

North Georgia News

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2 Sections 22 Pages

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Friends, family wish Conley well in retirement

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley's retirement party was a bittersweet affair on Saturday, with four generations of family members, longtime friends, past and present city employees, City Council members, county leaders and others attending to wish him well as he leaves public office.

The drop-in party took place over several hours inside the Brackett Community Room of United Community Bank Feb. 22, featuring Southern-style buffet catering by Blairsville Restaurant and a massive retirement cake for dessert.

Conley spent the time chatting with his many guests, all of whom attended to celebrate a "job well done" by the dedicated public servant

whose 26 and a half years of elective office at City Hall will conclude at the end of this month.

"It hasn't all hit me yet, but when it does - I'm just so full of gratitude, it's hard for me to explain," Conley said, overwhelmed by the showing of support by "all the people of the city who came out to honor me."

Mixed in with the "thank yous" and "farewells" for his time as mayor was an atmosphere of joyous reunion, featuring a diverse array of attendees ranging from people who have known Conley, 84, his whole life to those who have strived alongside him for the betterment of the city.

Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter has worked with Conley his entire city career, and he described the

See *Happy Retirement*, Page 7A



Mayor Jim Conley enjoyed the company of multiple generations of family members alongside the dozens of friends who attended his Feb. 22 retirement party. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Commissioner dissolves Development Authority

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Union County Development Authority is no more after Sole Commissioner Harold Collins dissolved the organization in his regular monthly meeting on Thursday, Feb. 20.

Upon adoption, Resolution R-2025-07 immediately disbanded the 51-year-old county agency and its current board members and leadership, including executive director Mitch Griggs who had led the authority since 2008.

"All assets, debts, rights and obligations held in the name of the Union County Development Authority will be immediately transferred to Union County," Collins said before moving on to other business.

Following the regular meeting, Collins opened the floor for comments, where



In his second monthly meeting as sole commissioner last week, Harold Collins continued to put his stamp on the Commissioner's Office. Photo by Todd Forrest

he encountered opposition from Development Authority members and others.

Collins justified his decision by stating the dissolution would save taxpayers approximately

\$190,000 annually, including salary costs north of \$100,000 for Griggs.

"From what I've seen over these last several years, we're not getting our money's

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New allegations leveled at Superintendent Hill

By Shawn Jarrard
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In their Feb. 20 regular meeting, members of the Union County School Board heard new allegations that Superintendent John Hill retaliated against another parent in the system for having filed a complaint with the schools.

As previously reported, parents Simon and Naveela Philbeck alleged in the January meeting that Hill made Naveela fear for her job - she works in Human Resources at Young Harris College - after she reported religious discrimination against their daughters by a Primary School teacher.

Hill declined to comment on the specific allegations last month, citing district policy involving potential legal matters, but said the schools were "committed to maintaining an open and



Young Harris College Professor Dr. Matthew Steven Bruen in the Feb. 20 School Board meeting. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

nurturing environment, free of discrimination of any type, where all our students can thrive."

The Philbecks pledged to return to the February School Board meeting, and so they did last Thursday to offer additional

In coming forward, See *Superintendent Hill*, Page 6A

BOE celebrates workers, honors YHC partnership



Congratulations to School Nutrition employees Rachel Primeaux and Angie Tanner for placing first in the district culinary contest, pictured here with Nutrition Director Heather Miller. Good luck at state in March! Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The Union County Board of Education paid tribute last week to School Nutrition employees Rachel Primeaux and Angie Tanner for finishing first with the delicious dishes they respectively prepared

for the School Nutrition Association District 9 Culinary Competition in January.

School Nutrition Director Heather Miller announced in the Feb. 20 monthly board meeting that the Primeauxs of Union County Middle School and Tanner of Union County Elementary School would be

competing at the state culinary competition in March.

In other business, Superintendent John Hill and Director of Teaching and Learning CT Hussion recognized Young Harris College with a "Partner in Education Award" in honor

See *School Board*, Page 8A

Young Harris resident killed in home explosion

By Shawn Jarrard
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The State Fire Marshal's Office is investigating the death of 67-year-old Thomas Lee Marcell, a Towns County resident believed to have been killed Sunday morning in a massive home explosion that echoed over a 10-mile radius from its epicenter near Downtown Young Harris.

Investigators are looking into the possibility of a gas explosion, with a preliminary analysis not being able to rule out the accidental ignition of a methane build-up inside the home as the likely cause, according to Deputy State Fire Commissioner Tony Pritchett.

Towns County Coroner Tamela Cooper said there is no reason to believe the victim was anyone other than Marcell

at this time, though given the extent of the damage, his body is being sent to the State Medical Examiner's Office for positive identification.

Next of kin notification was made Sunday evening with relatives who lived out of state, and Cooper has offered condolences to Marcell's family and friends in the tragic accident.

