

# North Georgia News

4 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, February 8, 2023

## BOE to buy \$1 million parcel for new elementary

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

In a Jan. 30 called meeting, the Union County Board of Education voted to enter into a contract to purchase a \$1 million piece of land for the construction of the new Union County Elementary School.

At 31.94 acres, the ridgetop property adjoins the High School campus behind the Fine Arts Center and is situated just across from the school bus depot, on Maple Bend Drive off Beasley Circle.

The land is being sold by The Bell Family Inc., a domestic profit corporation registered in the name of Blairsville resident Dick Bell.

In a countywide

referendum May 24, 2022, voters approved construction of the new school to accommodate student growth projections, and the project will be the bulk of the expense associated with the current Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax, which does not contain bonding provisions.

Initially, the Board Office received state approval to build the school on property already owned by the system at Wellborn and Hughes streets, with the idea of clearing the old Middle School Gym and a couple other buildings near the Board Office to make room for the new building.

School officials waited to conduct engineering work, however, until after the ESPLOST passed to avoid spending tens of thousands

of dollars in preparation for a multimillion-dollar project that would not be moving forward if the referendum failed.

After ESPLOST VI passed, preliminary engineering revealed that it would be too expensive to build in the area between the Board Office and the Primary School, with total projected costs exceeding the \$42 million ESPLOST cap. This presented a major problem for the system.

### Additional Context

"Back in 2018, (we) identified the need for a replacement Elementary School," Superintendent John Hill said in the meeting. "(The existing building) has some current challenges."

See Land Purchase, Page 2A



The Union County School System will be acquiring this roughly 32-acre land parcel next to the High School campus to build the new Elementary School. Screenshot/qPublic.net

## New Hope Food Pantry welcomes residents in need

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Although New Hope Fellowship Church has been operating its food bank for over 20 years, members experienced a record turnout Saturday, Jan. 28, at the New Hope Food Pantry.

In total, 78 people, some representing families, stopped by to pick up one or more boxes as needed. This added up to nearly 3,000 pounds of food.

Every fourth Saturday of the month from 10 a.m. to noon, volunteers gather around the small building directly beside the church and open a big garage door, revealing a storeroom. The shelves are stacked, but it's no grocery store – it's potentially a lifeline

See New Hope Pantry, Page 3A



Volunteer Linda Patrick of New Hope Food Pantry was excited to witness a record food giveaway during the January distribution. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## URA Board transfers Community Center in vote

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

The Union County Urban Redevelopment Agency Board of Directors voted to transfer the Union County Community Center property to Union County Government on Monday, Jan. 30, correcting an "unfortunate mistake" after being urged to do so by a small group of residents.

It was a long time coming.

Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris said years ago, in 2010, that his intention was to have the Urban Redevelopment Agency transfer the property and building to the county after construction was completed, which ended up being in January 2012. Yet the transfer

See Property Transfer, Page 6A



URA Board Members Daniel Davenport and Mary Ruth Cook in their Jan. 30 meeting to transfer the Community Center property to the county. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## Blue Knights Motorcycle Club rides for charitable causes

By Jeremy Foster  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Blue Knights Georgia XXII Chapter of Blairsville is part of an international law enforcement motorcycle club that consists of active and retired officers dedicated to promoting riding safety and doing everything they can to help local communities.

The club originated in 1974 in Bangor, Maine, and ended up spawning a worldwide brotherhood of over 15,000 advocates for positivity awareness and helping hands, to include the Blairsville chapter that opened shop in 2017.

To date, the nonprofit organization has contributed over \$18.8 million toward various charities throughout

the world, and members pride themselves on being a family-oriented fraternity.

Sal Anicito is Safety Officer for the Southern Region Conference and Road Captain of the local Knights, and after serving various roles in law enforcement, including traffic homicide investigator, he retired after 30 years in 2016 and moved to the area last July.

"We like to consider ourselves a support group for other organizations like police departments and sheriff's offices and others," Anicito said. "We like to get involved in the community in any way we can and supporting any type of program, like Shop With A Cop."

"Any charity rides

See Blue Knights Ride, Page 3A



The members of the Blue Knights Blairsville Chapter motorcycle club want the community to know that they ride locally for good causes. Photo/Submitted

## Blairsville woman arrested, charged with elder abuse crimes

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

A Blairsville woman has been charged with multiple felonies related to the alleged abuse and exploitation of two elderly residents in her care.

She stands accused of stealing tens of thousands of dollars and reducing one victim to using the bathroom in buckets and directly on a bedroom floor.

The Union County Sheriff's Office arrested

Sandra Lee Jones, 56, on Jan. 25 following a lengthy investigation that began in April 2022.

UCSO Capt. Daren Osborn said the investigation had uncovered alleged criminal activities dating to at least 2018, when Jones became the caretaker for a disabled man who is now 72 years old.

The man had lived with his parents until they died, at which point he moved in with his older sister in Marietta. They moved here around 2017, and after his sister passed away

in 2018, he began living on his own in the Blairsville home they had purchased, Osborn said.

