Altoona Mirror



Inside today
RELIGION C7,8

$2.50 Vol. 142 - No. 134 of our 152nd year

FRIDAY

November 20, 2026

‘IT MAKES ME SO HAPPY’



Mirror photo by Matt Churella

Altoona Area High School sophomore Arian Estep serves Principal Andrew Neely a deviled egg Thursday during the sixth annual Friendsgiving event. Every year, Life Skills students prepare and serve a Thanksgiving meal for district administrators, staff and faculty members, school board members and friends.

More than a meal

Altoona Area High School’s Friendsgiving event promotes inclusion, independence

By Matt Churella
mchurella@altoonamirror.com

For Altoona Area high school administrators, faculty and staff members, school board members and friends, Thursday’s annual Friendsgiving event is one of the best days of the school year.

Together, they enjoyed a Thanksgiving meal with groups of Life Skills students who prepped, cooked and served mashed potatoes, green bean casserole, stuffing balls, corn, gravy, pumpkin rolls and many other homemade desserts as part of their community-based learning program.

In early October, the students traveled to Sam’s Club on an Amtran bus with their teachers to purchase the food and prepare for their big day, said Paige Matteson Lieb, a Life Skills teacher who started the event five years ago.

“The students learned how to navigate public transportation,” Matteson Lieb said, adding they looked up prices for the ingredients and learned how to budget before traveling to the store.

“After they located every item, they had lunch at Sam’s Club, and it was a nice friendship and social skill bonding,” Matteson Lieb said.

Friendsgiving started during the 2021-22 school year with about 40 students, Matteson Lieb said, adding the event has grown to incorporate other students in emotional support and fine arts classes. This year, the advanced placement ceramics class made gravy boats, and the Altoona Police Department visited to build rapport with the students, she said.

Now in its sixth year, Friendsgiving is about so much more than preparing a meal, Matteson Lieb said, noting students practiced important skills that promote independence, inclusion and success in life after graduation.

Matteson Lieb said the students created grocery lists, read recipes, followed multi-step instructions, measured ingredients using math skills and practiced food safety and kitchen sanitation protocols while preparing and cooking the food.

They also worked collaboratively as a team, used creativity and problem-solving skills to manage their time and build independence and confidence, she said.

Bedford votes to raise salaries

County’s elected officials will receive wage increase of at least 3% in 2028

By Rachel Foor-Musselman
rfoor@altoonamirror.com

BEDFORD — In a two-to-one vote, the Bedford County commissioners approved annual salary increases Thursday evening of at least 3% for elected officials beginning in 2028.

Salaries for elected officials will increase by 3% in 2028 and 2029 and by 4% in 2030 and 2031, except for the county coroner, whose salary will increase by 10% in 2028 and 2029 and by 7% in 2030 and 2031.

MORE INSIDE

Commissioners discuss preliminary expenditures / **A5**

Commissioners Mike Stiles and Deb Baughman voted in favor of the proposed increases, while JR Winck voted against.

Prior to the vote, Stiles explained to those present that they were required to set a flat rate for all elected officials except for the lowest paid official, to whom they could provide a greater percentage salary increase.

In discussing their salaries, Bedford County Coroner Rusty Styer said he made about $33,000 a year while his Somerset County counterpart made about $74,000, despite both working for Sixth Class counties.

“We are so far behind, it’s not even funny,” Styer said.

He told the commissioners he wanted to see a “significant increase” going forward.

Sheriff Wayne Emerick Jr. echoed this, saying his Somerset counterpart made $14,000 more and that the sheriff’s office had taken on more responsibilities.

“I do know that the last time we discussed this, the sheriff’s office was 11 percent below the minimum starting average for Sixth Class counties,” Emerick said.

Styer pointed out that the commissioners, who are the county’s highest paid elected officials, were still paid less than their counterparts.

“It’s not us against you,” Styer said. “It’s all of us. You guys didn’t put us in this situation, but you three can help get us out.”

See **Salaries**/Page **A5**

Authority to build Vets Home waterline

By William Kibler
bkibler@altoonamirror.com

The Altoona Water Authority approved two easement resolutions Thursday that clear the way for the authority to advertise for bids on a waterline project for the Hollidaysburg Veterans Home.

The easements — or public service line license agreements — will allow for the new line to cross the Bureau of Forestry office property on Municipal Drive and a section of the Vets Home property.

The 2,350-foot line will tie in to an existing AWA line near the railroad tracks that cross Municipal Drive and connect with an existing meter vault on a Vets Home driveway, according to Jim Balliet of the authority’s consulting engineer Gwin Dobson and Foreman.

A year ago, Gwin estimated the project would cost about $939,000, officials said.

The authority will pay for the installation and be reimbursed by the state Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, which operates the home.

There had been a delay in getting the easement for the forestry office ground, because of a change in the general counsel’s office of the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, which operates that office, said Water Authority solicitor Dave Gaines.

The water line project is expected to take several months, Balliet said.

The new line will replace a system consisting of a leaking eight-inch service line that feeds a large water tank on top of the hill behind the vets home, according to Balliet and Mark Glenn, also of Gwin.

See **Waterline**/Page **A2**

City woman gets 15 to 40 years for role in OD death

Williams entered guilty pleas to charges in 3 separate but related cases

By Rachel Foor-Musselman
rfoor@altoonamirror.com

HOLLIDAYSBURG — A city woman implicated in the March 2025 overdose death of 32-year-old Colton Flannery was sentenced Wednesday afternoon to 15 to 40 years’ incarceration in a state correctional institution.

Casandra Michelle Williams, 44, was charged in three separate but related cases with single felony counts of drug delivery resulting in death, fleeing police, dealing in unlawful proceeds and knowledge that property is proceeds of an illegal act, two felony counts of criminal use of a communication facility and 16 felony counts of possession with intent to deliver, as well as 28 related misdemeanors. She has been held at the Blair County Prison since April 15, 2025, on bails of $250,000, $250,000 and $5,000.

Williams appeared alongside First Assistant Public Defender John Siford for sentencing by Judge Jackie Atherton Bernard, after entering guilty pleas to all counts in front of Senior Judge Timothy Sullivan on Oct. 26.

In addition to the state prison sentence of 15 to 40 years, Bernard ordered Williams to serve five years’ probation and one year re-entry, as well as pay $1,775 in fines, pay the cost of prosecution including $1,121 to the state police crime lab in Greensburg, undergo drug and alcohol and mental health evaluations, complete a cognitive behavioral therapy course and have no contact with the Flannery family.

Before handing down Williams’s sentence, Bernard heard from Blair County District Attorney Pete Weeks, who said he believed the plea agreement was appropriate.

See **Sentenced**/Page **A7**



Classifieds	B5,6
Comics	C6
Legal notices	B5
Obituaries	A4
Opinion	C4
Puzzles	C5
Religion	C7,8
Sports	B1-4

7 22910 00050 4