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# North Georgia News

2 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, September 11, 2024

# Investigation finds shooting threat groundless

By Shawn Jarrard North Georgia News editor@nganews.com

Union County Schools and the Union County Sheriff's Office take school shooting threats seriously - even when it turns out there is no actual

A Blairsville student was questioned Friday, Sept. 6, about whether he threatened to commit a school shooting, but an investigation quickly determined there was no evidence he had made such a threat or that any specific threat had ever been made regarding Union County Schools.

Tensions have been running high around the state

and nation since the deadly shooting at Apalachee High School in Winder last week, in which a 14-year-old student stands accused of gunning down two students and two teachers in cold blood.

The Barrow County school where tragedy struck Sept. 4 is a short two-hour drive from here, and for local school officials and law enforcement, the fear over such a nightmarish situation hit even closer to home when Union County Schools learned of a possible threat Friday.

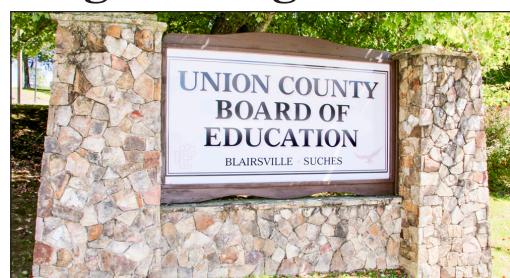
An investigator with the Clay County, North Carolina, Sheriff's Office reached out to the Union County Sheriff's

Office around noon on Friday to report that they were looking into the claims of a Hayesville student, UCSO Maj. Shawn Dyer said.

Reportedly, the Hayesville student had received a Snapchat message outlining a non-specific school shooting threat, and the Hayesville student apparently acted on a hunch that the message came from the Union County student investigators ended up questioning here, Dyer said.

The Union County Sheriff's Office immediately contacted the Union County Schools Police Department about the student in question.

See Shooting Threat, Page 2A



## GBI bomb squad responds to SouthState Bank

By Shawn Jarrard North Georgia News editor@nganews.com

The Blairsville Police Department and Union County Sheriff's Office responded to an apparent threat at SouthState Bank on Georgia 515 around lunchtime Monday, though the nature of the situation remained unclear at press time. Reportedly, an irate

woman with unknown affiliations went into the bank. threw bags on the counter and demanded money. She appeared to have been taken into custody Monday.

The bank was evacuated of employees and customers and closed to the public before officers cordoned off the

building with crime scene tape.

Multiple area law enforcement agencies responded to the location after the initial incident, including deputies from Hall and other counties.

Around press time, agents with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation Bomb Disposal Unit were in the process of sending a robot into the bank reportedly to check for explosives in the bags the woman carried. K-9 teams were present as well.

Union County Fire and Union General EMS remained on standby throughout the incident in case they were

See SouthState Bank, Page 2A



The GBI Bomb Disposal Unit sent a robot into the bank to check for explosives Monday, Sept. 9

### v to accept rollback mill rates

By Shawn Jarrard North Georgia News editor@nganews.com

Both Union County Schools and Union County Government are expected to accept their rollback millage rates this month for a combined property tax rate of 11.374 mills – a 0.435 mill reduction versus 2023.

According to the Georgia Department of Revenue, there are two types of value increases made to a county tax digest each vear: increases due to inflation in the real estate market and increases due to new or improved properties, the latter of which represents

actual growth.

Inflationary increases require the calculation of offsetting rollback rates, otherwise, "a local levying authority must notify the public that taxes are being increased," per the Department of Revenue.

Board and County Government have signaled that they can keep their budgets balanced by accepting full rollback rates this year, which should mean most property owners will be seeing which is used to calculate similar tax bills compared to

The Board of Education is expected to set a rate of 7.243 mills in its regular meeting on

Sept. 17 at 7 p.m. in the Board Office, and Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris plans to set the county's rate of 4.131 mills in a called meeting on Sept. 19 at 5 p.m. in the Union County Courthouse.

Every year, the School Fortunately, the School Board levies about two-thirds of each county resident's total property tax bill, with the county levying the remaining

> And the millage rate, property tax bills based on annual budgetary needs, has made dramatic shifts over the past several years.

