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Year in review: 2016's biggest stories in the Pine Belt

From staff reports 8:41 p.m. CT Dec. 31, 2016



(Photo: Lici Beveridge/Hattiesburg American)

The convictions of the Rev. Kenneth Fairley and Charles and Linda Bolton. The battle over Hattiesburg's annexation plans. The demotion of five Hattiesburg firefighters for allegedly stealing packages off a UPS truck.

There was no shortage of news in 2016 in the Pine Belt.

Here is a look back at some of the biggest local news stories from the past year.

Fairley convicted, sentenced to 3 years

The Rev. Kenneth Fairley, 62, of Hattiesburg, convicted of theft of federal funds and conspiracy to defraud the government, was [sentenced Dec. 19 to three years in prison \(/story/news/crime/2016/12/19/fairley-sentenced-3-years-prison/95601366/\)](#).

He was sentenced by U.S. District Judge Keith Starrett at William M. Colmer Federal Courthouse.

"There is no question in my mind there was a crime here," Starrett said. "I don't like passing sentence, especially for someone who has done so much for his community.

"But as someone who is well known in the community, you have an obligation to set an example."

[Fairley, senior pastor of Mount Carmel Baptist Church, was convicted Sept. 12 \(/story/news/crime/2016/09/12/jury-finds-fairley-guilty-all-3-charges/90254544/\)](#) of two counts of theft of government funds and one count of conspiracy to defraud the government, involving money received from the U.S. [Department of Housing and Urban Development](#) through grants administered by the city of Hattiesburg. Fairley was sentenced to serve three years for each of the counts with three years of post-release supervision, but the sentences will run concurrently.

He must also pay \$60,223.95 in restitution and a \$30,000 fine.

Artie Fletcher, who was indicted with Fairley but pleaded guilty to a separate charge of misprision of a felony, was given three years of probation and also ordered to pay \$60,223.95 in restitution. The other charges filed against him were dropped.

Wastewater woes continue for Hub City

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With Hattiesburg's current wastewater lagoons meeting permit levels for about a year, City Council members decided to see if the lagoons could be used as the city's sole wastewater treatment system. (Photo: Susan Broadbridge/Hattiesburg American)

The roller-coaster ride to a solution for Hattiesburg's wastewater woes continued in 2016.

The contention started in a special-called meeting of Hattiesburg City Council in early January, when council members voted 4-1 to override Mayor [Johnny DuPree's](#) veto of the council's recent decision to implement land application as the solution to its wastewater issues. Shortly after officials began making plans to begin with land application, officials from Hattiesburg contractor Groundworx announced the company had withdrawn its applications for conditional use permits for spray fields on Tatum Camp Road and handed to the city responsibility for construction and operation of the system.

But plans continued for land application, and in late January the city received a letter from the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality stating it had stopped the \$1,500-per-day fines accrued by the city for failing to submit plans for a treatment system in a timely fashion.

In late April, City Council members voted 4-1 to establish higher rates for water and sewer service to help pay for the upcoming land application system, which was expected to run in the neighborhood of \$120 million. Effective May 1, the rate was raised to \$6.27 per 1,000 gallons for 1,000-100,000 gallons used, and \$5.19 per 1,000 gallons for more than 100,000 gallons used. A monthly minimum charge of \$20.84 also was established.

Also effective May 1, residential water users — including motels, apartments and house trailers — were charged for sewer service at a monthly rate of 100 percent of their monthly water charge.

Throughout the months, land application faced more than a little resistance from citizens at town hall and council meetings. Some officials also opposed the system, such as when the Lamar County Board of Supervisors unanimously adopted an ordinance that would prevent spray field application on parcels of land larger than 55 acres and would necessitate spray fields of any size to be approved by the board.

But in early July, the city's wastewater treatment plans took a sharp turn when council members voted 5-0 to go with a \$135 million mechanical system rather than the land application system, saying land application was no longer a viable option for the city.

That was followed in late August by a meeting between officials from the city, MDEQ and Gulf Restoration Network. At that meeting, officials agreed to stop the latest set of \$1,500-per-day fines accrued by the city, which had totaled \$163,000. That meeting also set a new timeline for the city's wastewater system, giving officials a little more time to get the system implemented.

Because of that, council members were able to vote in early September to lower the previously-raised water and sewer rates.

