

# Tennessee CONNECTIONS

SPRING 2025 | CUSTOMER FOCUSED ⚡ COMMUNITY DRIVEN

## Behind the Scenes

The unsung heroes  
powering TUA

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# Behind the Scenes

## The unsung heroes powering TUA



At Tullahoma Utilities Authority, we believe in the power of teamwork to achieve excellence. While we operate multiple utilities and departments—spanning electric, water, wastewater and broadband services—we work as one unified team, focused on a shared mission: serving our community with reliability, innovation and care. Each department plays a unique and critical role, but it's the seamless

collaboration that ensures success. Whether it's resolving a customer issue, managing infrastructure projects or planning for the future, our strength lies in working together toward a common goal.

This commitment to teamwork is deeply ingrained in our culture and core values. We know no single department can succeed in isolation, and we take pride in supporting one another to ensure our customers receive the best service possible. By fostering open communication, mutual respect and a collective sense of purpose, we remain stronger together—delivering on our promise to be a utility our community can always depend on.

While many of our customers are familiar with the sight of our outside crews working hard to maintain and restore essential services, it's important to shine a light on the unsung heroes who work tirelessly behind the scenes: our customer service, administration and accounting personnel. These dedicated individuals ensure operations run smoothly, questions are answered promptly and resources are managed responsibly—all with a focus on delivering the best experience for our customers. Their work may not always be visible, but it's vital to our success and the trust our community places in TUA.

### Customer Service

Our customer service team is the face of TUA, often the first point of contact for our customers. Whether it's assisting with billing questions, handling service requests or resolving concerns, these team members embody the values of professionalism, empathy and efficiency. Every interaction is an opportunity to build trust and strengthen relationships with the people we serve.

What sets our team members apart is their unwavering commitment to creating positive experiences. This team handles thousands of calls, emails and in-person visits every year, ensuring each customer feels heard and valued. They are problem solvers, troubleshooters and, often, the calm in the storm when issues arise. From walking a customer through the steps of setting up a new account to resolving complex service concerns, their dedication is evident in every interaction.

### Administration

Behind the scenes, our administration team ensures TUA operates like a well-oiled machine. These individuals handle a wide range of responsibilities, from managing schedules and coordinating meetings to overseeing internal communications and supporting various departments.

This team also plays a critical role in fostering a positive workplace culture. By organizing events like companywide meetings, team celebrations and initiatives like the TUA movie night, they help create a sense of community among employees. Their efforts ensure everyone at TUA feels connected and supported, which translates into better service for our customers.

The administration team is also instrumental in executing strategic initiatives. They coordinate the rollout of new programs, such as our recent partnership with Tullahoma City Schools, and manage the logistics of major projects—ensuring every detail is accounted for. Their ability to juggle multiple priorities with precision and grace is a testament to their skill and dedication.

### Accounting

At the core of TUA's financial stability is our accounting team, whose meticulous work ensures every dollar is accounted for and allocated appropriately. This team handles everything from payroll and budgeting to financial reporting and regulatory compliance.

The team's attention to detail and commitment to accuracy are unmatched. They ensure customer payments are processed smoothly, vendor invoices are paid on time and our financial records are impeccable. Their role is particularly critical as TUA continues to invest in new technologies, infrastructure and community programs, requiring careful planning and resource management.

Beyond the numbers, the accounting team contributes to TUA's transparency and accountability. By providing clear and comprehensive financial reports, they give our board, management and customers confidence in how we manage resources.

### Customer Commitment

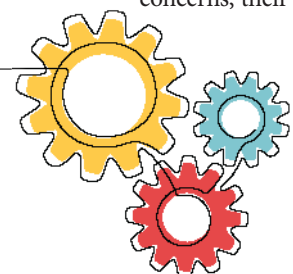
At TUA, our customers are at the heart of everything we do. We are dedicated to meeting your needs with prompt, reliable service and are here to help whenever you need us. If you have questions, concerns or issues with your service, we encourage you to contact us at any time. Your feedback and engagement are invaluable in helping us grow and ensuring that we continue to provide the outstanding utility services you deserve. Thank you for trusting TUA to serve you. ■

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Allen Potter".

**Allen Potter**

President, Tullahoma Utilities Authority







Tullahoma Utilities Authority Executive Assistant Shannon Hamblin, front row center, presents \$31,700 to the latest class of Round Up fund recipients.

## Small Change, Big Impact

Story and photo by Kelly Lapczynski

“It Takes Change to Make Change” was the general idea when Tullahoma Utilities Authority established its community assistance fund in March 2020.

If each TUA customer allowed their electric bill to be rounded up to the nearest dollar each month—at an average of 50 cents per customer—TUA could raise thousands of dollars to support local families in need and the organizations that serve them. The resulting initiative became the TUA Round Up Program.

The program costs a typical TUA customer less than \$6 a year. It’s not much, but it adds up: since the program’s inception, TUA has put more than \$190,000 back into the community where it is needed most.

The TUA Board of Directors administers the funds generated, but TUA President Allen Potter says it is the utility customers who are the heart of the program.

“It is through your kindness and willingness to participate that we are able to assist individuals, families and organizations in our community who need a helping hand,” Potter says. “Your contributions empower us to foster positive change and provide critical support where it matters most.”

Potential program recipients apply each November, and an internal allocations committee reviews each application to decide which best meets the criteria for helping those in need.

“We do not take this responsibility lightly,” says Potter. “Managing and distributing these funds is both an honor and a challenge, and we approach it with great care and integrity. Every

decision is made with the intent to maximize the impact of your generosity and to ensure that these resources are directed to those who need them most.”

Each December, the TUA Board of Directors approves the allocation of Round Up funds to the successful applicants and checks are presented to those organizations in January.

This year, the TUA board approved the disbursement of \$31,700 in 2024 Round Up collections to the following agencies: Shepherd’s House, \$4,800; 5 Loaves 4 Kids, \$4,000; Come to the Table, \$3,800; Attic Outlet, \$2,800; Henry Center, \$2,500; Good Samaritan, \$2,500; Coffee County Senior Citizens, \$2,000; Helping Hands Food Pantry and Clothes Closet, \$2,000; Tullahoma Lions Club, \$1,800; Coffee County Salvation Army, \$1,500; Partners for Healing, \$1,500; Hospice of the Highland Rim, \$1,500; and Tullahoma Day Care Center, \$1,000.

