off promotion does not include material costs. Not valid with any other offer, or previous job. See representative for details. New orders only for appointments completed by 6/30/2026. Offer expires 6/30/2026. Financing available with minimum purchase and approved credit. Mad City Windows & Baths, LLC, is neither a broker nor a lender. Financing is provided by third-party lenders unaffiliated with Mad City Windows & Baths, LLC, under terms and conditions arranged directly between the customer and such lender, all subject to credit requirements and satisfactory completion of finance documents. Any finance terms advertised are estimate only. Ask for details. New orders only. Not valid with any other offer, or previous job. Interest will be charged to your account from the purchase date if the purchase balance is not paid in full within the/ by the end of the 18-month period or if you make a late payment. New orders only for appointments completed by 6/30/2026.

SERVING ASHEVILLE SINCE 1870

CITIZEN TIMES

FRIDAY, MAY 15, 2026 | CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

Asheville property tax hike mulled

How would new rate affect taxpayers?

Sarah Honosky
Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE – When public-facing budget conversations began in January, the city was facing a \$30 million budget gap for the coming fiscal year. On May 12, City Council heard the proposed — and balanced — \$275.6 million budget,

which includes a 2.8% cost of living increase for full-time staff and a recommendation to increase the tax rate by nearly 5 cents above revenue-neutral.

For many property owners, this would mean a higher tax bill — \$237 more annually for a median-valued home of \$478,500, or nearly \$20 a month.

“Revenue neutral” describes the rate the property tax would need to be to achieve the same amount of revenue if revaluation had not occurred.

“This is a balanced and disciplined budget. It makes targeted investments

while recognizing the very real financial pressures facing our residents and our organization,” City Manager DK Wesley said in her presentation to council. “It does not attempt to solve every challenge in a single year, but it does move us forward in deliberate and meaningful ways.”

She said people can expect a continued focus on maintaining essential services, strengthening the workforce and advancing “key infrastructure and capital needs.”

No action was taken May 12. A budget public hearing will be held May 26.

Budget adoption is slated for early June.

Asheville City cuts

Budget manager Lindsey Spangler said they made almost \$9 million in cuts, including 16 vacant positions, as staff worked to bring down the gap. Among service reductions, the budget would also decrease community center hours to pre-pandemic levels, pause the

See **PROPERTY TAX, Page 9A**

WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

Writer will draw inspiration from Smoky Mountains stay

Holly Kays
Special to the Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

When Laurie McDowell begins a wildflower sketch, he always starts with the base, getting a feel for the curve and shape of the stem before exploring the contours of the leaf. Finally, he reaches the bloom. “It’s like an interview,” he said, glancing up from his sketchbook along Kephart Prong Trail — you start with the basic questions and build your understanding to get to the essence.

McDowell, 25, is all about getting to know the people, plants, animals, and landscapes around him a little bit better. As the 2026 recipient of the Steve Kemp Writer’s Residency offered by Smokies Life, he’ll have plenty of opportunity to do that during his six weeks in Great Smoky Mountains National Park this year. McDowell will use the time to learn about the Smokies’ natural and cultural history and render that experience in two mediums: poetry and illustration.

“In illustration, I get to meet the plant and get to know them as an individual and as the species, build an appreciation for them, pick out details and learn how to see them a bit better,” he said. “With the poetry, it’s like zooming out. I can pull in a little bit more of the ecological history, the cultural context, the social context, and then blend that with my experiences in a way that helps me fit myself into the broader landscape.”

The Smoky Mountain landscape is one that holds special meaning for McDowell. Born in Ashland, Kentucky, he graduated from high school in Asheville, North Carolina, after moving there as a 12-year-old. Growing up, he was often outside — playing in the woods behind his parents’ house in Kentucky with his



Laurie McDowell works on a sketch along Kephart Prong Trail in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY HOLLY KAYS/SMOKIES LIFE

See **WRITER, Page 8A**

MORE ONLINE

Take a walk on Anthony Creek Trail in Great Smoky Mountains National Park with our 2026 Steve Kemp writer in residence, Laurie McDowell. Through illustration and poetry, he seeks to magnify small, often-overlooked details, while also drawing connections and context across the larger landscape.

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKgpluFnSKY>



McDowell leans in for a closer look at a flower he plans to sketch on the drawing paper he keeps stored in the tube slung across his back.