For perspective, the

proposed 2024 combined rate will be lower than the school system's millage rate alone in 2020, highlighting how much downward pressure has been applied to the tax rate to counteract rampant inflation.

However, the digest and proposed millage rates for 2024 reflect a cooling market and perhaps the beginning of stabilization for fair market

For example, the combined millage rate in 2020, before the market skyrocketed after the onset of COVID-19, was 18.918 – more than 7 mills above the proposed 2024

See Millage Rates, Page 3A



Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris in his August regular Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## students complete second Habitat home build

By Brittany Holbrooks North Georgia News Staff Writer

It is often said that teamwork makes the dream work, and in this case, teamwork completed the framework for an entire house in about a year's time to benefit a local family in partnership with the Towns/ Union Counties Habitat for Humanity

Panther House 2 made its way down the road on Tuesday, Sept. 3, departing Union County High School to cheers from students and

teachers lining the sidewalks that benefits everybody. to see it off.

us – exciting especially for our students," said Superintendent John Hill as the house was carefully loaded onto a trailer for transport. "We are very thankful for our partnership and excited to see this home go to a family here in Union County."

Thanks to the partnership with Habitat, the UCHS construction class has started building homes for local families in need as part of a valuable learning experience

During the first semester, "It's an exciting day for the skeleton of the house comes together, to include the basic foundations for walls along with the floor and roof.

The second semester is devoted to finer details like windows, doors, siding, metal roofing, electrical wiring and plumbing, with the results being inspected with students by the local Building Department.

"It's much slower-paced than the real world, but it does provide students with See Habitat Home, Page 7A



UCHS construction students and educators proudly posing with the home they built to house a local family with Habitat for Humanity. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



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Hope in the Mountains Recovery Event Sept. 14 **Union Co. Property Tax Digest & 5-Year History** 

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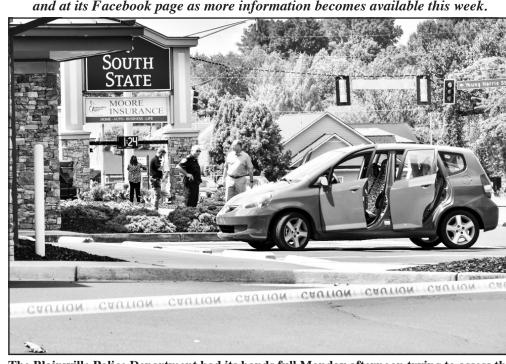
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THE NORTH GEORGIA NEWS **September 11, 2024** 

#### SouthState Bank...from Page 1A

The North Georgia News will update this story online at https://www.nganews.com/ and at its Facebook page as more information becomes available this week.



The Blairsville Police Department had its hands full Monday afternoon trying to assess the nature of the threat at SouthState Bank, with rumors running wild online. Photo by Todd Forrest

#### Shooting Threat...from Page 1A

been out of school with illness, so he was not on campus, Dyer

Deputies found him at his home within 20 minutes or so of learning of the potential threat, and Dyer and School Police Chief Scott Deyton said the student and his guardian were fully cooperative, allowing a search of the home and all electronic devices owned by the student.

Investigators could not find evidence of any crime having been committed, with no trace of the Snapchat account used in the threat discovered on the student's devices, Deyton said, and the student was released from suspicion.

"We take threats like this very seriously and investigate them to make sure we don't have an issue," Dyer said.

The investigation into the potential threat remains active in Clay County, where investigators believe someone possibly used a fake Snapchat account to communicate a threat that did not come from an immediately identifiable person or mention a specific target school, Dyer said.

One issue with Snapchat is that messages sent via the popular social media app can be set to delete when viewed, making re-viewing original messages impossible, thereby complicating investigations.

But even though the threat turned out to be unsubstantiated here in Union County, the local School System and Sheriff's Office treated it with deadly youngest and most vulnerable members of the community remains the highest priority for both entities.

Statistically speaking, schools remain the safest places for children to be, despite the handful of school shootings that have occurred around the country in recent years.

Still, the terroristic nature and tragedy of school shootings shock the public no matter how few actually take place, and it's something that school districts across America are constantly trying to safeguard against.

