

FORECAST

TODAY SUN MON
79°/51° 80°/50° 83°/57°
Complete forecast, A2

REGION



Policies stress proper use over prohibition

Sheffield City Schools' policy regarding student use of artificial intelligence (AI) at the start of the 2025-26 school year limited the use of the software on school devices. **B1**

YOUR LIFE



Breathing new life into a gothic classic

Local actor Daniel Dean found the chance to sink himself into something haunting, tragic, and deeply human in Cypress Moon Studios' production of "Frankenstein." **F1**

WORLD

Israeli military says ceasefire takes effect in Gaza

A ceasefire between Israel and Hamas came into effect in Gaza on Friday, the military said, hours after Israel's Cabinet approved a deal to pause the fighting and exchange the remaining hostages for Palestinian prisoners. **A3**

WEIRD NEWS

Scrapple contest winner puts pig into pigskin

PHILADELPHIA — In the contest for best scrapple sculpture in Philadelphia on Friday it was the "Mush Push" fashioned from the regionally popular pork breakfast meat that got Patrick Moser's entry over the goal line.
The Norristown tattoo artist's tribute to the Philadelphia Eagles' trademark short yardage play, known as the "tush push," took the top honor at a lighthearted art competition to kick off the Scrapple & Apple Festival.
The celebration of all things scrapple at Reading Terminal Market began with the contest to fashion art from 5 pounds of scrapple.
Moser and 11 other volunteer contestants were given sculpting tools and 90 minutes to come up with their best scrapple creations. The "expert judge" was Sasha Suda, chief executive of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

— The Associated Press

YOUR OPINION

Friday's question: Should President Donald Trump be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize?
Yes: 40.1%
No: 59.9%
Today's Question: Do you agree with mass firings during the government shutdown?
Vote at **TimesDaily.com**

Vol. 136 No. 243	
Business	D3
Classified	E1
Crossword	F8
Forum	D1
Obituaries	B2
Opinion	D2
Region	B1
Sports	C1
Your Life	F1
Weather	A2



TIMES DAILY

FLORENCE ■ MUSCLE SHOALS ■ SHEFFIELD ■ TUSCUMBIA ■ NORTHWEST ALABAMA



HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL: Muscle Shoals wins battle of unbeatens. **C1**

Saturday, October 11, 2025 WEEKEND EDITION timesdaily.com



But at what cost to the taxpayers?

By Brady Petree
Special Projects Editor

By Nov. 1, Muscle Shoals will have paid more than \$1 million in contracts to two companies for the proposed \$65 million sportsplex, while work has yet to begin, and an exact completion date has not been established.

According to documents obtained by the TimesDaily, the municipality is currently issuing monthly checks to Tuscumbia-based Strategic Construction Solutions (SCS), and Sports Facilities Management LLC., located in Clearwater, Florida.

In the event the municipality does not cancel either of the contracts before the end of October, Muscle Shoals will have paid \$1,073,333.40 to the two companies without any visible work being performed in 15 months.

On July 15, 2024, council members unanimously approved the contracts with SCS and Sports Facilities Management.

The exact date of when the city entered into the agreement with



Price tag for sportsplex contracts hits \$1M, and not a shovel of dirt has been turned

SCS is unclear — as the contract obtained by the TimesDaily does not outline a specific date, but rather parameters for when the commencement date will be.

However, check stubs approved by Mayor Mike Lockhart and City Clerk Brittney Walker show the municipality began issuing payments to SCS by Sept. 30, 2024.

Strategic Construction Solutions fees

Per the contract with SCS, the city will be required to pay a fee rate of "3.85 percent of the initial budget of \$65 million," to be billed out monthly over the course of 39 months. Broken down, the monthly payments come out to \$64,166.67.

Beginning in May, the check amounts were reduced to \$32,083.34, or half of the original amount, according to check stubs.

From September 2024 through April 2025 when the city was paying the original monthly fee, Muscle Shoals paid \$513,333.36 to SCS.

Under the reduced rate, which has been in effect from May through at least October, the municipality has paid out \$192,500.04, bringing the total paid to SCS to \$705,833.40.