Jones had actually offered statements in a prior case involving elder exploitation in the same household, as another woman was found guilty of having used the sister's checkbook without her knowledge to steal money from the family, Osborn said.

This other woman had introduced Jones to the man and his sister before being

arrested, after which Jones took over as his primary caretaker. She was paid to come over and help with activities like cleaning the house, grocery shopping, transport to doctor appointments, paying bills, etc., Osborn said.

The abuse came to light last year after a local water company reached out to the Sheriff's Office. Employees with the company were familiar with the man and his circumstances, and when his water had to be shut off for nonpayment, they got worried

and visited him, Osborn said.

They met with the man at his property and noticed the terrible state of the home, prompting them to call the law, Osborn said, who went on to note that when he entered the house for the first time, "It was awful – one of the worst I've ever seen. The stench would knock you over."

Fortunately, the man was able to be moved into a local assisted living facility soon after being discovered in such squalid conditions, and

See Elder Abuse, Page 3A



Sandra Lee Jones



Vol. 114 No. 07

Arrests - 2D Legals - 3D  
Church - 2C Obituaries - 4C  
Classifieds - 3D Sports - 2B  
Opinion - 4A

### BASKETBALL

Tues. Feb 7  
vs. Fellowship 7 PM

### DAR/SAR Georgia Day Celebration

See page 3A

### Rep. Gunter Week 4 Legislative Update

See page 6A

### Daddy Daughter Dance Tix On Sale

See page 4B



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# Land Purchase...from Page 1A

"It was originally a high school that opened in 1969 – that's the third-grade building (now) – and the fourth and fifth-grade building (opened in 1992) when it was a six through eight middle school. So, there's some aging issues there and also a fairly substantial safety concern."

"And in 2018, when we did our five-year facility review with the Department of Education, it really became apparent that needed to be our next major construction project."

During that facility review process, the Board Office also identified "some fairly substantial space constraints at our Primary School," Hill said.

As a result, school officials determined that the way to "maximize our state funding" while freeing up space

at the Primary School would be to move second-graders up to Elementary School level.

These factors weighed into the decision to seek construction of an expandable Elementary School with a starting capacity of 950 students, a figure that is not far off from current enrollment figures given the present growth rate of the system, per the Board Office.

With the passage of ESPLOST, "we really got into doing our homework as a district," and Hill credited Facilities Director Mike Patton, Assistant Facilities Director Derrick Pruitt and Assistant Superintendent Dr. David Murphy with shepherding the "extensive" Elementary School process.

## Running Into Problems

In collaboration with multiple consultants, including the system's architect and construction manager, the trio discovered multiple problems with building at the previously designated location of Hughes and Wellborn streets, including spacing and cost issues.

For starters, meeting the system's target enrollment capacity for the new school would have required the construction of a two-story building there due to the shape of the available space, which wasn't long enough to erect a one-story school.

This was a crucial consideration because, according to cost estimates, the system would have to pay \$35 more per square foot to build a two-story building compared with a one-story building, to account for the addition of stairwells, elevators, more construction equipment, etc.

It was also going to cost about \$900,000 just to remove old buildings to begin construction, such as the gym and offices for the Mountain Education Center Union Site and Alternative Education Program, which are set to take up residence in the old Elementary School at a later date.

For the buildings that date to the 1950s, demolition estimates alone ended up being about as much as the land purchase, as that particular expenditure ballooned due to necessary abatement for asbestos, which is only considered harmful if people are exposed to unencapsulated fibers.

Further, it was discovered that sitework at the Hughes Street location was going to be much more expensive than originally thought for another reason: construction would require about 200,000 cubic yards of fill dirt to be trucked in to bring the land up to level, or about 30-40 feet of dirt.

When the Board Office learned of these issues and others – potential traffic problems, expansion limitations, concerns over adequate parking – it started looking around for available raw land to price a second, more affordable option.

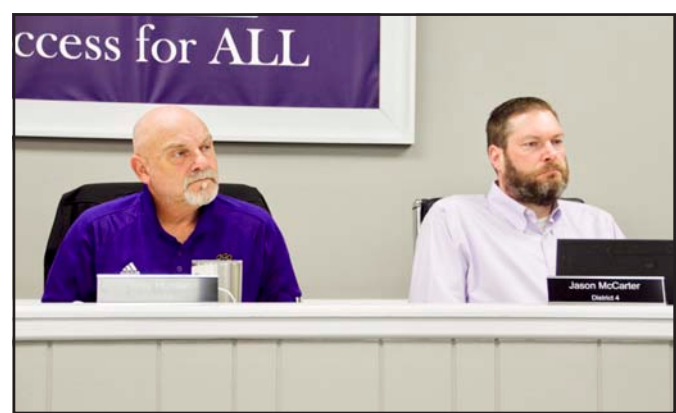
## A One-Story Solution

The Maple Bend parcel seemed like a perfect fit, not only for its proximity to existing school property and improved traffic flow and parking on a rural end of campus, but also because of its elongated shape enabling the construction of a one-story building with plenty of space to expand on either end for future growth.