See *Home Explosion*, Page 12A



Tragically, a man died Sunday in a home explosion that reverberated for miles in the mountains surrounding Young Harris. Photo by Shawn Jarrard



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Commissioner ...from Page 1A

worth," Collins said. When pressed, including in a comment by Panel Built Inc. owner Mike Kiernan – a UCDA Board member – that his company and its 350-plus employees wouldn't exist without the authority, Collins said he wasn't inherently against the idea of a development authority. Along with his current Panel Built staff, Kiernan stated this company is in the process of building a 72,000-square-foot addition for 75 more employees, and without the Development Authority, Panel Built will be unable to secure the industrial revenue bond already approved by the UCDA. As the bottom line, Kiernan said without the bond, this company's expected growth would be in limbo. "Just because I'm dissolving it right now doesn't mean I can't bring it back in three months under a new administration," Collins said. "I can bring it back at any time under a new administration." Asked for clarification, Collins responded, "I don't think that under the current (Development Authority) administration we are getting our money's worth." Kiernan questioned Collins regarding his decision and the potential impact it would have on the community's job market when 200 Union County High School graduates enter the workforce this summer, resulting in a brief back and forth. "I'm not stopping you from employing them," Collins replied. "If I can't build the facilities because I don't have an industrial revenue bond, then you are," Kiernan said. "We can talk about that. Come by my office," Collins said. "If we have to put a new board in next week, we'll do that if that's going to save jobs, but it will be under a new administration." Collins added that communication issues with the Development Authority have been a concern since he took office: "They don't reach out to you, and we've got to work together, so that's the reason I want to change the

administration." After being accused himself of a lack of communication with the Development Authority – the dissolution surprised board members as well as Griggs, who sent out the Feb. 21 UCDA Board Meeting agenda just hours earlier – Collins responded, "They should have come to me." As for when the Development Authority could possibly return under new leadership, Collins said he didn't know at the moment: "It may be one month, it may be six months." During a dialogue with Griggs, the commissioner implied that he was elected to limit growth before questioning where the county would house additional workers without adding more apartments and affordable housing. Griggs suggested that Union County is fortunate to attract a regional labor force from surrounding counties in Georgia and North Carolina, which is more than enough to cover the new job openings. He also told the commissioner if the tax digest doesn't grow to match inflation, the county will start losing money unless the millage rate is increased. In return, Collins cited additional costs in public services like law enforcement that come with maintaining growth. Local business owner Brad Lester stepped forward to verify Collins' motives behind the dissolution of the UCDA, asking if it was to limit growth, save money or simply bring in a new board and director. "It's to get a new administration so we won't be spending as much money," Collins answered. "The main one (Griggs) is making over \$100,000 a year." Local attorney Jack Lance suggested that Collins simply replace the Development Authority's current administration instead of terminating the organization entirely. County Attorney William Mercer Jr. stated that the county can only legally replace the board members by starting the UCDA over from scratch,

adding there is no timetable for a replacement and the UCDA was created by a resolution and can be dissolved by a resolution. After the meeting, Griggs disagreed with the way Collins characterized the Development Authority's value, highlighting the nearly 17 years he and board members have worked to secure \$94.3 million in direct economic investment that has resulted in the creation of 994 local jobs. He also pointed to 2025 being a banner year for investment locally, with \$80 million on tap to bring in over 400 additional jobs, though he intimated all that was up in the air now. Among other meeting business, Union County and the Georgia Department of Transportation reached an agreement for grant funding in the amount of \$158,250 for the period of July 1, 2024, to June 30, 2025, for the operation of the Union County Transportation System. For the Road Department, Collins authorized an \$11,275 contract with Estes Equipment Company to replace fuel monitoring system equipment, along with a \$16,665 deal for an OMNTEC ATG replacement for tank monitoring and leak detection purposes. The commissioner accepted a \$255,589.50 agreement with GMASS Inc. for the upcoming reappraisal of a third of county properties as required every year, with the duration of the contract spanning Jan. 29-Dec. 31 of 2025. Collins issued resolutions appointing Mercer as County Attorney – he formerly served as deputy county attorney – Jennifer Mahan as the Open Records Officer and Jill Chastain as Alternate Open Records Officer. Additionally, Collins tabled the idea of hiring a firm to conduct a forensic audit on the county government, citing the audit's exorbitant price tag of over \$400,000. Three Union County Recreation Department basketball teams, the 12U girls, 12U boys and 14U boys, were recognized for their wins in the Mountain Athletic Conference championships. County Manager Tony Hughes provided an operations update, praising the Rec Department's registration of

786 kids across five spring sports while announcing a "zero-tolerance policy" for fans and parents who display unsportsmanlike behavior during youth games. Immediately prior to the county meeting, Collins held a public hearing to discuss future business, including proposed revisions to the Union County Code of Ordinances related to alcoholic beverages. Collins is considering reducing a restaurant's minimum seating requirement threshold from 30 to 16 in order to serve alcohol. This proposal drew some pushback suggesting it would clear the way for more bars and nightclubs, but Mercer indicated that wasn't the case, declaring some smaller eateries don't have the septic tank capacity to serve more than 30 customers. The commissioner also held a discussion regarding revisions to the Code of Ordinances related to short-term rentals. If approved, the county would start requiring applicants to update their personal information annually when they reapply for a Short-Term Rental License. Furthermore, the required Good Neighbor Notification would have to be distributed to neighbors prior to the first rental.

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Superintendent Hill...from Page 1A



North of 100 people were present for the February meeting of the Union County Board of Education. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Naveela said she learned from others that she was “not the only one” to be subjected to “this pattern of behavior by the superintendent.”

“I have heard from former teachers, current teachers, former students, parents, that he has a history of basically pushing things under the rug, using unconventional methods to resolve problems, bullying tactics and things like that,” Naveela said.

