

Chatham News + Record

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Your VinFast questions answered



Staff photo by Ben Rappaport

The VinFast VF-8 is displayed at VinPearl Resort in Nha Trang, Vietnam. The car is a pre-production model of the electric SUV expected to be manufactured at the Chatham County factory.

BY BEN RAPPAPORT
News + Record Staff

After returning from Vietnam to tour VinFast's manufacturing facilities and learn more about the company, I found myself left with several questions about the viability of the Vietnamese electric vehicle manufacturer and what it would bring to Chatham County. I attempted to parse through those questions in two stories published in last week's edition of the paper.

VinFast has made big promises to Chatham County with its planned \$4 billion investment in a 1,977-acre site in Moncure, saying it'll bring 7,500 jobs to the county. Likewise, the state and county are taking a gamble that VinFast will succeed, luring the EV

company with \$1.2 billion in tax incentives. It's only natural to be skeptical, but the deep pockets of VinFast seemed to have persuaded local and state officials.

Writing last week's articles got me thinking — you, reader, probably have some questions about VinFast too. So, I put out a call on social media and in the Chatham Brew newsletter asking for your questions about the company.

Here are answers to a few things you wanted to know:

What will community engagement efforts look like between VinFast and Chatham County? Is there a plan to host events or talk with community members about the company?

The company will certainly be making an impact on the

county, whether residents want it or not. Community engagement logistics are still in the works and for now, VinFast officials say they are primarily focused on breaking ground on the Triangle Innovation Point site in September.

After the dirt starts moving, we may see more specifics of relations between the company and county residents.

"VinFast has a strong relationship with Chatham County officials and the Economic Development team and we stand ready to support their efforts to maintain an open dialogue with the local community," said Van Anh Nguyen, chief executive officer of VinFast U.S. manufacturing.

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CHATHAM COUNTY CONSERVATION

'Chatham conservation icon' awarded Public Lands Conservationist of the Year



BY MAYDHA DEVARAJAN
News + Record Staff

Gretchen Smith moved to Chatham County in 1985 as a lover of nature and volunteering. More than 30 years later, she's managed to bring together those two passions across multiple conservation groups in Chatham through

her environmental advocacy for the Haw River, helping to secure grants to improve public access points and spearheading campaigns for trail infrastructure projects.

Now, for her dedication to protecting the Haw River corridor, Smith is being honored as Public



Photo by Simon Smith

Gretchen Smith checks in attendees before a guided hike in the Lower Haw River State Natural Area.

Lands Conservationist of the Year by the North Carolina Wildlife Federation.

Smith, 70, is one of 17 recipients of the federation's annual Governor's Conservation Achievement Awards. The awards honor conservation leaders across North Carolina who have displayed an

"unwavering" commitment to the state's wildlife, habitat and natural resources, according to the federation's website.

This year marks the 58th such celebration held by the federation.

Smith, who is closing out her

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COVID HITS HOME

New variants have driven case counts up. Now, hospitalizations are increasing, too.

BY BILL HORNER III
News + Record Staff

Mike Zelek, the director of the Chatham County Public Health Department, says there's a lot of COVID out there.

And that's not just because the number of N.C. counties with "high" COVID-19 community levels has jumped from less than a dozen a few weeks ago to more than 60 today.

Zelek is feeling it — in every sense.

"I have been in isolation this week after testing positive," he told the News + Record last week. "This experience has given me added perspective not only on preventing COVID transmission, which is often our primary focus, but also on how to prepare for an infection should you or someone in your household test positive."

COVID, he said, "packs a punch."

"And I continue to feel it almost five days in," he said.

By last winter, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had estimated 58% of the U.S. population had been infected by SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID. Since then, a new wave of infections driven by Omicron variants has increased case counts and, most recently, hospital admissions.

Zelek, after being surrounded by COVID for more than two years but never being infected, is recovering. His advice at this point in the

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REMEMBERING WAYNE STROWD

Former North Chatham Volunteer Fire Department Chief leaves behind legacy of hard work and devotion

BY MAYDHA DEVARAJAN
News + Record Staff

Among his children, grandchildren, friends and colleagues, John Wayne Strowd Sr. — known as Wayne to most — could be counted on for his devotion to three things: his family, his farm and his fire department.

The former chief and a founding member of the North Chatham Volunteer Fire Department, died of cancer on July 9 in his home in Pittsboro at the age of 88. In his wake, his loved ones noted that Wayne leaves behind a legacy of hard work and commitment, evident in the community he helped



Submitted photo

This 2010 photo shows Wayne Strowd at work at Strowd Brothers Dairy in Pittsboro.

