

CHATTANOOGA OUTDOORS

## TAKE A HIKE

NEW 2.5-MILE TRAIL TO OPEN THIS WEEKEND



STAFF PHOTOS BY DOUG STRICKLAND

Mariah Prescott stands Wednesday on a section of the new Ritchie Hollow Trail as she talks about its construction. The trail's grand opening is Saturday.

BY MARK PACE » STAFF WRITER

A new hiking trail climbs the eastern edge of Prentice Cooper State Forest, ascending more than 1,000 feet with two main water crossings and several smaller ones sprinkled throughout. The climax of the rocky hike comes in the final mile: a 30-foot waterfall that rains down before the trail connects to the Cumberland Trail System's Pot Point Loop.

The "moderately strenuous" 2.5-mile Ritchie Hollow Trail connects the Tennessee River to the top of Suck Creek Mountain. It opens with an 11 a.m. ceremony and hike Saturday at the trailhead near Pot Point Cabin. However, while trail builder Mariah Prescott believes the hike is challenging, that shouldn't scare beginners, she said.

"It's a moderately strenuous hike. It's not necessarily geared toward a beginner, but a beginner could do it. It just takes time," she said.

The project adds to the growing trail network in the area and gives hikers a more advanced hiking opportunity. That's something Southeast Conservation Corps director Brenna Kelly believes the area could use.

The corps helped build the trail. The group did much of the techni-



The first water crossing of the new Ritchie Hollow Trail is seen on Wednesday.

**If you go »**

**What:** Ritchie Hollow Trail grand opening, 2.5-mile hike  
**When:** 11 a.m. Saturday  
**Where:** Trailhead near Pot Point Cabin

cal work that would have been too difficult for most volunteers. For instance, the group helped create a path through a rock garden.

"It's a little bit of a technical trail close to an urban center, which is unique," Kelly said. "It adds another level of opportunity for hikers. We're getting a nice, wide variety of trails within reach of the bulk of

Chattanooga's population."

The trail goes through a historical moonshine-making area. Several moonshine stills remain in the woods along the trail and can be seen on the hike. Eventually, Prescott wants to add more signs to highlight the history.

See TRAIL » B5

NORTH CAROLINA

## Erlanger acquires hospital

BY ELIZABETH FITE  
STAFF WRITER

Erlanger Health System brought a sixth hospital into its growing empire following a "yes" vote from the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Hospital Authority Board during a standing-room-only meeting Thursday evening.

Vice Chairman Mike Griffin, who filled in for Chairman Jack Studer, said the board "felt great" about the move to bring Murphy Medical Center, a 25-bed critical access hospital with 400 employees in western North Carolina, into the Erlanger system.

About two years ago, Murphy Medical began seeking partnership with a larger health care system, Murphy CEO Mike Stevenson said.

See ERLANGER » B5

## Legislators split on the governor's opioid plan

BY ANDY SHER  
NASHVILLE BUREAU

NASHVILLE — Republican Lt. Gov. Randy McNally predicted Thursday that Gov. Bill Haslam's proposed "TN Together" plan to address the state's opioid crisis will have broad backing among state lawmakers, but legislative Democrats continue to charge the proposal falls well short of the mark.

"The governor, I think, will receive wide support from the Legislature," McNally, the Senate speaker, told reporters during top GOP Senate leaders' weekly news conference.

McNally noted the \$30 million proposal relies on law enforcement and interdictions, treatment and education, not just for the public but for physicians on prescribing patterns, along with limits on initial prescriptions on painkillers.

Earlier, Senate Democratic Caucus Chairman Jeff Yarbro, joined by fellow minority Senate and House Democrats, argued the plan falls short of what's needed to address the epidemic.

See PLAN » B3

POINT-IN-TIME COUNT

## Volunteers take stock of the city's homeless

BY ROSANA HUGHES  
STAFF WRITER

Tucked away from the street, at the far end of a field and behind some tall, dry bushes, a homeless tent city lies.

On Thursday, a campfire burned in the distance and the smell of smoke filled the air as a small group of volunteers led by Theresa Biggs, housing navigator for the Chattanooga Housing Authority, made their way toward the entrance. A man met them there.

"Hi! I'm Theresa," she announced herself.

"Oh! I remember you," the man said enthusiastically as he led her and the others toward a cluster of tents.

The volunteers were helping with the annual Point-in-Time count, an unofficial census coordinated by the Chattanooga Regional



STAFF PHOTO BY DOUG STRICKLAND

Homeless Coalition and other local agencies. The purpose of the census is to gauge what the homeless population looks like each year, said Mark Williams, interim executive director for the Chattanooga Regional Homeless Coalition. It answers questions like how

long a person has been homeless, if they have any kind of physical or mental disability and if they are veterans.