Applications will open again in November, and monies collected in 2025 will be allocated at the end of this year and presented to recipients in early January 2026. The Round Up amount customers contribute to the fund is shown on their bills each month.

“We use our funding to help families with their utility bills, very specifically to pay back into the Tullahoma Utilities system,” says Attic Outlet Executive Director Lisa Cardwell. “With Round Up funds, Attic Outlet has helped thousands of Tullahoma residents keep up with the additional heating costs that come with harsh winter weather. That is a lot of homes that we have been able to help. And with your contribution to the Round Up program, you can be a part of helping the nonprofit community like the Attic Outlet, so we thank you for that. Thank you very much.” ■

# Paving Professional Pathways

## Be Pro Be Proud promotes in-demand trade careers

By Trish Milburn

For generations, discussions about education focused on “the three Rs,” a phrase thought to have originated in the early 19th century to denote reading, writing and arithmetic. While those are still important subjects, today’s Tennessee students also learn about the three Ps: pride, progress and professionalism.

A four-year degree is still the goal for many students, depending on the field in which they want to work, but it’s not the only path to a prosperous and stable future. That’s the message behind the Be

Pro Be Proud program, a multistate effort to highlight the opportunities, pride, progress and professionalism of skilled trades workers.

“The program shows them that there are options available after high school for good-paying, honorable jobs,” says Connie Vaughn, government relations manager for McKee Foods in Collegedale.

### Addressing a Need

Skilled trades workers build homes and businesses. They keep electricity flowing through power line maintenance and repair, operate heavy equipment on

construction and agricultural sites, drive truckloads of goods to retail destinations and so much more.

The current skilled workforce crisis is a growing concern. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s Worker Shortage Index shows Tennessee only has 56 workers available for every 100 open jobs. The construction and manufacturing industries, which have high turnover rates and more difficulty filling skilled labor jobs, are among the most in need of an influx of new skilled labor.

According to the National Association of Manufacturers, 82% of U.S. manufacturers have a moderate or serious shortage of skilled production workers. In addition, many individuals with years of experience in skilled trades are nearing retirement, leaving fewer professionals across an array of fields. Of the current skilled trade workers, 67% are 45 or older.

U.S. business leaders, knowing this labor shortage needs to be addressed, came up with Be Pro Be Proud. Launched in Arkansas in 2016, the movement has grown to four other states, including Tennessee, with more scheduled to join the effort in 2025.

Be Pro Be Proud takes an 18-wheeler filled with state-of-the-art, high-tech simulators to schools to introduce students to the modern possibilities of careers in the trades. The unit houses 12 augmented reality and virtual reality simulators for commercial truck driving, heavy equipment operation, electric line work, welding, construction, 3D printing, computer numerical control machining, truck technician and agriculture.



Shelbyville Power lineworkers Matt Crosslin, left, and Andrew Gordon prepare for students to experience the electric lineworker bucket truck simulator. PHOTO COURTESY OF SHELBYVILLE POWER, WATER AND SEWER SYSTEMS



“Students get to experience what these jobs are like through tech they gravitate toward,” Connie says, adding that following up with students after they tour the mobile unit is a valuable experience for both sides. “It’s so different from a traditional job fair.”

“It’s a very impressive setup they have,” says Brian Solsbee, executive director of the Tennessee Municipal Electric Power Association, which sponsors the electric lineworker bucket truck simulator.

Industry stakeholders make up the Be Pro Be Proud Founding Council: Tennessee Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Tennessee Road Builders Association, Tennessee Concrete Association, Tennessee Trucking Association, Associated Builders and Contractors of Greater Tennessee, Tennessee Forestry Association and McKee Foods.

Brian says the mobile unit offers a great opportunity to promote the utility trade and great-paying jobs.

“We encourage local utilities to talk to the students when the mobile unit is at a school in their service area,” he says.

Shelbyville Power, Water and Sewerage Systems General Manager Jason Reese and SPWS lineworkers attended three stops of

the Tennessee Chamber Be Pro Be Proud Career Trailer in their region last year.

“To say we came away impressed would be an understatement,” Jason says. “We were able to engage with hundreds of local middle school students at the virtual lineworker simulator and not only assist them but also answer questions and share real-life experiences about our industry. I would encourage all municipal power systems to actively support this initiative.”

school over a four-year university. When asked about what their parents wanted for them, the stats were even more striking. Seventy-nine percent of them said their parents wanted them to go to a four-year college, while only 5% said their parents were in favor of them going to school to learn a trade.

Connie says changing the negative attitude requires focusing on not only the students but also their parents and even educators.

“Students get to experience what these jobs are like through tech they gravitate toward.”

— Connie Vaughn, government relations manager for McKee Foods

### Changing Perceptions

While just about everyone will need the services and skills of a welder, plumber, mechanic, electrician or HVAC technician sooner or later, skilled trades careers have often been viewed as a step below jobs that require a college degree.

According to a 2023 Jobber survey, that stigma persists. Of the 1,000 U.S. adults ages 18 to 20 surveyed, 74% indicated a negative perception of going to technical

“Kids with good grades can also go into the trades,” she says. “We want electricians who can do math.”

The ever-increasing cost of a college education is another factor when deciding about one’s future.

“Four-year universities can cost upwards of \$40,000-plus,” says Sarah Burnett, chief of staff and director of foundation for the Tennessee Chamber of Commerce. “Many companies pay for

**A 65-foot, custom-built tractor trailer, filled with state-of-the-art, high-tech simulators, introduces students to the modern possibilities of careers in the trades.**  
PHOTOS COURTESY OF TENNESSEE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY





training for students going into the trades, or students can attend a Tennessee College of Applied Technology for free.”

Many companies also pay for employees to earn the necessary degrees to advance their careers while they continue working.

A college education at a four-year university can be a great path to a rewarding career, but it’s not necessary for everyone—at least not immediately after high school. Connie points out that someone who works in a trade for a couple of years after high school and then decides to go to college to become an engineer will be a much better engineer because of the hands-on experience.

Sarah agrees.

“On-the-job training and technical skills are in many cases more valuable to manage a factory or small business than a college degree,” she says.