And building on undeveloped solid ground that needed much less site preparation was a lot less complicated in addition to being more economical.

Construction cost estimates between the two sites came back substantially different. Even factoring in the \$1 million land purchase, the 113,000-square-foot single-story building was estimated to be about \$7.8 million less than the 116,000-square-foot two-story building.

School officials presented this information to



School Board Chair Tony Hunter and new member Jason McCarter listening to a presentation on the \$1 million land purchase, which the board approved in the Jan. 30 meeting at the Board Office.  
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

the Board of Education in the Jan. 30 meeting, highlighting a preliminary cost estimate comparison of \$36,506,900 to build the one-story school versus \$44,320,000 for the two-story school.

Breaux & Associates of Alpharetta drew up the comparison; the company is a "full-service Architectural Firm specializing in Educational Facility Planning and Design."

Intriguingly, these figures far exceed pre-pandemic era estimations, as the system thought in 2018 – prior to rampant inflation and supply chain issues brought about by government responses to COVID-19 – that the new school would likely cost around \$20 million.

## Valuation & Purchase

The Maple Bend property has a 2022 fair market value of \$246,000 as assessed by the Union County Tax Assessor's Office but was privately appraised by Keith Appraisal Service of Chatsworth as being worth \$1.008 million.

The asking price of \$1 million aligned with the appraised value, hence the contracted price of \$1.01 million that includes closing costs.

According to Stan King of Georgia Mass Appraisal Solutions & Services, the third-party vendor that assists the county Tax Assessor's Office in keeping property valuations up to date, the reason the assessed and appraised values vary has to do with classification.

On qPublic.net, a public access tool that enables residents to view information about the various properties in Union County, the roughly 32-acre woodland parcel is classified as a large residential tract with agricultural considerations.

All land that has been stratified as "large," even those in the residential class, "are valued based on timber extraction and soil productivity," according to King, who also noted that ag-use land is typically assessed lower compared with other types of use like commercial and industrial.

"State law requires (that such properties be valued) based on current use and not highest and best use," King said.

Essentially, the rural parcel's public valuation was arrived at for its agricultural designation, while it was privately assessed for its "highest and best use" as a commercial property for the purposes of the sale.

"The sale would indicate a change in use, and (the land) will be valued at current use for the next tax digest," said King, while also confirming that the School System is exempt from paying property taxes.

Four of the five School Board members voted to enter the \$1 million contract that morning: Tony Hunter, Patrick White, Julia Barnett and Jason McCarter.

"So, we're spending \$1 million today to save, based on our best estimates, (\$7.8 million)," McCarter said, demonstrating the general enthusiasm of the board.

Board Member Janna Akins could not make the called meeting but said later in the week, "I support the board's decision."

As to why the School

Board made the decision in a called meeting instead of regular meeting, Murphy said that they needed to get the contract in place to finalize the state-mandated Five-Year Local Facilities Plan presentation in time for a vote in February.

## Construction Funding

Based on current estimates, the system plans to utilize \$32,031,380 in ESPLOST proceeds, with the remaining \$4,475,520 coming from a drawdown of eligible Advanced Funding monies it has applied for with the Georgia Department of Education.

"Advanced Funding is based on the future earned entitlement needs the school district is scheduled to receive over a calculated period of time," according to the presentation.

And as long as ESPLOST revenues remain consistent, the Board Office anticipates that the five years of ESPLOST VI collections will result in \$39,896,409.60, which is about \$2 million shy of the \$42 million cap authorized by voters.

"Of course, that all depends on the economy," Murphy said.

The system has been saving ESPLOST VI and has access to other monies – like the General Fund and state reimbursements for recent projects at the College & Career Academy, Primary School and High School – to cover construction costs while awaiting ESPLOST collections to reimburse non-ESPLOST funds.

Regarding total student population, Hill said that "the district has seen, for us, a substantial increase in enrollment."

"We were right at 3,030 students last Thursday in the district," Hill said. "And as of today, if we were to open this (second through fifth-grade school) today, it would have 838 children enrolled."

The Elementary School is projected to take perhaps 18 to 24 months to complete once the project is bid for construction, with a hoped-for timeline of grading on the new land beginning by summer.

Should the school be ready in time, Hill projects that enrollment there will be around 850 kids at the start of the 2025-2026 school year, or about 100 shy of full capacity.

"And that's with no enrollment increases at all," Hill said. "That's with exactly the number of students we have now (taking into account advancing Primary School students)."

Continuing, "If we're going to open the doors (in August 2025), we need to think about a little bit of room for growth and expansion. Over the past 15 years, we've been seeing 1.5% – and in recent times 3% – enrollment increase, so we need to be planning for the future."

It should be noted that costs may fluctuate during actual construction due to volatility in the overall economy, which could lower the price tag by the end of the project, which will be negotiated to reach a "guaranteed maximum price" in the months ahead.

The new Elementary School will take up about 12 acres of the 32-acre parcel, leaving additional acreage for future needs.

6 - April 14 at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, 7 Ewing Street, Blue Ridge.

Ellijay on Mondays from 10 AM – 2 PM, February 6 – April 10 at the Gilmer County Library, 268 Calvin Jackson Drive, Ellijay.

