

The Warrensburg Star-Journal's annual Progress edition is a special supplement to your twice-weekly paper that explains how the community has progressed over the past year. The special edition includes content covering the topics of Business, Community, Government, Education, Sports, and Arts and Entertainment.

# Progress

## Warrensburg infrastructure on the right path in 2024

### Rethink Maguire Phase 1 set to begin this summer



Graffiti and rubble line the bridge over Highway 50 on Wednesday, April 17, on Holden Street. The bridge is set to be improved in Phase 2 of the City of Warrensburg's Rethink Maguire project, sometime in 2025. PHOTO BY ZACH BOTT | STAR-JOURNAL

By Zach Bott  
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As we move away from the harsh Missouri winter and into the summer months, Warrensburg is slowly but surely rebuilding its infrastructure and keeping up with the community's needs.

Warrensburg Assistant City Manager and Public Works Director Enrico Villegas has strived to improve the always aging infrastructure in the city's streets, sidewalks, buildings, and other structures.

The biggest project the city has on its plate this year is Rethink Maguire. As Maguire Street or Business 13 leads directly to the heart of Warrensburg and to the University of Central Missouri, the city is always looking for improvements to its pavement and sidewalk conditions.

"A lot of people come off Highway 50 and access Maguire," Villegas said. "We don't want the first thing that people see is a dilapidated road and sidewalk that's all buckled and beaten up. So, revitalizing that corridor can hopefully attract new business and, from an outsider's perspective, people want to see the city making an investment in itself."

With voters passing the one-half of one percent (.5%) sales tax for the purpose of funding capital improvements in the April 2 municipal election, both Warrensburg Public Works and the city are getting right down to business. In February, the city council approved a contract with Capital Paving & Construction to complete the improvements to the Maguire Street corridor.

Phase 1 is set to begin construction in June, with

the focus on easing the flow of traffic, making the road more aesthetically pleasing, and creating opportunities for those with property on the street.

The Rethink Maguire improvements aren't limited to the roads, however. In Phase 2 of the project, the city also hopes to improve the intersection on Young Street and the bridge over Highway 50. No timetable has been set yet for Phase 2.

"The major bridge over 50 is something where we are actively partnering with MoDOT to try to come together to get a plan in place to fix or replace the bridge," Villegas said.

For more information on Rethink Maguire, visit [www.rethinkmaguire.com](http://www.rethinkmaguire.com).

Catching up is key for Villegas, as he has heard and seen a lot about the shortcomings of the city infrastructure over the past two years in his current roles.

"We hear a lot here, our roads are in bad shape, our curbs are in bad shape, our sidewalks are in bad shape. And so the values are there. The voices have been heard," Villegas said.

He's keeping a positive attitude and trying to be as proactive in the community as possible. With programs focused on sidewalk improvements, improving the facades in the downtown area, or updating curbs and ramps to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, Public Works is getting stronger day after day.

"We wrapped up our pilot year (of the Sidewalk Improvement Program) last year. We did like 3,500 to 3,600 linear feet of sidewalk," Villegas said. "And that's the equivalent of the previous six years combined."

See **INFRASTRUCTURE**, Page 5

## Warrensburg Tourism sees progress with help of new headquarters



Warrensburg Convention and Visitors Bureau Tourism Director Marcy Barnhart, center, is surrounded by WCVB board members, community supporters and Warrensburg Chamber of Commerce members as she prepares to cut the ribbon for the new Visitors Center on Wednesday, Nov. 8. FILE PHOTO BY ANNELIA NIXON | STAR-JOURNAL

## WCVB working with local, state partners to improve tourism efforts

By Zach Bott  
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Since opening its visitor center doors to the public in October 2023, the Warrensburg Convention & Visitors Bureau has seen a shift in visitors to the city and hopes to continue it through 2024.

Tourism Director Marcy Barnhart spoke with the Star-Journal about how far the bureau has come since 2017, the first year she joined the board, with its new central location and increased visibility.

See **TOURISM**, Page 3



Representatives from the Missouri River Runner Marketing Commission convene at the Warrensburg Visitors Center on Dec. 5. "One of the meetings I said, 'It'd be great to do an in-person meeting. We'd love to have you all here.' And they all jumped on the train and by gosh, here they were," Tourism Director Marcy Barnhart said. PHOTO COURTESY OF MARCY BARNHART

## School district undergoing renovations, adding more offerings

### Program expansions, added resources on the way

By Nicole Cooke  
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It's been another year of change for the Warrensburg R-VI School District, with a new superintendent, program updates and relocations, and more training and resources on the way.

Superintendent Steve Ritter is closing in on his first year with the Warrensburg R-VI School District. He said that it's been a great year.

"We've got great people that work for our district and educate our kids and we've got a great, great community, supportive patrons," Ritter said. "Really, it's been a joy. It's been very rewarding for me personally. Just like any other job, there's challenges, but there's a lot of

successes and good things happening that we can celebrate and recognize as well."

The district started the 2023-24 school year with a new CSIP (comprehensive school improvement plan). It was approved by the Warrensburg Board of Education in late 2022, followed by feedback and approval from DESE.

"That really outlines our long-term vision and goals for the future," Ritter said. "Talking about, you know, successful students and talking about being fiscally responsible as a district, providing leadership, making sure that we're providing equal opportunities for our students. But it's our long-term five-year plan for improvement as a district."

### Staffing challenges

Staffing remains a struggle for many school districts and colleges



Superintendent Steve Ritter, left, poses for a photo in February with the spring 2024 recipients of the Warrensburg Schools Foundation's Dual Credit Scholarship. Front row from left: Anaya Iseri, Maggie Parsons, Jolin Wu, Avenelle Kientzy, Foundation Assistant Director Dr. Ashlee Holdren, and Foundation Director Judy Long. Back row: Ritter, Jordyn Tarr, Addison Gillogly, Megan Dark, Coalten Sederburg, and Maddox Buckson. PHOTO COURTESY OF WARRENSBURG SCHOOLS FOUNDATION

across the country. In Warrensburg, Ritter said the district has been able to "fill a good percentage of our positions" but still has some open positions. Some employees have taken jobs closer to home as positions

opened up this spring in other districts, and a few are leaving education entirely for other careers.

