

# Top 10 stories of 2015

Southwest Michigan's biggest stories of the year, as voted on by HP newsroom staff

The Benton Harbor High School football team's surprise performance turned a lot of heads, from Southwest Michigan to Manhattan. The Herald-Palladium's newsroom staff felt the roar, too. The Tigers clinched the No. 1 spot on our Top 10 stories of 2015 early in the third quarter of the ballot count.

Finishing a distant second was the downfall of Robert Wooley, the Berrien County commissioner sent to prison for embezzling.

**1. The roar returns:** Expectations were low for Benton Harbor High School football when the season began. The team had won only four games in the previous eight seasons. But an eager squad guided by an experienced coach earned the program its first-ever playoff berth, and it won its first playoff game.

The inspiring story drew reporters from Sports Illustrated, ESPN and "Good Morning America."

**2. Wooley's downfall:** Long-time Berrien County Commissioner Robert Wooley of Coloma is sitting in a Michigan prison after being convicted of stealing \$300,000 total



WOOLEY

from the North Berrien Senior Center, where he was the director, and North Berrien Fire Rescue, where he was treasurer. The thefts were linked to his gambling problem.

**3. Seawood saga:** The Benton Harbor school board suspended Superintendent Leonard Seawood in April, saying little

more than there was an investigation. The parties reached a deal under which Seawood would resign. The board will seek a permanent superintendent in the new year.

**4. Mason Mizwicki:** 2015 began with the methadone overdose death of Watervliet teen Mason Mizwicki at a party. Two people were convicted for supplying the drug. The case led to a state law protecting teens from prosecution if they report overdoses.

**5. New mayor:** In the November election, Benton Harbor City Commissioner Marcus Muhammad defeated Mayor James Hightower, who was



SEAWOOD

seeking his third term as city leader.

**6. Gamrat gone:** A Lansing sex scandal spelled the legislative end for Allegan County state Rep. Cindy Gamrat. The state House expelled the Plainwell Republican in September. She filed to run in the special election to fill the seat, but lost badly in the November GOP primary.

**7. Lighthouses:** Major remodeling began in 2015 for iconic lighthouses in South Haven and St. Joseph. The projects began after major fundraising efforts in the respective communities.

**8. Gas chamber doomed:** Responding to public pressure, the Berrien County Board of Commissioners agreed this year to end the use of gas in terminating unclaimed animals at the Animal Control center.

**9. Menefee's "mercy":** Monty Menefee pleaded guilty to first-degree murder after the April slaying of his mother, Lavonne Monta, 79, in their Coloma home. He told authorities it was a "mercy killing" prompted by the family's pending eviction.

**10. LMC's big year:** 2015 proved a landmark year for Lake Michigan College. It started a wine program, broke ground on a technology center, landed a \$17 million state grant



HARRISON

for building improvements and hired a new president. President Robert Harrison retires Thursday after six years in the post.