

School board receives update on boiler issues at WCHS

Approves audit report

By Bob Vlach
Woodford Sun Staff

The Woodford County Board of Education (BOE) was told during its meeting on Monday that some boiler issues are being experienced at the new high school. The district is currently working with the manufacturer to resolve those issues, Interim Chief Operating Officer Josh Rayburn told the BOE.

The boilers “are not functioning properly,” said Rayburn. “They are functioning,” but have to be reset when temps drop below 32 degrees.

“We are in a heated conversation (about the boiler issue),” said schools Superintendent Lori Jones, “and we’re definitely in the process of nailing that down,” telling the BOE, “I am aggressively pursuing” a root cause.

Jones also noted she has talked to three superintendents in other school districts who are experiencing similar boiler issues after new construction. “So, it’s not just isolated to us,” she said.

“It’s certainly not what we want to see,” she added, “but I have to pursue it and make sure it gets resolved.”

The board did not take action on resolving an underground spring issue near the bus circle as recommended by Jones.

She said based on her conversations with water conservation experts, they question whether it’s really an issue. “So they said we need to really wait until spring to see whether or not that is truly a concern,” she said.

After studying geologic maps, she said, “They really do not see it as ... a concern.”

Also, the board did not take action to move forward with adding an auxiliary parking lot, also recommended by Jones, because of winter weather and to see how much revenue is available in the contingency fund after the project is complete.

Audit report

The BOE unanimously approved an audit report with an unmodified opinion – or a clean report – on the district’s financial statements.

The audit report was given by Thomas Sparks, a certified public accountant at Summers, McCrary & Sparks. He said the audit showed cash flow issues, with expenses going up about \$3 million (mostly for salaries and benefits), and a \$2.8 million operating deficit in the general fund.

“We obviously know about the revenues and expenses that we are also tackling with the Budget Committee, and we’re going to have multiple conversations on that as well,” said BOE Chair Adam Brickler.

Sparks said the audit did not have any federal findings, but WCPS did not comply with state law because its annual financial statement and budget were not published in the local newspaper.

The audit also had management comments, which do not rise to the level of a finding, but could elevate to a finding if not addressed, said Sparks. At the board office level, he said two purchase orders were written after an invoice. “This is a budgetary control,” he said. Also, there were multiple invoice issues at Huntertown Elementary, he said.

Sparks said the U.S. government shutdown did not allow his firm to test the district’s compliance with federal programs, but financial numbers in the audit will not change. “Everybody’s in the same boat in Kentucky,” he said, so the BOE was asked to approve a draft. Any revisions will result in the approval of an amended document.

Because pensions are underfunded by the state, WCPS and other Kentucky school districts would not be able to pay that liability if required to do so immediately, Sparks said.

Superintendent report

Jones thanked board members for being patient during the transition to fill positions following the resignation of Chief Operating Officer Shane Smith.

Later, the board approved updated job descriptions for two positions: chief operations officer and director of finance. The COO will provide support services to ensure a positive work and learning environment while being the principal advisor to the Board of Education and superintendent in matters related to non-instructional areas of the district.

In addition to starting a book club for caregivers and parents to help students being cyber-bullied with their well-being and mental health, Central Office has started a food bank to help families with their immediate needs, Jones said. She also thanked students and teachers for doing a great job hosting Veterans Day programs at their schools.

Jones thanked Woodford County Judge-Executive James Kay for establishing partnerships with WCPS teachers and his support of project-based learning opportunities for students.

Budget Committee meeting

The district’s Budget Committee meeting is Thursday, Nov. 20, from 4 to 5:30 p.m., at Central Office (the old high school). Jones reminded those attending or watching the board meeting that a Budget Transparency tab on the WCPS website includes all the information that Budget Committee members receive.

Kudos to BOE chair

Vice Chair Ambrose Wilson gave a shout out to Brickler for his role in the search for a new superintendent and ensuring Jones has everything she needs to be successful.