County's lengthy ballot features plenty of contested races

Early voting starts Oct. 14

CN+R Staff Report

PITTSBORO — Early voting for the Nov. 8 statewide general election begins Oct. 14, and Chatham County's ballot will be lengthy — with six major county-wide seats, two state legislative seats and the sheriff's post among those being contested.

Key races on this year's ballot include:

- **U.S. Senate:** Republican Congressman Ted Budd faces former N.C. Supreme Court Chief Justice Cheri Beasley, a Democrat, and Libertarian candidate Shannon Bray, for the Senate seat being vacated by Republican Richard Burr. Budd first won the 13th Congressional seat in 2017.
- **U.S. House of Representatives, Dist.**

9: Incumbent Richard Hudson Jr., a Republican, faces Democrat Ben Clark. Hudson, first elected to the Dist. 8 seat in 2013, is seeking North Carolina's 9th congressional district seat after the 2020 census required the state to redraw its electoral districts and maps. Four of the counties Hudson represents moved into the 9th district, which now includes Chatham.

• **N.C. Senate, Dist. 20:** Incumbent Natalie Murdock of Durham, a Democrat newly representing Chatham County after redistricting, faces Republican Alvin Reed of Sanford. Murdock won office in 2020 to the seat of resigning Sen. Mickey Michaux, becoming the first Black woman under the age of 40 to serve in the state Senate. Reed, a software writer, describes himself as the author of "The Theory of Biblical

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ICON

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third term as president of the all-volunteer group Friends of Lower Haw River State Natural Area, was “stunned” to receive the call notifying her she’d been nominated for the award — though, if you ask her colleagues, it seems like she’s the only one who’s surprised.

“I had no idea that I had been nominated for this award,” Smith said. “And I just really feel like it’s a great honor to receive it.”

‘Phenomenal ball of energy’

For the past 15 years, Smith has been deeply involved in conservation work in the county, first as a volunteer with the Chatham Conservation Partnership (CCP). The CCP is a collaboration between individuals, local, state and federal government groups, businesses, nonprofits, and other entities with the goal of developing strategies to protect and build awareness for the county’s natural resources.

What sets Smith apart from many of her fellow Governor’s Conservation Achievement awardees is that her conservationist career is entirely rooted in volunteerism.

This background is part of the impetus for an initiative she began while working with CCP.

“I’m not a biologist or an ecologist or a geologist, or anything like that,” Smith, who worked in health administration with UNC Healthcare until she retired in 2014, recalled. “I thought, ‘Well, how can I help contribute to conservation in this conservation organization, given that I don’t have the technical expertise?’ And I thought, ‘Well, I can start organized outings.’”

Thus began a series called “Exploring Nature in Chatham,” in which Smith recruited experts and professionals to lead outings for residents at various locations like Jordan Lake or the Lower Haw River State Natural Area.

She became interested in promoting trails, and in 2016, helped to form the Friends of Lower Haw group to support the Lower Haw River State Natural Area. In April 2021, the Friends of Lower Haw organization, along with land trusts, the county government, state agencies, and trail and paddle groups formed the Haw River Trail Steering Committee, another focus of Smith’s conservation work.

Megan Lynch, a board member of the Friends group and a member of the N.C. Wildlife Federation, said Smith is particularly good at bringing people together to focus on a



Photo by Simon Smith

Gretchen Smith stands with Boy Scout Ben Pickens and his father Dr. Ed Pickens installing a bee house in the pollinator meadow created for Friends of Lower Haw as part of an Eagle Scout project.

common goal, calling her a “phenomenal ball of energy.”

Lynch was the one who nominated Smith for the Public Lands Conservationist of the Year award. She said she’d intended to nominate Smith for an award last year, but she missed the deadline. This year, however, she made sure to fill out the online form, nominating Smith for two awards. Lynch said she was quite confident Smith would receive Public Lands Conservationist of the Year because “it just fit (her) to a tee.”

Most recently, Smith was instrumental in helping to get grant funding in the county for a trail corridor feasibility study and economic impact analysis of undeveloped parts of the Haw River Trail Corridor. The project is intended to create groundwork for a Haw River Trail in Chatham that would connect to a regional Haw River Trail network.

As a leader, Smith is detail-oriented. She still does things “the old-fashioned way,” Lynch said, including sending out handwritten thank you notes to volunteers.

Lynch said she’s inspired by Smith, from her dedication to attending meetings to her fearlessness in contacting officials to push forward the group’s conservationist goals.

“She encourages you to do a little more than you were maybe thinking you were willing to do,” Lynch said with a laugh.

In nominating Smith for the award, Lynch also wanted to let Smith knew how much she is appreciated.

“And she has done so much, even going as far as writing the grants to get money for the county to do some of these things,” Lynch said. “That’s what made me realize that nobody really knows how much she did behind the scenes of everything.”