"We've been very fortunate that most of our positions

See **SCHOOL**, Page 5



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# Main Street prepares for its summer events season

By Zach Bott  
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As the summer begins to take shape, Warrensburg Main Street readies itself for a summer and finish to 2024 filled with plenty of events, fun, and communal growth.

Since taking over the role earlier this year, Main Street Executive Director Jamie DeBacker has been busy, to say the least.

"I feel like I've never really stopped," DeBacker said. "In the Main Street world, you're always planning like three or four months ahead. So, like in January, I'm already planning for April."

Just in May and June alone, Main Street will host its Opening Day Farmers' Market, a historic walking tour of the city, two movies on the lawn and a patriotic bike parade. That's not to mention the organization's already busy 2024, with April having events on three of the four weekends in the month.

Main Street is also preparing for the 11th annual Burg Fest in the fall.

The overall workload hasn't diminished DeBacker or her team's efforts, as both tend to pick each other up.

"I think it's been really great," DeBacker said. "(Marketing and Event Coordinator) Maggie (Burgin) and I make a great team. I have a really supportive board and committees, so that makes it really easy to have people to rely on."

Throughout her five years at Main Street, DeBacker has had the opportunity to learn from many. No one was more influential, however, than former executive director Jill Purvis, who took DeBacker under her wing from the moment she stepped in the door. Purvis retired in December, but she still makes time for Main Street by lending her experience.

2024 is looking to be a year for growth in downtown Warrensburg, and DeBacker is already seeing some development.

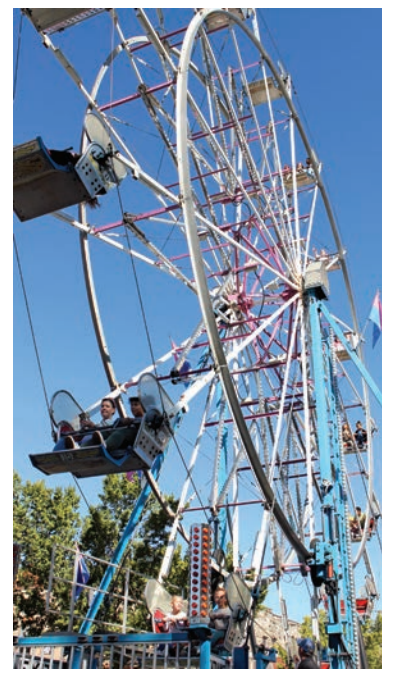
"It's great seeing the progress happen, like having people shopping the storefronts, noticing downtown, and keeping it clean," DeBacker said. "That's the most rewarding thing for me is that people are loving our community, investing in it, and attending the events that we put on."

Growth springs at any time and in any place. For the community, it's been the pride shown for its local storefronts. For DeBacker, Main Street's growth will be in its already existing infrastructure.

"I've always wanted to work on the design of downtown by helping add more greenery or



The Clay Clear Band plays during the beginning of their set on the Main Stage on Pine Street during the 10th annual Burg Fest on Saturday afternoon, Oct. 7. FILE PHOTOS BY NICOLE COOKE | STAR-JOURNAL



Riders enjoy the sunshine while riding the Ferris wheel in the carnival at Burg Fest on Saturday. 2023 marked the first year for Burg Fest to feature a carnival.

green spaces or gathering places," DeBacker said. "Continue to add art and make downtown visually appealing. It's already a cute, quaint place, but I'd love to add more color, more planters. I'd love to have a public space downtown and really start to work on our side streets."

DeBacker said she believes downtown Warrensburg can be more than the two main streets, Holden and Maguire, that run parallel to each other throughout the city. Citing the surge in businesses on Colton Street and the potential brewery on East Pine Street, DeBacker said that side streets, with enhancements like banners and other information about the city, can become main streets themselves.

Main Street can't do it all alone, though. With the help of its sponsors, commissions, organizations, businesses, and, most importantly, its community, Main Street can achieve its goals of preserving the community that anyone can love.

"The big thing for me is continuing to communicate with (other organizations), presenting, and talking about Main Street and talking about the future and what we can do together," DeBacker said. "I can have really great ideas, but like I said, it's the community, for the community, for everybody. So, having their input is very important."

"A really big goal of mine is to be seen as the economic driver for downtown, to be a resource, be someone that people can call," DeBacker said. "Continue to build those relationships and collaborations with business owners and to invite new people (into Warrensburg)."



With cars on display lining Gay Street, a crowd gathers near the stage as awards are announced for the 33rd annual Warrensburg Wheels Car Show on Saturday afternoon, Oct. 7 during Burg Fest.



Warrensburg Main Street Executive Director Jamie DeBacker is seen in January at the Main Street office, 125C N. Holden St. in downtown Warrensburg. DeBacker stepped into the role after former Executive Director Jill Purvis retired in December. FILE PHOTO BY ANNELIA NIXON | STAR-JOURNAL

For more information or to view Main Street's events list, visit its Facebook page or warrensburgmainstreet.org.

Zach Bott can be reached at 660-747-8123.



Warrensburg Main Street Executive Director Jill Purvis speaks about the launch of the new walking tour on Wednesday, May 17 in front of the Old Drum statue at the Johnson County Courthouse. Purvis retired in December. FILE PHOTO BY MELIYAH VENERABLE | STAR-JOURNAL

# Arts Commission hopeful for future projects in 2024

Returning events, new offerings planned

By Zach Bott  
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The Warrensburg Arts Commission has a busy summer ahead, with plans for art on coffee cups, on the streets, in the parks, and in a new activity book for kids.

Before the commission's meeting on April 15, Arts Commission Chair and University of Central Missouri Associate Professor of Musicology Dr. Allison Robbins talked to the Star-Journal about what the commission has been up to this year and the plans in store.

One idea that has already hit the printing press is a new children's activity book. Designed by UCM representative Sarah Chamberlain, the activity book aims to give kids a chance to learn more about the city, its landmarks, and its history, whether they are growing up in Warrensburg or just visiting.