The new water rates, which took effect Sept. 1, are \$4.82 per 1,000 gallons for 1,000-100,000 gallons used, and \$4 per 1,000 gallons for more than 100,000 gallons used. A monthly minimum charge of \$16 has been established. Also effective Sept. 1, all residential water users — including motels, apartments and house trailers — are charged for sewer service at a monthly rate of 100 percent of their monthly water charge, with a minimum charge of \$16.

But after city officials were informed that the city's current wastewater lagoons had been meeting permit levels for about a year, council members decided to take a step back to see if the lagoons could be utilized as the city's sole wastewater treatment system. Council recently made several changes to the lagoon's management, including appointing Carey Hardin, engineer with Clearwater Consultants in Starkville, as consultant for the lagoons.

The city also extended its contract with L&A Contracting of Hattiesburg. That firm — which was primarily in charge of aeration of the lagoons — will now take over entire management of the lagoons and will be in charge of cleaning, aeration, blowers and the diffusion system in the lagoons. The city also has entered into a contract with APG-Neuros in Canada, which will assist with the lagoon's blowers. Once that is complete, Rod Dickerson, an engineer with Dickerson Consultants in Homer, Louisiana, has been authorized to test a patent-pending microbiological technology on the lagoons.

HPSD suffers through financial crisis

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In January, a routine audit of Hattiesburg Public School District, ordered by the state, revealed the district had only about \$768,000 in its fund balance — down more than \$3.3 million from the previous year. (Photo: File photo/Hattiesburg American)

In January, a routine audit of Hattiesburg Public School District, ordered by the state, revealed the district had only about \$768,000 in its fund balance — down more than \$3.3 million from the previous year. Interim Superintendent Greg Ladner, brought in a short time after the resignation of previous superintendent [James Bacchus](#), immediately ordered cuts in non-essential spending, such as travel, supplies, consultants and non-emergency repairs.

In February, as Ladner struggled to address the financial crisis, he ordered the layoffs of 11 non-contract employees and a 5 percent salary cut for all other non-contract workers.

Later that same month, Ladner announced 5 percent salary cuts for contract employees, to take effect in the summer when contracts expired.

In April, Ladner laid off 45 more workers, including teachers and administrators at the Central Office. With Ladner's term up June 30, the district's board of trustees began a nationwide search for a new superintendent.

After narrowing a field of 31 applicants down to 10 and then to three, the board of trustees in June announced it had chosen Janice Johnson as the new superintendent. At the time, she was assistant superintendent of the Biloxi Public School District.

Johnson took office July 1, but resigned before the day was over, citing family reasons. The board said it has three options — conduct another lengthy nationwide search, re-interview the other two finalists for the job or make new interim superintendent Robert Williams the permanent superintendent.

At the Oct. 27 school board meeting, the board of trustees named Williams as superintendent. The announcement was greeted with cheers from a room full of supporters. Williams was overcome with emotion.

By the end of the fiscal year, Williams predicted the fund balance will be at about \$2.8 million. "It's a vast improvement," he said.

Hattiesburg Fire Department demotes 5

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Hattiesburg Fire Chief Paul Presley has declined to give the names of the five firefighters demoted for their alleged involvement in the theft of packages from a UPS truck. (Photo: File photo/Hattiesburg American)

The recent demotion of five members of Hattiesburg Fire Department for their alleged involvement in theft of packages from a UPS truck has caused no small amount of concern around the city.

The incident occurred Sept. 1, when firefighters responded to a burning UPS truck on [Interstate 59](#). After extinguishing the fire, the firefighters allegedly stole undetermined packages off the truck.

After an investigation, three officers were demoted: two from captain to lieutenant and one from lieutenant to engineer. The officers also received a year-long probation. Two other firefighters who were demoted also received a year's probation, along with reprimand and one shift without pay.

If the firefighters incur violations during their probation, they will be terminated. Fire Chief Paul Presley has declined to give the names of the members who were demoted.

At a recent Hattiesburg City Council meeting, Presley said the reason the firefighters were demoted rather than fired is because UPS officials declined to press charges against the department or firefighters. During that meeting, Council Vice President Mary Dryden said she had recently fielded several inquiries about the incident, including an email sent to her by a resident.

Council members are not allowed to hire, fire or direct city employees.