According to Union County Schools Superintendent John Hill, the school system has spent millions of dollars upgrading and reinforcing campus safety since the 2012 shooting massacre of 20 Newtown, Connecticut.

Measures in place today include a dedicated school police department with a resource officer at every school, plus a "floater" patrolling where needed; 100% badge-keyed entrances to school buildings; double buzz-in doors at main entrances; panic buttons and automatically locking doors in every classroom; hundreds of security cameras with weaponsdetection software; and more.

Additionally, all the glass in doors and windows systemwide is equipped with an impact-resistant coating, and each school has a Quick Response Team of staff members trained to assist School Resource Officers and other law enforcement and medical personnel in active shooter situations.

And the system has invested "a very substantial amount of resources" in mental health support for students, "trying to ensure that we're picking up on these troubled youth to prevent something like this from happening," Hill said.

Then there is the constant training, such as active shooter drills with multiple local first responder agencies that take place annually over the summer, regular staff safety meetings, first-aid trainings, and both soft and hard lockdown drills conducted with students and

The Board Office is also looking into alert systems that feature panic buttons on employee badges to immediately notify law seriousness, as safety for the enforcement and trigger system used at Apalachee High School that is being credited with preventing greater bloodshed there.

"Safety is No. 1 in our strategic plan: safety, relationships and expectations," Hill said. "And we devote a tremendous amount of our time and resources into doing everything we can to keep students safe at school when they're with us and in our custody."

Ådded Hill, "We are continually working and striving to ensure the highest level of safety possible for every student in Union County Schools.

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation reported multiple copycat threats in the aftermath children and six staff members of the shooting in Winder, and

As it turned out, the student had at Sandy Hook Elementary in local authorities hope kids who think it's funny to sow chaos online after tragic events think again, because those who do make threats, regardless of intent, will be held accountable. like the students in Gainesville and Valdosta arrested last week.

In a Facebook post Sunday, Union County Schools reiterated that the "safety of our students and staff is always our top priority" and urged community members to make a report if they see or hear anything suspicious.

"In light of recent threats across the state, particularly in North Georgia," the post reads, "we want to assure our community that we are closely monitoring the situation and maintaining constant cooperation with local law enforcement and authorities.

"While these threats have not directly impacted our schools, we are taking every precaution to ensure a secure and safe learning environment. We have increased security measures across our campuses and will continue working proactively to safeguard our school community.

As always, we encourage parents, students and staff to immediately report any concerns or suspicious activity to the school principal or law enforcement. Be assured that each concern will be taken seriously and thoroughly investigated!

"Thank you for your ongoing trust and support. We remain committed to the safety and well-being of everyone in our schools.'

Also on Sunday, neighboring Fannin County School System announced that Monday, Sept. 9, would be a virtual learning day for their students to err on the side of caution regarding "nonspecific threat rumors" that were circulating on social media over the weekend.

The school shooting rumors appeared to have been reported by students pertaining to potential threats in Fannin, Gilmer and Pickens counties for this week, and law enforcement investigations remained ongoing at press time.

"At this time, none of the reported rumors have been found to be credible or valid by the Fannin County Sheriff's Office Investigators, FCSO Maj. Keith Bosen said in the announcement posted to

#### **Tri-County Women's Connection Annual FUNdraiser A Big Hit!**

With a banquet room full of ladies and lots of quarters, the bidding was fast and fun at the 3rd Annual Quarter Auction FUNdraiser held Thursday, August 22. There were 22 donated quarter auction items up for grabs and, in 20 minutes, every item had been auctioned off! Added to the fun this year were two Silent Auction items, one for a 7-day condo stay near Orlando and a 2-night stay in a Dahlonega Premier Property Treehouse! The bidding went back and forth, but two persistent ladies went home with these very special donated destination packages.

Soloist Beverly Sutton added to the evening's entertainment with two beautiful songs and our guest Speaker Glenda Smith shared how she was able to get past the past, when it's past overdue.

