TOP NEWS, A3

**PUBLISHER PROTECTED TRUMP**

Enquirer boss testifies he served as lookout.

SPORTS, B1

**BRAVES' CATCHER GOES LOOONG**

D'Arnaud enjoying quite the home run tear.


# The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The Substance and Soul of the South • Wednesday, April 24, 2024 • Atlanta, GA • AJC.com • $2.00


# Office space abundant despite uptick in leases

Nearly one-third of the square footage in metro Atlanta was available to rent at the end of March.

**By Zachary Hansen**
zachary.hansen@ajc.com

Metro Atlanta's office market is starting to stir from its slumber – for better or worse.

More than 2.2 million square feet of office leases were signed in the Atlanta area during this year's first quarter, the most activity to start a year since 2020, at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, according to data from real estate services firm CBRE.

That's the good news. The bad news is that, despite the uptick in new leases and renewals, Atlanta's glut of unwanted office space continues to set records.

About 32.4% – or nearly one-third – of all office square footage in metro Atlanta was available to rent at the end of March, according to CBRE. That's the fourth straight financial quarter in which the region reached a new high-water mark for unused office space.

Real estate analysts say the leasing uptick signals that companies are starting to regain some confidence about their post-pandemic workplace needs. But so far, many employers have scaled back their space.

"There's been some good news about some companies expanding in the market," said Scott Amoson, CBRE associate field research director. "But it's just not enough to fill the void of how much space is coming on (the market)."

The office market has struggled to find its footing in the wake of the pandemic, which popularized hybrid and remote work while upending workplace expansion plans. The uncertainty has prompted droves of companies to seek other businesses to sublease their unused offices, with 9.3 million square feet of space on the sublease market.

For context, nearly 40 million

**Office** continued on **A6**

**MORE DETAILS**

Metro Atlanta had a record amount of available office space at the end of March, according to data from CBRE. Some key figures:

- Office availability rate: 32.4%
- Available for sublease: 9.3 million square feet
- Office space contraction (net absorption) during first quarter of 2024: -1.5 million square feet

# Kemp signs voucher bill he championed

Gov. Brian Kemp and legislators applaud after he signs Senate Bill 233, known as the Georgia Promise Scholarship Act, at Liberty Plaza on Tuesday. NATRICE MILLER/NATRICE.MILLER@AJC.COM

Funds can be used for private tuition or home-schooling; critics call it a subsidy for the rich, bad for public schools.

**By Ty Tagami**
ty.tagami@ajc.com

Gov. Brian Kemp on Tuesday signed legislation that will establish a new publicly funded private education subsidy for Georgia's K-12 students.

Commonly referred to as vouchers, this will be the first such program in recent history that is open to all students, though only in lower-performing schools. Parents will get $6,500 a year if they pull their child out of one and assume full responsibility for educating their child, whether at a private school or at home.

Republicans in Georgia have been trying for years to establish a general voucher program, and after numerous close votes, finally got a bill through both legislative chambers in March.

Kemp signed Senate Bill 233 at a ceremony at Liberty Plaza next to the Gold Dome. "This legislation has always been about one thing: providing every Georgia child the opportunity to get the education that they deserve," he said, adding it "breaks down barriers and opens doors" for students.

It establishes "promise scholarship accounts" controlled by parents, who can spend the money on private school tuition or on costs associated with homeschooling, such as books, tutors or online classes. They can also use it to pay

**Vouchers** continued on **A10**

# Officials, police prepare in case elections suffer any disruptions

State's exercise focuses on safety, how to handle 'worst-case scenarios.'

**By Mark Niesse**
mark.niesse@ajc.com

DALLAS — It isn't hard to imagine elections disrupted by rowdy groups claiming fraud at polling places, social media posts that spread disinformation or a credible domestic terrorist threat.

Georgia election officials and police are preparing for these kinds of hazards ahead of this year's contentious presidential contest.

During a training exercise last week at Paulding County's election office, sheriffs and election officials talked through how they would both ensure public safety and protect voting from interference.