Fight continues over annexation plans

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The Windlass Drive area would be included in Hattiesburg city limits if the proposed annexation is successful. (Photo: SUSAN BROADBRIDGE/HATTIESBURG AMERICAN)

In late April, Hattiesburg City Council members proposed enlarging the Hub City's borders by way of annexation.

If successful, the move would allow officials to annex in three locations in Forrest and Lamar counties: much of the commercial corridor on U.S. 98, the Windlass Drive area and a portion of U.S. 49 north of the current city limits.

Ten days after that council meeting, the Lamar County Board of Supervisors — along with attorneys Perry Phillips and Tim C. Holleman — filed a Notice of Appeal in Lamar County Circuit Court opposing the annexation.

After officially filing in Lamar and Forrest County Chancery Courts a petition for annexation, Hattiesburg officials then filed in Lamar County Circuit Court a motion to dismiss Lamar County's appeal against annexation in the county.

In early July, the [Mississippi Supreme Court](#) appointed retired chancellor Robert L. Lancaster of Columbus to preside over Hattiesburg's annexation cases in both Forrest and Lamar counties.

More opposition to annexation came in September, when Hattiesburg attorney Robin Roberts filed a motion to oppose the city's expansion into parts of the Rawls Springs community. That opposition was followed by a group representing the Bellevue community, who filed a response in Forrest County Chancery Court challenging the annexation on 11 defenses.

The latest chapter in the saga came shortly afterward, when during a return hearing in Forrest County Chancery Court, Lancaster consolidated the cases in both counties and allowed 120 days for discovery for both sides, with pre-trial motions to be filed by the 100th day of discovery.

Lancaster rescheduled that hearing for Jan. 27, at which point trial dates for the annexation cases are expected to be set. Lamar County officials are now working to get the case heard in that county's court system, rather than in Forrest County.

2 plead guilty in HPD officers' deaths

The wheels of justice keep turning as prosecution continues for those allegedly involved in the 2015 deaths of Hattiesburg police officers Benjamin J. Deen and Liquori Tate.

Nine people were charged with various crimes related to the officers' deaths. Alleged shooter Marvin Banks, 29, was found dead in his jail cell in December 2015.



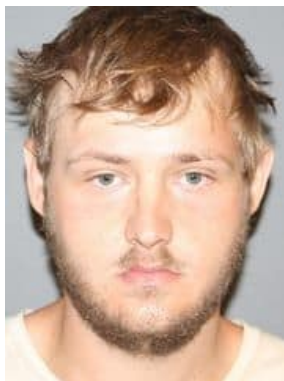
(Photo: Courtesy of Forrest County Jail)

This year, two others charged in the murders pleaded guilty.

Curtis T. Lorenzo Banks, Marvin Banks' brother, [pleaded guilty Aug. 11 \(/story/news/crime/2016/08/11/brother-officers-alleged-killer-pleads-guilty/88572112/\)](#) to accessory after the fact of capital murder. Curtis Banks, 27, made his plea at the Forrest County Courthouse before 12th District Circuit Judge Bob Helfrich.

He also pleaded guilty to an unrelated charge of sale of a controlled substance. He was sentenced to 20 years for his role in the officers' murders and five years to be served concurrently for the drug charge.

He was accused of trying to help his brother hide from police by taking him to a Hattiesburg motel.



(Photo: Courtesy of Forest County Jail)

Jimmy "Jimbo" Velton Brady was arrested May 15, 2015, and charged with possession of a stolen weapon — a .40-caliber [Smith & Wesson](#) handgun, which, according to his indictment, was stolen from Brady's father, Jimmy Brady Sr. — and selling or transferring it to Marvin Banks.

The gun was found May 14, 2015, by a maintenance crew cutting grass near Railroad Street in Hattiesburg. It was tested at the state crime lab in Biloxi, where it later was determined to be the murder weapon.

[Brady pleaded guilty June 27 \(/story/news/crime/2016/06/27/man-pleads-guilty-weapon-charge-deen-tate-deaths/86444678/\)](#) in 12th District Circuit Court. He was sentenced to serve five years on the

weapon charge. He also pleaded guilty to an aggravated domestic violence charge and was sentenced to 10 years. He was ordered to serve three years on the domestic charge, with five years of post-release supervision.