For the 39-month period specified in the contract, the total cost to the city would have been \$2,502,500.13 for the original monthly payment of \$64,166.67.

Under the reduced amount of \$32,083.34, the city could pay \$1,507,916, assuming the rate does not return to the original number stated in the contract.

The actual payments will likely fall between \$2,502,500.13 and \$1,507,916, depending on when the lower monthly amount is

readjusted.
The 39-month window allows for design work and 34-and-a-half months for construction, per the SCS contract.

Lockhart said SCS "voluntarily" reduced the fee after it was determined the timeline "was taking longer than initially anticipated."

He said the monthly fee will increase to the \$64,166.67 as the retail development aspect of the project "gains momentum" and architects and engineers are released to begin the actual design for the sportsplex.

Sports Facilities Management fees

The deal with Sports Facilities Management officially began on Aug. 1, 2024. The city is required to pay a monthly fee of \$24,500. Unless terminated by the city, it will run for at least seven years, according to the official contract.

By the end of October, the city will have paid \$367,500 to Sports Facilities Management.

SEE PRICE TAG, A6

ALABAMA

Public schools lose 5,700 students

By Trisha Powell Crain
Alabama Daily News

MONTGOMERY — Alabama public schools are seeing their steepest enrollment decline in 40 years — a drop expected to cost the state 500 to 700 teacher positions next year, according to State Superintendent Eric Mackey.

"This will be the largest reduction we've had in the last four decades," Mackey told the Alabama State Board of Education

Thursday, emphasizing that the numbers are not yet final. "About 5,000 students lost when it's all said and done."

Mackey said the reduction in students will directly affect funding for teachers.

"Teacher jobs are tied to student enrollment," he said. "This is between 500 to 700 teacher jobs that will disappear next year as we work on the next budget cycle. So, it's a big impact."

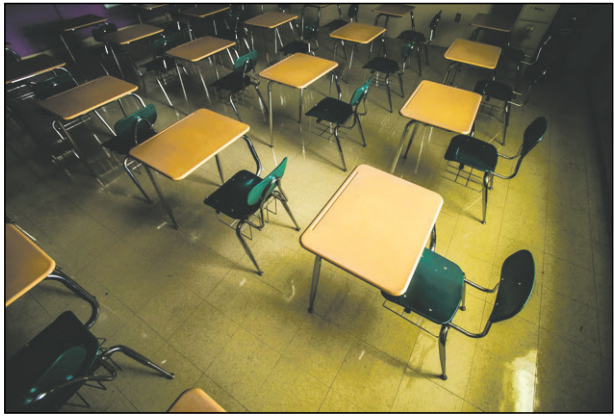
Mackey said the

department estimates about 3,000 students left public schools to use CHOOSE Act education savings accounts for private or home schooling.

"That was not unexpected," he said. "That's already been reported in the media."

But another 2,100 students are unaccounted for.

"We have essentially 2,100 kids that were enrolled last year that



State Superintendent Eric Mackey said Alabama's public schools are seeing their steepest enrollment decline in four decades. [PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

SEE SCHOOLS, A5

CLASSIFIEDS
See More in Today's Classified Section

- Classifieds on the cover -

COMPLETE TREE SERVICE

Removal • Stump grinding • Lots cleared • Bucket truck • Storm damage.
256-247-5010 or 256-247-5015

- Classifieds on the cover -

Deer Run Earth Work, LLC

Skid Steer Work, Mini Excavator, Mulching, Waterline installation.
Licensed/Insured
256-710-7085

- Classifieds on the cover -

MONTREAT APARTMENTS

1850 Darby Dr., Florence, AL
Accepting Applications for Seniors 62 and over or mobility impaired. Rent based on income. Call 256-767-2211

- Classifieds on the cover -

The TimesDaily is seeking a full-time
MACHINE OPERATOR
Questions and/or resume may be emailed to:
Kevin.Blurton@timesdaily.com

- Classifieds on the cover -

To Place Your Front Page Classified ad
Call Gina O'Kelley at 256-740-5816
Monday-Friday 8 am- 5 pm

PRICE TAG

From page **A1**

According to the contract, Sports Facilities Management is responsible for “all aspects of oversight,” including staffing, marketing, maintenance, event management, sponsorship and advertising sales and day-to-day operations of the facility.

