



# The Blackshear Times

Liked by Many • Cussed by Some • Read by Them All

144th YEAR • ISSUE 13 • BLACKSHEAR, GEORGIA 31516 • WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27, 2013 • 24 PAGES, TWO SECTIONS

\$1.00  
Including tax



Mississippi-based chemical producer Southern Ionics wants to build a mineral sand plant, or dry mill, on a 44-acre spot in Offerman at the corner of U.S. Highway 84 and Zero Bay Road (left in photo). The new facility will process non-toxic titanium and zirconium mineral sands collected from mines in Brantley and Charlton counties and provide approximately 35 new jobs.

## Offerman mineral sand plant to bring 35 jobs

Southern Ionics picks Pierce County site among five area contenders

By WAYNE HARDY  
Managing Editor

Mississippi-based Southern Ionics wants to build a multi-million dollar mineral separation facility in Pierce County that could bring a minimum of 35 new jobs to the community.

The proposed Offerman Mineral Sand Plant would process mineral sands from two mines in Charlton and Brantley counties, with the separated titanium and zirconium mineral sands then sold to manufacturers throughout the country. The plant, also referred to as a "dry mill," is set to begin operating in early 2014.

A final agreement between the company and the Pierce County Industrial Development Authority is pending.

"We're looking forward to continued investment in South Georgia," says Ron Rose, director of mining for Southern Ionics. "We've already begun constructing the two mines, and we'll be producing by the end of this year. After four months of searching for a site, we're excited to have found the right spot for our Mineral Sand Plant in Pierce County."

County Chairman Mitch Bowen calls the opportunity "tremendous and great"

for the community.

"They're a fine bunch of people," he says. "I know they'll do a good job and bring money to Pierce County."

IDA Board Chairman Jim Waters

"I'm really encouraged that [Southern Ionics is] going to be investing here," Waters says.

Pierce was among five South Georgia counties evaluated as potential sites.

Southern Ionics worked with state and local economic and industrial development authorities, utilities, railroads, and landowners, according to a press release.

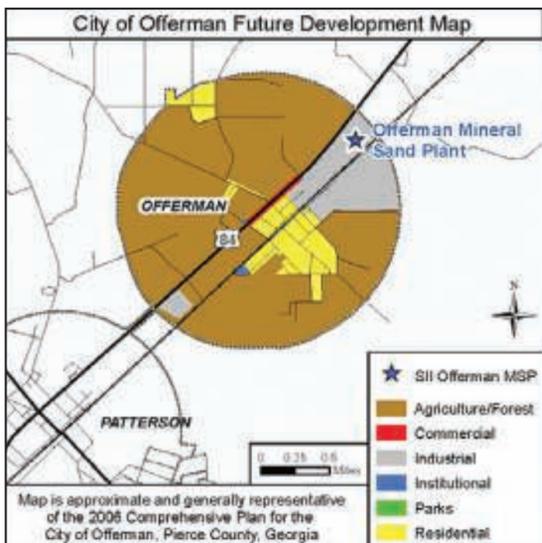
Rose tells *The Times* the company will train skilled laborers to use equipment at the Offerman plant and focus on hiring locally. Applicants will need a GED diploma and be able to pass a drug screening and background check, he says. Employment opportunities will be advertised locally as the opening date approaches.

Southern Ionics plans to build the facility using local contractors and specialty contractors with experience building similar plants.

The proposed plant location fronts U.S. Highway 84 at the southwest corner of an intersection with Zero Bay Road, just northeast of Offerman. The 44-acre tar-

get site had previously been used as a log yard and is just across the railroad tracks from a Rayonier wood chip mill.

The Offerman Mineral Sand Plant  
(Continued on Page 5)



This Southern Ionics map shows the proposed plant (blue star) in the northeast corner of Offerman, where the company says it is ideally located to highway and rail access, as well as a natural gas supply.

credits the progress to support from county and Offerman officials, as well as dedication from county Industrial Development Director Matt Carter and IDA attorney Dan Bennett Jr.

## WATER WORRY?

Health District says no significant arsenic levels found in wells here, despite concern spreading online

State and local health officials say there is no evidence of an imminent health threat from arsenic in the community's water supplies, despite rumor and concern that has escalated through social media and email.

