

THE TENNESSEAN

★Williamson

News from
around
the county

WILLIAMSON COUNTY'S TOP 10 STORIES OF 2015

JILL COWAN
JCOWAN@TENNESSEAN.COM

It's been another year of growth in Williamson County, where new development was a major storyline. This year, though, drama in the county's top-performing school district also dominated the headlines, including the near-loss of Williamson County Director of Schools Mike Looney to neighboring Metro Nashville schools.

Here were some of the year's top stories:

1. Looney stays in Williamson

After a search firm looked far and wide for a potential new Metro Schools superintendent, board members ended up picking an option much closer to home: Williamson County Schools Director Mike Looney. In July, the Metro school board designated Looney as its top choice. But after business and school leaders rallied support for Looney, he decided to stay.



Looney

Metro school officials said they were disappointed with the decision and that they felt Looney had used the prospect of his departure as leverage for a big raise, even as some members of the Williamson County School Board sought his ouster.

2. School board politics

Looney's decision to stay in Williamson capped a year of drama at the Williamson County School Board. In 2015, the parent group Williamson Strong — formed in response to what members have said was an overly politicized new board — was fined for being an unregistered PAC.

But the group has appealed the fine, which followed a complaint filed by controversial board member Susan Curlee. Curlee and her supporters have battled with Williamson Strong members in various public forums, including social media.

3. Durham controversy

House Majority Whip Jeremy Durham, R-Franklin, is hanging onto his leadership role after revelations that he



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Michelle Jenkins from Chicago dances to the music of Big Sam's Fancy Nation at the Pilgrimage Music & Cultural Festival in Franklin on Sept. 27, 2015.

was the subject of a 2013 prescription fraud investigation in which he was never indicted and that he opted to write a letter seeking leniency for a former youth pastor who was convicted of possessing child porn.



Durham

The news touched off a discussion about Durham's judgment. House Speaker Beth Harwell told reporters that she had previously asked a legislative human resources official to speak with Durham about "appropriate professional behavior and all that entails," though neither she nor the human resources official would say what spurred the meeting.

The House GOP caucus is set to discuss Durham's future in leadership Jan. 12.

4. February crash

In February, as ice storms paralyzed the region, a young Franklin mother and her 10-year-old son were struck and killed when they tried to help passengers of an SUV that had flipped on the black ice in front of them. Kristi Clark and Carter Oakley were remembered by the community and Clark's large family. Franklin Police Chief Deborah Faulkner described the pair as "heroes."

Their deaths were among the first of what would be about 30 weather-related fatalities during the series of storms early this year.

5. Sturgeon brings gun to board meeting

In December 2014, Williamson County Commissioner Barbara Sturgeon was charged with illegally bringing a gun onto school grounds after authorities said she brought a handgun to a school board

work session.

That was just the beginning of a monthslong saga that also involved Sturgeon suing Williamson County Director of Schools Mike Looney as well as the district's attorney in response to a letter they sent barring Sturgeon from school grounds without permission from Looney.

Though Looney reversed the action shortly thereafter, saying he didn't want to get into a costly legal battle, Sturgeon continued her lawsuit. In July, the parties settled. No money changed hands in the settlement — except for attorneys' fees — and the agreement didn't change Sturgeon's abilities to attend meetings.

Sturgeon had struck a plea deal in May related to the gun charge that downgraded the initial charge from a felony to a misdemeanor.

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British inspired brunch a hit

VICKI STOUT
FOR WILLIAMSON

Christmas Day brunch at the home of Yvonne and Kim Thompson was akin to pulling up a chair to a table across the pond. Yvonne Thompson, long an Anglophile, centered tables with nut-crackers and accompanied every place setting with an English cracker.

Pulling apart the crackers revealed tiny trinkets, jokes and a paper crown. The English-themed brunch has been a tradition with Yvonne Thompson since her children were born. Some of them are now parents themselves.

The stately Franklin home's halls were decked with fresh greenery and tables were laid in plaid. The farm table in the kitchen was covered in divine dishes from end to end. Guests each brought a dish to accompany the hosts' fare, which included bacon, quiche, fresh biscuits, fresh cranberry sauce, French toast and cheese grits. The meal was a feast.

Guests may not have been British, but they became so for a bit during this fabulous annual tradition. The day was well deserving of a passport stamp.

Cheerio!



Larry LeBlanc and Jerry Golenor.

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Aimee Golenor and Sandra Wills.



The table in the library was nestled in front of the fireplace, where needlepoint stockings dangled from the mantle.

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6. Hill Center Brentwood

The transformative Hill Center Brentwood, a planned mixed-use development at the intersection of Franklin Road and Maryland Way, hit major milestones in 2015.

The project is expected to be complete in 2016, but in November, the project — which will be a bit like the Hill Center in Green Hills — hosted a “topping out” celebration to mark the completion of the building's tallest point.

7. Fear of Islam in schools

Conservative advocates hosted a town hall to discuss the way Islam is taught in schools this year on the heels of statewide concerns that many said were unfounded and distracting.

The town hall, which took place in December, came as board members considered various measures that would have changed out textbooks that some activists felt emphasized teaching Islam. Board member Susan Curlee started a petition to drop state social studies tests because they might conflict with students' religious beliefs. The issue was national.

8. Pilgrimage Fest

Neighbors expected a traffic apocalypse. Some wondered whether attendance would be

any good. But, aside from a few minor gripes (hello, hourlong food truck lines), organizers, attendees and the city of Franklin said they were thrilled with the way the first Pilgrimage Music and Cultural Festival went. The event, which organizers said drew more than 10,000 on each of its two days in September, was meant to be a more laid-back, family-friendly alternative to massive music festivals sprouting throughout the country. A high-profile lineup headlined by Willie Nelson, Sheryl Crow, Weezer and Wilco helped attract a diverse crowd and rain didn't stop the revelry.

9. Thompson's Station annexation

The tiny town of Thompson's Station grew a lot in 2015, with the annexation of nearly 2,000 acres for a planned golf community. The annexation is the town's largest in almost two decades and represents a major step for the town's reshaping of its zoning code. The town is trying to tackle expected growth without losing its rural character.

10. Teens die in weather crash

Three Franklin teens were killed in a Maury County car crash in December, just before Christmas. Their loss hit the community hard, as friends, students and family members mourned Nickell Whitson, 17; his girlfriend, Anisah Bourriague, 16; and former schoolmate Adrian Williams, 17.