‘Chatham conservation icon’

To Margaret Sands, membership and outreach coordinator for Triangle Land Conservancy (TLC), Smith is a “Chatham conservation icon.”

“You don’t really do environmental work in Chatham without knowing Gretchen,” Sands said.

Sands first met Smith through CCP, before Sands began working for TLC — an accredited land trust and non-profit group that works across six counties in the Triangle.

Sands said Smith played a key role in establishing relationships and bringing different people together when TLC acquired some properties while working to expand the Lower Haw State Natural Area. Together, the two women have also worked on Haw River projects such as canoe access near Bynum and strategizing for trail conservation.

“I also think that Gretchen is a good example of how important citizens are and community members are,” Sands said. “Obviously, working with TLC is my job. But we can’t really replace the importance of community connection when we’re trying to do conservation.”

Bill Holman, the N.C. State Director of The Conservation Fund, has worked with Smith for a number of years. He said he also appreciates people like Smith who devote their free time to conservation.

“She could have just quietly gone out and done hikes all by herself or with her family,” Holman said. “But she’s really dedicated herself to promoting more public access and more trails along the Haw River.”

When it comes to her environmental advocacy, Smith says she uses a “conservation through recreation” strategy, something she’d picked up from individuals from Alamance County in collaborating on a Haw River Trail Partnership.

It can sometimes be difficult to get people to join up conservation efforts for conservation’s sake, she said.

“But if you approach it from an outdoor recreation standpoint, where the public can have access to enjoy the natural resources and the river, then it becomes easier to sell the conservation part,” Smith said.

Smith is from Hamlet, a small town in Richmond Coun-

ty in the Sandhills region. She grew up in a family that loved to travel, particularly along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

“Being outside and appreciating nature was definitely something that we did when I was growing up,” Smith said. “So it’s always stayed with me.”

And though she calls herself an introvert, over the years, she said she’s had to learn to be more extroverted in order to accomplish her goals, including taking that love of outdoor recreation and using it to find common ground with others to encourage them to take action when it comes to conservation.

Chatham County is home to the Haw, Deep and Rocky Rivers, but of the three, the Haw River is facing the urgent development pressures, Smith said.

The river spans 110 miles, according to the Haw River Assembly. Its source begins as small streams in Forsyth County, which join together, flowing through parts of six different counties, to eventually meet the Deep River and become the Cape Fear River.

Despite a growing urbanization in the surrounding areas, she said she loves that the Haw River still maintains a “sense of wildness to it.” Different parts of the river have different feelings to it, she said.

“You can be in one section along the Haw River and feel like you’re in the mountains because they have the steep slopes and the mountain laurel,” she said. “And then other parts, it’s flat, and it’s more like you’re walking in a floodplain.”

The Lower Haw State Natural Area — which stretches from old Bynum Bridge to beyond the U.S. Hwy 64 bridge — is a particularly popular spot for hiking and canoeing.

One of Smith’s environmental concerns regarding the area is a desire to ensure the spot has responsible recreational use. This can be partly achieved through more public access to the river so that visitation isn’t concentrated in one area, she said.

Smith said people have been taking canoes in and out of the Haw River and walking alongside its bank for decades, but don’t realize that those are informal social footpaths.

“And there’s a lot of damage being done to the natural ecosystems because of that informal use,” Smith said. “And so we need to have sustainably designed land and paddle trails so that we can accommodate that visitation while limiting the negative impact to those natural areas.”

Smith also fears public access to the area will decrease, and that current riparian and natural vegetated buffers will be altered as a result of contin-

ued residential development in the land surrounding the area.

“And there’s a sense of urgency that if we don’t do something now, it’s going to be too late,” she said.

Looking forward

Both Smith and Sands highlighted a lack of concentrated funding for conservation in the Haw River corridor as a limitation to advocacy work in the area.

Though she was pleased to see more money devoted for land and water conservation in the latest state budget, Smith said she thinks there needs to be greater investment in the state park system, particularly with regard to understaffed facilities and amenities that are in disrepair.

“I just hope that our state will start investing more in parks at both the local and state level because I think our public lands are really important,” Smith said. “And it’s important to invest in them.”

Though her term as president of the Friends of Lower Haw group comes to a close in September, Smith said she’ll still be involved in the group but in a different capacity. Some of her goals include seeing an active management of the Lower Haw River State Natural Area, the development of sustainable land and paddle trails and implementation of the trails plan.

On its website, the N.C. Wildlife Federation states that in recognizing conservation leaders through the Governor’s Conservation Achievement Awards, the organization “hopes to inspire all North Carolinians to take a more active role in protecting the natural resources of our state.”