Worry about publicized cancer cases in the past two to three years, particularly in children, apparently gained traction when an email from a state employee began making the rounds, says Roger Naylor, spokesman for the Southeast Health District (SEHD) headquarters in Waycross. Though the email references wells in South Georgia, the state's actual area of study was specifically in Southwest Georgia, he says.

The SEHD noticed the discourse developing online and also received calls from concerned residents in Pierce and Ware counties.

"We felt we needed to address it because some were mixing up information," Naylor says.

In October 2011, the state Department of Public Health received a resident report of abnormally high arsenic lev-

els in private wells in Thomas County and suspicion of health complaints, Naylor says. For comparison, random wells throughout the state were also studied.

"There were no wells in our area, in Pierce County and Ware County, that had any significant level of arsenic."

City- and county-provided water systems have routine testing regulated by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division, Naylor says.

State health officials continued to study the Southwest Georgia area and released a report of findings earlier this month. Conclusions in the study noted arsenic is naturally occurring and is not easily absorbed through skin contact, such as bathing or washing clothes.

The higher levels of arsenic found in Southwest Georgia were noted to coincide with the region's location on the Gulf Trough, a geological formation extending up to Middle Georgia and through Southern Carolina to the coast. It does not include Southeast Georgia.

The study further states a  
(Continued on Page 5)

**'We felt we needed to address it because some were mixing up information.'**

- Roger Naylor,  
Spokesman  
Southeast Health District

## BOE picks assistant as PCHS principal

Dara Bennett is the new principal of Pierce County High School.

Bennett was hired by the Pierce County Board of Education during a brief called meeting early Friday morning. The vote was 3-0. Board member Jimmy Lynn did not vote. Lynn's son, Jared is married to Bennett's daughter, Cara, making them in-laws.

Bennett was one of seven applicants for the job, but she was the only one within the system.

"That's the quickest we've ever hired a principal," observed Board chairman Mark Dixon.

Dixon added that the choice was easy.

"We know Mrs. Bennett will do a good job for us."

Lynn also echoed Dixon's remarks.

"I certainly approve of our choice of principal. Because of our kinship, I can't legally vote for her."

Board member Pat Park is ill, but attended the meeting via Facetime. Board member Jack Saussy was not present.

School superintendent Terri DeLoach praised Bennett as she recommended her for the job.

"Mrs. Bennett has done a superb job as assistant principal. She is totally committed to our high school," DeLoach said. "It is with heartfelt excitement that I recommend her for this job. She will do a great job for us."



Dara Bennett

Bennett says she is looking forward to her new position.

"I am both humbled and honored to serve as principal alongside such a dedicated group of educators," she says.

(Continued on Page 2)

► **High school needs two new assistant principals**  
Dr. Sauls takes new job. See Page 2.

## Former EMS, fire director files lawsuit

By JASON DEAL  
Staff Writer

A federal lawsuit has been filed against Pierce County by former Emergency Medical Service and Emergency Management Agency director, and fire coordinator, Ken Justice.

The almost 100-page suit was filed last Tuesday in the Waycross division of the United States District Court for the Southern District of Georgia.

Justice names the Pierce County Board of Commissioners and Okefenokee Emergency Medical Service and County Manager Paul Christian, current EMS director James Spivey, former human resources director Edward Cady, County Commissioner Bill Cselle, Okefenokee EMS chief financial officer Derek Mallard both in their official capacities and as individuals. Cady has since resigned as human resources director and is now employed by the

sheriff's department.

The suit claims the defendants denied Justice his constitutional right to free speech and due process, have libeled, slandered and defamed his character, have caused him emotional distress, terminated him for refusing to violate the Americans with Disabilities Act and violated his employment contract (by terminating his employment).

Justice claims in the suit that "as  
(Continued on Page 10)



Ken Justice



### Community Easter service Sunday at B'shear City Park

The annual community-wide Easter Sunrise Service will have a new location this year. This year's service will be held at 7 a.m. this Sunday, March 31, at Blackshear City Park. Speaker for this year's service will be the Rev. Chris Roberts, pastor of Bridge Community Church. The annual event is sponsored by the Pierce County Ministerial Association. Everyone is invited to attend.



PCMS boys and girls tennis teams net conference trophies  
Page 6

If you paid \$1.00 for this paper at a convenience store, we thank you! Remember, you can save \$22 per year by having it delivered to your mailbox each week by calling 449-6693.