The Arts in Public Places Committee sit under spotlights on Friday, Feb. 23, in the UCM Art Gallery. The committee met for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic. FILE PHOTO BY ZACH BOTT | STAR-JOURNAL

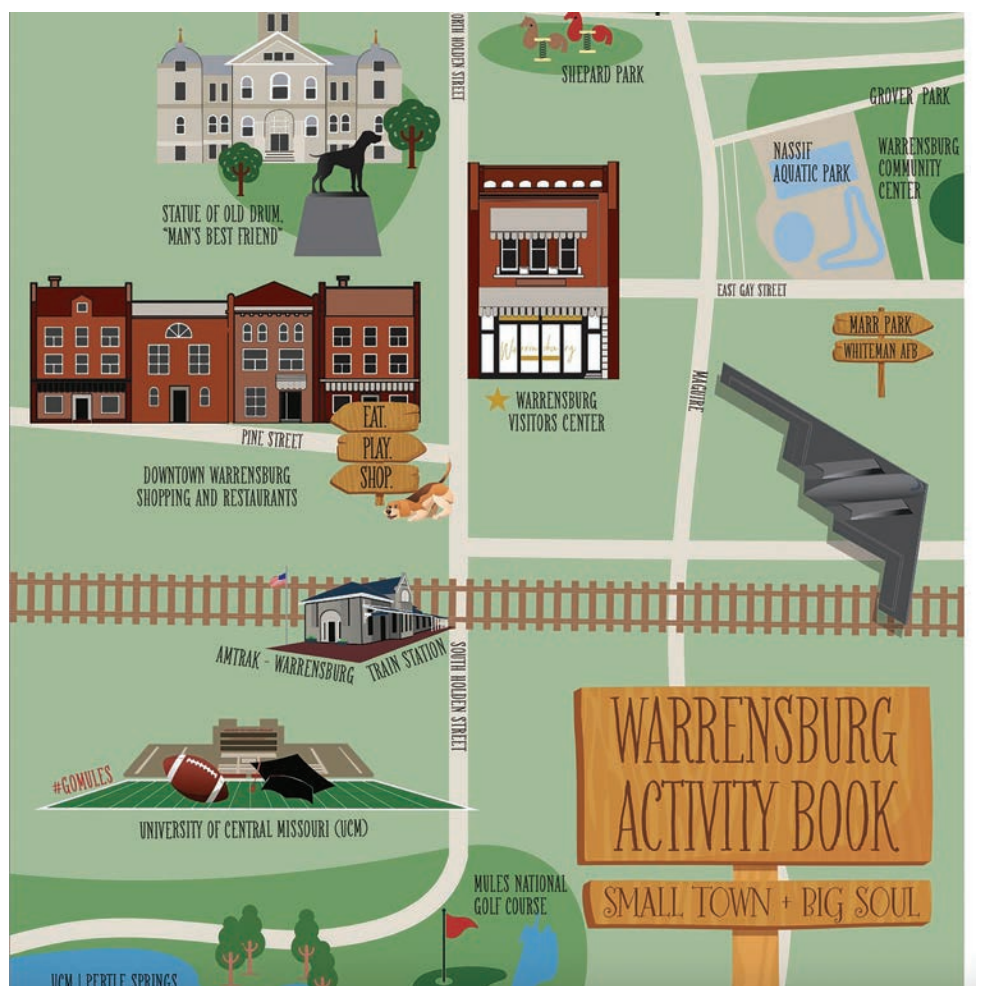
"We're hoping that those activity books will be dispersed at local hotels when people come to visit Warrensburg," Robbins said.

"It's a collaboration with the (Warrensburg Convention and) Visitors Bureau, and it's great. It has a word search, coloring pages, spot the difference, and a maze. It's a 10-page book that allows kids to kind of do some coloring and do some activity about things in Warrensburg."

Commission member Cindy Bechtol suggested that the commission look into making a coloring book a couple of years ago. A partnership was formed with the WCVB and the art commission's liaison, Tourism Director Marcy Barnhart, and the book has since been brought to light.

Robbins said 1,000 activity books will be printed.

The books aren't the only art project centered around Warrensburg kids, however. The



The Warrensburg activity book, a collaborative effort from the Arts Commission and the Warrensburg Convention & Visitors Bureau, aims to give kids a chance to learn more about the city, its landmarks, and its history, whether they are growing up in Warrensburg or just visiting. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE WARRENSBURG ARTS COMMISSION

commission is looking into another project with Barnhart and the WCVB that involves coffee sleeves.

Hoping to work with local coffee shops, the commission wants to have local children decorate

the sleeves. In doing so, people will become more aware of the commission's activities and give young artists a chance to see their work in public.

"You get your cup of coffee and a little bit of art in your day," Robbins

said. "So that's the idea and we're just working out the process for that."

Robbins said the idea is still in the works, but hopes to get it started in the fall.

# Area agriculture-related fields are resilient

Farmers overcoming cost increases, utilizing more technology

By Faith Bemiss-McKinney  
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As 2024 progresses, local agriculture, farmers and ranchers are seeing a more difficult time financially, but all is not lost, according to Tim Noland, a commercial loan officer at Central Bank in Sedalia.

Noland, who specializes in taking care of loans for ag-related issues, noted that 2022 was a record-setting year for gross farm receipts for commodities sold for the farming economy locally and nationwide. A good year was also seen in 2023. But 2024 is a different story. However, farmers are versatile and dynamic and often find a way to supplement their income. Today, in 2024, Noland said farmers are challenged with input costs such as seed, fertilizer, equipment, real estate, and the increase in interest rates.

"Today, as farm income is normalizing, it's a little bit of a slimmer margin," he noted. "Because expenses are still elevated, but the price they're getting for their commodity has fallen some from the record high."

"The other challenge with row crop, grain farms, is we've



State Fair Community College Agriculture Director Brad Driskill coaxes one of 23 expectant mothers from the woods at the college's new 200-acre farm in August 2023. Ag student Macy Reed helps on the farm as she learns about agri-business. FILE PHOTOS BY CHRIS HOWELL | SEDALIA DEMOCRAT

had two consecutive years of drought," he noted. "Which have impacted yields. So, there's been a lot of challenges to overcome."

He added Missouri is one of the top cattle producers in the country, and the outlook is much better for that sector of the industry than for row crops.

"The cattle situation: Because of the drought, many people have liquidated some or, in some cases, all of their cattle herds," he continued. "A lot of cattle went to the feed yards, and so now our numbers are down, which is creating a strong market for cattle."

He added they anticipate 2024 through 2026 as solid years for the cattle market.