In this rendering of a plant community by McDowell, a butterfly perches on a mayapple while a West Virginia white drinks from a woodland phlox.

Xi warns U.S. against mishandling of Taiwan

Trevor Hunnicutt and Mei Mei Chu
REUTERS

BEIJING – China’s Xi Jinping told President Donald Trump at the start of a two-day summit on May 14 that trade talks were making progress, but cautioned that disagreement over Taiwan could send relations down a dangerous path and even lead to conflict.

Xi’s remarks on Taiwan, the democratically governed island claimed by Beijing, came in a closed-door meeting of the leaders of the world’s two largest economies that ran more than two hours, China’s foreign ministry said.

They represented a stark – if not unprecedented – warning during a pomp-filled occasion that was otherwise friendly and relaxed, although the U.S. summary of the talks made no mention of Taiwan.

Instead it focused on the leaders’ shared desire to reopen the key waterway of the Strait of Hormuz, effectively closed due to the Iran war, and Xi’s apparent interest in buying American oil to reduce China’s dependence on Middle East supplies.

With Trump’s approval ratings dented by a war with Iran that shows no signs of abating, the first visit by a U.S. president to China in nearly a decade has taken on added significance as he searches for economic wins.

“There are those who say this may be the biggest summit ever,” Trump told Xi in brief opening remarks after a ceremony that featured an honor guard and throngs of children waving flowers and flags at Beijing’s Great Hall of the People.

Xi told Trump that preparatory negotiations between U.S. and Chinese economic and trade teams in South Korea on May 13 had reached “balanced and positive outcomes,” China’s foreign ministry said in a summary.

The talks aimed to maintain a fragile trade truce struck when the leaders last met in October, where Trump suspended triple-digit tariffs on Chinese goods and Xi backed away from choking global supplies of vital rare earths.

Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, who led the talks, said he expected progress on establishing mechanisms to support future bilateral trade and investment, and an announcement about large Chinese orders for Boeing aircraft.

See **TAIWAN, Page 9A**



Writer

Continued from Page 1A

older brother and running almost daily through the NC Arboretum as a member of his high school's cross-country team — but didn't start learning about ecology, taxonomy and land stewardship until after college.

"I didn't have any ecological knowledge growing up, so being able to come back and re-meet all of these plants and do sketches and just walk along the trails has been so beautiful," he said.

McDowell's interest in drawing and poetry grew up alongside his love of nature, and he can trace all three back to a Literature of the Environment class he took in high school, taught by his cross-country coach Andrew Devine. The class required him to keep a nature journal, making entries while perched on his "sit spot" atop a culvert in a forgotten corner of the school grounds.

"I think that was the first time someone had told me to just go outside and sit down and you don't need to be doing anything while you're out there," McDowell said. "Just look around."

Since then, McDowell has sought out opportunities to sharpen his skills: poetry and drawing classes in college, as well as a five-week drawing program in northern Italy. He has put those skills to use during his career in conservation, creating sketches for an exhibit during a previous position at Presquile National Wildlife Refuge in Virginia. In his current job as an ecological horticulturist for the Randall's Island Park Alliance in New York City, his sketches are framed as wall art for the alliance's annual fundraising auctioned.

McDowell didn't set out searching for a career in conservation. He began his college career at the University of Virginia as an architecture student but soon realized he didn't want his life's work to revolve around buildings. He shifted his focus to landscape design, and after graduation he found a job at a nearby native plant nursery in Afton, Virginia.

"That was my first really tangible experience of having that reciprocal relationship with the land that you're on, using your skills and observations to figure out where you can 'slot in' to the landscape and be of help," he said.

His manager liked to say that their job was to "scratch the land's back in the



Laurie McDowell sketches a thyme-leaved bluet growing along Kephart Prong.

PROVIDED BY HOLLY KAYS/SMOKIES LIFE

place it can't reach," an idea that captivated McDowell's imagination and "really kickstarted" his desire to continue a career in ecology. He's been in his position at Randall's Island Park since January 2025. The city's Department of Parks and Recreation website describes the island as a 480-acre "oasis." In addition to tennis courts and recreation fields, the park is home to more than 15 acres of wetlands, 500 species of plants and animals, an urban farm, meadows, and forests — all at the center of the nation's most populous city.