“I believe this complaint of mine could have been resolved in 30 minutes or less,” she continued, adding that the school district has been a welcoming place in all other regards. “Had I been approached, ‘Mrs. Philbeck, come on in, let’s talk; we assure you we advocate for a safe environment for your child’ – I would not be standing here today.”

Naveela also accused a woman she described as Hill’s girlfriend, former school employee Crystal Beach, of harassing her outside the Board Office following the January School Board meeting, saying there were witnesses to the event.

When reached for comment, Beach said, “I emphatically deny all of the fallacious allegations Ms. Philbeck made regarding me harassing her. I did not get in her face; upon exiting the building, I went one way, and she went another; and I did not shout at her in the parking lot.”

Bringing the new allegations against Hill during public comments on Feb. 20 was Young Harris College Professor Dr. Matthew Steven Bruen, a parent of two young students at Union County Schools.

Bruen said he, too, had been professionally targeted by Hill last fall after he lodged complaints about “a couple of issues” at the schools.

“I emailed the school about those issues,” Bruen said. “Rather than take them seriously, the school, under the leadership of Superintendent Hill, engaged in a conspiracy to enact professional consequences on me in what I can only describe as being a complete outrage.”

Bruen said the alleged attempt was “ultimately unsuccessful” because he is a tenured professor, “but what I would like to say is that we should feel like we can bring complaints to the school and not have to deal with this kind of unprofessional behavior.”

“I am an educator myself; the conduct here is completely unbecoming of educational professionals,” Bruen said. “I think that the people in the room know this.”

“I would also like to point out that if you have been victimized or abused or targeted by Mr. Hill, now is the time to come forward and tell your story. You’re not alone anymore; the ice has been broken.”

Continuing, Bruen said he could “corroborate every single thing that Mrs. Philbeck has said because it happened to me as well.”

“This is also not an opinion – it is a fact,” he said. “I have all of the evidence to prove everything that I’m saying right now. So, just to be clear, this is not just me spouting off but rather reflective of a reality.”

“And I would implore you as the board, please take action to make sure that this does not happen to any other families in the school system again.”

Hill did not respond to a request for comment regarding these latest allegations.

The Feb. 20 meeting had above average attendance from the public, with many in the standing-room-only crowd apparently there to show solidarity with the schools.

Scotty Jarrard, who



School Board Member Janna Akins addressing the recent controversy following public comments in last week’s meeting. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

preaches at Harmony Grove Baptist Church, offered comments addressing the controversy surrounding the publicly made allegations, asking that the School Board make sure to follow due process in investigating any claims, which he feels are very one-sided right now.

As a parent in the system, Jarrard said he had seen “nothing but the utmost care for our students and for our parents as well,” adding that, in light of the recent accusations, “everyone is considered innocent until proven guilty.”

“It is crucial for everyone to understand, ladies and gentlemen of the board, that due process is rarely swift,” he said. “I am sure you’re acting on these things. And it must be carried out in a manner that brings about privacy to all the people involved.”

“Therefore, my request to the School Board is straightforward. Once investigations of accusations have been conducted, do your best to communicate to the public what has happened. I understand fully that you cannot share every detail, but I urge you to inform the community in some way if at all possible.”

Retired House of Prayer Pastor Jerry Helton, who worked for the district years ago, praised the longstanding culture of Union County Schools. Helton graduated locally, as did his children and grandchildren, and he has other grandchildren currently enrolled here.

“It is my opinion that we all benefited from a good education while maintaining a moral culture and moral values,” Helton said. “For the last three years I’ve been in the middle school and high school often, on a regular basis.”

“I try to attend as many of the sporting events, plays, chorus and band concerts as I can. So, I know the importance of giving earned thanks when they’re deserved, and that’s why I’m here.”

“I want to thank you, the administration, the board, and I want to thank the educators and everyone involved, all the support personnel and all the teachers who have worked so hard to make Union County School System one of the best systems not only in the state of Georgia, in my opinion, but in the nation.”

Retiring Assistant Superintendent Tiffany Setzer was one of the five people allowed to address the board for three minutes at the end of the meeting, per public comment rules.

Setzer lauded the district’s commitment to “Success for All” and requested that the board continue to uphold the level of excellence that has become synonymous

with Union County Schools.

“As a special educator, I have witnessed firsthand how Union County Schools has excelled in inclusivity, striving to meet the diverse needs of all learners,” Setzer said. “The ongoing support from this board has been vital to ensuring every student, regardless of background, ability or circumstance, feels safe, valued and welcome.”

“That commitment to creating an environment where all students can thrive is something that’s always stood out to me, something I’ve been very proud of, and something I know will continue here at Union County.”

“As I prepare to step into retirement, my hope for this district is simple. Please, continue to prioritize what is best for our children. Continue to hold onto the values of our community, values that have always made Union County Schools a great place for both educators and for students.”

In closing, Setzer acknowledged that “there will always be trying times,” but she asked the School Board to “stay focused on the real work at hand, which is educating our children.”

“The success of this district has always been about the collective effort of all of us – board members, educators, staff and families working together toward a common goal,” Setzer said. “And I know that this work will continue. I leave knowing that this district is in capable hands.”

When the public comment period ended, Board Member Janna Akins offered a statement about what many in attendance appeared to be there to hear.