A new trucking operation for Pierce Timber Company is being constructed on Zero Bay Road in Offerman.

## Former Pierce Timber Co. trucking division moving to new Offerman site

By JASON DEAL  
Staff Writer

Pierce Timber — at least the trucking division — will be moving from its long-time home on U.S. Highway 84 in Blackshear to a new, state-of-the-art facility in Offerman.

Hugh M. Thompson Jr., owner of Pierce Timber and Tracy Harris, owner of Mac 44 Trucking, made the announcement Monday morning.

“We’ve been anticipating such a move for a long time,” says Thompson. “It all boils down to safety. With the growth along U.S. Highway 84, including the recent opening of Dairy Queen, it just makes sense to move the trucking division.”

Harris bought the trucking division of the company in January.

Mac 44 Trucking’s new home, will be a \$1 million, 25,000 square foot office and shop complex fronting on Zero Bay Road in Offerman. The complex will occupy a portion of a 59 acre tract near the Georgia Chip Mill just east of town.

Thompson bought the land last year after leasing it from International Paper for several years. He will lease the land to Mac 44 Trucking for the office and shop complex.

“This is a great location for our business,” Harris says. “We have plenty of room to service and maintain trucks and to ex-

pand in the future if we need to.”

R.H. Tyson Construction of Blackshear is constructing the new facility.

“We are happy to be able to get someone local to come in and build it for us,” says Thompson. “It is important to us to use local contractors and that’s what we intend to do. We are using the local companies for the plumbing and electrical and in other

servicing the entire truck and trailer. An additional, exterior bay will be used for tire repairs on trucks and trailers. An additional unique feature is a steel rail trail for servicing bulldozers and other track-wheeled equipment.

“That was designed for us especially by Jamie Boyett,” Harris says. “That keeps the tracks on those machines from destroying the concrete.”

ated in an industrial area away from residences and U.S. Highway 84 already features accel and decel lanes at the Zero Bay intersection.

The new office and shop complex will have 40-45 employees. The facility will service all seven of Pierce Timber’s logging crews.

“We’ll also do some service work for other companies,” Harris says.

Thompson and Harris both say they are excited about the move.

“The new facility will help us in our goal of keeping safety first,” says Harris.

“We can’t wait to get it finished,” Thompson adds.

Thompson points out the company will keep a presence at its long-time home in Blackshear.

“We are not going to completely leave Blackshear,” he says.

The company’s wood procurement and business office divisions will remain in Blackshear.

Mack Thompson Sr., Thompson’s father, has owned and operated Pierce Timber from the Blackshear site since purchasing the Pierce County Lumber Company from John Shackleford in 1962.

“It’s important to Dad to keep the Blackshear office and we certainly intend to do that,” Thompson Jr. says.

*‘It all boils down to safety. With the growth along U.S. Highway 84 ... it just makes sense to move the trucking division.’*

— Hugh M. Thompson Jr.  
Owner, Pierce Timber Company

places where possible.”

Construction began January 24.

“We expect to have the complex completed by mid-summer, weather permitting,” says Jamie Boyett, lead engineer on the project for Tyson Construction.

The new facility will feature 5,000 square feet in offices for the trucking division and a 2,500 square foot, fully-stocked parts department. Both will be two-story. The large, expansive shop will feature four, full-length indoor bays for servicing trucks and trailers. One of the bays will be equipped with an underground pit for

The facility will also feature an area for welding and for repairing bent steel on trailers and trucks.

An additional truck washing bay and scales will be housed at the facility. A fuel depot will also be located on the site.

Both Thompson and Harris say the facility will be environmentally friendly. The pit will be equipped with pumps that will remove oil and transmission fluids into a large, underground holding tank and later recycled.

Harris estimates a truck and trailer can be fully serviced in a half-hour at the new shop.

The site is also already lo-

## BPD eyeing drivers illegally using handicap parking

Motorists who illegally use handicap parking spaces may have extra eyes on them and face a penalty for doing so — even for a “brief stop.”

Blackshear Police Chief Chris Wright says patrol of-

ficers are paying special attention to handicap parking spaces downtown, particularly at the post office on Main Street, after the department received numerous complaints about able-bodied drivers us-

ing them.

“I’ve had handicapped people call who have to park and walk down the road and I have had onlookers who aren’t handicapped who have called,” Wright says. “One fellow said

its just burned him up. Parking is already limited [at the post office].”