Blue Ridge and Ellijay are also by appointment only. Please call (770) 312-2258 for reservations at these locations.

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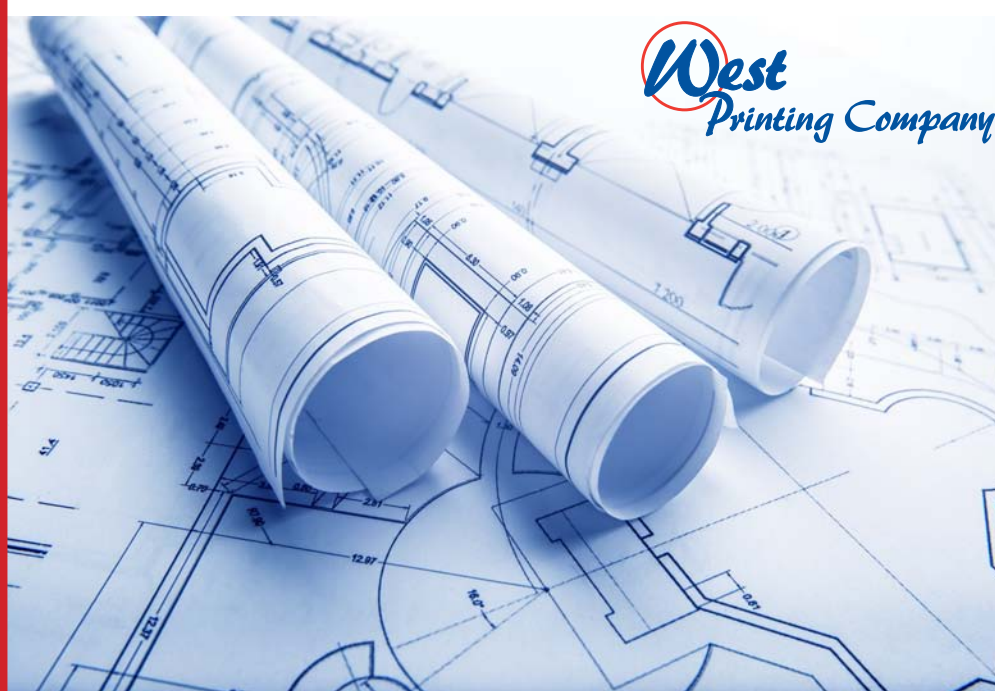
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## AARP® AARP Tax Aide Free Tax Preparation

AARP Tax Aide is providing free tax preparation in Blairsville on Thursdays from 10 AM – 2 PM beginning February 9 through April 13. Location is the Brackett Community Room, behind United Community Bank, 177 GA-

515, Blairsville, GA. This service is by appointment only. Please call (770) 403-7959 for reservations.

Other AARP Tax Aide locations are:

Blue Ridge on Fridays from 10 AM – 2 PM, February

## Wood Slice Painting at the Library



Union County Public Library will be hosting a Wood Slice Ornament Painting class on Wednesday, February 15, 2023 at 2 PM. Join us as we paint wood slice ornaments to hang on your door, wall, or car



## New Hope Food Pantry...from Page 1A

for struggling residents.

Anyone looking to utilize the pantry also can contact a member of New Hope or call the church directly if experiencing dire need.

The vision shared among New Hope's congregation is that one day they can grow their little pantry into a fully stocked charity market where those in need can freely come and pick out what they're looking for.

For now, folks can stop by on distribution days and pick up discreet cardboard boxes filled with a variety of useful foods. This may include macaroni and cheese or spaghetti noodles, pumpkin bread or cookies, cans of fruits and vegetables, and even seasonings or sprinkles.

When somebody picks up a box, they fill out a form with their name, address, the number of people in their household and whether there are any minors or other dependents. It's up to the volunteers to record how many boxes the person – or their family – receives.

New Hope makes a point of nourishing the body as well as the mind and spirit by offering a small closet of clothes to choose from and, if visitors are so inclined, as many prayer sessions as they would like.

Sometimes, patrons are so moved by the lifechanging service that they return to help others, making them better,

more charitable people.

Of course, the recipients of New Hope Food Pantry's blessings are always grateful for the help, but sometimes, volunteers wish they could do more.

For example, several different brands and boxes of dry spaghetti noodles line the shelves, to say nothing of the ones already loaded into boxes. Meanwhile, there's a scarcity of spaghetti sauce.

Other times, there's a lack of meat or produce, and popular choices like eggs tend to go quickly. Because much of the food comes from the Gainesville Food Bank, New Hope often must wait and see what goods they get after statewide distribution, which sometimes leads to a surprising lack of coveted fresh fruits and veggies while they're in season.

So how does one help support the New Hope Food Pantry? It might be as simple as visiting the church itself, where there's a little red wagon outside the door on Sundays and Wednesdays to collect food donations, or stopping by on Saturdays like one generous donor did to drop off a big bag of Progresso soup cans.

That said, while volunteers will gladly accept food donations, cash is preferable because it goes farther and opens up more

options.