Participation in the survey is voluntary, and any data collected is entered into the Homeless Management

System. Participation in the survey is voluntary, and any data collected is entered into the Homeless Management

See COUNT » B5

## Thongnopnua seeks state House District 30 seat

STAFF REPORT

Joda Thongnopnua announced Thursday he is running as a Democrat for the state House District 30 seat.

District 30 includes East Lake, Missionary Ridge, East Ridge, Brainerd, East Brainerd, Concord, Apison and Collegedale. It will be an open seat this year because Republican incumbent Marc Gravitt is giving it up to run for Hamilton County register of deeds.

Thongnopnua said he will focus on issues that matter to working families and solutions that expand opportunity for the residents of his district and all Tennesseans.

"Working families in Tennessee deserve someone who's going to fight for them," he said in a news release. "Not just another empty suit who's only running to rubber stamp a failed agenda of politicians in Nashville. That's why I'm running, to make sure voters have a clear choice: someone with substance or more of the same."



Joda Thongnopnua

The bread-and-butter economic issues that matter to working families will be at the forefront of his campaign, including raising the minimum wage, expanding Medicaid and fighting predatory lending practices, the release states.

Thongnopnua said he learned the value of hard work and perseverance through his family's story of working their way into the middle class. But the path into the middle class is getting increasingly narrow, he said in the release.

"I was raised in a working family in East Ridge, so I know firsthand that we can't afford to elect a politician who will settle for two more years of the same problems," he said.

"I watched my parents work hard to provide for my sisters and I. Sometimes that meant making tough choices. But that never shook their core belief that if they worked hard, played by the rules, and did the right thing, they could achieve the American Dream.

See DISTRICT 30 » B5

# Police work to identify human remains

BY BEN BENTON  
STAFF WRITER

Winchester, Tenn., police spent most of Wednesday and Thursday exhuming human remains found in the yard of a home on Spring Hill Drive in what for now is a missing person's investigation turned homicide probe as officials work to identify the body.

The body was found during an investigation into the report of a missing person filed last week, Winchester police

Chief Richie Lewis said. The investigation led to a search warrant that was served at the home around 10:30 p.m. Wednesday, he said.

The body, wrapped in a sheet or blanket, was buried in the backyard of the rancher-style brick home in an area between downtown Winchester and Decherd.

According to the Winchester Police Department's Facebook page, a missing person notification was posted Monday regarding 50-year-old

James L. Wood, who was reportedly last heard from on July 29. He was thought to be driving a 1988 white Ford F150.

The chief stressed that the body has not been confirmed as that of Wood.

Lewis said Thursday the home where the body was found belongs to Wood and was purchased last July.

The body had been in the ground for "probably about five months," he said.

Meanwhile, investigators continue to work at

the scene. The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation is assisting in the investigation, Lewis said.

Once the remains are exhumed, they will be turned over to the state medical examiner for a forensic examination, Lewis said. The chief said more about the case could be released in the coming days as the investigation continues.

Anyone with any information on the case should contact the Winchester Police Department at 931-967-3840.

## Count

› CONTINUED FROM B1

Information System, a tool used to collect data on the provision of housing and services for homeless people.

The information is also reported to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, which compiles the data from across the country and releases a nationwide report later in the year.

The latest national report showed the homeless population saw an increase for the first time since 2010. Nearly 554,000 people were homeless, a figure that was up nearly 1 percent from 2016.

Of that total, 193,000 people had no access to nightly shelter and instead were staying in vehicles, tents, the streets and other places considered uninhabitable. The unsheltered figure is up by more than 9 percent compared to two years ago.

Chattanooga's numbers from this year's count won't be ready for several months, but in recent years, the city has seen a drop in the number of people experiencing homelessness. From 2015 to 2016, the number fell from 634 to 527 across 11 counties in

Chattanooga and Southeast Tennessee.

On Thursday, volunteers set out for about 10 locations, some more difficult to access than others. Coordinators gave advice before teams headed out. They told volunteers to be loud so it doesn't seem like they're sneaking up on people and gave them pointers on how to handle potentially awkward situations.

"Be mindful of people," said Sam Wolfe, one of the outreach coordinators. "I think one of the things to remember is this is someone's home. It may not be the home that you envision or the home that you like or think it's something that's nice, but most of these people, that's all that they have."

He said people he encounters tell him the best thing about the outreach program is that it shows them that someone cares.

"For so many people out on the streets that you're going to talk to, you may be the only person that's been decent to them in months," he told volunteers gathered in a small building before they set out.

Contact staff writer Rosana Hughes at [rhughes@timesfreepress.com](mailto:rhughes@timesfreepress.com) or 423-757-6327 with tips or story ideas.

## Erlanger

› CONTINUED FROM B1

Like many small, rural hospitals across the country, Murphy faced the growing challenges of limited resources, high costs, federal regulations and isolation.