"It's supply and demand, and supply has gone way down," he noted. "As the numbers level out, they anticipate a strong market. Overall, the outlook for cattle is pretty bright for the immediate short-term of the next couple of years."

However, if consumer demand for beef drops, it can affect market prices.

Noland noted he believes the American farmer is resilient and usually finds a way to survive. He added that the farmer is conservative-minded based on several factors, such as their upbringing, their business, and their management of operations.

"Everybody follows the markets, and they know what's going on," he said. "Obviously, the expenses are very familiar to them, and so they're making plans to overcome this short period of time that's going to be a challenge of increased expenses and normalized income levels."

"I think the key takeaway is more diversification of farms," Noland added. "With stacked enterprises (and) getting creative with ways to produce additional income with what they've got, to help offset the increased operating costs."

Noland said it's important for a lending institution to help customers understand their needs, their balance sheets, and their balance

sheet ratios and use that information to help them make well-informed management decisions.

"I think it's important, especially when you are in a period of time where you're coming off of an all-time high of gross farm receipts, as things are normalizing, we want to really dig into people's financials and help them grow their operations," Noland noted. "Agriculture is such an important part of our economy and it's a really important part of Central Bank and our customers."

"We want to help our farmers and ranchers however we can," he continued. "Help them move their businesses forward."

There are also programs with the USDA and FSA which benefit farmers and ranchers during tough times. Many are situational.

"There are programs for young farmers and first-time farm own-

ers," Noland said. "That can help the next generation."

He is seeing a trend where the average age of the first-time farmer is increasing, and he noted that not as many young people are staying on the farm but pursuing other occupations as in the past. As farm families have decreased in size, the number of children who stay and work in agriculture has also decreased.

"There's been somewhat of a consolidation," he noted. "There's bigger operations, there's less small farms than there was historically."

Noland added that modern-day farmers have many equipment choices that were absent years ago, and technology has uniquely advanced for them. Farmers can use precision fertilizer and chemical applications. If one takes soil samples, they can be plugged into a GPS, which will tell them if there is a fertilizer deficiency in a particular field area, saving money.

Weather forecasts are now on smartphones, and many farmers utilize drones for chemical applications.

"I think drones, precision agriculture, variable rate applications, and GPS are all pretty cool ways that farmers can increase their yields," Noland said.

Central Bank has partnered with State Fair Community College and will present an Ag Forward program six times a year, three in the spring and three in the fall. Speakers have included a livestock specialist, a grain specialist, and a tax planning specialist. In March, the event featured Missouri Director of Agriculture Chris Chinn.

The Ag Forward events are free and open to the public. For more information, contact Brad Driskill at bdriskill@sfccmo.edu.

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Justin Hollrah and Brianna Bachman from Case IH are dwarfed by this self-propelled sprayer on sale for a cool \$400,000 on Friday, Feb. 2 at the Central Missouri Agriculture Club's annual Ag Expo in the Mathewson Exhibition Center on the Missouri State Fairgrounds. The Case 3250 stands over 13 feet tall. Money raised by the Central Missouri Ag Club helps support area agriculture students.



Missouri Director of Agriculture Chris Chinn speaks during the Ag Forward dinner hosted by Central Bank and State Fair Community College on Thursday, March 28 in the SFCC Thompson Conference Center.

## TOURISM

Continued from Page A1

"When I came on in 2017, the city administration said, at some point, it's a project you need to work on and the board already has it on their plans, but you need to have a visitor center," Barnhart said. "You need to have a space, you need to have something that's visible, accessible and welcoming."

The WCVB hosted countless meetings in the Warrensburg Municipal Building, as it never had a home of its own.

After years of gaining funding from the city lodging tax and a \$250,000 award from the Missouri Department of Economic Development Local Tourism Asset Development Grant, the WCVB bought the property at 205 N. Holden St. in downtown Warrensburg in 2021, and began renovating it in 2023.

Officially opening on Oct. 18 and celebrated with an open house and ribbon-cutting ceremony on Nov. 8, the WCVB has since been busy playing host to other groups and clubs.

"We've had a lot of different groups come in, utilize the facility, and allow us the opportunity to start that conversation about the WCVB

and what we're doing," Barnhart said. "We want to constantly engage the residents of Warrensburg and let them know who we are, and what we're doing, and how we're funded."

Good Neighbors 4-H Club, the Central Rotary Club of Warrensburg, and the Missouri River Runner Marketing Commission are some of the 12 groups that have hosted meetings in the Visitors Center since its opening. In fact, the WCVB board just held its first meeting in its own facilities in April after previously having to borrow or lease space in other buildings.

"We were able to hold our board meeting in our home and it felt incredible. The board was able to come together for our monthly meeting and acknowledge, 'Wow, how far have we come?'" Barnhart said.

Besides hosting meetings, the WCVB has been at work to give visitors a sense of comfort when they get off Highway 50 or Interstate 70 and enter the city. Barnhart reported that the visitors center is seeing an increase in foot traffic in the month of April and is excited to see how it looks in the summer months.

"We've always seen our lodging tax numbers from November to March drop significantly and then

in March around spring break, it starts picking up," Barnhart said.

The WCVB is funded by the lodging tax in Warrensburg, which is only funded by the hotels in the community. As more visitors come to Warrensburg, whether for a trip, to visit family at school or for athletics, the WCVB receives a portion of the funds received from the city's tax.

Ultimately, the majority of Warrensburg's visitors are for the University of Central Missouri. Barnhart and the WCVB want to improve upon that and raise awareness of the city's tourism efforts.

To do this, the bureau has partnered with the UCM Alumni Foundation, Warrensburg Main Street, the Warrensburg Arts Commission, the Johnson County Historical Society, the Warrensburg Schools Foundation, Wings Over Whiteman and plenty more.

"Our partnerships and our networking is absolutely crucial in us being able to give back to the community and us growing to where we need to be in 10 years for the Warrensburg and Johnson County communities," Barnhart said.

It is also trying to increase stability in business and events travel by increasing the vis-

itors center's hours to accommodate weekend travelers.

"Stability is hard to build with the community," Barnhart said. "We have that visibility now being downtown and having our building branded. In the future, I only see it growing."

Coming up in May, the WCVB will celebrate a

milestone. In May 2014, the WCVB articles of incorporation were approved and adopted by the city, thus establishing the tourism board. The WCVB plans on hosting a celebration on May 23.