[Six others await their day in court. \(/story/news/crime/2016/10/29/new-trial-dates-set-hpd-officers-shooting-deaths/92853478/\)](#)

Boltons convicted, sentencing delayed

Charles Bolton of Hattiesburg, former Forrest County sheriff's chief deputy, was found [guilty of four counts of tax evasion \(/story/news/crime/2016/09/15/bolton-trial-could-wrap-up-today/90388668/\)](#) for the years 2010-13, not guilty on one count of tax evasion for 2009, and guilty on five counts of filing a false tax report for 2009-13.

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Charles Bolton of Hattiesburg, former Forrest County sheriff's chief deputy, was found guilty of four counts of tax evasion for the years 2010-13 and five counts of filing a false tax report for 2009-13. His wife, Linda Bolton, was found guilty on five counts of filing a false tax report for 2009-13. (Photo: File photo/Hattiesburg American)

His wife, Linda Bolton, was found guilty on five counts of filing a false tax report for 2009-13, and not guilty on one count of tax evasion for 2009. The jury was deadlocked on four counts of tax evasion for the years 2010-13. U.S. District Judge Keith Starrett declared a mistrial on those four charges.

Their sentencing has been rescheduled for Jan. 18, due to time constraints caused by the Rev. Kenneth Fairley's lengthy sentencing hearing held the same day.

The Boltons own two Hattiesburg businesses, Sports 22 Restaurant and Hall Avenue Package Store. They were accused of trying to hide income by "cashing tens of thousands of dollars in checks purportedly issued in payment for liquor, wine and catering services to prevent those payments from being recorded on the business bank statements."

Daniel Browning vs. William Carey

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On April 28, tenured religion professor Daniel Browning was fired from his job at William Carey University. Browning later filed suit against the university, President Tommy King and the board of trustees, claiming breach of contract and intentional infliction of emotional harm. (Photo: Ellen Ciurczak/Hattiesburg American)

On April 28, tenured religion professor Daniel Browning was fired from his job at William Carey. Browning, who had tenure for 20 years and had been a university employee for 26 years, was shocked. Hundreds of students supported him, signing an online petition asking that he be reinstated.

In September, Browning filed suit against the university, President Tommy King and the board of trustees, claiming breach of contract and intentional infliction of emotional harm. The complaint stated Browning was entitled to notice of the reasons for his termination and asks for an unspecified amount of punitive, actual and compensatory damages.

The complaint reveals that a May 24 letter to Browning's attorney from Don Odom, dean of the Winters School of Music and Ministry, said the reason for the firing was financial and enrollment changes, which caused the university to reduce faculty.

Throughout the fall, various legal documents were filed by both sides, eventually resulting in a hearing on the defendant's motion to dismiss King and the board of trustees on Dec. 16.

Judge Robert Helfrich denied that motion, saying it was premature because the defense had failed to show there were no facts upon which Browning's case could not succeed.

Hattiesburg sees 8 homicides in 2016

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Hattiesburg saw eight homicides in 2016, including three within the first six days of the year. (Photo: SUSAN BROADBRIDGE/HATTIESBURG AMERICAN)

Hattiesburg saw eight homicides in 2016 — three of them in the first six days alone.

The most recent occurred Nov. 21. [Frank Jenkins, 64, of Hattiesburg died \(/story/news/crime/2016/11/22/1-dead-hattiesburg-shooting/94259698/\)](#) at Forrest General Hospital after he and another man were shot during an altercation that night at a home in the 3000 block of Prince George Road. Four men — Virgil Stephen'Lee Luckett, 24; Aaron Deshun Jones, 21; Carlos Akeem Sibley, 24; and David Bernard Jones, 25; all of Hattiesburg — were charged with Jenkins' death.

Sixty-four-year-old [Ann Georgian's body was found \(/story/news/crime/2016/09/06/hattiesburg-police-rule-death-homicide/89931614/\)](#) the morning of Sept. 3 in a wooded area at Fourth Avenue and Davis Street, off Hardy Street. Her brother, Gus Timothy Georgian, was charged with her murder. Also arrested was the Georgians' cousin, Pam Hamilton, who was charged with hindering prosecution/rendering criminal assistance. [Both remain free on bond \(/story/news/crime/2016/09/16/suspects-georgian-murder-released-bond/90492880/\)](#).