As work has yet to begin on the project, and with the opening of the facility at least three years away, the TimesDaily asked Lockhart about the work being performed by the companies to justify the amount spent thus far.

Lockhart explained there are three “phases” of the project, noting SCS is currently in phase one, or “pre-construction services.”

He said the work SCS has done to this point ranges from soliciting requests for proposals to conducting weekly meetings and working “hand-in-hand” with Sports Facilities Management.

Lockhart did not specify the work Sports Facilities Management has conducted for the city to date. Instead, he defended the contract, claiming it as a “strategic move” for the municipality.

“Because of their excellent reputation, including involvement with parks in Alabama, it is a strategic move to be sure the city is capturing the right tournaments and maximizing its potential as a facility,” Lockhart said. “They have the expertise and track record, why try to recreate the wheel when experts already exist?”

If construction on the sportsplex began in November, it would take 34-and-a-half months to finish, according to the contract. Combined with the 15 months that have passed since the agreement was approved, that would leave less than three years (34 months) for Sports Facilities Management to operate the sportsplex under the initial agreement.

According to the contract, for the first three years of the deal, Muscle Shoals will pay a total of \$882,000 to the Sports Facilities Management.

After the third anniversary of the agreement, which will come on Aug. 1, 2027, the annual fee paid to Sports Facilities Management will increase by 5% each year for the life of the contract.

Factoring in the 5% increase year over year, the city will pay the following after the third year:

- From Aug. 1, 2027 through Aug. 1, 2028, the city will pay \$308,700;
- From Aug. 1, 2028 through Aug. 1, 2029, the city will pay \$324,135;
- From Aug. 1, 2029 through Aug. 1, 2030, the city will pay \$340,341.75;
- From Aug. 1, 2030 through Aug. 1, 2031, the city will pay \$357,358.84.

The city was also required to pay approximately \$147,000 upon the “execution of the agreement,” per the contract.

In total, the city will pay \$2,359,535.59 over the length of the contract with Sports Facilities Management.

Financing

As for how the project will be financed, the city has discussed a bond issue.

Lockhart in his written responses to questions did not specify whether the city has secured the bond, or if the process is ongoing. However, he did mentioned the idea of a “non-general obligation bond”

Strategic Construction Solutions



LEAH DANIELS/TIMESDAILY GRAPHIC

that will be sold in the market and based on the “revenues of the retail development” that is a component of the sportsplex.

“If the development goes belly up and the retail doesn’t perform or the sports complex doesn’t cash flow, the city is left with no obligation of debt,” Lockhart said of the bond proposal. “There is no better way to fund the project. It becomes a no-brainer, considering the sales tax revenue from the retailer is non-existent unless there is a sports complex to drive tourism to increase population during peak times.”

As for the money already spent on the contracts with SCS and Sports Facilities Management, Lockhart claims the payments are “under a resolution” to be paid back to the city’s general fund by the bond once it is executed.

Birmingham attorney Alston Ray said while he is not familiar with the Muscle Shoals project, he said municipalities attempting to get a non-general obligation bond agreement is “not that common.”

Ray said while there is a way to move forward with a project sold with debts based on revenues from the project, the bond market for such a structure is typically unpredictable.

“Without knowing anything specific, whether the market would accept that, or a potential buyer would accept that kind of debt with nothing more than a pledge from revenues, sounds speculative,” Ray said.

When it comes to the land needed for the 65-acre project, Lockhart said the city “currently has available” the property necessary for the sportsplex.

As part of “phase one” of the project, according to SCS, officials “have been working” with landowners on land transfers. Those will be finalized once the design and construction are signed off on.