"I'm really excited to showcase that to the public and our board members and those that work in our tourism-related

industry, our hotels or restaurants or retail," Barnhart said. "Let them know what we've been doing in these last 10 years and why we're doing it to support them."

For more information, visit the Visit Warrensburg Facebook page or www.visitwarrensburg.com.

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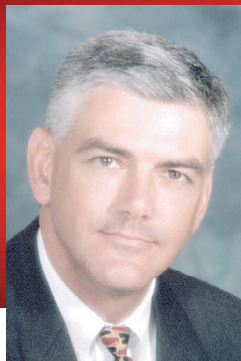
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# A year of community progression! Building a community together!

The Warrensburg Star-Journal's Progress edition is a special supplement to your weekly paper that explains how the community has progressed over the past year. The special edition includes content covering the topics of Government, Education, Business, Health, Faith, Community, Sports and Arts and Entertainment.

## SCHOOL

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we've been able to find, even some of the more difficult positions," Ritter continued. "Such as, we just filled the auto body repair instructor for over at the (Warrensburg Area) Career Center. That's going to be kind of a unique position. You don't see too many of those positions around the state. So we're very excited about having been able to fill that position, as well as others."

Ritter said the district was deficit spending this year, which was expected due to keeping several positions and programs that were paid with federal COVID-19 funds that are no longer available. Without that specific revenue, most of those positions are going away after this school year.

"However, we're anticipating increased funding from the state based on the calculation of the basic formula and so with that expectation, we have been able to increase our teacher base salary by \$1,500, which then also translates into raises for everyone across the district," Ritter added. "So we're continuing, even though things are a little bit tight financially, we've still been able to figure out a way to put things in place so that we can provide some increases to wages for our employees. We are going to make compensation a priority because we want to make sure that we retain the quality educators and support staff that we have."

### District projects

An expansion is underway at the Warrensburg Area Career Center as the district is adding another building between the center and Ridge View Elementary.

The new building will be the future

home of the construction program, along with another to-be-determined program that Ritter said will complement construction, such as electrical, plumbing or HVAC. Those moves will take place in the 2025-26 school year.

WACC construction students will do part of the interior work on the new building.

A grant is helping pay for the new WACC building, and a safety grant will allow the district replace some of the intercom systems in its buildings.

"We had some very old systems that were in place, and so we've been able to upgrade those so that we have a safer environment when information needs to be shared, whether it's from the offices or to the office from the classrooms," Ritter explained.

The district is also in the process of moving programs out of the Reese Education Center. Ritter said it would take a minimum of \$2 million to renovate the facility in areas such as HVAC, roof and windows. He said other needs would've added to that cost. Instead, the district chose to remodel other areas to allow for the relocation of the Parents as Teachers and Gateway Alternative programs.

### Training and curriculum

The Warrensburg School District is working to expand Project Lead the Way, which focuses on STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), to all of its elementary schools.

"It really focuses on problem-solving skills," Ritter explained. "Back in the day when I was in school, you tear out the worksheet lab and you'd go through and they tell you step by step what to do. Well, instead of giving you the steps, it would say, 'Here's the problem. How are you going to figure out the problem?' So we're

excited to be able to do that."

The district received a couple of grants to help make the expansion possible. One is focused on the materials, while the other will pay for teacher training over the summer.

"It was great to hear that we had very much an overwhelming response of teachers who were anxious and excited to come out for training on that," Ritter said.

Another area of training is continuing with the science of reading through LETRS. Two groups wrapped up their two-year training process this month, and another cohort will begin in the fall.

The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education offers the state-level initiative. Katie Ritter, a first grade teacher at Ridge View Elementary, was first interested in the program and became a trainer, which allowed her to bring that knowledge back to Warrensburg.

"So for the last couple of years, she's been doing her professional development, but then training our teachers and the response from our teachers has been wonderful," Ritter said. "Many of them have commented that they feel they really have much better tools in their toolbox now for teaching reading to our students. ... It is a priority for the district to make sure that we get these instructional strategies to our folks."

Ritter added that a Memorandum of Understanding with the University of Central Missouri allows district teachers to earn graduate credit from participating in the LETRS training (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling).

This year, Ritter said the district added a new reading series for the elementary and middle school levels, the first time classrooms received updated reading re-



Sterling Elementary students walk with arms intertwined as they head for the bus just before summer break in May 2023. FILE PHOTO BY MELIYAH VENERABLE | STAR-JOURNAL

sources in "well over a decade, so it was very much needed." Next year, additional curriculum resources will be added for middle school science.

"The following year, we'll be looking at updating our math resources and making sure that we have the best resources," Ritter continued. "The goal is to always have the best resources in the hands of our teachers to be able to provide instruction for our students. That's something that (Executive Director of Academic Services Susan) Crooks and her instructional leaders have been really spearheading and working towards."

Overall, Ritter said it's been great to see so many athletic teams and student activities succeed and that schools have seen "really good turnouts" at events like family reading nights, STEAM nights, and elementary career days.

"It's just great to see that level of parents and community involvement and a lot of the things that we were able to offer in the buildings," he added.

Nicole Cooke can be reached at 660-530-0138.

## INFRASTRUCTURE

Continued from Page 1

New technology is also being developed and used for infrastructural needs in the city. Public Works implemented a new community-focused alert system a few months ago and is hoping it'll make everyone's lives easier.

"If there's a pothole on your street, and so you say, 'Man, that pothole is really ugly and I'm gonna get a flat tire.' You can take a picture of that. Going into SeeClickFix, upload the picture and say, 'There's a pothole in front of my street.' That notification will go to us, and then we can go out there. The goal is to attend to it within 48 hours, go in, and patch that pothole," Villegas said.

"It's giving a positive way for the city or the community to have a voice, but also for them to be able to receive that feedback from the city in a very positive manner."

Warrensburg's infrastructure, like anything that ages, can have its faults and structural breaks at any moment.

For all the improvements the city can make, with everything looking up, there will always be a force pushing back down. So, a strong base is needed, and Villegas hopes they've established that.

"I do think, especially with the renewal of the half-cent sales tax, that we'll be able to continue the momentum," Villegas said. "With the condition of the infrastructure as it is (now), it is aging and then, in some aspects, it's not very good, but this will at least allow us to get to a point where we can catch up."

