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Staunton Commonwealth's Attorney John Baber was sworn in Dec. 16 by Circuit Judge Anne Reed. BRAD ZINN/THE NEWS LEADER.

'I'm truly humbled'

John Baber sworn in as commonwealth's attorney

Brad Zinn
Staunton News Leader
USA TODAY NETWORK

Staunton Commonwealth's Attorney John Baber was sworn in as the city's top prosecutor during a ceremony in circuit court on Dec. 16.

In November, Baber defeated Joe Perry, who, at the time, was Staunton's chief deputy commonwealth's attorney, grabbing 55% of the vote to Perry's 43%.

"I'm truly humbled and I want to be of service to this city," Baber said mo-

ments after being sworn in by Circuit Judge Anne Reed.

During his remarks, Baber, 44, thanked Tim Martin and David Ledbetter, the commonwealth's attorneys for Augusta County and Waynesboro respectively.

"For whom I will draw upon quite a bit. They, between them, have a wealth of experience," said Baber, who noted he's already reached out to the veteran prosecutors for help. Both Martin and Ledbetter attended the ceremony.

Baber, a former assistant prosecutor in Staunton and Waynesboro, is just

the city's third commonwealth's attorney since 1974, when Raymond C. Robertson took the seat and held it for more than 40 years until his retirement in 2017. Commonwealth's Attorney Jeff Gaines took over after Robertson, but his retirement announcement earlier this year set the stage for the race between Baber and Perry. Robertson's son, Raymond "Ramey" Robertson, remains a paralegal at the Staunton Commonwealth's Attorney's Office.

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Deadline approaches for farmer assistance program

Lyra Bordelon
Staunton News Leader
USA TODAY NETWORK

Local farmers affected by changes in crop markets this year could be eligible for financial assistance.

A press release from the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced \$12 billion would be made available for one-time payments to American farmers "in response to temporary trade market disruptions and increased production costs."

Of the \$12 billion dollars, \$11 billion will go to the Farmer Bridge Assistance program. The program provides funds to row crop farmers who produce barley, chickpeas, corn, cotton, lentils, oats, peanuts, peas, rice, sorghum, soybeans, wheat, canola, cramble, flax, mustard, rapeseed, safflower, sesame and sunflower. The remaining funds will be reserved for crops not included in the bridge assistance program – which crops are still up in the air.

Richard Fordyce, undersecretary for Farm Production and Conservation, explained how payments will work to the Wisconsin State Farmer on Dec. 8.

"Payments will cover a portion of those modeled losses, scaled to fit within the \$11 billion available. We plan to use a one-time, capped payment under the OBBBA of up to \$155,000 per person or legal entity, with an adjusted gross income limitation of less than \$900,000," Fordyce said. "I want to stress that this program is simple, proportional and fair, with no complicated factors, no carving up producers by crop or region. If you've planted a crop and you've taken a hit, you'll receive support."

The press release pointed to former president Joe Biden's "lack of a new trade deal" as a reason the bailout is needed. However, reporting in USA Today shows the tariffs imposed by President Donald Trump, and other country's retaliatory tariffs on the United States, have created millions in financial losses and farm bankruptcies.

Farmers who qualify can expect for funds to be released by Feb. 28, 2026, according to the press release. The release also states "eligible farmers should ensure their 2025 acreage reporting is factual and accurate" by 5 p.m. on Dec. 19. Producers can reach out to farmer-bridge@usda.gov for more information.

Lyra Bordelon (she/her) is the public transparency and justice reporter at The News Leader. Do you have a story tip or feedback? It's welcome through email to lbordelon@gannett.com. Subscribe to us at newsleader.com.



A bean sprout is one of the many crops growing at the Allegheny Mountain School's farm project at the Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind in Staunton. GRIFFIN MOORES/THE NEWS LEADER

Lawmakers fail to extend health care subsidies

Zachary Schermele
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – Congress has run out of time to extend the Affordable Care Act subsidies that will expire at the end of the year, meaning health insurance premiums are about to go up for millions of Americans.

That reality became clear after a last-minute effort failed among Republicans in the House of Representatives who were hoping to trigger a vote on the tax credits, said Speaker Mike Johnson on Dec. 16.

Though roughly a dozen moderate GOP lawmakers worked on the issue the weekend before Congress was set to depart for the holidays, Johnson told reporters that no consensus had been reached.

"Many of them did want to vote on this Obamacare, COVID-era subsidy the

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Speaker of the House Mike Johnson said although roughly a dozen moderate GOP lawmakers sought the extension of health care subsidies, no consensus had been reached. ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES

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