“We as a board understand that there are varying comments and opinions regarding the recent issues that have been raised by community members,” Akins said. “We support and we champion free speech and vigorous debate on all issues.”

“While the School District does not and cannot comment on potential or ongoing legal matters, we are addressing and will continue to address all concerns, whether legal or otherwise, through the appropriate channels consistent with our policies and in the best interests of our community and our schools.”

“The School District in Union County strives to serve our children every day, and we remain committed and focused on the hard work of educating our children and fostering an open and nurturing environment where all our students can succeed.”

Coverage of the awards, discussion items and business portion of the Feb. 20 meeting appears in a separate article in this week’s newspaper.

Happy Retirement...from Page 1A



Friends of Mayor Conley eagerly lined up to speak with him on Saturday and get their pictures taken with the Blairsville native who has been a fixture of local politics for nearly three decades. It's certainly the end of an era.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

mayor as a good friend to him and many others, as well as a tremendous champion of the city who always made himself accessible to the public and did the right thing.

"He is dedicated to Blairsville and wants the best for the citizens and the visitors and the businesses of our town," Baxter said. "He has just been a supporter of everything that's made this town successful."

Baxter said Conley has been a great advocate of Blairsville PD and "law enforcement in general," a sentiment backed up by retired sheriff Mack Mason, whose office worked hand-in-glove with Blairsville PD to keep residents safe, thanks in large part to Conley's leadership.

"I am grateful for Mayor Conley and all he's done for the city and the county, and I appreciate the fine working conditions that we always had together," Mason said.

Conley's legacy and successes on behalf of the city are too many to list here, but he, too, is proud of the relationship between the Sheriff's Office and Blairsville PD, and indeed, the other working relationships he shared with county and state officials.

He is also proud of the work he helped oversee in expanding City Hall in the mid to late-2000s to add a building onto the Historic Jail, creating new offices for the City Clerk, Accounting Clerk, the Police Department, the Downtown Development Authority and Council Chambers.

In more recent years, Conley helped to steer the development of standalone police headquarters with the city's purchase and remodel of the building next to City Hall, enabling Council Chambers to be expanded once again.

To improve walkability downtown, the mayor worked with State Sen. Steve Gooch to secure funding through the Georgia Department of Transportation for a major sidewalk project running the length of Wellborn Street from the square to Granddaddy Mimm's Distilling Co.

And under his leadership, the city and DDA were able to finally erect public restrooms and install a badly needed parking lot in Downtown Blairsville, and he has guided expansion of the Wastewater Treatment Plant over the years in his quest to offer the best services to the public.

Conley has always made it a point to upgrade city facilities when needed, for instance, the then-new Maintenance Building he helped establish as a councilman, and later, as mayor, he traveled Georgia and Tennessee with local pilot W.C. Nelson to research the construction of a world-class terminal at the Blairsville Municipal Airport.

The W.C. Nelson Terminal Building opened in 2017 as a clear testament to the importance of the Blairsville Airport to Conley and the city as a destination-making economic venture for not just Union County but the region.

A lifelong friend of Conley, Nelson credits his vision and that of the City Council for continuing to foster interest in and improvement of the local airport, where ongoing safety and quality of life updates remain in the works.

"Jim has worked hard for the city," Nelson said. "If a road was bad, he cared about it and tried to get it fixed, as well as anything else in trying to improve the city – and the airport."

"He and the council were very innovative. A little town like Blairsville wouldn't have an airport like we've got if it wasn't for this group in the city."

Nelson was happy to support Conley at the party, speaking with others about their extensive shared history. The two native sons played together as kids, with Conley serving as the leader of a group of local children who had fun the old-fashioned way – outside and with plenty of imagination.

Leadership is something Conley has long been acquainted with, as attested to also by his niece, Ann Miller, who relayed at the party that Conley, a popular and "well put together" student, served as both Junior and Senior Class President at Union County High in the late 1950s.

Twelve years younger than Conley, Miller said she benefited from growing up with a patient uncle who minded the best interests of those around him, and she views Conley's

deep history with the area as the perfect bridge to have guided Blairsville responsibly into the 21st century.

After a successful career in the grocery industry, Conley retired from Marietta in the early 1980s and returned home to Blairsville to care for his beloved mother Estelle. He got involved in city politics in the mid-1990s at the urging of his friend Bill Forster, and the rest is history.

Conley may be leaving office – he served on the City Council for several years before winning election five times as mayor – but in addition to spending time with his kids, grandkids and great-grandkids, plus exercising more in retirement, he will still be involved with city affairs.

He looks forward to attending City Council meetings as a member of the public moving forward, and he will also maintain a volunteer presence at the Board of Health, the Historical Society and the Chamber of Commerce.

Ultimately, Conley said the legacy he leaves behind as a dependable servant leader would not be possible without the hard-working employees he has had the privilege of overseeing throughout the years, with trust serving as the key to the city's success.

"They have always been as good as they come," Conley said. "I trusted and could depend upon each and every employee. I've always said that the people that work for the city made my job easy, because they've always stepped up and got the job done."

"I've guided them and given them (freedom to do their jobs), but I could always depend that the job would get done and I'd get a phone call telling me it's taken care of. And that goes for every department, including City Hall, too."

