

# Patriots return to state tourney

Patrick Henry girls top William Fleming **SPORTS, B1**



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# THE ROANOKE TIMES

Wednesday, February 21, 2024

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## Pipeline completion delayed again

### MVP now six years, nearly \$4 billion over original estimates

**LAURENCE HAMMACK**  
The Roanoke Times

Once again, builders of the Mountain Valley Pipeline have pushed back the finish line for the highly divisive and long-delayed project.

Equitrans Midstream Corp., the lead partner in constructing the natural gas pipeline, said Tuesday that it is now expected to go into operation sometime in the second quarter of this year.

Also announced during a conference call with financial analysts was another cost increase, boosting the project's total price tag to between \$7.57 billion and \$7.63 billion.

It was the latest in a series of

timing setbacks and budget overruns for a pipeline being built by five energy companies. When construction began in early 2018, it was projected to be completed by the end of that year at a cost of \$3.7 billion.

Work on the buried pipeline that passes through Southwest Virginia has been slowed by lawsuits filed by environmental and community groups, who say problems continue with muddy

runoff from construction sites.

"This news is as predictable as a mudslide on these steep slopes in the rain," Russell Chisholm, co-director of the Protect Our Water, Heritage, Rights coalition, said of the latest delay.

"MVP's rush to work recklessly through winter has led to pollution in our streams and landslides near our homes while they bury corroding pipe and backfill their trenches with investor money,"

Chisholm said in a statement released by POWHR.

In an early January filing with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, Equitrans reported that it "has continued to make significant forward construction progress" and remained on target to have the pipeline in service by the end of March.

But the company on Tuesday

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DAVID HUNGATE PHOTOS, THE ROANOKE TIMES

Roanoke's first Youth Poet Laureate Elani Spencer read her poem "Perennials" to city council Tuesday night. Spencer is from Rochester, New York, and is a first-year creative writing student at Hollins University. **Below:** Spencer received a standing ovation after reading her poem.

## Finding power in poetry



### Roanoke's first youth poet laureate hopes role can help city be a 'beacon of hope'

**LUKE WEIR**  
The Roanoke Times

Roanoke's first youth poet laureate read her initial piece to city council on Tuesday, introducing a new role intended to uplift and empower young voices and cit-

izenship.

Elani Spencer, who will serve in the role through 2024, is a first-year Hollins student from Rochester, New York. She said poetry can help Roanoke "live up to its full potential as a beacon of hope" in Virginia.

"There is so much joy in this community, but there is also a lot of violence," Spencer said on a city webpage. "I hope through literature we can encourage

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## Mayor: Blacksburg, Tech at start of long process

### Collaborative housing plan may still be a year out, Hager-Smith says

**PAYTON WILLIAMS**  
The Roanoke Times

BLACKSBURG — A plan between the town and Virginia Tech to alleviate housing con-

cerns might not be reached for at least a year, Mayor Leslie Hager-Smith said Tuesday.

During a town council work session, Hager-Smith said that a long-planned meeting between herself and Virginia Tech administrators — including University President Tim Sands — had taken place.

During their meeting, Hager-Smith presented university officials with what she referred to as a "white paper" outlining some options for how the university might collaborate with the town on the issue of housing. While Virginia Tech administrators expressed interest, Hager-Smith sees it as the start of a long process.

"My guess is that, if they let

that planning process run its course, that would take about a year" Hager-Smith said. "It was supposed to have started already, but it hasn't."

Members of town council estimate that discussions about joint housing plans have been ongoing between the town

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## Collective bargaining agreement approved

### Workday limits for Montgomery County teachers among contract provisions

**MIKE GANGLOFF**  
The Roanoke Times

The Montgomery County School Board voted Tuesday to approve its first-ever collective bargaining agreement with the county Education Association.

The agreement, which is retroactive to Jan. 1 and lasts through 2025, does not contain anything about pay. Instead, it sets rules for staff schedules, evaluations and for other matters.

The new agreement involves teachers and certain other school system employees.

Among the provisions of the agreement are 7½-hour workdays for teachers with up to three hours of meetings per month outside the regular work hours — though the agreement allows additional meeting hours in emergencies.

A caveat in the agreement is that it might not be fully implemented if the school board receives "insufficient appropriation or funding" from county supervisors or other agencies. If school board members determine that there is not enough money to pay for the agreement's provisions, there may be additional negotiation to decide what's next, the agreement said.

It was unclear what the specific costs would be based on Tuesday night's discussion.

When the Montgomery County board decided last year to begin bargaining with the education association, it was thought to be one of the first in Southwest Virginia to do so. Collective bargaining was permitted by legislation that the General Assembly approved in 2020.

Tuesday's vote came with no discussion of the agreement. School board member Dana Partin cast the board's lone vote against it.

**Mike Gangloff**  
(540) 381-1669  
mike.gangloff@roanoke.com

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# Measures would strip tax breaks from UDC

United Daughters of Confederacy enjoys the same status as churches, hospitals

CHARLOTTE RENE WOODS  
Richmond Times-Dispatch

RICHMOND — The United Daughters of the Confederacy could lose tax exemptions pending proposals that have been working their way through Virginia's legislature. With the Senate passing House Bill 568 on Tuesday, its similar companion, Senate Bill 517, is pending review in the House.