Be Pro Be Proud emphasizes the earning potential of jobs in the trades. According to data provided by the organization, the median income for heavy equipment operators is \$49,100, with the top 10% earning \$86,300. The median income for an electric lineworker is \$68,030, with the top 10% making \$108,380 annually. Similarly, the top 10% of plumbers can make close to \$99,000 per year, while the field’s median income is \$56,330.

Beyond income figures, the Be Pro Be Proud program showcases the pride that workers in these fields have, knowing their professional efforts help to build homes, communities, businesses and economies.

For example, electric lineworkers play a vital role in their communities.

“They are often at the forefront of natural disasters, like first responders, helping to get the power back on,” Brian says.

### On the Road

The mobile Be Pro Be Proud unit occasionally takes part in community events, but priority is given to school visits with students in grades eight through 12. These visits—which last from one to five days, depending on the size of the student population—are underwritten by sponsoring organizations

and come at no cost to the schools. There is so much interest that the mobile unit stays booked four to five days a week during the school year.

“It depends on the location, but we encourage all students to visit the unit,” Sarah says.

The goal is to raise awareness and interest in careers in the skilled trades among students who may not be already enrolled in career and technical education classes.

Building the unit came with a price tag of nearly \$1.5 million, and it takes another \$700,000 a year to run it. That may seem like a lot, but making sure the Tennessee workforce is filled with skilled workers benefits those workers and their families, employers, customers, communities and the state’s economy.

Brian says the goal is to eventually have a second mobile unit so schools in all of Tennessee’s 95 counties can be visited more quickly.

### Positive Reception

Sarah says the student response to mobile unit visits has been extremely positive. Students complete surveys before and after their tours to gauge changes in their perceptions about technical education and careers.

“Tennessee observed significant improvements in attitudes and intentions across all three survey focus areas,” she says.

Those post-tour statistics show that Be Pro Be Proud is beginning to accomplish its mission.

- 83% of students reported favorable attitudes toward career technical education, and 67% reported their intention to pursue it.
- 74% reported favorable attitudes toward technical careers, and 56% indicated they plan to pursue those careers.

Connie says the data coming out of the program—which is available to employers—is impressive.

“Students are signing on to join the movement and want to know more,” she says. “Kids learn in different ways. They can continue lifelong, hands-on learning without a four-year college degree.” ■

*To learn more about Be Pro Be Proud or to join the movement, visit [tn.beprobeproud.org](http://tn.beprobeproud.org).*







CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Multiple interactive exhibits are available within the traveling career center. Examples include construction, working on electric lines, welding and operating heavy equipment.

# DIG SAFELY—IT'S YOUR RESPONSIBILITY

By Christina Sawyer

When it comes to maintaining safety and preventing service interruptions, your electric utility is committed to doing its part. That includes performing dig locates for consumers who call the 811 Call Before You Dig service. But safety doesn't stop at the locate. It's crucial for everyone take personal responsibility to dig carefully, remain cautious and contact your utility immediately if any lines are accidentally hit. Remember, even with the best technology and the most diligent efforts, some risks simply cannot be predicted.

## Call Before You Dig: The First Line of Defense

The first step in any digging project—whether you're planting a tree, installing a fence or setting up a mailbox—is to call 811. This free service alerts utilities in your area to mark underground lines with flags, paint or stakes. This crucial step helps you avoid hitting underground lines and protects yourself, your neighbors and the infrastructure that keeps our community powered.

The process is simple: Call 811 or submit a request online at least two business days before you plan to dig. After that, utility representatives will visit your site and mark the approximate location of underground lines. Each type of utility line is marked with a different color—electric lines are typically marked with red. This visual guide is your map to digging safely.

## Use Caution While Digging

Even after a locate, the work isn't over. The lines marked on your property are approximate. While the markings give a general idea of where the underground lines lay, there is still room for error. That's why we urge you to dig with care, especially when you're within a few feet of any markers.

Hand tools, such as a shovel, should be used within this area. This might slow down your project, but it significantly reduces the risk of accidentally hitting a utility line. If you're using heavy equipment, be extra cautious and consider using spotters or soft digging techniques to further minimize the risk.

## Risk Factors That Can't Be Predicted

Underground utility lines can shift over time due to erosion,

temperature changes and soil movement. Even with a locate, you could encounter lines in unexpected places. Additionally, lines may not be as deep as expected due to changes in the landscape over the years, such as soil erosion or excavation work done before the current standards were enacted.

Furthermore, not all lines are owned or maintained by your local utilities. Private lines, such as those running from the meter to your home or shed, might not be marked during a locate. The owner is responsible for knowing the location of these lines and digging carefully around them.

## The Locate Process and Resources Available

When you call 811, our team uses state-of-the-art mapping and detection tools to pinpoint the location of underground lines. These maps are developed based on detailed records and regular updates, but they're only as good as the information available. That's why digging carefully is essential, even when you think you know where every line is located.

## The Responsibility of Digging

As a member of a community, you share the responsibility of maintaining community safety. Digging is no small task. It requires awareness, caution and a willingness to follow the right procedures. Should you hit a power line or any other utility line while digging, cease all work and contact us immediately. Do not attempt to repair or inspect the damage yourself. We have trained personnel and specialized equipment to handle the situation safely.

## Inspiring a Culture of Safety

Safety is not just the responsibility of the utility company; it's a shared duty that each of us carries.

When you plan your next digging project, remember a little extra caution can prevent accidents, outages and even save lives. By calling 811, following the locate markings and digging carefully, you contribute to a safer, more reliable community for everyone.

Let's work together to keep our power flowing and our neighborhoods safe. Dig smart, dig safe and always reach out if you're unsure. We're here to help you every step of the way. ■





When you call 811, utility representatives visit your site to mark the approximate location of underground infrastructure, such as buried gas. ADOBE STOCK PHOTO BY JJ GOVIN



# Dip Into Spring

Flavors and colors to brighten any table

By Anne Braly

The colors of spring come alive in dips that dance with the flavors of the season. With warm weather knocking at our doors, it's time to shed the hearty, heavy dips of winter and change up the snack game.

Think color: the cheery bright hues of beautiful red beets, lively peas in shades of green. And what about radishes—one of the most overlooked, yet delicious, vegetables of all? Their bright red colors and crunchy texture mixed with spring green onions make a delightful dip for chips or an assortment of crudites on your charcuterie board.