Though Randall's Island is more than 700 miles distant from the Great Smoky Mountains, McDowell has found familiarity between the flora and fauna he's meeting in the Smokies and those he interacts with at work each day. He enjoyed getting into a detailed conversation with Park Entomologist Becky Nichols on the finer points of swallowtail butterfly identification — "I think maybe I surprised her a little bit with those questions," he laughed—and his knowledge of Latin species names has revealed a multitude of connections be-

tween the plants he knows in New York and the native diversity of the Smokies.

As an example, he pointed to a yellow-centered aster whose common name is Robin's plantain. That moniker would indicate that it's somehow associated with species like the common and narrow-leaf plantains, both members of the *Plantago* genus of the Plantaginaceae family. But the Latin name for Robin's plantain is *Erigeron pulchellus*, making it a close relative of species McDowell knows well on Randall's Island.

"I saw this plant, learned about it, identified it, and was able to make that connection across 700 miles to these plants that I help take care of and steward at Randall's Island," McDowell said. "Somehow those Latin names are able to communicate that in a really beautiful way, where just from the name you can know that familial connection and connect those ecosystems across so many miles. But common names have so much cultural value to them that I really can't make a case for either-or. It's just both."

To maximize his acquaintance with

Smoky Mountain plants, McDowell is dividing his residency into three parts. He recently concluded his first two-week stay in April and will return for additional two-week segments in July and September. This spring he focused on wildflowers; he expects his summer stint to be full of meadow blooms and leafy trees, with a vibrant transformation in fall.

"One thing I've really been enjoying since being here is documenting plant communities," he said. "So when I find fringed phacelia, and it's next to a species of phlox, and then also maybe there's *Trillium ludium* here, I have been documenting that so I can represent the whole family that's gathered together rather than just individual plants."

Coming out of the residency, he hopes to produce a collection of drawings and poems that showcase his experience in the Smokies.

"I'm really excited to have the space to write, because it's not something I often give myself time for," he said.

Time is perhaps the residency's biggest gift. McDowell's steps are slow and loping as he walks Kephart Prong Trail, stopping frequently to sketch and building space to see, appreciate, and reflect. A helicopter-like bumble bee flies low over the ground, kicking up flurries of dust in its wake. An army of tiny pollinators flits between blooms on a carpet of fringed phacelia, searching for nectar. New poison ivy shoots punctuate the pattern, their oily beauty undeniable, as is the danger that awaits those who get too close. And on the way out, a trio of elk bed down among the rhododendrons, nearly invisible against the backdrop of the still-brown forest floor.

"Sometimes hiking, I don't really need to 'go on a hike,'" he said. "I just want to exist on a trail somewhere."

Laurie McDowell will lead an ecological illustration workshop 9-11 a.m. Saturday, September 19, meeting participants at Sugarlands Visitor Center. Registration is open to Smokies Life members. Watch for a sign-up link at SmokiesLife.org/branch-out-events.

Holly Kays is the lead writer for the 29,000-member Smokies Life, a non-profit 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.

May is Better Hearing Month

Join us for month-long savings

At AudioNova, we want to restore your sense of hearing so that you can get back what you've been missing.

\$100 GIFT CARD

for completing your **RISK-FREE TRIAL¹**



Trial Bonus

EXCLUSIVE FINANCING
HEARING AIDS AS LOW AS

\$89/month²

Finance Offer

Book a **FREE HEARING SCREENING!**

AudioNova 
Your Hearing Experts

1829 Hendersonville Rd, Suite 130, Asheville
206 3rd Avenue West, Hendersonville
145 Weaver Blvd., Weaverville

CALL US NOW

828-203-9971

¹Patient will receive \$100 gift card upon completion of hearing instrument trial. Certain types of hearing loss may require a hearing instrument model that is not appropriate for the trial. Hearing evaluation required. See clinic for details. Open to adults 18+ years and older. One gift card per customer, per year. Not valid with managed care or state insurance plans. No cash alternative. Must provide a valid email address for gift card redemption. Please allow 2-4 weeks for delivery of the gift card. ²With \$260 payment to start, a total of \$2930 will be financed at 19.90% APR on approved credit for 48-months. Additional upgrades and other financing options are available. Terms are subject to change without notice and other restrictions may apply. Please see office for details. Offers expire 6/1/26.