Taking over from Conley will be longtime Councilman Robert "Buddy" Moore, who will swear in as mayor on Friday to serve the remainder of Conley's unexpired term through December.

"We've worked together for 15 years, and he's a hard worker who has seen a lot of long hours," Moore said Saturday, echoing a common refrain. "You've probably heard other people say that the city is his life; he really loves the city and does what he thinks is best for it – always has."

Blairsville Cruisers Meeting Thursday, February 27th



Members are asked to attend the monthly meeting to be held on Thursday, February 27th. The meeting will be held at the clubhouse on the Murphy Hwy at 6 PM sharp. Come get the latest schedules on local car shows and events.

Important information and applications will be available for the upcoming North Georgia Hot Rod and GM truck shows to be held in Meek's Park on May 2-3rd. Meet our newest member and club computer/webmaster and visit with friends and fellow members.

The March Newsletter will be published shortly after this meeting. We look forward to

seeing you Thursday.

The Blairsville Cruisers is a 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation that has supported our mountain communities by helping children in need and local veterans who need a helping hand. Since 2007 we have schedules for car shows, information and flyers for the Sheriffs' "Shop with the Sheriff" and Clay County Sheriff's "Shop with a Hero" as well as several other programs that assure that no child goes without at Christmastime.

Your donation for raffle tickets along with our other fund raising events and our wonderful sponsors help raise an average of \$50,000 annually. All of these funds go back to the communities where our club members reside to help children and veterans.

Thank you for your support of the Blairsville Cruisers Car Club.

School Board...from Page 1A



Young Harris College President Dr. John Wells and Vice President for Enrollment Management Clint Hobbs had great financial news for Union County students in the February School Board meeting.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

of the district's longstanding, fruitful relationship with the college.

Hussion used figures to demonstrate "what this partnership means." For the 2024-25 school year, there are 170 students enrolled in 540 credit hours at Young Harris College, which translates to over \$400,000 in tuition

costs through the state's Dual Enrollment Program – for this year alone.

And YHC allows Union County teachers to qualify as professors administering college courses here, of which there are currently three who teach 300 credit hours on the local campus. This allows students to remain with their classmates and enjoy the educational culture at UCHS.

Accepting the award were new College President Dr. John Wells and Vice President for Enrollment Management and External Relations Clint Hobbs. Both men recently returned to YHC after serving in similar past capacities, and Wells said they were proud to partner with Union County Schools.

"The Dual Enrollment Program is really important,

both to Union County and to Young Harris as well," Wells said. "Young Harris wants to make sure that everyone knows that, as an institution, we are committed to being partners here in North Georgia."

As a testament to that commitment, Wells said that students going through the Dual Enrollment Program in Union County "are going to get a special scholarship at Young Harris."

"In fact, if you are a full Pell (Grant) student and you are a resident of Georgia, we're going to get you as close to tuition-free as we can get you," Wells said. "Come see us, and we will make that happen."

Hill said he was keeping a close watch on legislative updates at the Gold Dome, including a proposal to increase state health care costs for school employees that would add an estimated \$230,000 to the local budget, plus proposed safety improvements that could increase local costs.

The superintendent also said state legislators were considering several bills to prohibit transgender athletes in sports, to coincide with federal efforts under the Trump Administration, and a new state bill would restrict the use of cellphones for kindergarten through eighth grade.

Director of Accountability and Compliance Dr. David Murphy said the U.S. Department of Education had sent a "Dear Colleague" letter advising that race can no longer be factored into policy decisions, effectively ending "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion" initiatives in public school education.

In other news, Murphy said that Union County Schools had not only successfully renewed accreditation through Cognia – the premier accreditation nonprofit with an international footprint – but that the system did so with flying colors, beating global averages in most categories.

Also revealed in the meeting, the under-construction Elementary School is under budget by roughly \$125,000 and ahead of schedule for completion. A ribbon cutting will take place April 24, with moving to begin April 25 in plenty of time to start the 2025-26 school year as planned.

Be sure to check out the Sports Section of this week's newspaper for more information on new Union County High School Head Football Coach Rob Stowe, who was hired in the Feb. 20 School Board meeting.

The public comment portion of last week's meeting, which occurred at the end of the evening, is covered in a separate article in this edition of the newspaper.



Cleo is a gorgeous black girl with a white locket. She is ready to come home and give you some love. Text June at 706-400-8612 for her story.

If you like winning money come to Bingo at Civic Center every Wednesday at 6 PM. If we have 70 players one game will offer a \$1,000 prize!

Legislative Update: Georgia Representative Stan Gunter

This week, my colleagues and I convened for four legislative days, passing a total of 25 bills as we continue to advance legislation to the Senate in preparation for Crossover Day on Thursday, March 6th. Legislative Day 28, or Crossover Day, serves as a crucial milestone in the session as it is the final opportunity for bills and resolutions to pass out of their respective chambers and remain eligible to become law.

To start the week, the House unanimously passed House Bill 223, reaffirming our commitment to addressing agricultural losses from Hurricane Helene, particularly among those working in the timber industry who were heavily impacted by the storm's damage. HB 223 is like legislation that the Georgia General Assembly passed after Hurricane Michael caused much damage and destruction to Southwest Georgia in 2018. Like Michael, following Helene, many in the timber industry incurred significant economic expenses for salvaging downed timber, site clearance, restoration and reforestation. This bill would provide much-needed relief to these hardworking tax-payers as they try to rebuild from the storm's damage.