Physician recruitment was the hospital's biggest challenge, as many doctors prefer the support and benefits that come with practicing in larger groups. With the exception of some mid-level providers, currently there are no family practices accepting new patients in the town, according to Stevenson.

Murphy Medical isn't alone in its struggles, and Stevenson said the deal with Erlanger was necessary to avoid the fate of 25 rural hospitals in Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia and Alabama that have closed since 2010.

George Pink, professor and deputy director of the North Carolina Rural Health Research Program at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, said the Erlanger and Murphy

Medical deal demonstrates a growing national phenomenon.

"The rural hospital itself may approach the health system and say, 'We can read the writing on the wall: the day of the independent, free-standing rural hospital is quickly coming to a close,'" Pink said, adding that a trend toward population health, financial gain, competitive advantage and certain policies are all potential drivers of hospital mergers and acquisitions.

Tom O'Brien, chairman of the Murphy Hospital Authority, said "the biggest thing for our residents is having the possibility of long-time care in the future and the strength of Erlanger."

Erlanger's presence in Murphy, N.C., isn't new. In fiscal year 2014, 98 patients were transferred to Erlanger from Murphy Medical, and Erlanger projected that number will grow to 592 in fiscal year 2018.

Michael Ramey, a principal at Pershing, Yoakley and Associates, which performed a financial analysis of the deal, said it's advan-

tageous for Erlanger to keep those patients close to home when possible.

"It allows Erlanger to operate at its highest and best use, and that is a tertiary, academic health center," he said. "So the patients that need to be at Erlanger from the community have the provider network ... but then they also have the care locally."

Murphy Medical Center brings approximately \$30 million in net assets and \$4.1 million in long-term debt. All but \$1.4 million of that debt will be paid in the transaction.

During his dean's report, Dr. Bruce Shack, dean of the University of Tennessee College of Medicine in Chattanooga, addressed a resolution passed in the previous monthly board meeting that directed Erlanger to review and enforce the terms of the hospital's affiliation agreement with the University of Tennessee and its Health Sciences Center.

"As all the board members know, we are currently involved in conflict resolution issues with the hospital," Shack said.

## Trail

› CONTINUED FROM B1

The trail was dedicated to Carl Lawson, the caretaker of Pot Point and a reformed moonshiner. Its creation was due primarily to partnerships and volunteers.

"It's a trail that was built on local partnerships in Chattanooga and some sweat and hard work," Prescott said.

The Tennessee River Gorge Trust led the project and received a memorandum of understanding allowing the trust to build the trail on state forest land. It received funding for the project from the Riverview Foundation, Benwood Foundation, Rock/Creek and others. The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga's Interdisciplinary Geospatial Technology Lab built the trail map. Representatives from TVA, the Chattanooga Hiking Club, Rock/Creek and others volunteered to help build the trail.

"The Ritchie Trail is a great complement to the larger network of outdoor recreation resources we have in Chattanooga and the surrounding region," said Bruz Clark, executive director of the Riverview Foundation. "... Numerous volunteers from a variety of backgrounds have also coalesced around this project, which is one of several criteria the Riverview Foundation takes into consideration when funding outdoor recre-



STAFF PHOTO BY DOUG STRICKLAND

Eliot Berz, left, and Larry Roberts construct a kiosk for the new Ritchie Hollow Trail on Wednesday.

ation initiatives."

The Southeast Conservation Corps was primarily paid for its work but also volunteered for part of the process to use the area for training.

The trail has been several years in the making, but the brunt of the work was done in 2017.

"We wanted to build something that tied the river into the trail system at the top of the mountain," Prescott said.

Prescott, who is the

business and community access director for the river gorge trust, plans to extend the trail later this year to Davis Pond campground and parking lot. That will give trail access at both the top and bottom of the mountain.

Contact staff writer Mark Pace at [mpace@timesfreepress.com](mailto:mpace@timesfreepress.com) or 423-757-6361. Follow him on Twitter @themarkpace and on Facebook @ChattanoogaOutdoors.

## District 30

› CONTINUED FROM B1

"But because of the inaction and negligence of our state legislature, too many Tennesseans are falling further behind and find themselves locked out of the promise of opportunity."

Thongnopnua is executive director of the Metro Ideas Project, a nonprofit urban policy startup that works on

### More info

For more information on the Joda for TN-30 campaign, visit [votejoda.com](http://votejoda.com).

municipal issues. He has helped city leaders fight for more funding for neglected schools, developed neighborhood revitalization strategies and worked to put a stop to

predatory lending across Tennessee.

He called himself a sensible, pragmatic community leader who has worked with a wide range of people, regardless of political party. He pledged to bring the same consensus-building style to his campaign.

Thongnopnua is the only Democrat in the race to date. There are two Republicans, Esther Helton and Johnathan Mason. Election Day is Nov. 6.

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