Villegas admits Warrensburg's infrastructure will never be perfect. He knows complaints will always be one voice away. But, he and everyone at the city are willing to accept the backlash and make the city better than it was before.

"I don't always expect five-star reviews, because it's hard to please everyone," Villegas said. "But I want people to have a good impression of the city. They're willing to accept feedback or constructive criticism. I know our roads aren't perfect, but let me know how I can help you."

Zach Bott can be reached at 660-747-8123.



A man begins to walk on the bridge over Highway 50 on Wednesday, April 17, on Holden Street. "The major bridge over 50 is something where we are actively partnering with MoDOT to try to come together to get a plan in place to fix or replace the bridge," Warrensburg Assistant City Manager and Public Works Director Enrico Villegas said. PHOTOS BY ZACH BOTT | STAR-JOURNAL



The bridge over Highway 50 contains many potholes, dilapidation, and wear across it on Wednesday, April 17, on Holden Street.



Warrensburg Community Band President David Robinson, standing in the center, overlooks the ensemble's Monday, June 5 rehearsal at Warrensburg High School. The Warrensburg Arts Commission awarded one of several grants to the band this year, the commission's first grant awards since 2020. FILE PHOTO BY GRACE FUGATE | STAR-JOURNAL

## ARTS

Continued from Page 2

Previously brought up in the first meeting of the relaunched Arts in Public Places Committee in February, the public sculpture on loan program is making a return, but not until 2025. It is looking at locations, with an empty concrete slab near the Warrensburg Police Department being the first option.

On a shorter timeline, organizers of the poetry in public spaces project hope to collect poetry in the summer and place it in the parks in 2025 as well.

The commission has also been busy award-

ing its allotted grant money of \$3,000 in the last month, something it hasn't done since 2020.

"The grants have gone to the Old Drum Woodcarvers, the Warrensburg Community Band and Alex Smith, who is a professor of music at UCM who's arranging for a public concert of a percussion ensemble," Robbins said.

Turnover within the arts commission has been frequent since the COVID-19 pandemic. But, board membership has remained stable over the past six months, with only one remaining seat available to someone in the Warrensburg School District.

"If there's anybody

out there who works for the school district and wants to join us, we'd love to have them," Robbins said.

At its meeting on April 15, the commission passed its budget for the fiscal year 2025, brainstormed about future funding, and talked about other projects in the Arts in Public Places Committee and its art walks hosted on the third Wednesday of each month from April through September.

For more information, visit [www.warrensburg-mo.com/163/Arts-Commission](http://www.warrensburg-mo.com/163/Arts-Commission) or the Warrensburg Arts Commission Facebook page.

Zach Bott can be reached at 660-747-8123.



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# UCM Athletics planning into the future

Strategic planning highlights year one under Howdeshell

By Joe Andrews  
joea@warrensburgstarjournal.com

Matt Howdeshell's first 11 months as Vice President for Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Central Missouri have been all about building off a foundation.

Howdeshell officially took his post June 16, 2023, a little more than a month after being announced as the successor to the late Jerry Hughes.

He described his tenure thus far as a period of growth.

"Growth would be a good way to summarize it," Howdeshell said. "Growth for our department, obviously by implementing changes to set us up to grow now and into the future. Obviously, there's been growth for me personally, too, transparently. Being in a role like this, understanding everyone in the Warrensburg community, and growth for our team too."

Since Howdeshell joined, UCM Athletics has undergone a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis. The results, which included internal and external data, were translated to the strategic planning and facilities process. The department is now finalizing its initial map.

"We've done, and are doing, a lot in the last 10 months or so," Howdeshell said. "Like a strategic plan and a master facility plan, those are things that take athletic departments two or three years to do separately, let alone us doing it in 10 months."

The initial results of strategic planning will be noticeable as soon as next fall for Mules and Jennies student-athletes.



The UCM Multipurpose Building was rededicated as the Jerry M. Hughes Athletics Center on Feb. 17. UCM Athletics partnered with DLR Group to revision the building and all other athletic facilities during the last year. FILE PHOTO BY JOE ANDREWS | STAR-JOURNAL

## Enhancing student-athlete support

The department will be initiating a fueling station in the weight room for its student-athletes.

In partnership with the UCM Alumni Foundation, the department has secured a lead gift to help fund the amenity's construction. The project will begin in May, with completion expected before football returns for summer workouts.

The gift will also cover the foundation of a nutrition program, providing every student-athlete with a protein shake after every workout.

UCM has enough funds to run through the program, which is a \$50,000 expense, for two years.

"When we roll out our strategic plan, that will be one of our top five priorities, funding the fueling station on an annual basis," Howdeshell said. "Getting back to what oth-

er schools are doing - Pitt State spends over \$100,000 a year on nutrition. Northwest Missouri spends over \$95,000 on nutrition. Missouri Western is in the 80s. Even Nebraska-Kearney spends in the 60s. Outside of what football does right now, we spend zero."

UCM is also prioritizing its student-athletes' mental health. The department is hiring a mental health counselor exclusively for student-athletes overseen by the campus' health group.

Central Missouri will be the first school in the MIAA to have such a position.

UCM is also working to enhance NIL for its student-athletes. The department will unveil an updated resource later this year. The Mules and Jennies have previously partnered with Opendorse to provide a marketplace for their athletes.

Central Missouri is also partnering with ARMS, a digital compliance tool de-

signed for efficiency for student-athletes, coaches and administrators alike. The program is used by many other MIAA members, and will launch this summer.

## Enhancing facilities

UCM Athletics has been working with DLR Group, a design firm based in Overland Park, Kansas, to develop a master facility plan.

"They've done a comprehensive analysis of all of our facilities," Howdeshell said. "They've done what we call listening sessions with our coaches and staff where they had them fill out a survey that essentially says what are all of your needs, what are all of your wants."

Based on the input gathered, DLR created a program summary and proposed recommendations for each UCM Athletics facility.

"I'll use South Rec as an example. We want to maximize the square footage that we renovate, so maximize the current square footage and minimize the square footage of new construction," Howdeshell said. "They did that at all [facilities]."

The discussions include planning an indoor field house, which would consist of an indoor turf field alongside an updated indoor track and field facility.

MIAA schools with such facilities include Pittsburg State, Washburn, Northwest Missouri State and Missouri Western.