Not only are cold dips welcome, but baked dips also have their place on your spring menu. Artichokes and Parmesan marry beautifully on a garlicky bread round toasted to a crispy bite, and roasted garlic, shallots and tomatoes harmonize tastefully in a roasted caprese dip.

Spring dips put a spring in your step with their welcome flavors, ushering in the long-awaited season of alfresco parties on the patio and gatherings of friends.

## ROASTED GARLIC CAPRESE DIP

- |                                      |                                   |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| ½ cup fresh basil, chopped           | ¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese      |
| ¼ cup mayo                           | 2 cups shredded mozzarella cheese |
| 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil | 1-2 heads of garlic               |
| 8 ounces cream cheese, softened      | 1-2 shallots                      |
| 2 tablespoons fresh thyme leaves     | Kosher salt and black pepper      |
| 2 cups cherry tomatoes, divided      | Red pepper flakes, to taste       |

Preheat the oven to 400 F. Place the garlic and shallots in a small 8-by-8-inch baking dish. Drizzle with olive oil. Add the thyme. Bake for 40 minutes, until deeply golden and very soft. Remove the garlic and shallots and let cool.

Add 1½ cups tomatoes to the baking dish. Toss with olive oil, salt, pepper and red pepper flakes. Bake for 10 minutes.

Squeeze the garlic cloves and shallots onto a cutting board. Mash into a paste. In a bowl, combine the cream cheese, mayo, garlic, shallots and basil. Season with pepper. Mix in the Parmesan and 1 cup mozzarella.

Remove tomatoes from oven. Add the cheese dip and gently mix the dip into the tomatoes. Top with mozzarella. Bake for 15 minutes, until the cheese melts and the sauce bubbles.

Slice the remaining tomatoes. Serve topped with fresh basil, thyme and sliced tomatoes. Serve with garlic bread or crackers.





## GREEN ONION AND RADISH DIP

- ¾ cup sour cream
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ¾ teaspoon garlic powder
- 1½ cups radishes, thinly sliced
- ½ cup green onion, trimmed and thinly chopped (both green and white parts)

Combine all the ingredients in a bowl and mix well. Reserve a little of the sliced green onion for a garnish. Chill until ready to serve. Sprinkle with extra green onion and freshly cracked black pepper. Serve with crackers, chips or vegetable crudite.



## SPRING PEA FETA CHEESE DIP

- 1 cup frozen peas, defrosted
- ½ cup plain Greek yogurt
- 2 ounces feta cheese
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 2 or 3 sprigs fresh mint
- Juice of one lemon

In the bowl of a food processor or **blender**, add mint leaves and pulse to chop.

Add all other ingredients and process until smooth. Taste and adjust seasonings, if necessary. Serve with chips, veggies or slices of toasted garlic bread.

## RED BEET HUMMUS

- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ½-1 cup tahini, or to taste
- 2 pounds red beets, scrubbed (about 2 large beets)
- 2 garlic cloves, chopped
- 2 tablespoons ground coriander
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- Kosher salt

Heat the oven to 425 F. In a Dutch oven, cover beets with water and bring them to a boil on the stovetop. Then, keep them covered and braise in the oven for about 2 hours until very tender. Use a knife or fork to test for tenderness, then, with a slotted spoon, transfer beets to a cutting board. When cool enough to handle, slip off the skins and cut beets into 1-inch pieces, spread them on a baking sheet and refrigerate until cold, about one hour.

In a food processor, combine the braised beets with the garlic, coriander and lemon juice, and pulse until finely chopped. With the machine on, slowly drizzle in the olive oil until incorporated, and the beet puree is smooth. Scrape into a bowl and whisk in the tahini. Season with salt and serve with pita bread or pita chips.



## BAKED ARTICHOKE DIP

- 1 8-ounce can unmarinated artichoke hearts, drained and chopped
- ½ cup sour cream
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- 8 ounces cream cheese, softened
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1¼ cups freshly grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- Dried or fresh dill weed, to taste

Preheat oven to 350 F.

In a mixing bowl, add sour cream, mayo, cream cheese, garlic and 1 cup of Parmesan cheese. Combine until smooth. Stir in chopped artichoke hearts and a little bit of dill, to taste.

Place in a greased baking dish. Sprinkle remaining ¼ cup of Parmesan cheese on top. Sprinkle with a little extra dill, if desired. Bake in preheated oven for about 20 minutes or until hot and bubbly. Serve warm with crackers or small rounds of bread.





# A Beginner's Guide to Composting

By Robin Howard

Every year, an estimated 35 million tons of food waste goes into landfills—the equivalent of burying 35 million Volkswagen Beetles in the earth.

Not only does food waste needlessly take up 28% of all landfill space, because it is deprived of oxygen as it breaks down, it also creates biogas made of methane and carbon dioxide—two gases that trap heat in the atmosphere.

According to the Composting Council, composting food scraps instead of tossing them in the garbage has the same environmental impact as taking 7.8 million cars off the road.

Composting is the process of recycling food and yard waste so it breaks down into its smallest components. The process drastically reduces household trash bound for a landfill and creates a rich earthy product that feeds the soil.

Even if you are not a gardener, allowing your household food waste to break down naturally is an easy way to contribute to a healthy environment—and, when your food scraps are happily breaking down outside, your trash cans won't smell.

Unless you have a large amount of land that can accommodate a compost heap, you need a bin to start composting your food scraps. The bigger your bin, the more you can compost. Most households do just fine with a bin the size of a milk crate.

Compost bins can live outside, in the garage or carport, underground, above ground or even on the countertop.

Composting is easy if you follow a few simple rules. Done correctly, they are odorless.

## What Can Go in My Compost Bin?

There are two types of compost: green and brown.

Green compost includes fruit and vegetable scraps and plant trimmings.

Brown compost includes dried leaves, eggshells, newspaper, coffee and tea grounds, filters, paper plates, towels and napkins, sawdust from untreated wood, and corrugated cardboard.

Don't put meat, dairy, oils, fats, glossy paper or waxed cardboard in your bin.

You will add equal amounts of green and brown to your bin in layers, along with enough water to keep everything damp but not soaked.

## How It Works


When organic waste such as paper, cardboard, leaves, grass, fruit and vegetable scraps come in contact with soil, water and air, microorganisms in the soil eat the carbon in the waste, breaking it down into its simplest form.