[LaRita Dewberry \(/story/news/local/oak-grove/2016/07/14/oak-grove-murder-victim-loved-god-family/87009328/\)](#), 26, of Oak Grove was shot in her truck July 9 at Oakwood Apartments, 3901 W. Fourth St. Hattiesburg resident Taiwan Jermaine Blakely, 25, Dewberry's boyfriend, was charged with her murder.

[Corey Husband \(/story/news/crime/2016/06/29/corey-husband-one-kind/86484148/\)](#), 20, was found shot June 26 inside a vehicle left parked outside a Hattiesburg restaurant. He died later at Forrest General Hospital. James Malik Windham of Petal and Demethius K. Dixon of Hattiesburg were charged with murder and conspiracy to commit a felony. The conspiracy involved selling a controlled substance within 1,500 feet of a church. Chadrick M. Dixon of Hattiesburg was charged with hindering prosecution.

[Madison Sims, 48, was shot at a gas station \(/story/news/crime/2016/05/31/police-seek-suspect-monday-night-shooting/85186948/\)](#) on U.S. 49 on May 30. He died June 2 at FGH. [Andre Antonio-Rapheal Baker of Bassfield \(/story/news/crime/2016/06/08/hattiesburg-murder-suspect-turns-himself/85591974/\)](#) was charged with Sims' murder.

The three homicides in January all occurred in the victims' homes. [Anna Griffith \(/story/news/crime/2016/01/05/autopsy-woman-died-gunshot-wound-chest/78310786/\)](#), 39, died Jan. 1, allegedly shot by her boyfriend, Theopolis Schaffer. [Kelly Ladner \(/story/news/crime/2016/01/03/woman-identified-hattiesburg-death-investigation/78231962/\)](#), 37, was found beaten to death Jan. 2. Her boyfriend, Joe Michael Shaw Jr., was charged with her murder. On Jan. 6, [Nicholas Brown \(/story/news/crime/2016/01/06/hpd-responds-3rd-homicide-2016/78356370/\)](#), 35, also was found beaten to death, allegedly by his roommate, Steven Armstrong.

Councilmen step down from leadership posts



Hattiesburg City Council members Kim Bradley and Henry Naylor, not pictured, abruptly stepped down as president and vice president, respectively, in August. (Photo: File photo/Hattiesburg American)

The leadership of Hattiesburg City Council took a sharp turn at the Aug. 16 council meeting, when council members Kim Bradley and Henry Naylor abruptly stepped down as president and vice president, respectively.

Immediately after that decision, council members voted to institute Ward 3 Councilman Carter Carroll as president and Ward 4 Councilwoman Mary Dryden as vice president.

Bradley, who was elected to council in 2005 and had served as president for the previous 10 years, said he decided to step down because serving on the council had taken time away from his business and personal life. Shortly after stepping down, he announced he would not seek re-election to the council in 2017.

Naylor, who said his reason for stepping down was because the council felt like it was time for a change in leadership, said he more than likely would run for re-election. Naylor was elected to council in 2001 and had served as vice president for the previous five years.

Severe weather hits the Pine Belt

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National Weather Service and emergency management officials look at debris from a tornado that hit Lamar County on Feb. 23. (Photo: Susan Broadbridge/Hattiesburg American)

Tornadoes and flooding were pre-eminent in the Pine Belt during the first quarter of the year. It all began with an EF2 tornado that hit the Rocky Branch community of Sumrall on Jan. 21, damaging several homes and one business. There were no injuries or fatalities reported, though 21 structures suffered damage.

Another EF2 tornado touched down near Sones Road in Lamar County on Feb. 23, killing Harris Dale Purvis, who was alone in his mobile home when the twister struck. That storm, carrying 115 mph winds, was one of a handful of tornadoes that hit the Pine Belt that day, including one in southeast Marion County and an EFO tornado near Carnes.

It was less than one month later, in mid-March, when torrential rains soaked the Pine Belt. After four days of storms, 158 homes in Forrest County suffered some sort of flood damage, with major damage occurring to 47.

In Lamar County, eight homes and two commercial properties were affected by the floods. One of the hardest-hit areas was Mississippi 589 in Lamar County just north of Burnt Bridge Road. Water washed out a chunk of the highway, causing it to collapse. The road was not fully repaired until seven months later, when it reopened on Oct. 14.

American staff writers Lici Beveridge, Haskel Burns and Ellen Ciurczak contributed to this report.

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