UCM is among a plethora of MIAA schools that share their indoor track and field space with basketball and volleyball.

"I was pleasantly surprised how nearly unanimous the agreement was. The consensus among our coaches and student-athletes was that an indoor fieldhouse should be our top priority, even by the sports that wouldn't use it on a daily basis," Howdeshell said. "When you look at it, it's a facility that would impact all student-athletes. Not only football and track, baseball, softball and soccer using the space on a daily basis, but by getting track out of the Hughes Center, it makes that place way more efficient for men's and women's basketball, volleyball and wrestling, too. It's something that really raises all waters."

UCM is working to gather donors for the project, and the department has chosen a location and design.

As those plans develop, construction for the Harbert Collegiate Golf Center, a 2,100-square-foot single-story building with lounge spaces, coaches office, restrooms and meeting rooms, has concluded. A ribbon cutting was hosted April 20.

Construction is also on track for the Terry Noland Football Offices. The project is overhauling the previous offices while adding

coaches' offices, position meeting rooms and a reception area. It will be completed by the 2024 season.

In March, the Multipurpose Building was rededicated as the Jerry M. Hughes Athletics Center. As part of its renaming, the exterior entrance received a revamp with a new sign and the addition of UCM branding.

The current master planning process also puts into play a budget for playing surface upgrades. Since most are due for replacement at similar times, the goal is to space them out for budgeting purposes.

## New faces

Since Howdeshell took over, Central Missouri has seen three new faces join its athletic administration, with a fourth and fifth expected soon.

"I know sometimes change is hard," Howdeshell said. "And for people, change is difficult. Unfortunately, within college athletics, change is kind of the norm from the shifting landscape and also on the personnel side. For better, we've been immune to that for a long time here ... With change is also opportunity and potential to bring in a fresh perspective and try new things and continue to elevate the realm."

When Howdeshell arrived, he already had to fill a role due to the retirement of Associate Vice President for Intercollegiate Athletics Kathy Anderson, who retired effective June 30, 2023.

Anderson has still been involved with the department in numerous other capacities, including support in her former full-time position as a search for her replacement lasted longer than initially planned.

Lori Hopkins, formerly at Northwest Missouri State, was hired into the role in August and officially began in October. She holds the title alongside Senior Women's Administrator.

In July, Michelle Schubert left her role as assistant athletic director for development to take a similar fundraising position at Western Missouri Medical Center. Ryan Snyder filled the role in late 2023, joining the department from Missouri Southern.

In January, Scott Thomson left his role as Associate Athletic Director for Facilities and Capital Projects for a position outside of athletics. Kelsey Lee filled the position this month after previously working with Chattanooga Sports, the sports tourism division for Hamilton County, Tennessee.

Effective May 1, Associate Athletic Director for External Operations Jeff Mason will depart UCM for an unannounced position elsewhere in intercollegiate athletics.

Marketing and Promotions Director Bob Jackson will also soon retire from UCM. The role will remain, with a focus on internal marketing.

Sponsorship and external marketing will be handled by one of two positions to be filled by Taymar Sales U, which UCM announced a partnership with in April.

## Enhancing support

In collaboration with the UCM Alumni Foundation, Howdeshell and UCM Athletics will tour Missouri in May to touch base with alumni.

The tour spreads seven different stops, including Traditions Restaurant in Warrensburg on May 2, the Sedalia Country Club in Sedalia on May 21 and the Primitive Olde Crow & Winery in Clinton on May 22.

"At those events, we're talking about what the vision and what the future of UCM Athletics is," Howdeshell said. "No. 2, we're also talking how people can be a part of that. Here's how you can support these priorities. ... Also growing our base. To progress and move forward, we need to continue to grow our base."

As part of the tour, UCM will discuss the Mule Train's rebranding to the Cardinal and Black Fund.

The Mule Train has 79 members, fewer than other MIAA schools UCM benchmarks against.

"When you look at some of our peers, a lot of them are at the 150, 200 or 250 level," Howdeshell said. "What we want to do with this when we roll out the Cardinal and Black Fund is generate some excitement around it and really treat these events as membership drives. We need your support, we need you to be involved, we need you to help support our student-athletes and help us keep pushing forward. We can be at the top of the MIAA. That's how we want these events to be structured."

## Moving forward

Howdeshell noted that continuing relationship development, both internally and externally, is a goal as his first anniversary at UCM approaches.

"The last 12 months within college athletics have changed probably more than any other 12-month span you can point to within the history of college athletics," Howdeshell said. "Whether you like it or not, the next three to five years of college athletics are going to be much of the same. What we're doing right now is preparing us really well to be able to manage a lot of priorities on a lot of different fronts. That's what we're going to have to deal with."

Joe Andrews can be reached at 660-747-8123.



University of Central Missouri Vice President for Intercollegiate Athletics Matt Howdeshell speaks during his introductory press conference May 12, 2023, at the Jerry M. Hughes Athletics Center. FILE PHOTO BY JOE ANDREWS | STAR-JOURNAL





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# UCM experiencing growth across campus

Enrollment increasing, capital projects continue

By Nicole Cooke  
nicolec@warrensburgstarjournal.com

The University of Central Missouri tracks progress across four categories: People, Place, Students, and Stakeholders. President Roger Best recently sat down with the Star-Journal to discuss the updates and impacts of each one over the past year.

## Students

Student enrollment for the spring semester is 13,734, up almost 40% since Fall 2020.

"We are thrilled to see the number of students who are coming to us today," Best said. "We have had a distinctive shift from our traditional undergraduate population to much more of a mix of undergraduate and graduate."

This semester, UCM's student population is 60% undergraduate and 40% graduate, compared to five or six years ago when that split was 80% and 20%, respectively.

"That's been important for us for a couple of reasons," Best explained. "We know that the number of high school students who are choosing to go to college these days is down from what it used to be. And we also expect there to be fewer high school graduates in the coming years because of demographic shifts. And so, there was intentionality on our part to focus more on graduate recruitment and create more of a balance of undergraduate and graduate. And as we look forward into the fall semester ... we see a lot of positivity on our undergraduate recruitment and enrollment. As it turns out, we have about 20% more admitted students for Fall of '24 at this point than we did a year ago."