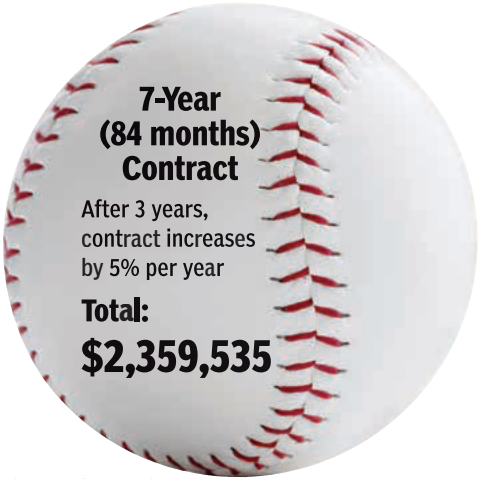
Other costs

The monthly contract payments aren’t the only costs the city is obligated to meet. The municipality will also be on the hook for extra financial items for the duration of the contracts as well.

Sports Facilities Management will receive 30% of the “gross revenue for sponsorship and advertising ... for the life of the manager’s service.” This also includes naming rights for the facility.

Sponsorship and advertising packages for the Muscle Shoals complex have yet to be publicly released. However, a similar facility being built in Saraland, Alabama, which is also supported by Sports Facilities Management in an advisory role, gives

Sports Facilities Management



a snapshot of what can be reasonably expected in Muscle Shoals.

For the \$72 million complex in Saraland, sponsors can purchase packages ranging from \$500 per year to an annual fee of \$7,500 for the highest sponsorship level.

Per the contract, Sports Facilities Management will also be paid 30% of the “total cost savings for sponsored equipment, scoreboards, fencing, or other budgeted items donated to the project as a sponsorship.”

For instance, if a company opts to sponsor all the scoreboards in the facility, Sports Facilities Management will receive 30% of the savings the city would have spent on the materials without a sponsorship.

On top of advertising fees and sponsorship savings, Sports Facilities Management will also receive compensation for airfare, rental cars, parking fees, lodging and meals for the duration of the contract.

Council feedback

The TimesDaily reached out to each Muscle Shoals City Council member for their comments on the sportsplex contracts and the lack of work performed to date.

Of the five elected officials, Place 1 Councilman Chris Hall and Place 3 Councilman Willis Thompson were the only ones to respond to inquiries.

In a text message, Hall said the sportsplex is still in a “due diligence phase” and confirmed the facility will take at least three years to complete once work actually begins.

Hall also said “a lot of questions” have to be answered in the coming months with regards to the entire project. He said he wants to see what has actually been accomplished by the contracts as well.

“With a new mayor coming on board in the next few weeks, a lot of questions have to be answered in regards to where a sportsplex of this magnitude fits in with his overall plan,” Hall said. “Projects of this nature require upfront spending, but I don’t know how we can justify or defend this one.”

Regarding the contracts, Thompson said the deals are “worthwhile” and noted he does not have any issues with the cost of the agreements.

“I think this will be a win-win for our city in terms of both the sportsplex and the proposed stores and other things that will be coming to our area,” Thompson said. “I have no concerns at all.”

HOW RESPONSIVE IS YOUR ELECTED OFFICIAL?

The TimesDaily reached out to each Muscle Shoals City Council member and Mayor Mike Lockhart for comments and answers to questions regarding the proposed Muscle Shoals sportsplex project.



Mike Lockhart
MAYOR

After initially agreeing to a phone interview on Oct. 7, when called Lockhart changed his mind and requested the questions be submitted to him via email.

The TimesDaily received Lockhart’s responses by the evening of Oct. 8.

Here is how each council member responded, along with when they were first contacted and how many times:



Chris Hall
PLACE 1

Chris Hall was first contacted on Oct. 7 via text message and phone call. He responded the same day via text message.

“With a new mayor coming on board in the next few weeks, a lot of questions have to be answered in regard to where a sportsplex of this magnitude fits in with his overall plan,”

Hall said. “Projects of this nature require upfront spending, but I don’t know how we can justify or defend this one.”



Gina Clark
PLACE 2

Gina Clark was first contacted on Oct. 6 via text message and phone call. The TimesDaily sent follow-up text messages each of the next four days.

Clark did not respond to any of those requests.



Willis Thompson
PLACE 3

Willis Thompson was first contacted on Oct. 6 via phone call. Thompson was the only councilmember to answer the initial telephone call.

“I think this will be a win-win for our city in terms of both the sportsplex and the proposed stores and other things that will be coming to our area,” Thompson said. “I have no

concerns at all.”