Violators may face a fine up to \$1,000 and have their vehicle towed from the site, Wright says.

## \* Offerman plant

(Continued from Page 1)  
will operate around the clock with about 25 trucks accessing it daily, officials say. Part of the parcel, owned by local businessman Hugh Thompson, adjacent to the Southern Ionics site is being developed as a new trucking operation formerly owned by Thompson. (See related story.)

The parcel is on the CSX railroad mainline between Jesup and Waycross and near an existing natural gas line. Commercial rail service, highway access and natural gas and electricity supplies were key factors in the search, Carter says.

Southern Ionics states it is opening the mines and mineral sand plant because zirconium oxychloride, an important industrial chemical produced from zircon sand, is now only available from foreign sources. The company wants a more reliable domestic supplier to satisfy a contract for a new kidney dialysis technology.

“Producing our own zircon sand from which we can produce zirconium chemicals gives us a secure supply while bringing good industrial jobs back to the South,” Rose says.

The IDA is to buy the property from Thompson and provide tax abatement while leasing it Southern Ionics, according to a non-bidding inducement agreement obtained by *The Times* under the Georgia Open Records Act. (View this story online at [www.theblacksheartimes.com](http://www.theblacksheartimes.com) for a link to the documents.)

Negotiations are still ongoing, Carter says, for roughly 69 acres surrounding the site preferred by Southern Ionics. The IDA has been holding roughly \$300,000 in savings for decades and reportedly plans to use that

cash to help secure the property and not seek additional dollars from the county. The IDA would offer the company a 10-year lease-purchase option for the tract with full repayment occurring in the first five years. The plan is still subject to a final public vote by the IDA.

The lease rate for the final five years will be a dollar annually. At the end of the lease term, Southern Ionics would purchase the site from the IDA for a dollar. The company will provide insurance at the facility.

The agreement states the IDA will also issue bonds up to \$35 million to finance construction and equipment acquisi-

ents in the final year of the tax break.

Terms call for the IDA to seek state and federal funding for rail and road improvements, including a potential \$400,000 in state Employee Incentive Program funds.

The mineral sand plant is expected to include an estimated annual payroll of about \$2 million — roughly \$57,000 per year for the expected minimum 35 jobs when fully operational.

Carter touts cooperation among officials during preliminary talks with Southern Ionics.

“We have a company that is interested in putting back into our community. Not only

*See this story online at [theblacksheartimes.com](http://theblacksheartimes.com) for a link to documents related to the proposed agreement between the IDA and Southern Ionics.*

do they provide jobs, they are a team player,” he says. “This shows that with teamwork, positive results can happen.”

Carter anticipates the IDA board will likely meet in the next week or two to finalize the deal. Once the property is obtained, Southern Ionics will finish designing the plant and seek state and local permits to begin construction.

### About the operation

Small amounts of titanium and zirconium mineral sands will be extracted from mines in Brantley and Charlton counties and then transported by truck to the plant, according to Southern Ionics.

Various minerals will be subjected to water-gravity separation, high-tension electri-

## Guest Road residents seek paving plan change

By JASON DEAL  
Staff Writer

Will right-of-way issues delay the already long-delayed Guest Road paving project?

Several neighbors along the roadway came before the county commission last Tuesday night to ask for changes to the route of the plan for road paving.

Guest Road runs between Hacklebarney Road and the Old Alma Road and has been at the top of the county’s road paving priority list for at least 10 years. Other than securing rights-of-way, little else has been done over that time, however. The hold-up in recent years has been funding, as the downturn in the economy and the NFC/library project drained away sales tax funds.

First District Commissioner Harold Rozier Jr. brought up the issue after being contacted by landowners in the area in reference to recent news articles on the progress of the paving project.

“I don’t mean to confuse the issue,” he said. “I am just trying to be responsible to the citizens of my district.”

Tommy Melton, son-in-law of Wilton Banks, opened the remarks by thanking commissioners for the hard work to get the project this far.

“I think all of us here are happy to see the progress,” he said. “I know lots of people have worked long and hard to get this road paved.”

However, Melton requested commissioners make changes to the proposed route of the road.

Speaking on behalf of his father-in-law Melton pointed out that all his family had donated right-of-way for the highway to the county.