Smith hopes that her award will help bring more attention to the Lower Haw River State Natural Area and the need for better stewardship and resources to protect the waterway. Ultimately, she emphasizes that in order to participate in conservation work, it’s not necessary to have a specific background in environmental studies.

All a person needs is an appreciation of nature and a desire to conserve that, she said.

“Don’t let your lack of expertise in something stop you from getting involved,” Smith said.

Awardees will be honored at a banquet Saturday, Sept. 10, at Embassy Suites Raleigh Durham Research Triangle in Cary. Tickets for the banquet, which starts at 5:45 p.m., may be reserved for \$100 online at the N.C. Wildlife Federation’s website.

Reporter Maydha Devarajan can be reached at mdevarajan@chathamnr.com and on Twitter @maydhadevarajan.

ELECTION

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Patterns,” which he says proves that a higher intelligence wrote Genesis 1:1.

• **N.C. House, Dist. 54:** This race pits veteran legislator Robert Reives II of Goldston, who’s held the seat since 2014,

against Republican challenger Walter Petty.

Reives is the House Minority Leader in the N.C. General Assembly and has been re-elected four times. Petty, a long-time Chatham County commissioner first elected in 2010, resigned that seat in April 2019, citing the pressing time demands

of his business, Atlantic Power Solutions.

• **Chatham County Board of Commissioners, Dist. 3:** This seat, being vacated by Democrat Diana Hales, will be contested between Democrat David Delaney, the vice president and assistant general counsel for cybersecurity and privacy for

Truist Bank, and Republican Tom Glendinning, a former U.S. Marine who lost to Valerie Foushee in the 2020 race for state senate.

• **Chatham County Board of Commissioners, Dist. 4:** This seat is held now by Robert Logan, who once was the superintendent of Chatham County Schools. Logan was appointed to fill the term of former Commissioner Jim Crawford, who resigned the seat in December. On the ballot are native Chatham Countians Katie Kenlan, an educator, and Republican Joe Godfrey, a service operations supervisor at Siemens Industry.

• **Chatham County Board of Commissioners, Dist. 5:** Incumbent Democrat Franklin Gomez Flores faces Republic Peyton Moody. Gomez Flores beat Republic Andy Wilkie for the seat in 2020; Wilkie had been appointed to fill the unexpired seat of Walter Petty.

• **Chatham County Sheriff:** Incumbent Sheriff Mike Roberson, a Democrat, faces challenger Marcus Globuschutz, a Republican. Roberson was appointed to the position in May 2016, replacing the retiring Richard Webster, then won re-election in 2018.

The popular Roberson, who has increased the visibility and staffing

of the office, has come under a steady stream of criticism, largely through social media, by Globuschutz, who has accused Roberson’s administration for its handling of the county’s illicit drug trade and its administration of the new Animal Resource Center, among other things.

• **Chatham County Board of Education, Dist. 3:** Incumbent Democrat Del Turner, who’s held the seat since 2010, faces two challengers: Jessica Winger of Pittsboro and Clifford Stickney of Siler City. Winger, who has four children at Chatham County Schools, has been a vocal proponent of an optional school masking policy and actively advocated for a return to in-person learning while CCS was in a hybrid or remote learning schedule.

• **Chatham County Board of Education, Dist. 4:** Incumbent Jane Allen Wilson. Wilson doesn’t face opposition on the ballot, but was expected to be challenged in an organized write-in campaign by Wendy Copelan. Board of Elections Director Pandora Paschal told the News + Record that Copelan had stated to her she wasn’t going to pursue the write-in campaign; Copelan didn’t respond to an email message from the News + Record.

• **Chatham County Board of Education, Dist. 5:** Incumbent Gary Leonard, who is the board’s chairperson, faces Timothy Moore. Leonard, a former athletic director at coach at Chatham Central High School, was first elected in 2010. Moore, a Texas native and U.S. Army veteran, has joined Winger on campaigning for a “parents-first” approach to board policy-making.

The board of education seats are nonpartisan; there were no primaries for these seats in May.

Other seats on the general election ballot include two on the N.C. Supreme Court, four on the N.C. Court of Appeals, one on the N.C. Superior Court, and the uncontested District Attorney and Chatham County Clerk of Superior Court seats, as well as the Chatham County Soil & Water Conservation District Supervisor.

Other key dates include:

• Sept. 9: absentee ballots available

• Oct. 14: voter registration deadline

• Nov. 1: last day to request an absentee ballot

• Nov. 5: early voting ends

• Nov. 7: absentee ballot request deadline

• Election Day: polls open at 6:30 a.m. and close at 7:30 p.m. on Tuesday, Nov. 8.

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