"If we get the cash, we can buy this a lot cheaper than what they can go to the store and buy it for because we buy all this through the food bank up in Gainesville," explained Linda Patrick, a volunteer and member of New Hope. "So, if we get cash, we can buy a lot more food."

Another volunteer and churchgoer, Larry Stover, clarified, "We pay 78 cents per pound across the board."

What's more, any extra funds can be spent to expand the current pantry into that dream of a more formal, shop-like setting.

"I think there's a need (to help the community). You know, grocery costs are horribly high," Patrick remarked, while fellow volunteer and church member Roberta Ford recalled a joke her father used to say:

"I went into the grocery store and bought \$100 worth of groceries, came out, realized I forgot something, put my groceries in my glove box, and went back in to get what I forgot."

The program has changed quite a bit from its original incarnation. What started out as a church gathering in a parking lot beside CVS grew into a program that had to be moved into one of New Hope's Sunday School rooms.

From there, further

## Blue Knights...from Page 1A

that take place in our area, we participate in those motorcycle-related rides to help support whatever that ride is supporting, and just help promote those activities. And what money that we raise internally, we'll help out."

Blairsville Chapter President Eddie Henderson concurred, saying the Blue Knights of Blairsville have given money over the last year to individuals in the community to help with their expenses.

Henderson moved here full-time in 2017 for the scenery and friendly people, and he subsequently retired as a colonel with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources Law Enforcement Division in 2019 after 36 years of service.

"Another thing we're about is promoting the safety of motorcycles and advancing the sport of it and its associated activities and operations," Henderson said. "And really, we just do what we can to try and make this community better."

They also work to clear up misconceptions about motorcycle clubs, of which there are many service-oriented groups, especially in the mountains.

"A lot of times, people will see a group of motorcyclists riding down the road with 30-40 bikers, so the conception is that it may just be another 'biker gang,'" Anicito said. "So, we want to break that stigma and let people know

that when they see our Blue Knights vests, we are riding for a greater purpose, and we just want to educate everyone here in Union County on what we're all about."

The Blue Knights work with many organizations like The Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, Make-a-Wish Foundation, Toys for Tots, D.A.R.E., Concerns of Police Survivors (C.O.P.S.), and they ride for as many local charitable causes as possible.

Members meet every third Friday of the month at 8:30 a.m. inside the Blairsville Restaurant. For more information, to make donations, or to become a member, contact Henderson at 404-276-4705 and visit [www.blueknights.org](http://www.blueknights.org).

## Elder Abuse...from Page 1A

he is doing well today, with funds from the eventual sale of his home having been securely transferred to his account.

The investigation by UCSO Inv. Lisa Foes with the Criminal Investigations Division continued in the meantime, leading to subpoenas at multiple banking institutions and other companies because Jones had been using his financial cards for years, Osborn said.

"When all was said and done, she got away with over \$70,000 from him," Osborn said, adding that investigators believe she also took many items from the home during her employment there, as reported by neighbors who witnessed such activity.

Adult Protective Services, which is the state entity tasked with investigating all such reports of abuse, neglect and/or exploitation, contributed to the case.

Last week, the Sheriff's

Office became aware of a second alleged victim of exploitation after receiving a call from the out-of-town daughter of a 92-year-old Blairsville man with Alzheimer's disease whom Jones had assisted since August 2022.

Jones was introduced to the family while working for a local home health care agency, and when the daughter heard of Jones' arrest, she shared enough information to get another investigation started, Osborn said.

The second investigation, opened on Friday, Jan. 27, led to additional charges being filed pertaining to money stolen via debit and EBT cards, though the amount taken was not immediately available, as the investigation remains ongoing, Osborn said.

Denied bond last week, Jones is facing one count of neglect to a disabled adult, elder person or resident; 18 counts of exploitation and

intimidation of disabled adults, elder persons or residents; and one count of crossing the guard lines with drugs, in this case amphetamines found on her at the jail.

She has been charged only and is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

The Sheriff's Office believes other victims could still be out there, waiting to be identified, and individuals or family members who have worked with Jones and suspect abuse are being asked to come forward.

"If you or someone you know has been under the care of this lady in the past, please contact us at the Sheriff's Office," Osborn said. "And anyone with elderly parents or grandparents, always keep a close watch on their bank accounts to help avoid scams, too."

The number to call is 706-439-6066.

## Daughters and Sons of the American Revolution Observe Georgia Day Sunday, February 12, 2023

Old Unicoi Trail Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution will celebrate Georgia Day, February 12th, by exploring Georgia's Revolutionary War Trail – battles fought in Georgia – the colony. Jared Ogden, Blue Ridge Mountain Chapter, Sons of the American Revolution will speak to daughters at the Union County Public Library, Saturday February 11 at 10:30 p.m.

If you would like to attend, please email [oldunicoi-trail@gmail.com](mailto:oldunicoi-trail@gmail.com) as space is limited.

According to Pam Greene, Regent, Old Unicoi Trail Chapter, "SAR explains in their educational materials that the Georgia backcountry where most battles were fought in Georgia was called "the Horner's Nest" because of the stinging attacks made by the Patriots against the British, Loyalists and Indians."

