



# Dollar rises to start 2026 after big drop

INSIDE, 6A

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The French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization will consider recommending the installation of express lanes along an over 16 mile corridor of Interstate 40 to help fund a widening project along the corridor. The lanes would begin at Exit 27 near Clyde and end at Exit 44 in Asheville, seen here on Oct. 20, 2025. WILL HOFMANN/ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

# Asheville-area I-40 express lane proposal recommended

**Will Hofmann**  
Asheville Citizen Times  
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE - A plan to include express lanes along Interstate 40 west of Asheville has been recommended by the French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization. If built, the project would establish Western North Carolina's first toll-based highway lanes.

Planned along a 16 mile stretch of I-40 from Exit 44 in Buncombe County to Exit 27 in Haywood County, the project would widen I-40 to six or eight lanes, depending on the final proposal. With tolls, the project is estimated to cost between \$700 million to \$850 million.

First identified as a possibility in 2018, the express lane proposal was studied by the North Carolina Department of Transportation in early 2024 and then introduced to the board in September of 2025. The project's recommendation means the toll lane plan will be included in a funding proposal that will be submitted in 2026.



The French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization will consider recommending the installation of express lanes along an over 16 mile corridor of Interstate 40 to help fund a widening project, depicted by this map. PROVIDED BY FRENCH BROAD RIVER METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION

Express lanes in North Carolina include 27 miles along Interstate 77 from Brookshire Freeway in Mecklenburg County to Exit 36 in Iredell County, which are managed by a private developer, I-77 Mobility Partners, according to the North Carolina Department of Transportation website.

The road uses a high-occupancy toll pricing method, where pricing is dynamic and based on traffic. Vehicles

with three or more people may use the lanes for free with an NC Quick Pass sticker transponder. Motorists can ride in adjacent lanes for free.

Because the tolls would produce income, the express lane proposal along I-40 may score higher in the North Carolina Department of Transportation's funding prioritization program than if

**See LANES, Page 8A**

# DA Bell faces removal hearing over delayed trials

**Ryley Ober**  
Asheville Citizen Times  
USA TODAY NETWORK

A rare petition to remove District Attorney Ted Bell from office may proceed, according to a Dec. 30 court ruling. Special Superior Court Judge William T. Stetzer assigned independent counsel to investigate Bell's alleged misconduct in delaying the prosecution of church members accused of beating a fellow member "in retaliation for his sexual orientation."

The petition, known as North Carolina G.S. 7A-66, was filed Dec. 1 in Rutherford County Superior Court by former Word of Faith Fellowship member Matthew Fenner, who said Bell — the top prosecutor for McDowell and Rutherford counties — delayed for eight years the trials of four church members who Fenner said beat him in 2013.

The order does not weigh in on whether the allegations are true, but says a hearing is required to determine if the delay was unwarranted and whether Bell should be removed from office.

Word of Faith, a church in the Rutherford County town of Spindale, has faced allegations for decades from various former members who call the church a cult. These include charges of child abuse, systematic separating of families, assault, obstruction of justice and fraud.

Five Word of Faith members were charged with kidnapping and assault after Matthew Fenner told police in 2013 that he was beaten for hours to "break me free of the homosexual 'demons,'" according to the petition and previous reporting. Those charged include Brooke Covington, Sarah Anderson, Justin Covington, Adam Bartley and Robert Louis Walker Jr.

The cases faced setbacks, including juror contempt and a mistrial, and were moved to Buncombe County in 2017 and 2022.



**Bell**

A week before the first defendant — Brooke Covington — was scheduled to be retried on Dec. 8, Fenner filed a petition to remove Bell from office, according to court filings.

Bell has served as the district attorney for Prosecutorial District 41 since 2015 and remained the prosecutor in the Word of Faith cases after they were moved to Buncombe County.

In his petition, Fenner claims Bell exhibited willful misconduct, conflict of interest and failure to perform duties because he allegedly "declined or refused" to retry Covington for over eight years.

Stetzer dismissed several of Fenner's claims, including that Bell used political strategy to reschedule Covington's trial before midterm elections, that he showed favoritism toward Word of Faith defendants and that Bell violated the Crime Victims' Right Act.

**Response to trial delay claims**

In response to the petition, Bell argued through his Asheville-based attorney Sean Devereux that several factors have contributed to the lengthy

**See BELL, Page 3A**

# Nicolas Maduro's tight grip on power ends

**Rule in Venezuela was marked by economic collapse, social crises**  
REUTERS

Nicolas Maduro ruled Venezuela with a heavy hand for more than 12 years, presiding over deep economic and social crises and resisting pressure from domestic opponents and foreign governments for political change.

His rule abruptly ended on Jan. 3, when President Donald Trump an-

nounced U.S. forces had captured him and flown him out of the country. Trump said later the United States would run Venezuela with a group, adding this would be "until such time as we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition."

A 63-year-old socialist and the handpicked successor of the late Hugo Chavez, Maduro was long accused by critics both at home and abroad of being a dictator who jailed or persecuted political opponents and repeatedly staged sham elections.

Maduro, a salsa aficionado with a

flair for theatrics, often called opposition politicians "fascist demons" and took pride in resisting U.S. pressure against him, even having his invocation to Trump of "yes peace, not war" remixed into an electronica song.

He was sworn in for a third term in January 2025 following a 2024 election that was widely condemned as fraudulent by international observers and the opposition. Thousands of people who protested against the government's declaration of victory were jailed.

**See MADURO, Page 3A**

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