We also focused on further solidifying Georgia's position as a leader in workforce readiness with the passage of House Bill 192, the Top State for Talent Act. HB 192 would build on the successes of numerous workforce development initiatives, such as Georgia's High Demand Career List, compiled by the State Workforce Development Board, the Georgia MATCH Program and legislation passed last year that strengthens articulation agreements. HB 192 would repurpose a grant program to help schools adjust their career, technical and agricultural education programs to match the High Demand Career List, which would create a more unified and streamlined approach to workforce development. Cultivating workforce readiness is necessary for ensuring that Georgia's labor force meets the evolving needs of its competitive economy. As such, HB 192 would also establish a system where the High Demand Career List would directly inform the Georgia Department of Education's development of career education courses for students in grades six through 12. Additionally, the bill would require the creation of a report on articulation agreements to eliminate redundancy, which would ensure students do not repeat coursework for skills they have already mastered. The Top State for Talent Act would strengthen Georgia's position as a national leader in workforce development, driving growth and prosperity for Georgia's economy by creating a clear pipeline of skilled talent that is prepared to meet the demands of the future workforce.

This week, we also took a significant step to ease a burden on Georgia families by unanimously passing House Bill 181, which would remove unnecessary costs and delays for families seeking a Georgia Certificate of Foreign Birth for children who have already completed the foreign adoption process and received U.S. citizenship. Currently, when

a family adopts a child internationally and the adoption is recognized and verified by the federal government, thus granting the child U.S. citizenship, Georgia law requires adoptive families to undergo a "re-adoption" or "domestication" process. This process can involve hiring an attorney, navigating the court system and obtaining a report of adoption – essentially an acknowledgment of the adoption. The report must then be submitted to the Georgia Department of Vital Records to obtain the Certificate of Foreign Birth. This re-adoption process can be redundant and costly for families who have already invested significant resources in adopting a child internationally. Additionally, without the Certificate of Foreign Birth, adoptees are left with only their birth certificate from their country of origin, which can present challenges when using it for identification purposes. HB 181 would address this by allowing children who have automatically acquired U.S. citizenship through foreign adoption and who hold a Certificate of Citizenship to skip the extra step of obtaining a report of adoption to receive a Certificate of Foreign Birth. HB 181 would update the process to be quicker and less expensive for Georgia families by eliminating the need for unnecessary legal steps.

My House colleagues and I also turned our attention to enhancing protections for household pets through the passage of House Bill 177, which would allow for a protective order in cases of family violence or dating violence to include provisions for the care, custody and control of any household pet. This would apply to pets owned by either party or by a child living in the household. Under HB 177, the individual accused of violence toward a household pet could also be ordered to stop harassing, injuring, taking or hiding the pet. Family and dating violence can often have a significant impact on household pets, with animals sometimes being harmed or threatened as a means of controlling or intimidating victims. HB 177 would ensure that victims of domestic violence are not forced to leave their pets behind when seeking safety, thus removing a common barrier that often prevents victims from escaping abuse. Additionally, the bill would give judges the tools to inform victims of their legal rights regarding their pets, helping them better understand the parameters of the protective order and reinforcing their ability to protect both themselves and their animals.

We also passed the following bills during the sixth week of session:

House Bill 38, which would provide Georgia College Completion Grant (GCCG) eligibility to students who have completed 70 percent of a four-year program or 45 percent of a two-year program. The sunset date for the GCCG program would be extended from June 30, 2025, to June 30, 2029;

House Bill 51, which would authorize the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority to finance and manage projects related to natural gas facilities, including outside any certified areas of a nonmunicipal gas company. This would include the storage, supply and distribution of natural gas, pipelines, storage tanks, natural gas distribution systems, associated equipment, vehicles, properties, furnishings and devices. The bill would also empower the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority to create and enforce rules and regulations to fulfill its responsibilities and add "natural gas systems" to the personal liability of the au-

thority's members, officers and employees;

House Bill 53, which would update criteria for veterans to be eligible for burial in a Georgia veterans cemetery. Members would qualify in accordance with the federal Burial Equity for Guards and Reserves Act of 2021, provided the member died after August 1, 1990, and completed a full term of service with an honorable discharge. Reserve and National Guard members who died during service, as well as immediate family members, would also be eligible. The Department of Veterans Service may charge burial fees;

House Bill 58, which would define the term "ticketed entertainment event" and would make it illegal to fly an unmanned aircraft over or within 400 feet of a ticketed entertainment event without proper consent. It would specify that anyone found guilty of violating the terms of this bill would be punished as a misdemeanor;

House Bill 90, which would amend Georgia law related to bona fide conservation use property to increase the maximum acreage to qualify as a bona fide conservation use property from 2,000 acres to 4,000 acres. These changes would be effective on January 1, 2027, only if the related constitutional amendment is ratified by voters in the statewide election held in November 2026;

House Bill 92, which would update Georgia law related to base year homestead exemptions by changing the date by which local governments must follow certain procedures to opt out of the base year homestead exemption from March 1, 2025, to March 31, 2029.