“We have not been paid for rights-of-way, like others have,” he said. “We’ve wanted the road paved from the get-go. We do want a little favorable consideration now, however.”

Melton explained to commissioners that under the proposed route of the road, Banks

will lose every tree and bush in his yard and the road will come within 30 feet of his house.

The Banks live on Guest Road near its intersection with Winky Trail. The move is part of a plan to straighten a curve in the original roadway.

Melton also pointed out the Banks’ are raising their grandchildren.

“We are also afraid the road will be a safety threat to the children,” he said.

There was some discussion among the parties to reduce the amount of right-of-way. The state, however, requires an 80 foot right-of-way.

Melton asked for the curve to be shifted taking land from the other side of the roadway.

The other landowner, Gloria Guest, was also present and told commissioners she does not intend to give any additional land.

“I’ve already given up 10 acres in trees. I don’t intend to give up any more.”

Melton and Rozier both say they hope a compromise can be reached and all parties satisfied.

Most of the right-of-way negotiations and purchases were settled several years ago during Bowen’s first term and completed under the term of his successor Jim Dennison.

Bowen pointed out, however, that he had actually inherited the project from former Chairman Troy Mattox.

Bowen said he has already contacted the Georgia Department of Transportation’s (DOT’s) district engineer’s office in Jesup to investigate the issue.

“We’ll get it worked out,” he said. “We’ll meet, talk about it, shake hands or cry about it — whatever it takes.”

The county recently received \$469,000 in additional state funding for the paving for a total of about \$870,000. The county will be responsible for the remaining cost, estimated at about \$500,000. The county’s portion will come from sales tax funding.

## Pierce Special Olympics set for Thursday at PCMS track

Dozens of local students will come together to inspire at the eighth annual Pierce County Special Olympics this Thursday.

The event will be held at the Pierce County Middle School track, beginning at 9 a.m. with opening ceremonies featuring a parade of athletes from elementary to high school age. The games are to conclude around noon with a medal ceremony.

Students will participate in various events such as sprints, ball throws and the long jump.

They may also take part in an Olympic Village to be setup offering games and other activities.

Pierce County High School students will serve as “buddies” to the athletes, assisting them to events throughout the day.

Anyone seeking more information or wishing to help the Pierce County Special Olympics may contact PCMS teacher Kelly Dickerson at the school at 449-2077 or by email at [kdickerson@pierce.k12.ga.us](mailto:kdickerson@pierce.k12.ga.us).

## \* Water worry?

(Continued from Page 1)

person who regularly consumed water from private wells with the highest level of arsenic found in Thomas County over a lifetime (70 years) may have an increased risk for developing cancer related to that exposure. Though the county had elevated cancer rates compared to the state, none of the cases could be attributed to arsenic exposure, according to the report.

Naylor adds there has been some public misinformation about arsenic’s effect. He says only certain cancers come from arsenic — lung, skin, liver and bladder cancers — and that requires a long-term exposure, likely to be seen in older adults and not a 2-year-old child, for example.

State health officials are, however, looking into suspected “cancer clusters” in this area in response to numerous calls. Naylor says the number of cancer cases in Pierce and Ware counties are on par with what is normally seen based on this area’s population. Clusters usually involve many cases in a condensed time period and share a common thread.

“We can definitely say the cases we know about so far are not directly related to arsenic,” Naylor says.

The spokesman says health officials encourage private well owners concerned about arsenic levels to have their wells

tested by their local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension office. The state study recommends periodic testing all private wells.

The test costs \$45 and results are returned in about a week, says Pierce County Extension Agent James Jacobs. He says the office has received a spike in tests requests in the past two to three weeks coinciding with a rise in concern in online social media. Pamphlets with more information about water testing and arsenic are available at the office, located in the Pierce County Ag Building on Hendry Street, which can be reached at 449-2034.

Residents can install household water filters to reduce arsenic concentrations if they are concerned about levels in their drinking water. Officials note bottled water may also be substituted for some or all of water that is consumed.

Those with health concerns are encouraged to contact a health care professional for exposure testing or visit a veterinarian in cases involving animals.

• A link to the Georgia Department of Public Health’s report on arsenic levels in Southwest Georgia can be viewed by clicking the “Health Report” link at [www.theblacksheartimes.com](http://www.theblacksheartimes.com). The Southeast Health District website can be accessed by clicking the “SEHD” link.