The Union County Community Center overlooking the mountains and Butternut Creek Golf Course provided a gorgeous setting. Dinner joyed the scrumptious chocolate and vanilla cake baked by Melissa's Bakery celebrating the 85th anniversary of Stonecroft, the organization that makes these events possible. This year's fundraiser

was a success because businesses and individuals donated fabulous items for both the Quarter and Silent Auctions and \$1,717.79 was raised. We are very thankful to

those who generously provided donations for our event:

Abide Coffee; Angela Benson, Healing Landmark; Antionette Meintjes; Barbara Honaker; Betty Sipes; Chuck Honaker; Crooked Creek Farm; Debra Stipe-StayDahlonega; Erin Hughes-LipSense; Fae Herd; Habitat for Humanity Blairsville Thrift Store; Hannah McGinn-The Beauty Barn, Blue Ridge; Humane Society Upscale Resale & Thrift Store, Blue Ridge; Jacci Szafranski; Jocelyn Bowers; Judy & Randy Teague; Kelli's Custom Creations; Kim Brown; Mary was delicious! We also en- George; Patty Cianfrocca; connecting with you!

Rachelle Cronje; Relax Nail Salon & Spa; Rhonda Stidham; Ruth & George Cantu; Scrabble Table Gifts; Smoky Mountain Handmade Candles; Sweet Pea's Downtown Eatery; Teacups & Twigs, Blue Ridge; The Book Store; Vickie Miller-Ruby Ribbon.

Since 1981, Tri-County Women's Connection, in affiliation with Stonecroft, has planned and hosted events for women that provide a positive, upbeat time of fun, food and friendship. Stonecroft is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization based in Kansas City, MO. Funds raised from this event will help Stonecroft provide training and resources that support thousands of women who volunteer in communities just like ours all over the country SAVE-THE-DATE for

TCWC's next Ladies Night Out event! Thursday, October 17, 6 PM - 8 PM. Details to come in the October 2nd article in the North Georgia News. We do look forward to

Once the millage

rates are set this month, Tax

Commissioner Lee Knight

can start preparing property

tax bills, which he anticipates

will go out for mailing in the

beginning of October with the

same Dec. 20 due date as in

combined rate. And the gross digest for real and personal property in 2020 was about \$1.4 billion countywide.

In 2024, the real and personal property digest sits at roughly \$2.9 billion - a doubling since 2020. But even though the digest has jumped significantly in that time, most of the increase occurred between 2021 and 2023, with the uptick from last year to this year totaling about \$140

This recent upward trajectory in the digest has been driven largely by pandemic-era relocations to the area pushing fair market values higher, with the swings from 2021-2023 adding up to a 78% increase from inflation in the housing market, per past reporting.

But the inflationary increases have resulted in smaller tax rates in recent years, with both countywide taxing authorities decreasing their millage rates to arrive today at the lowest combined rate in decades.

Of course, the overall picture of the real estate market is complicated. According to the Union County Tax Assessors Office, the number of property sales has decreased

prices have continued to climb but at a slower rate than the last

"Our best guess would be due to the increase in the interest rates (for mortgages)," the Assessors Office said.

Following statemandated property reassessments for 2024, most residential and commercial properties had a markedly lower average value increase of around 3%, "while agricultural had a slightly lower increase," per the Assessors Office.

Even with the largest digest ever, the 2024 rollback rates will result in just 1.08% and 1.18% net tax revenue increases for the schools and county respectively – the lowest non-inflationary county growth in years and another indicator of a potentially stabilizing

growth" is good for the county from the School System's perspective, as the recent rapid share" contribution to educate students, that is, less money

coming from the state. Not only have the from the prior year, while "sales taxpayers - been expected to "watching their budgets."

kick in more local dollars due to the "local fair share" stipulation in the state education funding formula, but health care and salary costs have also increased via state mandate.

To account for the double whammy of large state funding cuts and cost increases, the School Board adopted a partial rollback last year, which amounted to a roughly 10% tax increase, and Hill is thankful that, in 2024, the system can afford to set the millage to the full rollback rate.

'We're excited to be able to accept the rollback rate in the Sept. 17 meeting," Hill said. "We're thankful that we're not having to consider any kind of tax increases.