A former chair himself, Wilson said, “I can attest that being the chairman of the Board of Education can be very difficult from time to time. Adam has handled it – each and every meeting – with professionalism and fairness to all of the members,” since he became chair in January of this year.

WCPS chief operating officer resigns

By Bob Vlach
Woodford Sun Staff

The chief operating officer for Woodford County Public Schools (WCPS) has resigned. Shane Smith’s resignation was effective Nov. 11 and schools Superintendent Dr. Lori Jones told the *Sun* in an email that she received communication of the resignation on Oct. 28.

In an email to staff, Jones wrote, “Shane has dedicated three and a half years to Woodford County Public Schools to lead the new high school construction project, oversee finance, food service, transportation and maintenance. We want to thank him for fulfilling such a challenging role to provide support that has opened more opportunities for the students of Woodford County. We wish him all the best in his future endeavors.”

In a telephone interview with the *Sun* on Tuesday, Smith said, “I accepted a CFO (chief financial officer) position that is just a tremendous opportunity for me professionally and personally.” He said he will be working for a nonprofit in Lexington, but declined to identify his new employer.

“I wish the folks in Woodford County Schools nothing but continued suc-

cess and best wishes for them,” added Smith.

Asked if his resignation had anything to do with the school district’s operating deficit and the financial challenges that lie ahead, Smith said, “They are not related. I felt confident that we would be able to resolve the operating deficit over the next couple of years.

“I do think that there are some changes from a staffing standpoint throughout the district that are going to have to be made in order to correct that revenue and spending balance. But that had no bearing on the decision whatsoever.”

Smith attributed the district’s \$2.8 million operating deficit to aggressive raises over a two-year period and reductions in state SEEK revenue that WCPS was experiencing because of the growth in local property assessments.

Dr. Josh Rayburn has been appointed interim chief operating officer, while maintaining his other position as chief information officer, Jones said.

At its meeting on Monday, Nov. 17, the Woodford County Board of Education was asked to reactivate the director of finance position with an updated job description and salary.

‘I do think that there are some changes from a staffing standpoint throughout the district that are going to have to be made in order to correct that revenue and spending balance. But that had no bearing on the decision whatsoever.’

Shane Smith

Should Woodford County have the bourbon blues?

A conversation with Eric Gregory of Kentucky Distillers Association

“I got holes in both my pockets where all the money goes

*And this guitar life is lonesome, it’s the only life I know
It’s a fire that keeps on burning, hard times they lit the fuse*

And I’m a rider on this lonesome train called “Bourbon and the Blues”

Whitey Morgan

By Scott White
Managing Editor

As president of the Kentucky Distillers Association, Midway resident Eric Gregory is a well-known name in the bourbon industry. So, if anyone has an inside understanding of perhaps Kentucky’s signature product, bourbon, while also knowing a little about its other signature product, horses, it is Gregory.

And, as a long-time Midway native who has been involved in supporting this county’s own bourbon industry, he has a keen eye on Woodford County distilled bourbon.

Woodford County has both historic, iconic distilleries as

well as small, craft-oriented makers: Woodford Reserve, Castle & Key, Glenn’s Creek and Bluegrass Distillers at Elkwood Farm. Plus, it is the home to dozens of storage facilities for distillers located in Franklin and Anderson counties.

So, with dire reports over the last several months about the health of the industry relating to tariffs, the less than robust economy, competition for leisure dollars, changing drinking habits of Gen X and Gen Z, the new entry of legal cannabis in many states, over production and too much supply, and a few small distilleries finding themselves in bankruptcy court or retrenchment, who better to ask about the future of the industry, and its impact on Woodford County.

“We’ve had better years,” Gregory said, referencing the impact of tariffs. “We have 17.1 million barrels of bourbon being aged in Kentucky, the most we have ever had, so this is slowed production right now.”

He said a particular disappointment was when Canadian shops abruptly stopped

selling Kentucky bourbon, adding, “We knew there would be a response to the tariff, but we did not expect them to actually remove our product from the shelves.”