The Georgia Society Sons of the American Revolution has highlighted Georgia's major battles, leaders and key events during the American Revolution in a series of brochures at <https://gasociety.sar.org>.

Each brochure describes one of the Battles



on Georgia's Revolutionary War Trail: 1. Elbert County – Fight at Van(n)'s Creek; 2. Wilkes County – Battle of Kettle Creek; 3. Lincoln County – Elijah Clarke & John Dooly: Heroes of the Horner's Nest; 4. Augusta – Sieges of Augusta and Revolutionary Capital of Georgia; 5. Screven County -- Battle of Brier Creek; 6. Savannah -- Battles of Savannah, Royal & Revolutionary Capital of Georgia; 7. Liberty County – Sunbury, Fort Morris & Midway; and 8. St. Simons Island – Frederica Naval Action. On

Georgia's Revolutionary War Trail, one can discover where the past can be found in the present.

The DAR represents over one million Daughters. Founded in 1890, it promotes historic preservation, education, and patriotism. A woman 18 years or older, regardless of race, religion, or ethnic background, who can prove lineal descent from a patriot of the American Revolution is eligible to join.

Email [oldunicoi-trail@gmail.com](mailto:oldunicoi-trail@gmail.com) to attend a meeting or learn about joining.



# Property Transfer ...from Page 1A

did not take place.

As background, the Georgia General Assembly has empowered each county government to create an Urban Redevelopment Agency as a public entity “vested with urban redevelopment project powers.”

On behalf of the county, Paris created the Union County URA in 2010, when sales tax collections were coming in low during a prolonged economic downturn and he was looking for an alternative form of financing to go ahead and build the SPLOST III-approved Community Center.

Despite underwhelming SPLOST returns, Paris decided to move forward with the Community Center because he perceived multiple benefits of getting the project completed sooner rather than later, as he was hoping to foster development in tough economic times.

Specifically, Paris was aiming to redevelop the “old club house” area at the Butternut Creek Golf Course with a multipurpose building to house the Pro Shop, Chamber of Commerce, Union County Economic Development Authority, large community rooms and more.

“The Community Center is a project that was voted on by you, the voters, in our SPLOST (III) referendum vote in 2008,” Paris offered in an Oct. 27, 2010, notice. “It has been on our books, in the newspaper, advertised for bid, and the bid has been let months ago for construction.”

Continuing, “The only difference is in the financing method. Instead of borrowing the money from the USDA (Department of Agriculture Stimulus Funds) for 40 years as we were on course to do, we will now be borrowing it through an Urban Redevelopment Agency Bond Sale.

“The term will be for 20 years instead of 40 years, but after five years, we can

pay the building off, and we think there is a 50/50 chance that will be possible when the economy recovers. However, if the economy does not recover, we will simply pay the building off with the next SPLOST.

“By not going through the USDA, we will save several thousands of dollars in interest cost and estimate to save (\$250,000) simply because we will not have to comply with all the federal guidelines.”

After receiving transfer of about seven acres of county property at the golf course in 2010, the URA issued \$5.1 million in a revenue bond to fund construction of the Community Center there, and the county made roughly \$1.1 million in interest-only bond payments through 2015.

As Paris outlined as a possibility in 2010, the county ultimately issued a SPLOST IV-backed general obligation bond in 2015 for \$8.185 million – at a much better interest rate – to pay off the \$5.1 million revenue bond, leaving \$3 million in proceeds for other SPLOST projects.

At that point, the property had been built for several years and was finally paid for, yet it remained under the ownership of the county agency, which continued leasing the property to the county at no cost after the debt was paid. With no other business, the URA sat idle for years without active board members.

The matter of rectifying the issue came back before Paris in a March 7, 2022, meeting of a similar nature.

On that date, the newly re-appointed Union County Governmental Finance Corporation Board had gathered to transfer the old Bill Elliott property to the county, which, due to an “unfortunate oversight,” had remained in the nonprofit corporation’s possession for about a decade longer than intended.

The corporation had been established by the

Commissioner’s Office in 2001 for the sole purpose of purchasing the Bill Elliott property that was later developed to include the Health Department, Department of Driver Services, Sports Center, and soon, the new Elections Facility and Multipurpose Gym.

Resident Linda Pittman attended the meeting last year. For years, she has attempted to hold the Commissioner’s Office responsible for perceived mishandling of funds. Pittman asked about the URA and why the Community Center property had yet to be turned over to Union County.

County Attorney William Mercer promised at the time to look into the matter, which resulted in the commissioner appointing a new URA Board of Directors last summer, then the meeting on Jan. 30.

Last week’s gathering inside the courthouse featured input from most of the seven members of the public who attended, including Pittman.

Multiple times, the Commissioner’s Office was criticized for the way it handles SPLOST, which has been likened by some of Paris’ more vocal critics to a “slush fund” that is used at the whim of the commissioner in disregard for the will of the voters.