House Bill 167, which would revise restrictions relating to hunting feral hogs, bears and deer. The bill would make the color fluorescent pink an acceptable outer garment color that can be worn while hunting these animals under specific circumstances;

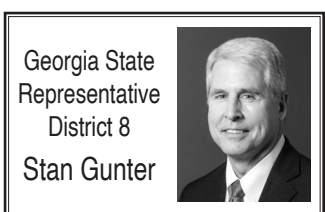
House Bill 196, which would require health insurers to reimburse a pharmacy for a drug dispensed to a covered person on the State Health Benefit Plan based on the national average drug acquisition cost. Additionally, the bill would require a professional dispensing fee that is not less than the professional dispensing fee paid by the state under the Social Security Act;

Senate Bill 16, which would prohibit any member of the governing authority of a local government to engage directly or indirectly in a bail bond business within the jurisdiction of their respective government.

The Georgia House of Representatives will resume its work on Monday, February 24th for our seventh week of the session. Tuesday, February 25th will be dedicated to our first committee workday where the day will be packed with committee meetings to review legislation before we reach Crossover Day.

I encourage you to reach out with any questions or concerns regarding the bills being considered. Please don't hesitate to schedule a phone call or a visit to the State Capitol to discuss matters that are important to you and your family. You can reach my Capitol office at 404-656-5125 and via email at Stan.Gunter@house.ga.gov.

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



Georgia State Representative District 8 Stan Gunter



This is Moe. He is a 3 year old wire haired terrier. He loves going on walks and getting belly rubs.



Meet Simba. He is a 5 years old domestic long-haired orange tabby cat. He does great with other animals and very sweet.

For more information about our animals, please call Mountain Shelter Humane Society at (706) 781-3843.

ARFS: Give Your Pain Purpose

If you have lost a dearly loved pet and your heart is grieving, why not "give your pain purpose" by making a donation to Animal Rescue Financial Support (ARFS) in honor of your cherished fur friend.

ARFS will use your donation to provide medical care for an animal that is suffering and has an owner who cannot afford veterinary expenses. Memorials can be made

to ARFS, P.O. Box 972, Hiawassee, GA 30546 or on ARFS website (www.arfs-inc.org) by clicking the DONATE button. Please indicate that your donation is a memorial and provide the name of your pet. Memorials will be posted on ARFS's website, unless you request otherwise.

Let's not forget that precious pet that gave you so much joy. Let's give your pain purpose!

Support Group for Families with Addicts at Positive Pathways

Addiction affects everyone close to the addict. If someone's addiction to drugs is affecting you, we can help. Nar-Anon is a twelve step program for families and friends of addicts. At our meetings you will hear others, who are going through similar prob-

lems, share about how they cope and find recovery.

We meet on Sunday from 6 PM to 7 PM at Positive Pathways, 243 Hunt Martin Street, Blairsville, GA 30512. Phone 706-994-6703. First meeting will be held on May 12, 2024.

Home Explosion...from Page 1A

"Thomas Lee Marcell was a beloved member of the Young Harris community, known for his remarkable skill in repairing guitars, chainsaw motors and gas engines," Cooper told the newspaper. "His hands could restore the soul of a beloved instrument and bring life back to worn-out machines."

"Thomas was also a world champion boatsman, achieving greatness in the Marcell boats he built alongside his father."

"Thomas was a kind-hearted and generous man, always willing to lend a helping hand to those in need. His presence will be deeply missed, but his legacy of craftsmanship and kindness will live on in the lives he touched."

Reportedly, Marcell hailed from New York originally and had been renting the property on Brown Circle as living quarters for the past six years. He was the lone occupant of the old cinderblock building that previously served for decades as a garage shop.

No one else was hurt in the incident, but the explosion decimated the roughly 1,000-square-foot structure situated across the highway from Gibson's Drive-In Restaurant on US 76.

The tremendous blast and resultant fireball blew straight up through the building, charring treetops on the bank behind the home and scattering debris over the area.

Somehow, destruction and fire from the eruption were largely contained to the immediate vicinity of the building, with no major damage to incredibly close-by occupied homes.

E-911 Dispatch toned the emergency call out at 7:39 a.m. on Feb. 23, and Towns County Fire & Rescue responded with Tanker 1, Tanker 2, Engine 2 and Engine 3 to extinguish the blaze.

Fire Chief Harold Copeland said firefighters quickly learned that a man was in the home at the time of the explosion, and after putting out the flames, they transitioned to the difficult work of recovering his body.

At the Fire Department's request, the State Fire Marshal's Office sent three agents to the scene, and Chief Copeland said he also called an excavator company to help move debris at the site.

The fire chief expressed sympathy for the man who lost his life and his loved ones, and he commended the response of his firefighters and all responding agencies, including the State Fire Marshals, Towns County Sheriff's Office, Towns EMS and the Coroner's Office.

On the cause of the explosion, Deputy Fire Commissioner Tony Pritchett, who serves directly under Georgia's Insurance and Safety Fire Commissioner John F. King, said the state office would publish a full press release once the investigation is closed.

"Preliminarily, there are absolutely no signs of any foul play, and at this point ... it's being investigated as a gas build-up inside the building," Pritchett said. "Right now, we can't rule out methane. It does not appear to be propane at this point."

As for an ignition source, Pritchett said they were working to nail down exactly what would have sparked such a blast.