"We really appreciate everybody's contributions to the school. These kids are very important; they are our future. We need to do a really good job educating them and making sure that this community School Superintendent continues to be successful John Hill said "slow, steady and thrives by providing them and thrives by providing them good opportunities for their

Sole Commissioner rise in property values has Lamar Paris also expressed meant a growing "local fair excitement about being able to accept the rollback rate for the county portion of tax bills, crediting the various county departments and schools - and by extension elected officials' offices with

"With everything that's gone on, we're still, as far as we know now, the third lowest millage rate in the state of Georgia out of 159 counties," Paris said. "And we've got no debt, and we are very appreciative of the support we've gotten in the community, and we're thankful that we're able to keep our taxes as reasonably low as possible.

revenues.

"That's always been our goal, to try to provide the most services and the best facilities at the lowest possible price. And we think that's what we've been able to do by the fact that we're able to roll the millage rate back to the lowest number since I've been in office.'

Added Paris, "Our other goal is to provide a safe county for our residents, which means safe roads, safe bridges, a good Fire Department, 911 Center, Sheriff's Office – everybody that's able to do things to make sure Union County is not only a nice, quality place to live, but also a safe place to live at the least possible cost."

The School Board operates on a fiscal year and set its budget earlier this summer, years past.

As always, people who while the county works from a calendar year for budgeting own property inside Blairsville purposes, so Paris will be approving the county budget city limits will be receiving a city property tax bill in addition in December – a process that to the taxes they owe in the is directly tied to property tax

county Blairsville City Council members will hold a special called meeting soon to set the city's millage rate, and "unless the council decides otherwise, the proposed millage rate will be 1.117, same as 2023," according to City Clerk Kaye

#### **Union County Schools Future Farmers of** America program receives generous donation



A Cup of Kindness Event Planning had a Large Children's Re-Sell event last weekend and donated the proceeds to local The Union County Schools FFA program through the FFA Alumni & Supporters Group.

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#### Habitat Home...from Page 1A



Students lined the Glenn Gooch Bypass at Union County Schools to see the new Panther Photo by Brittany Holbrooks House off last week.

experience for the whole housebuilding process," explained Construction Teacher Charley Cattanach. "Everything completed on the house at this point has been done by students.'

So far, Panther Houses have followed similar blueprints, but Panther House 2 had some slight adjustments for handicap accessibility. Otherwise, the floor plan is the same as Panther House 1.

The final leg of the process involves Habitat working with contractors and businesses who "usually give

materials" to fully complete the home. On-site, the house is lowered onto a foundation and given a deck and steps or a ramp. Insulation, sheetrock, interior trim, and exterior

Many of the students 2 have already graduated, but most of their younger classmates were present to experience the closure of a job they've worked to complete long-term.

Before the house was

us a discount on labor and hauled to its destination, students posed for a picture with Cattanach in front of their handiwork, including UCHS junior Trey Hawley. He particularly enjoyed putting together the tresses on the house technical work are the last to more or less connect the walls and help support the roof.

Toward the end who worked on Panther House of the final product, we're starting to see that build come together and just form a great establishment," said Hawley, who was particularly thankful for the chance to be a part of a construction class that helps the community. For someone who



The second Panther House at its "forever home" in the county after being delivered from Union County High School Sept. 3. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

wants to one day start his own business in construction, he believes it helps to get all the experience he can.

Local Habitat for Humanity Executive Director Charlotte Randall calls the agreement between her organization and the school "a great program to provide some affordable housing in the area."

That partnership has been going strong since Cattanach, who now also serves as Career, Technical and Agricultural Education Director, approached Habitat about forging a partnership nearly six years ago after being

Lumpkin County. "Charley had his shop built, and we met a few times, and basically, Habitat pays for the materials and then the students build it," Randall said.

inspired by a similar program in

Habitat hasn't yet chosen the people who will move into Panther House 2, but, as of the Sept. 3 move, Randall said that the choice had been "narrowed down" to eight different families, one of which may go on to call the building home.

A Board of Directors reviews applicants before settling on the new homeowners, House 3, and we'll just keep who must be able to hold a rolling," she said.

mortgage. In this case, families for both Panther House 2 and the previously built Panther House 1 will be notified, as the latter is wrapping up on-site

construction now. "We try to limit (the family selection process) to once every couple years because of the substantial amount of applicants that we do get," Randall revealed after the house had been moved, though she, like everyone involved in the process, is excited to see what comes next.

"We're starting Panther