The bills involve sections of state code that concern real es-

tate taxes where UDC is the only specific-interest group to be exempted from deed recordation taxes. These breaks typically apply to broader organizations like churches, government buildings, and nonprofit hospitals. UDC — headquartered in Richmond — is also exempt from real estate and property taxes. If the bills become law, the organization would lose these exemptions.

The UDC is a nonprofit organization that commemorates those who served the Confederacy in the Civil War and collects artifacts and documents from that time. UDC is also known for its role in fundraising efforts to erect Confederate monuments — much of which were erected

in the early 1900s during the era of Jim Crow laws that disenfranchised Black Americans. Many monuments around Virginia have come down in recent years amid changes in state law that gives local governments the authority to keep them or not.

Representatives from UDC could not be reached for comment on the pending legislation concerning the organization's tax breaks. Members of the organization also did not speak during committee meetings where the bills were presented.

With Virginia's 2024 legislative session currently at its midpoint, bills that clear one chamber must also clear the other chamber. So far, both bills — carried by Del.

Alex Askew, D-Virginia Beach, and Sen. Angelia Williams Graves, D-Norfolk — have cleared their respective chambers with bipartisan support. This means they could likely make their way to Gov. Glenn Youngkin's desk where he could choose to sign them into law, seek amendments, or veto them.

Last year, now-Speaker Don Scott Jr., D-Portsmouth, carried a bill, but it never made it out of the then-GOP-controlled House of Delegates.

He'd taken up the effort after a Virginia Beach high school student, Simone Nied, reached out to him about the matter. In a recent interview with The Washington Post, Nied said she'd be-

come aware of the tax exemptions during a dinner conversation two years ago when her lawyer father mentioned it in passing.

Youngkin does not typically weigh in on pending legislation during the session, and the administration's response is usually that he will "review all legislation that comes to his desk."

In the meantime, Williams Graves said she is honored to take up the measure with others and commends fellow lawmakers who have supported advancing the proposals.

"I think the members of the House and the Senate have done the right thing," Williams Graves said. "I'm just honored to be the one carrying the bill."

## Housing

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and the university for about 10 years, and have run into delays. In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic stalled talks, but now, Hager-Smith feels the time is perfect to begin planning again.

"Right now is the right time to return to a conversation that is basically 10 years old," Hager-Smith said, adding that she felt the meeting with Virginia Tech administrators had been "productive."

After Hager-Smith said publicly in January that the current situation with housing and the university's enrollment growth is "unsustainable," Sands agreed to meet with the mayor and he also referenced the issue over housing in his state of the university address this month.

Leaders have also said the discussions of a plan could also include Montgomery County, the town of Christiansburg and potentially other localities in the New River Valley.

Virginia Tech's enrollment has grown since Sands took the role of president in 2014. At that time, he and his team of administrators set a goal of getting 30,000 undergraduate students enrolled at the university. That goal was met, but housing infrastructure has lagged behind, according to both university and town officials.

Hager-Smith said she asked Sands during their recent meeting what the "business case" was for bringing in several thousand new students, an inquiry from which she said she didn't feel she got a solid answer.

"The answer was effectively, when the president and administration arrived 10 years ago, they looked over Tech's reputation and Tech's size and decided they preferred to be in a peer group of land-grant institutions that ranged from 30,000 to 50,000 students," Hager-Smith said.

With the rapid growth of the university, and the inflated housing prices and traffic problems that come with it, some members of the town council are concerned



MATT GENTRY, THE ROANOKE TIMES

A new house is under construction this month off of Prices Fork Road just outside of Blacksburg. Housing availability and Virginia Tech's enrollment growth continues to be a major issue.

the university doesn't do enough to alleviate the added pressure they place on the community.

Jerry R. Ford, Jr, a member of the council, suggested the uni-

versity should make a case for itself, and its benefit to the local community.

"I think we really need to be able to define, or the university really

needs to be able to put into words, 'What's that value we're bringing to the community that offsets the inconvenience that people often feel,'" Ford said.

## Poetry

From A1

people to solve problems with love and communication rather than weapons."

A panel selected Spencer after a performance contest at the Rhythm & Rhyme Festival last October. During the city council meeting Tuesday night, she read an original work called "Perennials," written for the occasion, likening the city to a garden.

"Perennials are plants that die off in the winter but return each spring. They persevere just like Roanoke will, no matter what issues our community faces," Spencer said. "Whether that be the housing crisis, or gun violence, we will

survive and continue to grow."

Civic-minded Roanoke residents aged 13-19 are encouraged to apply for the 2025 youth poet laureate online at [roanokearts.org/ypl](http://roanokearts.org/ypl). Applications are open through September, according to Roanoke Arts & Culture Coordinator Douglas Jackson.