Even so, Gregory is optimistic.

“Things are challenging mainly because of the uncertainty. This is a business where our distilleries are making decisions concerning things like demand 12 to 20 years from now. It is like a crystal ball, and the forecasters are now going to make sure inventory is right down the road,” he said. “But the distilleries in Woodford County, and those like them, have a backstop in tourism, which keeps significant revenues and brand exposure up.”

The foresight of the KDA in creating the “Kentucky Bourbon Trail” in 2012 and the Woodford County Chamber of Commerce in its branding of “Woodford County: Birthplace of Bourbon,” has paid significant dividends not just for the distilleries, but generates a ripple in the local economies of Midway and Versailles ... a critical factor that, for example, tobacco did

not have when its production (a major part of the Woodford County economy) went into free fall in the early 1990s.

The Kentucky Bourbon Trail website has a page devoted to Woodford County, including attractions like Rail Explorers, accommodations, restaurants and other amenities.

“Here in Woodford County, we have a really nice blend of producers – large, historic brands along with smaller, heritage brands and storage warehouses for brands like James Pepper (located in Lexington),” he said. “Woodford County is one of the most stable when you look at the distilleries, their success and their brands.”

Gregory pointed to Castle & Key as a good example.

“It is a beautiful setting, it is a historic landmark, the first bourbon tourism destination (when it was built in the 19th century), and though its brands are newer, they report the number of tourists going through keeps rising, which allows them to expose those folks to their brands while the visitors enjoy just a gorgeous location.”



ERIC GREGORY, president of Kentucky Distillers Association (Photo courtesy of KDA)

Gregory said distilleries, referencing those here, are smart and have solid plans, and are “watching their budgets, monitoring tariffs, which is like a roller coaster, drinking habits and market research.”

He pointed out that Woodford Reserve sales keep going up.

“I still remain bullish because we are a resilient industry. Look at our 200-year history, and we always come out stronger,” Gregory pointed out. “The bourbon industry, by our nature, think in decades – we have experienced all of this before, changing drinking habits, domestic policy changes.”

Gregory, after a short pause, laughed, saying, “Heck, we survived Prohibition, where it was illegal to distill and sell bourbon for over a decade, and then thrived. Really, at the end of the day, our saving grace is we have ‘Kentucky’ on the bottle and no one else has that ... we will continue to thrive.”

It doesn’t sound like Woodford County has the bourbon blues, but just good Kentucky bourbon, and it will be around a long time.

Woodford County Agricultural Development Council 2025 County Agricultural Incentives Program {C.A.I.P.}

ONE-TIME SIGN-UP: Producers can turn in applications for completed projects OR for projects to be completed. This signup period is **November 5, 2025 through December 10, 2025**. Applications are currently available for pickup at the Agriculture Resource Building OR electronically on the Woodford Co. Extension Service website (woodford.ca.uky.edu).

There will be an informational meeting on November 20th at 6 pm at the Woodford County Extension Office, 184 Beasey Drive, Versailles.

Eligible receipts for completed projects must be dated **April 28th or later**. *A picture of the completed project and proof of payment must accompany receipts to receive reimbursement. All applications are scored, based on the scoring criteria set by the Kentucky Agricultural Development Board.*

 Cooperative
Extension Service


KENTUCKY AGRICULTURAL
DEVELOPMENT FUND

Woodford County Cooperative Extension
184 Beasley Drive, Versailles, KY 40383
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**MON. DECEMBER 1
6:00 - 7:00 PM**

AT THE MIDWAY BRANCH

(ADULTS, TEENS 12-18) JOIN THE
MASTER GARDENERS TO USE
FRESH GREENERY TO CREATE A
DECORATION FOR YOUR HOME OR
GIVE AS A GIFT THIS HOLIDAY
SEASON. ALL MATERIALS WILL BE
PROVIDED.

PLEASE RSVP FOR THIS PROGRAM.



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