In vermiculture, composting worms similar to earthworms eat the scraps and produce a rich fertilizer called castings.

Compost worms, or red wigglers, are the same worms used for fishing bait. They are voracious little critters that can eat their body weight in food scraps every day.







That means a pound of red wigglers in your worm bin can consume up to a pound of household food scraps a day.

People who use worms to compost get a kick out of feeding their worms and watching their food scraps, lawn debris and cardboard shipping boxes disappear virtually overnight.

### **Types of Compost Bins**

A compost bin speeds the decomposition process by giving food and yard waste the right balance of air and moisture to break down quickly.

A healthy compost bin environment breaks down food so quickly it doesn't have time to develop odors or attract animals.

Bins aren't complicated. You can build your own out of scrap wood or pallets, cinder blocks, stone, wire fencing, or plastic or ceramic containers.

A Google search for "DIY Compost Bins" turns up hundreds of ideas, plans, and YouTube videos for building your own above or below-ground bin. The search options include building from repurposed and inexpensive materials.

If you don't want to make a bin, you can buy durable above or below-ground compost bins and worm farms online for \$100 or less.

With a garage or yard, you have plenty of options for commercial or do-it-yourself compost bins.

If you have even a little outdoor space, the easiest way to start composting is to drill large holes in a plastic flowerpot or bucket, cut out the bottom, and bury the container in your yard or garden. Cover the top with a lid, such as a sturdy plant tray, and layer your green and brown scraps.

To speed up the process, add a few hundred red wigglers. Buy them online or at a pet or bait store.

If your bin fills up before your scraps are broken down into the soil, simply pull it out of the ground and move it.

One of the most popular new options is the Subpod, a milk crate-sized bin meant to be buried in a raised bed, planter on a porch or balcony, or directly in the ground. The box has aeration holes so compost worms can go in and out and a lid that snaps tight.

After you bury the box, layer green and brown compost inside, add a big bag of red wigglers, then watch up to 34 pounds of food waste, paper and cardboard disappear every week.

The brown box barely sticks up above the ground, so neighbors won't get nervous about having a compost bin next door, and it won't disrupt your pretty lawn or garden.

### **Give Composting a Try**

Composting is easy and practical.

You will always have a free supply of garden and flower fertilizer, you will spend less on garbage bags and, without rotting food in them, your garbage bins won't smell.

Most importantly, composting keeps an average of 250 pounds of trash per household out of the landfill every year, according to the Composting Council.

If you are ready to try your hand at composting, there is a lot of information available for beginners. Some can seem scientific and complicated, but rest assured composting is easy—even if you are new to it.

"The Complete Compost Gardening Guide" by Barbara Pleasant and Deborah Martin simplifies the process.

"Composting for a New Generation" outlines innovative, zero-cost ways to compost wherever you live. ■

ADOBE STOCK PHOTO BY TORTOON



## TENNESSEE CONNECTIONS

# PLANNER

Spring in Tennessee is alive with colorful festivals, hands-on expos and cherished traditions. Use this guide to plan your next outing—there are unforgettable events waiting for you across the Volunteer State.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WEST TENNESSEE STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL

## HUMBOLDT

May 4-10

### West Tennessee Strawberry Festival

Celebrate 86 years of tradition at the West Tennessee Strawberry Festival in Humboldt. Founded to highlight community spirit during difficult times, this weeklong festival now features parades, carnival rides, pageants, recipe contests, a golf tournament, live music and fireworks. Indulge in freshly picked strawberries and classic festival treats while reuniting with friends and family. Experience the charm of West Tennessee and savor the sweet taste of spring.

[strawberryfestivaltn.com](http://strawberryfestivaltn.com)

## GALLATIN

March 8-9

### Nashville Stamp and Postcard Show

Discover the thrill of collecting at the Gallatin Civic Center, where the Nashville Philatelic Society hosts a showcase of stamps, postcards and covers. This annual gathering offers free admission and parking, plus complimentary stamps for kids. Dealers from near and far bring a variety of treasures, and collectors' supplies are on hand to help organize or expand your collection. Bring the whole family to experience a friendly environment dedicated to the art of philately.

[nashphil.krbaker.com](http://nashphil.krbaker.com)

## SEYMOUR

March 15

### Autism Expo

This free, family-focused occasion in Seymour features resource vendors, informative sessions,

a kids' zone and a marketplace where autistic entrepreneurs can showcase their products. Organizers will do their best to accommodate requests for shared tables, electrical hookups and additional floor space. Gather useful information, connect with like-minded individuals and celebrate a community dedicated to inclusivity, creativity and entrepreneurship.

[www.smashautism.com](http://www.smashautism.com)

## DICKSON

March 21

### Wild Wonders Kids Day

This special event offers hands-on activities and live animal encounters guaranteed to delight children and adults alike. Explore Wonders Center and Science Museum exhibits, watch a Tesla coil demonstration and consider adding a planetarium show to your day. Puppet shows, singalongs and story times provide fun for younger guests. Museum members receive free admission to all daytime activities and the

evening show, while children 5 and under attend free with a paying adult (excluding planetarium seats). Embrace a day of interactive science and nature in Dickson.

[wonderscenter.org](http://wonderscenter.org)

## KNOXVILLE

March 27-30

### Big Ears Festival

Founded in 2009, this cultural staple draws more than 40,000 attendees to downtown Knoxville each spring. The multivenue event showcases nearly 200 concerts, talks, workshops and film screenings, spotlighting innovative talent that crosses musical and artistic boundaries. Beyond its world premieres and celebrated performances, Big Ears promotes community engagement through expanded programming that makes the arts more accessible. Join this eclectic celebration to experience the creative pulse of East Tennessee.

[bigearsfestival.org](http://bigearsfestival.org)



## CHATTANOOGA

April 5

### Chattanooga Outdoor Festival

Celebrate Chattanooga as an outdoor destination with vendors, conservation efforts, education, retail, music and community. Outdoor enthusiasts, nature lovers and adventure seekers of all ages are invited to this second annual event on Saturday, April 5, from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Activities, demos, live music, a beer garden and more showcase the city's diverse recreational opportunities at the historic Choo Choo Gardens downtown. Admission is free and family-friendly, uniting local businesses, nonprofits and conservation organizations. Discover new hobbies, check out new gear and foster environmental awareness in the heart of Chattanooga's thriving outdoor scene.