Best said the university feels good about student outcomes as well, noting that while recruitment is always a priority, the ultimate goal is to see students leave UCM with a degree. Within six months of graduation, 94-95% of UCM graduates are in a career, military service, intentionally volunteering or attending graduate school. The four-year graduation rate and the persistence rates, which tracks students who stay from the fall semester to the spring, are also up.

UCM has continued efforts to create agreements with two-year institutions in Missouri and neighboring states to provide students with a more seamless transfer. Examples include nearby State Fair Community College in Sedalia and, most recently, North Central Missouri College in Trenton. Similar agreements exist with international institutions.

Best said those agreements have helped create pathways for students. UCM has just under 4,000 international students, and has seen an uptick in transfer student enrollments for the fall.

## Places

UCM completed its master plan last spring, and the university's efforts in renovating and constructing infrastructure are tied to that plan.

Over the last few years, several new construction projects have been underway, including the new terminal and education center at Skyhaven Airport, which opened in the fall, and the Harbert Collegiate Golf Center, which just opened earlier this month. Both were made possible through private donors and university funds, along with \$1 million in state

funding for Skyhaven.

Construction is underway on the Terry Noland Football Offices, and the university is about to begin a \$4 million renovation of the safety science and construction management labs in the Gaines Technology Complex.

The university also received a \$2 million grant from the Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development, which includes a \$2 million match from UCM, for work on UCM Farms. The work includes expanding greenhouse spaces, renovating the farm on Mitchell Street, and adding a storefront to sell some of the products produced by students.

The largest project on the docket is a \$39.8 million renovation and modernization of the Humphreys Building. Best said that if the legislature passes the budget as it currently stands, the project will be fully funded by the state of Missouri by the time construction is complete.

Learning and common spaces will be renovated and opened up, and offices will also be improved.

"But equally important, they will be better equipped as well, so we'll be able to modernize our entire infrastructure of that building and bring in the newest technology to support learning and even the work that our faculty and staff do on a daily basis," Best said.

Less high-profile infrastructure projects have also continued, including \$12 million spent last year on the deferred maintenance backlog.

"So from a place perspective, we recognize that we have a very large campus and we have one of the largest campuses in the state of Missouri with all the acreage that we have and the facilities we have, and that requires a lot of time, effort and money to keep up," Best said. "And we've been trying to make more and more investment in keeping our buildings and our infrastructure modern, functional and something that we can be very proud of."

## People

UCM has provided raises to employees for the last three years and based on the current budget forecast and plan, Best said he anticipates this will happen again in the next fiscal year. More money has also been put into benefits over the last couple of years, such as added educational benefits for employee dependents and the university now pays a higher share of employee health insurance.

Best said the university has also examined the work environment and offers outside activities for employees, like providing tickets to the holiday lights event at Powell Gardens and offering close to 1,000 free tickets for employees to attend UCM Day at Kauffman Stadium this summer.

He has also tried to provide more engagement opportunities, such as Pastries with the President, to allow faculty and staff to socialize with each other, enjoy some snacks, and ask questions of Best.

"And so we've done not just salary, not just benefits, but also from a campus community perspective, trying to ensure that people have opportunities to engage with each other and not only feel but also recognize they're part of something much greater than just their office or their individual work," Best added.

## Stakeholders

According to Best, UCM has seen a "tremendous increase" in alumni engagement over the last



State officials and University of Central Missouri representatives celebrate the opening of the University of Central Missouri's new Skyhaven Aviation Center with a ribbon cutting Friday afternoon, Sept. 8. From left, David Pearce, UCM executive director for governmental relations; Scott Fitzpatrick, Missouri state auditor; Warrensburg residents Lynn and Jackie Harmon; Roger Best, university president; state Sen. Denny Hoskins, Missouri District 21; Tyler Young, senior professional pilot student from Troy; Courtney Goddard, vice president for advancement and executive director of the UCM Alumni Foundation; Mark Suazo, dean of the Harmon College of Business and Professional Studies; and Ed Hassinger, Missouri Department of Transportation deputy director and chief engineer. FILE PHOTO BY NICOLE COOKE | STAR-JOURNAL

four years.

He credited the UCM Alumni Foundation and its employees, especially Director of Events and Alumni Tiffany Cochran, with that increase.

That statistic is measured by how alumni engage with the university, whether through communication, volunteering, or donating. There are about 100,000 living alumni, and to date, 28% have engaged in some capacity, a percentage Best said he expects to increase to 30% by the end of the fiscal year. Hitting that target would make it a record year for engagement.

The foundation has also received record donations, bringing in almost \$17 million in gifts last year. Best pointed out that some of those donations have provided substantial funding for many capital projects on campus.

"So we're very grateful for what our alumni and our donors, other supporters have done for us in helping us achieve this mission that we have and achieve the vision we have as well," Best said. "It's not just the mission but also the vision that we have for all of our students and who we are as an institution."

Mule Nation events have continued across the country, with alumni gatherings occurring from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C., plus several throughout Missouri.

Best noted that UCM's relationship with its alumni is lifelong. He joked that the foundation won't turn down a check to support the university, but they also want to hear success stories and encourage connections between alumni and students.

"We want our alumni to know that, again, we appreciate the financial support and that's meaningful, and the time that they give to us in helping us on advisory boards and making us better," Best continued, "but we also want to know their stories and what impact we had on them so that we can share that with our current students. And I also tell our alumni and our current students that they regularly have an impact on the university that they can't imagine either. That they make us better in so many ways."

Nicole Cooke can be reached at 660-530-0138.



A new UCM graduate shakes hands with university officials as she walks across the stage during the May 8 commencement ceremony. More than 2,000 new graduates were eligible to walk in one of four ceremonies the weekend of May 5-6 in the Multipurpose Building. FILE PHOTO BY NICOLE COOKE | STAR-JOURNAL



Flanked by UCM airplanes, people walk out of the Skyhaven Aviation Center to see some of the planes lining the runway during the ribbon cutting and public tours on Friday afternoon, Sept. 8. FILE PHOTO BY NICOLE COOKE | STAR-JOURNAL



Dozens of countries are represented by UCM international students holding their home country's flag in the Homecoming parade on Saturday, Oct. 21. The annual Homecoming weekend celebrations are just one way the university works to engage with its thousands of alumni. FILE PHOTO BY NICOLE COOKE | STAR-JOURNAL



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