"The Youth Poet Laureate program is a collaborative community effort supported by the Roanoke Arts Commission and Roanoke Public Libraries," Jackson said in an email. "Roanoke youth poets are invited to consider creating work in the coming six months to apply to follow Ms. Spencer as the 2025 Roanoke Youth Poet Laureate."

In her role, Spencer will appear at and provide original works of poetry at events and showcases in

Roanoke and beyond.

Spencer's poem came at the start of a 7 p.m. city council session that included a public hearing about a master plan document for potential development of Evans Spring. The future use of the property — the largest undeveloped tract of land that remains in the city — has prompted debate and a campaign by a sizable group that wants the land to remain in its natural state.

The room was full, standing room only at the meeting's start.

*The hearing was continuing at press time. To read more about the hearing, go to [roanoke.com](http://roanoke.com) and see Thursday's Roanoke Times.*

Luke Weir

(540) 566-8917  
[luke.weir@roanoke.com](mailto:luke.weir@roanoke.com)



DAVID HUNGATE, THE ROANOKE TIMES

Roanoke's first Youth Poet Laureate Elani Spencer is in role to help uplift and empower.

## Pipeline

From A1

cited unanticipated problems — including heavy rainfall and "challenging construction conditions" — as the reason for adding another three months to its timeline.

"While our construction plans took into account the potential effects of winter weather, these conditions were far worse and longer in duration than anticipated, imposing a significant impact on productivity, which, in turn, impeded our ability to reduce construction headcount," Diana Charletta, Equitrans president and CEO, said during a quarterly conference call held to discuss financial earnings.

"Collectively, these factors resulted in our updated timing and total project cost targets," Charletta said.

The 42-inch diameter pipe has been installed along all but about three miles of the pipeline's 303-mile route from northern West Virginia, through the New River and Roanoke valleys, to connect with an existing pipeline near the North Carolina line.

"While the majority of MVP construction is complete, the remaining construction includes some of the most difficult paths on the project, and could present further challenges," Charletta said.

By the end of this month, con-



DAVID HUNGATE, THE ROANOKE TIMES

A section of the Mountain Valley Pipeline is installed in a trench cut from limestone in Montgomery County in November.

struction is expected to be completed on all but a few Virginia stretches — such as Poor Mountain in Roanoke and Montgomery counties and the Jefferson National Forest in Giles County — where some of the steepest slopes remain.

When work restarted last summer under a law passed by Congress, there were 428 streams and wetlands to be crossed, either by digging through or borrowing beneath them. All but 13 have been completed.

Boring under the Roanoke River near Elliston started in late October. Crews have about 20 feet

more to go on the approximately 330-foot-wide crossing. "It is slow going, but it is going," Charletta said.

Another difficult job still in progress is atop Peters Mountain in the national forest, where Mountain Valley is boring under the Appalachian Trail. That boring, which is about 80 feet below the trail and 600 feet in width, is about 60% complete, the company says.

Charletta said most construction work should be done by late March. After that, the focus will shift to commissioning the pipe, or preparing it to carry natural gas

at high pressure.

The first step in that process is hydrotesting, which involves running water through sections of the pipe to test for leaks and other flaws. About 180 miles of the pipeline have been successfully hydrotested, according to Mountain Valley spokeswoman Natalie Cox.

Following hydrotesting, air is purged from vents on the pipe and the line is prepared for the gas it will carry.

"Natural gas will continue to be fed into the segment via a valve until the gas reaches anticipated operating pressure, allowing our crews to ensure the system is secure and airtight and ready to enter operation," Cox wrote in an email. "The gas will remain in the system until the pipeline begins in-service operations."

The pipeline will transport up to 2 billion cubic feet per day of natural gas from shale formations in the Appalachian Basin to markets along the East Coast. Supporters say it will strengthen the country's energy supply and security.

During Tuesday's conference call, Charletta briefly alluded to a possible sale of Mountain Valley. Outside advisors are discussing "strategic transactions" with third parties, she said.

"We are not surprised by this interest, given the expected near-term completion of MVP and our view of the strength of our assets," Charletta said. She declined to

elaborate.

Meanwhile, opponents continue to raise concerns about erosion and sedimentation along the pipeline's path through Virginia. On Feb. 8, POWHR and 28 other groups asked the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality to stop work until the company could demonstrate its compliance with stormwater regulations.

DEQ did not respond to a letter from the organizations, Chisholm said Tuesday.

In the Giles County community of Newport, a natural spring was clouded by mud for more than a week — apparently caused by a breach of an underground karst formation by a pipeline boring operation nearly a half-mile away.

An inspection report from DEQ states that the spring has since cleared up. Mountain Valley took steps to limit the spread of sediment to nearby Sinking Creek, and the case was closed Feb. 16 after "appropriate compliance actions" were completed, according to the DEQ report.

But opponents say problems continue.

"We've said it from the start, and we'll never stop," Chisholm said. "This project is a beleaguered climate nightmare that is a costly liability to its misguided investors."

Laurence Hammack

(540) 981-3239  
[laurence.hammack@roanoke.com](mailto:laurence.hammack@roanoke.com)