[www.chattanoogaoutdoorfestival.com](http://www.chattanoogaoutdoorfestival.com)

## BROWNSVILLE

April 25-27

### Hatchie BirdFest

Explore the wonders of West Tennessee's Hatchie National Wildlife Refuge during the annual Hatchie BirdFest. Perfect for seasoned birders or curious newcomers, this event offers guided hikes, nature walks and close-up encounters with more than 200 bird species. Hear from special speakers, watch demonstrations and browse various exhibitor booths. With plenty of outdoor fun, food and live music, Hatchie BirdFest highlights the region's rich biodiversity while encouraging responsible environmental stewardship.

[www.hatchiebirdfest.com](http://www.hatchiebirdfest.com)

## TULLAHOMA

April 30

### Jazz on Jackson With Karla Harris

Award-winning vocalist Karla Harris and her quartet perform on International Jazz Day. Specialty seating available at South Jackson Performing Arts Center.

[www.southjackson.org](http://www.southjackson.org)

## SPRINGFIELD

May 2

### 1st Fridays

On the first Friday of each month from May to October, downtown Springfield comes alive from 6-9 p.m. with free, family-friendly festivities. Enjoy live music, food trucks, a kids zone, a specialty vehicle cruise-in and more than 80 local vendors offering produce, crafts and unique merchandise. Stroll the square, connect with friends and savor the small-town charm that makes Springfield special.

[realspringfieldtn.com/main-street/1st-fridays](http://realspringfieldtn.com/main-street/1st-fridays)

## DICKSON

May 3

### Old Timers Day Festival

Join Dickson's 66th annual Old Timers Day Festival for a day of hometown fun. Festivities include a parade, pancake breakfast, live music, vendors and plenty of contests, from horseshoes to cornhole. This longtime celebration brings the community together in downtown Dickson, offering something for all ages. Don't miss your chance to experience the charm of small-town Tennessee at this beloved festival.

[theoldtimersdayfestival.com](http://theoldtimersdayfestival.com)

## VONORE

May 17

### Feast of Saint Barbara Garrison

Step back in time at Fort Loudoun State Historic Park and learn about the French and Indian War through living-history demonstrations. Watch cannon firings, blacksmithing and daily soldier routines. Explore the barracks and infirmary, then meet Cherokee reenactors at Tuskegee just outside the fort. This interactive event shows how the British and Cherokee allied against the French. Bring the family to discover life on the 18th-century frontier.

[tnstateparks.com](http://tnstateparks.com)

## GREENEVILLE

May 17-18

### Iris Festival

Hosted by the Greene County Partnership, the 30th annual Iris Festival fills downtown Greeneville with arts, crafts, local merchandise and regional entertainment. Established in 1994, the event has grown into the area's signature spring festival, drawing visitors of all ages. Browse creative offerings, sample delicious food and enjoy live music amid East Tennessee's scenic beauty.

[www.discovergreenevilletn.com/irisfestival](http://www.discovergreenevilletn.com/irisfestival)

## LINDEN

May 21-22

### Blooming Arts Festival

Downtown Linden becomes an arts hub each spring, featuring more than 150 exhibitors of fine art, crafts and handmade goods. Live performances represent a range of musical genres, while food vendors serve up Southern favorites. Families can enjoy interactive art stations, activities and workshops for all ages.

[www.bloomingartsfestival.com](http://www.bloomingartsfestival.com)

### Include Your Upcoming Event

Want to share an event with the readers of Tennessee Connections? Please visit [tinyurl.com/TennesseeEvents](http://tinyurl.com/TennesseeEvents), or scan the QR code, to submit the details. Thank you.



## BROWNSVILLE

May 24-25

### Exit 56 Blues Fest

Honor the legacy of country blues pioneers "Sleepy" John Estes, Hammie Nixon and Yank Rachell during this two-day tribute in Brownsville. Live music echoes throughout the weekend, accompanied by a Corvette car show, arts and crafts, and mouthwatering local barbecue. Admission is free, with performances on Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 12-5 p.m. Immerse yourself in the soulful sounds and history of an authentic Tennessee hometown.

[www.exit56blues.com](http://www.exit56blues.com)

PHOTO COURTESY OF EXIT 56 BLUES FEST



# Meet a majestic reptile at the Nashville Zoo at Grassmere



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE  
NASHVILLE ZOO AT GRASSMERE

## What Is It?

Situated in the Grassmere area, the Nashville Zoo is a premier wildlife attraction featuring more than 3,000 animals from around the world. Visitors can stroll along shaded boardwalks, interact with friendly critters at designated exhibits and learn about conservation efforts firsthand.

## History

The zoo opened at this location in 1997, but the Grassmere property's story goes back much further. The estate dates to the early 1800s and was once a working farm. In 1964, it was willed to the Children's Museum of Nashville, eventually transitioning into the expansive, modern zoo that now occupies the grounds. Today, it merges historic architecture with contemporary habitats and exhibits.

## In the Site

One notable resident is the green crested basilisk or plumed lizard, famed for its vibrant crest and ability to "walk" on water. You'll find it in the Unseen New World exhibit, alongside a variety of reptiles and amphibians. Elsewhere, popular stops include the Kangaroo Kickabout, where you can hop alongside the marsupials, and the Tiger Crossroads.

## Outside the Zoo

Located just a few miles from downtown Nashville, the zoo offers easy access to Music City favorites such as the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, the Ryman Auditorium and Broadway's world-famous honky-tonks. If you have time, explore nearby 12 South or East Nashville for unique dining and shopping experiences.

## More Info

Plan your visit early in the day to catch the animals at their most active. For tickets, memberships or a full schedule of events, go to [nashvillezoo.org](http://nashvillezoo.org) or call 615-833-1534.





# Basic Garden Planning

After what always seems like a long winter, spring is finally upon us. Home gardeners are dusting off their shovels, starting seeds and champing at the bit to get their hands in the soil. However, some are new to gardening and are looking forward to fresh tomatoes or cucumbers grown in their own gardens but are intimidated by even the thought of it.

While gardening may seem like a mystical art only tamed by those who have the coveted “green thumb,” it is really a matter of understanding a few basics and learning by doing. Whether you are an expert or have never planted a seed, here are a few basics to help get you started.