Essentially, Paris has been accused by several residents of using certain projects to sell SPLOST referendums to voters before effectively abandoning said projects once the money starts to accrue, thereby allowing him to use the funds in ways that violate the terms of the SPLOST vote.

Cited as examples, the SPLOST III resolution called for \$2 million in “Jail Renovation and Expansion” and \$750,000 in “Solid Waste Transfer Station/ Recycling Center Renovation and Expansion,” but the county postponed those expansions due to a reported “lack of funding” and/or lowered priority.

And the resolution called

for the Community Center to be built for \$3.5 million, which was millions of dollars less than the actual cost to erect the building, though the accounting regarding how much it ultimately cost is complicated, considering interest and set-up fees on the bonds involved.

Worthy of note, the SPLOST III resolution outlining specific projects and estimates is not what was voted on by the electorate in 2008; the actual referendum that appeared on ballots contained only project categories and did not commit the commissioner to specific expenditure amounts.

In response to such criticisms, county officials have said the economic downturn contributed to the reprioritization of various projects from SPLOST III, which fell about \$10 million short of projected collections, and that, while they always spend some money in every SPLOST category, in the past, they have not had the proceeds to do everything as planned.

Further, the county said SPLOST referendums must be planned at least a couple years in advance of collections and eventual construction, which means that by the time the county has the money to start building, project costs may have changed, like with the Community Center.

And sometimes, needs simply change as time goes on, as it is impossible to perfectly forecast six-plus years into the future when preparing a list of projects for a new SPLOST, according to the county.

Georgia law provides the Commissioner’s Office wide latitude as to how SPLOST collections are distributed among voter-approved project categories, and Paris and his staff have publicly communicated several times in the past that their intent is always to use the money to serve the best interests of the public.

Another point of consideration is that while SPLOST is certainly voted on by the electorate, so is Paris.

As six-time elected sole commissioner, it is clear that most residents trust the way Paris is running the Commissioner’s Office and enjoy the results of SPLOST, which has been voted in for five consecutive cycles.

Also in the Jan. 30 meeting, the URA Board nominated and elected officers from among its civic-minded volunteer members, who are appointed to the board by



County Attorney William Mercer provided information and fielded questions from a curious public in last week’s URA Board Meeting. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Commissioner Paris. Daniel Davenport will serve as chair, Mary Ruth Cook as vice chair, and Jack McKechnie – who could not attend – as secretary.

After voting to transfer the Community Center deed to the county, the board then decided to keep the URA active, with an annual cost of \$25 in state renewal fees.

Even though the agency now has zero assets and no planned future business, the directors wanted to keep it open to defray the legal costs to re-establish the URA should a future commissioner decide to utilize the agency to fund a project, to include potential grant opportunities.

Incidentally, the renewal fee has historically been paid out of longtime County Attorney Boyd Pettit’s office, which is one reason Mercer said the Community Center transfer fell off the county’s radar, as no one in the Commissioner’s Office dealt with the URA after the revenue bond was paid off in 2015.

“How many more ‘unfortunate oversights’ have we got that us taxpayers are having to bring to your attention?” Pittman asked, highlighting the apparent recent pattern.

“If we make oversights, please bring it to my attention, because if you do, we’re taking care of them,” Mercer replied, to which Pittman responded, “You are taking care of them, and we thank you.”

“Small communities, small offices – they’re going to have some oversights and things are going to happen,” Mercer said. “When you work on short staff, (there are a few) people who have got to do a lot of things.”

All told, the meeting featured input from everyone in attendance who wanted to offer any, including on how often the URA Board should meet once it became evident the agency

would be staying active.

The board voted to hold annual meetings to decide officer elections and present suggestions, with public input, for who Paris should nominate as future board members. The next annual meeting will occur “on or around July 31, 2023,” to coincide with the end of current member terms.

Additional community input included a request that the new board members – and all future directors – keep a better eye on the goings-on of the URA and what business is conducted in its name, monetarily or otherwise.

“I appreciate you guys, and I see (from) the look on your faces, I think you will be a little more involved in what goes on,” resident Diana Barton said to the URA Board. “We’re not here to argue or do anything negative toward you, I just want to let you know.”

“But we as citizens are trying to do the job of what some of the boards are not doing for us. We’re doing all the research, we’re looking at everything, and we’re running across these errors that we’ve encountered.

“We’re just concerned citizens, and we do appreciate volunteers; I’ve been in a volunteer position, too. I just want to let you know we’re not here to get at you or anything, it’s just we have some concerns.”

There was a question about the county’s ability to legally use a SPLOST-backed general obligation bond to pay off a revenue bond, which is typically repaid from revenues generated by a constructed project, but such appeared to be acceptable under a URA arrangement.

As previously reported, the above-mentioned \$8.185 million bond from 2015 received its last remaining payment in 2021, at which time Paris declared the county officially free of debt.