Ken Sockwell
PLACE 4

Ken Sockwell was first contacted on Oct. 6 via phone call and text message. The TimesDaily sent follow-up text messages each of the next four days.

Sockwell did not respond to any of those requests.



Donnie Linley
PLACE 5

Donnie Linley was first contacted on Oct. 6 via text message. He requested the questions be sent to him via email but did not respond to questions. The TimesDaily sent follow-up text messages each of the next four days.

Linley did not respond to any requests.

FLORENCE

Sportsplex: \$34M spent in 16-year history

Funded by general obligation bonds and sales tax revenue

By Bernie Delinski
Staff Writer

FLORENCE — The creation of the Sportsplex at Coffee-O’Neal Park 16 years ago was a \$17 million project, and expansions since then have nearly doubled that cost, but interest in it has grown by much more.

The complex opened in 2009 with six soccer, four softball and five baseball fields, said Randy Burns, athletic director for the city’s Parks and Recreation Department.

“We’re serving about 1,800 kinds in the spring,” Burns said. “In the fall we serve probably close to 1,200 kids.”

He has watched interest in youth league sports expand along with the park.

“The first year we started baseball here we had maybe 300 kids,” he said. “Now, baseball has between 700 to 800 [kids]. We didn’t have softball [at the start] and now our peak numbers are 300.”

Approximately 200 youths played tackle football the first year.

“Now it’s not that many so we started flag football to offset that and have 300 playing flag and about 100 playing tackle,” Burns said. “This year we started girls flag football with close to 60 kids. The numbers will grow since the

Alabama High School Athletic Association offers that as a sport now.”

The field also hosts the AHSAA North Regional Softball Tournament, which brings in \$1.5 million to \$2 million in economic impact, according to tourism studies.

The Sportsplex also is the location of the Babe Ruth World Series and Cal Ripken World Series, which tourism officials said had a \$1 million economic impact this year and as much as \$3.8 million in 2024.

Burns said the difference in World Series impact was due to the tournaments being combined this year and played over a shorter timespan. That changes next year.

“I know the dates next year for softball will move back to mid-July and the first of August for baseball,” he said. “That will help us with more teams for softball. We had seven international teams this year and will have 12 to 15 next year.”

Four softball fields were added to the Sportsplex in 2015 at a cost of \$6 million, Burns said. A miracle field, four turfed baseball/softball fields and a conversion of a soccer field into a multipurpose field were part of a \$10 million project in 2024.

City officials said the 2009 construction was funded as part of a 2003 bond issue and



Four softball fields were added to the Sportsplex at Coffee-O’Neal Park in 2015, part of continued investments which have helped the site attract major tournaments such as the AHSAA North Regional Softball Tournament and Babe Ruth World Series. [DAN BUSEY/TIMESDAILY]

\$1.3 million from revenue from a countywide 2-cent sales tax. The 2015 expansion was part of a separate bond issue.

Burns said both bond issues have been paid off. He said the existing projects are being paid from budget funds.

The \$10 million expansion was part of a 2023 general obligation bond of \$32.795 million for various projects, officials said.

Some 440 parking spaces are being added to the park, which will bring the total amount of paved spaces to 1,600 That project costs \$499,000, Burns said. Twelve fields are being renovated

at a cost of \$890,000.

He said the fields require year-round maintenance, but without those efforts, the tournaments and economic impact don’t happen.

“Our maintenance guys do a tremendous job taking care of the Sportsplex,” Burns said. “The place looks like it does because of the maintenance guys. They work tirelessly every day.”

He said support from local businesses in terms of sponsorships and donations also play a role in success.

“It’s a team effort, not just the team at the Sportsplex but a

community team,” Burns said.

Parks and Recreation Director Bill Jordan said that combination is essential.

“When I come to the Sportsplex, I am truly amazed by what I see — our community coming together and the dedication of our incredible team who make it all possible,” he said. “None of it happens without the true alignment of the community and the dedicate staff who make this place special every day.”

bernie.delinski@timesdaily.com or 256-740-5739. Twitter @TD_BDelinski