## Selecting a Garden Site

Perhaps the most important part of starting a successful garden is first selecting a location. This will require a little legwork as you will first need to identify north in relation to your yard. Next, look at how trees, fences and buildings affect the shade.

For a vegetable garden, it is recommended to have at least six hours of sunlight daily, preferably with early-morning sun. You will also want to think about the proximity of water. It is really helpful to have a rain barrel or faucet close to your garden, as there are few things worse than toting gallons of water across your yard in the heat of summer to keep your plants alive.

After you have selected a few potential gardening sites, the next step is to evaluate the soil. Having your soil tested through the University of Tennessee Soil, Plant and Pest Center tells you the pH and nutrient levels, while digging up a few shovels’ worth of soil will let you know the soil type. Although well-drained soil is best, gardens typically do OK in most soils, given it is not compacted, has suitable pH and nutrient levels, and is watered appropriately.

## Planning Your Garden

Once you have settled on a garden location, you can then begin laying out your garden plan. This is where you will make a final

decision on plant varieties, transplant/seeding times, spacing and areas within your garden.

There are a few different schools of thought when it comes to plant spacing. Most publications will reference “row” plantings, especially for larger in-ground gardens. For smaller gardens or raised beds, you may come across the square-foot method. Both have pros and cons. Be sure you follow the plant spacing recommended for the planting style you choose.

In addition, you also want to consider the cultural requirements of your plant selections. Some plants, such as tomatoes, require trellising for the best results. Others, such as watermelons, require a place for their vines to spread out and grow. In some cases, such as exclusion of pests, you may need to use a floating row cover to protect the plants. No matter the situation, it is best to plan the space and materials needed up front as much as possible.

## Give It a Try

The best way to build your confidence and experience as a gardener is to give it a try. It is incredibly rewarding to raise plants from seeds and small transplants to the point you are getting fresh, homegrown produce. As your gardening skills grow you learn from successes and failures—hopefully making your garden more successful year after year. ■

*This article was written using information from Tennessee State University Extension publication “Growing Vegetables in Minigardens.” You can read more at [www.tnstate.edu/extension/documents/GrowingVegetablesinMiniGardensContainers.pdf](http://www.tnstate.edu/extension/documents/GrowingVegetablesinMiniGardensContainers.pdf).*



**Rylan Thompson** is a Tennessee State University Agriculture and Natural Resources/4-H Extension agent in Knox County. He specializes in residential/consumer horticulture and 4-H and is the Knox County Master Gardener coordinator.



# Fostering Leadership

By Kelly Lapczynski

“The most important thing any leader can do is develop more leaders.” Those words from leadership expert John Maxwell are at the heart of a program that has helped Tullahoma Utilities Authority strengthen the skills of its leaders for nearly 30 years through the Coffee County Leadership Program.

Jointly coordinated by the Tullahoma and Manchester chambers of commerce, the program is a nine-month opportunity for workers from differing sectors in the community to learn more about each other.

The format can change from year to year, but the fundamentals remain the same. Through monthly themed tours and panel discussions, participants get an inside view of how various institutions work together to make their community successful. Each year’s class explores themes, including government, education, agriculture, public safety, health care, tourism and economic development.

“At TUA, we take great pride in our support of the Leadership Program,” says TUA President Allen Potter. “This program aligns perfectly with TUA’s mission of strengthening our community through innovation, collaboration and service.”

This year’s TUA participants are unique, because none of the three were raised in the Tullahoma community. The leadership program is giving each of them an insight into the community they might not otherwise have.

Director of Marketing and Strategic Initiatives Emma Cook learned about Tullahoma through the job search that brought her to the area from North Dakota. Soon after she began working for TUA, she became interested in the program.

“I was encouraged by people who went through the last class,” she says. “I heard a lot of people talking about the value of

the program, which got me interested in it. Being able to meet people from so many different industries and positions across Coffee County helped them get a better understanding and grow their professional network. As somebody new, it seemed like a great way to jump in and get to know the area.”



**The Coffee County Leadership Class of 2025 gather for orientation at University of Tennessee Space Institute. Among this year’s class are TUA Electrical Engineer Supervisor Brad Zill, General Foreman of Construction Kyle Riddle and Director of Marketing and Strategic Initiatives Emma Cook.** PHOTO COURTESY OF COFFEE COUNTY LEADERSHIP

Electrical Engineering Supervisor Brad Zill has a similar story. Like Cook, Zill discovered Tullahoma last year through a job search, which, in his case, brought him from West Tennessee.

“I moved to the area. I didn’t know anyone, and, with a family, it makes it hard to get the exposure outside of doing something like this program,” he says. “In business, it’s hard to break through the established cliques as the outsider. Working together with this group of 20-something people is a chance to build new relationships.”

General Foreman of Electric Construction Kyle Riddle approaches the program from a slightly different perspective. Riddle has known a little about Tullahoma his entire life. He was raised in neighboring Moore County.

“I’m familiar with how Moore County works, and I know just about everybody down there, but I don’t know a whole lot about Tullahoma, and I don’t know a whole lot about Coffee County,” he says. “Being more invested in the community gives me a better understanding of how

the community here works. I enjoy understanding how folks do things. It takes a lot to make a community function, and it’s really nice to see all the different functions and to be able to go out and learn what they’re doing, how they’re doing it, and the trials and tribulations they have to go through to be able to do what they do.”

Together, the group agreed that creating relationships was a primary focus of their leadership training. For Riddle, it’s about knowing you have a network to rely on.

“If I have questions about something in the city, I want to be able to reach out to someone that I’m familiar with,” he says.

For Zill, it’s about making sure that the network knows who he is when they need to reach out to TUA.

“I wanted to be familiar in the community,” he says. “It’s

better to put your name out there and be understood and be known so that people can put a face to the department.”

For Cook, it’s expanding her networks, both personal and professional.

“It’s hard coming into a new town and getting to know people,” she says. “In Coffee County Leadership, you have people from banks, people from health care and from nonprofits. Getting to know them and their stories helps create a better picture of the area.”

Potter says the benefits of this partnership between TUA and the Leadership Program are twofold.

