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# ATHENS BANNER-HERALD

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## Foster hometown pride to grow civic engagement



Regular community events, from farmers markets to fireworks, build emotional ties to a place. GETTY IMAGES

## Local patriotism one cure for sour feelings about politics

Sean Richey

Georgia State University | THE CONVERSATION

Eileen Higgins won a historic victory in December. She became the first woman ever elected mayor of Miami, as well as its first Democratic mayor since 1997. • Although the stakes in the city's Dec. 9, runoff election were high, interest was not – 4 in 5 registered voters stayed home.

Low turnout is common in municipal elections across the country. While much of the nation's political attention stays focused on Washington, the leaders who control the nation's streets, schools and neighborhoods are typically chosen by a small fraction of citizens.

Although many Americans can identify their U.S. senators or members of Congress, far fewer can name even one of their local elected officials, such as a city council member. To cite one example, a North Carolina study found that 86% of state residents could not identify their own elected leaders, including local government officials.

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Turnout in local elections regularly falls below 20%, often leaving critical decisions in the hands of small, unrepresentative groups, creating an electorate that's disproportionately White, elderly and affluent.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

People who loved their town were more likely to attend city council meetings, contact local officials, volunteer for campaigns and discuss local issues with friends. The same pattern held for civic participation – from volunteering with community groups to organizing neighborhood cleanups.

## Athens man sentenced to life for 2001 murder

Wayne Ford

Athens Banner-Herald  
USA TODAY NETWORK

The man convicted in the slaying of a University of Georgia law school student 25 years ago stood in silence late Thursday as a judge administered a maximum punishment for the violent crime.

Judge Lisa Lott offered little comment as she imposed two life sentences plus a consecutive 45 years in prison on Edrick Lamont Faust, the 50-year-old Athens man convicted by a jury of murdering Tara Baker on Jan. 19, 2001.

"You are in custody," Lott told Faust as she adjourned the proceedings in a Clarke County Superior Court trial that lasted 12 days plus an additional five days in the jury selection process. Deputies placed chains on Faust and he was led from the courtroom.

Defense attorney Ahmad Crews had asked Lott to impose a minimum sentence allowed by law, but Western Circuit District Attorney Kalki Yalamanchili asked the judge to impose the maximum punishment.

In arguing for the maximum, Yalamanchili offered documents showing a portion of Faust's criminal record over the past two decades, including convictions for aggravated assault, possession of a firearm by a convicted felon, possession of cocaine with intent to distribute and obstruction.

Faust was convicted in a case that went "cold" over the years, but when new technology identified DNA in Baker's body as belonging to Faust, he was arrested in May 2024. That DNA was the crux of the state's case against Faust. The defense attempted to convince the jury that Baker's then-boyfriend could be the actual killer.

However, Athens-Clarke police officers had testified they confirmed Chris Melton's alibi, that he was in the Loganville area working when Baker was killed that morning.

The jury returned verdicts of guilty on all counts, including murder, rape, burglary, aggravated sodomy, arson, and possession of a knife during a crime. Baker was stabbed in the neck, strangled with a cord, and beaten in the head while she was sexually assaulted, according to the state's evidence. Afterward, the killer set Baker's apartment on fire, which the state contended was an effort to destroy evidence.

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## Project Safe announces 'Dancing with the Athens Stars' cast

Andrew Shearer

Athens Banner-Herald  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Athens-based nonprofit Project Safe has announced the cast for this year's Dancing with the Athens Stars, an annual event that pairs local celebrities with professional dance instructors in a competition that raises funds for survivors of domestic violence.

Dancing with the Athens Stars is scheduled to take place on Saturday,

March 21 at The Classic Center Theatre, and tickets are on sale at classiccenter.com.

The dancers will be paired up into teams that will compete for Judges' Favorite, Community Favorite, and Audience Favorite awards.

The 2025 Dancing with the Athens Stars event raised more than \$220,000 for Project Safe, and the organization aims to achieve a milestone goal of raising \$2 million with this year's competition.

### 2026 'Dancing with the Athens Stars' cast

- Team 1: Robby Bailey and Jessie Penouilh
- Team 2: Jennifer Cruse-Sanders and Joseph Stunzi
- Team 3: Natalie Bishop and Abigale Bishop
- Team 4: Linda Boza and Natalie Cox
- Team 5: Victoria Dugger and Zena Rose-Curole

- Team 6: Philip Hong and Britt LB
- Team 7: Dustin Watts and Allison Smith
- Team 8: Mathew McRae III and Viv Martinez
- Team 9 – Jeremiah Bame and Andie Richardson
- Team 10 – Bart King and Lucille King and Catherine Huff

The Classic Center is located at 300 N. Thomas St. in downtown Athens. For more information about Project Safe, visit project-safe.org.

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