## A History of Apples Seminar at the GMREC Campus

The history of apples is an interesting one. This fruit has been part of the human diet for thousands of years, moved across continents, and a source of controversy. Dr. Stephen Mihm, is a distinguished professor at UGA’s Franklin College, teaches history and in his spare time, is lead researcher for the heritage apple planting at Georgia Mountain REC. He traces his love of apples back to his youth in Connecticut where apples were part of his daily life. Now, he lives on a farm in Athens, where he grows heritage varieties and helps to find and preserve lost and forgotten varieties from the southeast.



Heritage Apples on the GMREC Campus

we are ½ mile on the left past the big chair.

Georgia Mountain REC is an agricultural research campus that primarily serves scientists from the University of Georgia. From new varieties to new treatments for disease, this center has served Georgia’s agriculture industry for 93 years. In 2003, the center partnered with the Com-

munity Council to promote the mission of the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences. The center is semi-open, with visitors able to access the ethno-botanical gardens and periodic seminars. Tours of the research areas are available in the summer, see our website for more details at [www.gmrec.uga.edu](http://www.gmrec.uga.edu) or on [FB@GeorgiaMountainREC](https://www.facebook.com/GeorgiaMountainREC).

## Georgia House of Representatives Legislative Update Week 4

Representative Stan Gunter

Monday, January 30, marked the start of the fourth week of the 2023 legislative session. The House convened for another four legislative days in the House Chamber this week, and before our week was over, we voted on our first bill of the session: the Amended Fiscal Year 2023 state budget.

Each session, the Georgia General Assembly is constitutionally required to pass a balanced state budget, and on Thursday, we passed House Bill 18, aka the Amended Fiscal Year (AFY) 2023 budget. During the 2022 legislative session, the legislature passed the original Fiscal Year 2023 budget, which went into effect last July and set state spending at \$30.2 billion based on projected revenue estimates. Due to revenue collections being higher than expected, the AFY 2023 budget recognizes approximately \$2.36 billion in additional revenue, or 7.8 percent more than the initial FY 2023 budget, and brings the total appropriation for the AFY 2023 budget to \$32.56 billion. This is the second year in a row that the state has experienced such a large growth in revenue for an amended budget, and with this increase in funding, the House was able to provide additional one-time investments to keep Georgians safe, healthy and prosperous over this coming year.

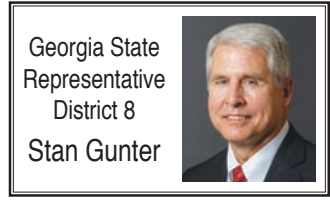
First, the House’s version of the AFY 2023 budget recognizes many of the governor’s recommendations to support economic and workforce development initiatives throughout the state. Additionally, Georgia’s K-12 education system also receives special attention in the House’s version of the AFY 2023 budget. HB 18 includes \$128.2 million for the Quality Basic Education formu-

la’s midterm adjustment to meet the education needs of 12,939 new students, account for charter system growth and expand the Special Needs Scholarship. The House’s amended budget also includes funding for school security grants in the amount of \$60,000 per school.

The House’s budget would also allow the state to provide more support to the employer portion of the State Health Benefit Plan (SHBP) for teachers and school employees. To adjust for the rising costs of health care, this budget increases the SHBP monthly employer match for certified employees from \$945 to \$1,580 starting this year, totaling \$424.8 million in this budget.

Additionally, the House’s AFY 2023 budget dedicates state funding towards organizations and programs that provide critical health care services to Georgians. This budget also includes \$2 million to support private psychiatric contract beds so adults struggling with severe mental health issues can receive the care they need, as well as \$1.97 million to open offline psychiatric beds at the state’s Georgia Regional Hospital in Atlanta. Furthermore, the Georgia Department of Human Services would receive \$5 million to help find alternative housing for youth in our foster care system who have complex needs. Finally, the House’s amended budget allocates \$250.8 million for the state’s Medicaid program, which has experienced an increase in enrollment during the pandemic.

Other highlights in the House’s AFY 2023 budget include \$1 billion for the governor’s new Homeowner Tax Relief Grant program, which would provide one-time property tax relief for qualifying homesteads for the tax year beginning Janu-



ary 1, 2023. This budget also reflects the need to take care of our retired state employees who dedicated their careers to serving the state by including \$14.5 million for a one-time benefit adjustment for retired state employees.

In other news, the House Page Program resumed at the State Capitol this week following a three-year hiatus due to the public health emergency. For more than 50 years, the Page Program has provided an exclusive opportunity for Georgia’s students between 12 and 18 years old to visit our Capitol and serve in the House Chamber. Parents and students can learn more about the application process here: <https://www.legis.ga.gov/house/page-program>.

The House will reconvene on Monday, February 6, for Legislative Day 13, and my colleagues and I will be busier by the day as the session progresses. Now that the AFY 2023 budget has passed in the House, this legislation will undergo the same consideration process in the Senate, and the House will shift its focus towards creating a full budget for the upcoming fiscal year. We will also continue to see many more bills reach the House floor in the days and weeks ahead, and I encourage you to reach out to me about any legislation that interests you. My Capitol office phone number is 404-656-5125, and my email address is [Stan.Gunter@house.ga.gov](mailto:Stan.Gunter@house.ga.gov).

As always, thank you for allowing me to serve as your state representative.