"Any kind of electrical switching in any kind of appliance inside of the structure would be all it would take to ignite whatever kind of gas is in there," Pritchett said of the scenario being investigated.

And while it is too early to say that the following is what happened, Pritchett explained that sewer gases, like highly flammable methane, can quickly fill a structure if a septic or sewer drain line attached to a plumbing fixture goes dry, such as from non-use or damage.

Drains for fixtures like sinks, showers and toilets are installed with a special fitting called a P-trap that holds a little bit of water to act as a barrier preventing gas from backing up into a building.

It is called a P-trap because the fitting makes the shape of a letter P on its side, designed to hold water in the bend. And a P-trap going dry increases the likelihood of gases like methane seeping into homes, potentially filling spaces to cause extremely hazardous conditions.

Speaking to public safety around the potential for explosions in situations of methane build-up, Pritchett said people need to make sure there is water in the P-trap portion of their drains "to keep that methane gas from coming back into the house."

This holds true especially

for plumbing fixtures that are not used regularly. A precaution people can take in such cases is simply using a bucket to pour enough water into a drain to keep the P-trap filled and prevent a backflow of gas.

"When properly installed, the vent pipe that ventilates the plumbing out of the top of the house will help it a lot," Pritchett said. "But still, if you don't have the P-traps properly filled with water, you could still have an issue."

The deputy fire commissioner said people with this issue can sometimes notice the unpleasant smell of methane in their homes, but it can depend on how a building is laid out or what part of a home residents typically frequent.

"People get used to smells inside their homes as well and it gets to the point to where they don't even notice it," Pritchett said. "I don't know if that's the case in this situation."

"Also, it's possible that methane can come in overnight when somebody's sleeping, or it can happen pretty sporadic. And there's so much of that that's built up in septic tanks a



An explosion devastated this home off Brown Circle Sunday, killing the lone occupant.

lot of times that it doesn't take long at all to fill a structure up."

Pritchett said that if anyone notices any kind of suspicious smell to call the Fire Department and have them come check it for potentially dangerous exposures, and "they'll want to get a plumber out there."

People with propane running to their homes should

make sure everything is installed correctly by professionals who are qualified to do it, he said.

"And we really urge everybody to have a home multi-gas detector to pick up on anything like that," Pritchett said. "That way, if you can't smell it, at least that detector's going to pick up on it."

Though relatively rare, Pritchett said that, sadly, there

are usually four or five structure explosions across Georgia each year.

"Sometimes it's propane, sometimes it's methane – it just really depends on the situation," Pritchett said. "The majority of the time, if somebody's in the building, they are almost always fatal because of the blast, and it's hard for anybody to survive that."

Local Car Club seeks raffle car, donations for children in need



The Blairsville Cruisers Car Club, local recipient of the "Non-profit of the Year" award, is searching for a vehicle to be used in its fund raising efforts for the 2025 season.

The Blairsville Cruisers is a 501(c)3 non-profit that supports local children in need, especially at Christmas time. Since 2007 the club's primary source of funds comes from the raffle of a good used vehicle. We are having no luck finding a vehicle within our budget this season and would like to appeal to our fine citizens to be on the lookout for a prospect, or to help by making a tax deductible donation specifically toward the purchase of a suitable vehicle. We look for a good clean lower mileage sporty type vehicle with automatic transmission that would appeal to donors buying raffle tickets.

Since 2007 we have had a variety of Mustang, Camaro, Firebird and other coupes or convertibles as raffle vehicles. We would consider other types of desirable cars or a pickup truck as well. Our "Shop with a Cruiser" enabled 100 children to have a Merry Christmas in 2024. Our support of local law enforcement programs in

Union, Towns and Clay counties also assisted their efforts to help Children in need.

The car club also helps year around with children and their families to get through a rough patch as well as offering scholarship for trade and technical college students.

Please call Blairsville Cruisers Chairman Wayne Tanner at 706-897-2501 or Club President Dick Couture at 706-400-1036 if you know of a prospective vehicle or would like to donate to the purchase of a vehicle.

The Blairsville Cruisers is a 501(c)3 nonprofit corp. that has supported our mountain communities by helping children in need and local veterans who need a helping hand. Since 2007 we have sponsored "Shop with a Cruiser", "Shop with a Cop", Union County Sheriffs' "Give-a-Gift", Towns County Sheriffs' "Shop with the Sheriff" and Clay County Sheriff's "Shop with a Hero" as well as several other programs that assure that no child goes without at Christmastime. Your donation for raffle tickets along with our other fund raising events and our wonderful sponsors help raise an average of \$50,000 annually. All of these funds go back to the communities where our club members reside to help children and veterans.

Thank you for your support of the Blairsville Cruisers Car Club.

AARP Tax Aide Free Tax Preparation



AARP Tax Aide is providing free tax preparation in Blairsville on Wednesdays from 10 AM – 2 PM beginning February 5 through April 9. Location is the Brackett Community Room, behind United Community Bank, 177 GA-515, Blairsville, GA.

This service is by appointment only. Please call (706) 963-0905 for reser-

vations.

Other AARP Tax Aide locations are: Blue Ridge on Fridays from 10 AM - 2 PM, February 7 - April 11 at St. Luke's Episcopal Church, 7 Ewing Street, Blue Ridge.

Ellijay on Mondays from 10 AM – 2 PM, February 10 - April 14 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.