

HAPPY NEW YEAR

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Memorial dedication honors Kings Road plane crash victims

By Shawn Jarrard
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BLUE RIDGE – It's been a year since the Kings Road plane crash of Dec. 19, 2018, in which three people lost their lives and a fourth person woke up broken in a horrific tragedy just days before Christmas.

Now a year on from the accident near the Blairsville Municipal Airport, lone survivor Brittany Thomas Whitener and the loved ones of Michelle Seay, Renea Greiner and Robert Atkinson are doing their best to cope with the tremendous losses suffered that day.

One thing that helps is staying in touch with each other. Whitener speaks regularly with the families of her departed friends, and she sees Renea's husband, Rich, every week at work.

The four friends knew each other from their time at RiverStone Medical Campus, where Atkinson was previously employed as a pharmacist, and where Whitener, Seay and Greiner worked at the time of the crash.

RiverStone is a tightknit community of health care professionals and other staff who work together to maintain the multi-specialty regional medical complex.

Whitener refers to her colleagues there as her "work family," and dozens of them showed up in loving support for a special memorial dedication on Dec. 16 commemorating the one-year anniversary of the date when RiverStone community members lost three of their own.

The memorial event took place in the elevator lobby of the second floor and featured the dedication of a nice bench

and commemorative plaque.

Flagship Healthcare Properties, which purchased the RiverStone building in April 2018 and continues to manage the property, organized the gathering as a way of honoring and remembering the victims of the plane crash.

"RiverStone Medical is a family community – they've all worked together a long time, and we want to support that community," said Mavis Giska of Flagship, noting that everyone in the building was affected by the tragedy.

Special guests during the gathering were Brittany Whitener and her husband Junior; Michelle Seay's daughters Brittany Combs, Katie Bergen and Anna Deyton; and Renea Greiner's husband Rich, who serves as maintenance engineer for RiverStone Medical Campus.

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Brittany Thomas Whitener, Rich Greiner, Anna Deyton, Katie Bergen, Brittany Combs, Dr. Raymond Tidman and Dr. F. Stan Trigg at the Dec. 16 memorial bench dedication for the Kings Road plane crash victims. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Sheriff's Office celebrates family ties with annual Christmas party



The UCSO Christmas party is a time for law enforcement families to gather for fellowship. L-R: Colleen Mangifesta with baby Oliver Pilote, Melissa Pilote, and Inv. Marc Pilote. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

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Union County Sheriff's Office deputies, jailers and staff gathered for their traditional

Christmas party on Thursday, Dec. 19, at the Community Center.

Every year, the occasion serves as a treasured time of fellowship for the Sheriff's

Office, allowing the local law enforcement family to come together with their personal families to share the season's blessings over a warm meal.

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Paris adopts bigger budget for 2020 as revenues pace expenditures

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union County's Fiscal Year 2020 Proposed Budget is up \$2,362,693 over last year, which Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris said his office has been able to cover without having to raise the 2019 millage rate thanks to increased revenues.

All Georgia counties are required by law to operate under a balanced budget, meaning revenues and expenditures must match. The FY20 proposed budget balances to \$19,462,648, with the new budget featuring a 13.82% increase over last year's budget of \$17,099,955.

Due to tight operating margins, Paris said he does not anticipate making any deposits into the general fund in 2020, which will still leave the county about two months of operating

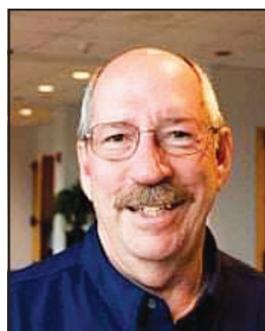
reserves at the end of the fiscal year.

The commissioner adopted the FY20 budget on Friday, Dec. 27, following two public hearings last week.

"Our goal is and always has been to keep our millage rate and tax rate as close to what it is each year without raising the public's taxes," Paris said. "The hard part is there are continual expenses that go up every year, and more so now when times are good than when times are bad."

"The hard part for all of us is to try to figure out how we can go up, hope that our revenue goes up a like amount or close to it, so that we can keep our taxes at a reasonable rate. So, that's what we've done this year. We've kept our taxes pretty much what they were last year."

Paris said that medical insurance has had the biggest



Lamar Paris

impact on the 2020 county budget.

"Medical insurance costs have increased over the last four years an average of \$450,000 per year," Paris said. "That in itself is close to half a million dollars."

The commissioner attributed that to an aging workforce and skyrocketing

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EMC meetings return to Tuesdays in 2020; directors welcome guests

By Shawn Jarrard
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After a year of Monday board meetings, the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Board of Directors is going back to its former regular meeting schedule of every second Tuesday.

The two exceptions to the 2020 schedule will be the July and October meetings, which will take place on the third Tuesday those months.

Originally, the board decided to move the board meetings from the second Tuesday of each month to accommodate several scheduling conflicts known to be coming up in 2019.

Board members went with primarily third Mondays last year based on a recommendation from EMC staff, which determined that

doing so would allow co-op leadership more time to prepare the meeting packets for board members each month.

Based on feedback from the board and a staff recommendation, board members voted in their Dec. 9 meeting to revert to holding meetings primarily on the second Tuesday of every month in 2020.

All meetings begin at 6 p.m. inside the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Headquarters in Young Harris.

In other news, EMC Directors welcomed guests and members to speak in their December board meeting, including John Kimsey and Burton Benkwith, both regional vice presidents of the Cooperative Finance Corporation.

"Created and owned by America's electric cooperative



Jeremy Nelms

network, CFC – a nonprofit finance cooperative with more than \$27 billion in assets – provides unparalleled industry expertise, flexibility and responsiveness to serve

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Panther cookoff promotes friendly competition among faculty, staff

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union County High School hosted its Third Annual Panther Pitmasters Faculty BBQ Tournament on Friday, Dec. 20, in the school cafeteria.

The event began a few years back as a friendly competition between school employees following early release of students the last day before Christmas break, and it has turned into a Panther tradition, offering the staff a chance to gather for a good time heading into the holiday break.

"This all started as kind of some smack-talking between some of the staff with five people, and now we have 10 people that compete every year," High School Principal C.T. Hussion said. "It's a great time for fellowship."

"The kids are gone, and we get to eat, then go home for the holidays. It's a great faculty fellowship moment."

Boston butts are provided via the Faculty Sunshine Fund for competitors to use



Stephen Mitchell was "Champ" and Josh Davis was Runner-Up in the Third Annual Panther Pitmasters Faculty BBQ Tournament on Friday, Dec. 20. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

in the competition, and each participant spends the day before the tournament preparing their meal and working on their winning recipe.

With the barbecue prepared and onlookers ready to dig in that Friday, all the food was placed on a table for faculty and staff to enjoy, while a panel of judges tried each of

the dishes and decided which would be the winning plate.

Staff enjoyed the meal as a social event to talk about their plans for the holidays and say some goodbyes until the next semester starts in 2020.

"All of the food is good," Hussion said. "People are eating everyone's food that they

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