"Hopefully it will not grow and get worse than it did in 2020, but I think there's a chance it will," said Chris Harvey, a former Georgia elections director who now oversees law enforcement training. "We're not trying to make you really paranoid; we're trying to make you a little paranoid and to plan for worst-case scenarios."

The threat to elections and election workers isn't theoretical. In an article published last fall in the

**Election** continued on **A6**

Bud and June Runion (right) of Marietta were on their way to check out an antique car when they were killed. The trial of Ronnie "Jay" Towns (left), charged in their deaths, could start this summer.

# GBI: Man using a magnet discovers evidence in killings

Rifle, belongings in creek tie into 2015 Craigslist case, slain Marietta couple.

**By Shaddi Abusaid**
shaddi.abusaid@ajc.com

A man with a magnet who was fishing in a Middle Georgia creek discovered items linked to the 2015 killings of a metro Atlanta couple who drove 200 miles in the hopes of buying their classic dream car, authorities said.

The GBI said Monday that the man found a .22-caliber rifle April 14 while magnet fishing in Horse Creek on Old Prison Camp Road in McRae-Helena. Two days later, he pulled up a bag containing drivers' licenses and credit cards belonging to Bud and June Runion, along with what authorities believe was the couple's cellphone.

Investigators said they executed multiple search warrants last week at a home in the 400 block of Webb Cemetery Road and that the items collected will be analyzed at the agency's crime lab. Officials would not say exactly what was taken from the home or who lived there.

Magnet fishers use a large magnet to scour bodies

**Craigslist** continued on **A6**

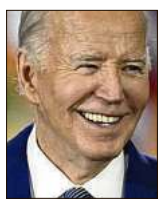
# Biden speech at Morehouse prompts calls for walkout

At same time, college's leader hails Atlanta visit and praises president.

**By Ernie Suggs**
ernie.suggs@ajc.com
**Greg Bluestein**
gbluestein@ajc.com
**and Auzzy Byrdsell**
auzzy.byrdsell@ajc.com

President Joe Biden could receive a mixed reception when he delivers the commencement address at Morehouse College's graduation ceremony next month.

Social media was buzzing with calls for students and faculty to stage a walkout in protest of the Biden administration's support for Israel in its war against Hamas in Gaza. Faculty & Staff for Justice in Palestine-Georgia, a group of academic workers with chapters across the country, posted a statement on social media that said the visit to Morehouse "will discourage new applications from a youth generation that overwhelmingly supports a ceasefire. It will prompt significant protest among current students and faculty, subjecting them to discipline and,



Joe Biden

**Morehouse** continued on **A10**

**GEORGIA'S COMMENCEMENT SPEAKERS**

Some of the high-profile guests invited to give commencement addresses at some of Georgia's colleges and universities:

Warnock

Ossoff

Bastian

Franklin

Cole Hayes

Schmitt

- **Albany State University:** U.S. Sen. Raphael Warnock, D-Ga.
- **Clayton State University:** U.S. Sen. Jon Ossoff, D-Ga.
- **Georgia Tech:** Delta Air Lines CEO Ed Bastian
- **Morris Brown College:** Gospel music star Kirk Franklin
- **Savannah State University:** Slutty Vegan restaurant founder Pinky Cole Hayes
- **University of Georgia:** U.S. Olympian Allison Schmitt, a four-time gold medalist and UGA grad

**POLITICAL INSIDER: MORE INCUMBENTS SKIP DEBATES**

The AJC's Patricia Murphy says leaders' reasons for declining to appear vary, but the ultimate result will be the same — empty lecterns where missing candidates ought to be standing. **A8**

BUSINESS, A9

**Plastic recycling factory coming to Middle Georgia**

California company Brightmark plans new facility in Thomaston, a nearly $1 billion investment in state.

INDEX


| | |
|---|---|
| Classifieds | C5 |
| Comics | C6 |
| Crossword | C3 |
| Lotteries | B2 |
| Obituaries | A10 |
| Sports | B1 |
| Stocks | A12 |


Volume 76,Number 115