“Internally, it empowers our employees to refine their leadership skills, deepen their understanding of local issues and develop innovative solutions that enhance our services,” he says. “Externally, it contributes to a stronger, more resilient community—one where leadership thrives and challenges are met with collaborative solutions. We remain committed to initiatives like the Coffee County Leadership Program because they inspire a culture of growth, connection and shared purpose. Together, we are building a better future for all.” ■



# Improve Your Wi-Fi Experience



Whether you're working from home, streaming your favorite television series or gaming with friends online, you can never have too much bandwidth. Even if you have access to LightTube's gigabit fiber service, there are things you can do to help that ultrafast internet reach every corner of your home. Because no matter how fast the service is when we provide it to your home, how that service moves through your Wi-Fi router to the rest of your home will largely depend on the equipment you have and where you've chosen to put it. If you've experienced lag in your Wi-Fi internet speeds or coverage, here are a few things you can do to troubleshoot the problem.

## Move Your Router

One frequent cause of poor Wi-Fi reception is a poorly placed router. Obstacles are the enemy of your Wi-Fi signal. Anything can negatively affect your Wi-Fi signal, from walls and windows to furniture and appliances. The more centrally located and prominent your router is, the better the coverage it will provide. Unfortunately, we often buy routers that aren't particularly attractive additions to our home décor, so we try to hide them. If you've stuck your router in a closet, under a cupboard or inside a drawer, you've created an obstruction that may either block or weaken your Wi-Fi signal.

## Add a Password

You probably already know that you should have a password on your Wi-Fi network, but do you actually have one? A good password keeps hackers away and stops your neighbors from hijacking your bandwidth. LightTube can push a gig of fiber internet directly to your home, but if you don't protect that signal when you broadcast it with your Wi-Fi router, you could be paying for someone else to binge-watch 47 seasons of "Survivor." When they do, your bandwidth is voted off the island.

## Upgrade Your Router

Unless you're using a router provided by LightTube, you may not have the most capable equipment for your home. If your home has dead zones, you may need to look at how far your current Wi-Fi router can broadcast its signal. You might even consider

adding a Wi-Fi extender or repeater. For large homes, LightTube recommends a network of router nodes, otherwise known as a mesh network.

## Do Not Press Reset

Sometimes, we try to get around calling technical support by attempting to fix the problem ourselves—only to make matters worse. When you hit the reset on your LightTube-provided router, not only will you still have to call technical support, but you'll also have to schedule a time for a technician to visit your home. The reset button on your router restores the device to its factory settings—before it was programmed to communicate with LightTube services at all. We try to prevent these memory dumps from happening by putting a "Do Not Remove" sticker over the reset button, but if you remove that sticker to press reset, you are probably not going to get the outcome you hoped for.

## Call Us

If you have tried it all and still have problems or questions about our LightTube speeds, our technical service representatives can help. We have compatible routers and mesh systems ready to install at your request, for a minimal monthly fee, and maintenance and upgrades are included with your service. Of course, you aren't required to use our Wi-Fi equipment to access our services, but it's a convenience that many of our customers appreciate. Call 931-455-4515 for more information. ■





# The Miracle of Life

By John N. Felsher

As spring approaches and waters begin to warm in Tennessee, fish prepare for their annual rituals that renew life and restock waterways.

In Tennessee, anglers can catch four main black bass species: smallmouth, spotted, Alabama and largemouth. Smallmouth, Alabama and spotted bass often act similar. All three prefer clear water, cooler temperatures, rocky habitat and current. Largemouth like placid places with thick vegetation.

For spawning bass, everything depends upon water temperature. Not all waters warm at the same rate, and not all fish—even of the same species—spawn at the same time in any given water body. On a massive and complex system like a major river watershed or a large and complex impoundment like Kentucky Lake, the same species could spawn in one cove today and not in a nearby cove for weeks.

Rivers that carry water down from the north tend to run colder, and the tributaries and shallow backwaters warm fastest. Therefore, fish might spawn in a shallow lake weeks earlier than those in the main river channel. Depending on water levels, temperatures and species, the spawning season could last for months.

In Tennessee, smallmouth primarily live from Kentucky Lake eastward. Tennessee holds the world record for smallmouth: an 11-pound, 15-ounce fish. That lunker came out of Dale Hollow Lake near Celina. Smallmouth spawn a little earlier than largemouth. They usually spawn when water temperatures reach about 60 to 65 degrees, usually from late March through May.

Two species of spotted bass—northern or Kentucky spotted bass and Alabama bass—live in the Volunteer State. Northern spotted bass live throughout the state except in the higher

elevations in East Tennessee. Alabama bass live mainly in southeastern Tennessee in the Tennessee and Ocoee River systems.

Spotted bass look similar to largemouth but with slightly smaller mouths and somewhat different coloration. Spotted bass and smallmouth generally spawn at about the same time and frequently in the same places. Smallmouth and spotted bass sometimes naturally hybridize, creating a “mean mouth.”

Largemouth live in warmer waters throughout the state. They normally begin spawning when water temperatures reach about 62 to 68 degrees. Spawning could start in early March. Spawning usually peaks in April but could extend into June. For spawning, largemouth normally like shallow flats about 2 to 4 feet deep with sandy or gravel bottoms around weeds, flooded brush, fallen trees, docks or other cover.

Male bass head to shallow water first. Using their lower jaws as pivot points, they rotate themselves with their tails to scour out saucer-shaped nests. Females arrive about two to three weeks later. A healthy female largemouth in her prime can produce about 5,000 eggs per pound of body weight. After laying her eggs, the female moves off the nest to rest and recuperate while the male guards the nest.


When fishing during spawning season, always handle any bass with care. Unless keeping one to mount, return any large females swollen with roe to the water as quickly and gently as possible to protect future generations. ■



**John N. Felsher** is a professional freelance writer, broadcaster, photographer, editor and consultant. An avid sportsman, he's written more than 3,600 articles for more than 170 different magazines on a wide variety of outdoors topics. He also hosts an outdoors tips show for WAVH-FM Talk 106.5 radio station in Mobile, Alabama. Contact him at [j.felsher@hotmail.com](mailto:j.felsher@hotmail.com) or through Facebook.



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901 S. Jackson St.  
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A not-for-profit state utility, TUA provides reliable electric, water, wastewater, television, internet and phone service to more than 11,000 customers. Please recycle.

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*Pastor Jim Norman*



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