

Budget...from Page 1A

regular meeting. "In the 2018 budget, we have included salary increases, as well as all costs in operation of the county continue to rise with the improving economy.

"We have had an increase in the cost of medical benefit coverage, health insurance, and we have adjusted some categories to standardize them

with our audit.

"But overall, we are very pleased to have this modest increase, and also not have to raise property taxes to cover this cost."

Paris elaborated on the county's rising health care costs in the public hearing.

"We're partially self-insured under our medical

plan, so the more losses, the more people we have that have medical problems in a year, the higher our costs are," said Paris. "It's kind of an unusual process, but it saves us a lot of money and it has for many years.

"But when you have a year where you have several people that have been sick or have had a serious illness, it can impact you some."

Adopted annually, the county budget is an extensive list of all items, or expenditures, the county plans to spend money on during its budget period, known as the fiscal year.

Such items include, but are not limited to, costs for building maintenance, covering election costs, paying the salaries and benefits for county employees such as those working at the road department, sheriff's office, the fire department, and more.

The budget is required by state law to balance expenditures and revenues, and the county must show in the budget how it plans to pay for its expenditures during the fiscal year.

County revenues come in the form of property tax collections, sales taxes, fees collected for licenses and permits, as well as other revenue sources, nearly all of which are expected to be up this year over last year.

Fortunately, the county was able to balance its 2018 budget without having to utilize reserve money, so moving forward, the county will maintain its reserve of four months of operating budget, all without having to raise the millage rate last year.

Paris said in the Dec. 21 regular meeting that he was thankful to Laura Driskell, who came on board as county finance director in April 2017, for her hard work and long hours spent preparing the budget.

Also in the meeting, Commissioner Paris approved an agreement to authorize the county's participation in the Firefighter's Cancer Benefit Program through the Association County Commissioners of Georgia, which will cost the county



Paris has used his family's trusty VHS camcorder to record all county meetings since 2000. The digital camera on the right will be replacing the older video recorder in 2018 meetings. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

\$12,225 per year.

Commissioner Paris conducted several end-of-year housekeeping activities as well, securing the food and health services at the Union County Jail for 2018, and applying for grant money to

help run the county transit system.

Interested parties can acquire copies of the 2018 tentative budget at the commissioner's office inside the Union County Courthouse.

Jarrard...from Page 1A

University of Georgia, where he earned two bachelor's degrees, one in English, the other in journalism with an emphasis in newspapers.

"Shawn is a dedicated, hard worker," West said. "Giving this young man some responsibilities was really a no-brainer. We're fortunate to have him."

After graduating from West Hall High School in 2003, Jarrard spent about 12 years in Athens before moving to Blairsville more than three years ago.

"While in Dawg Country, I worked all kinds of jobs – for the student newspaper, in a restaurant, a big box store, a convenience store, doing business transcription," he said. "Fortunately, Charles reached out to me with an opportunity to use my education to work for Kenneth West.

"The decision to take the job and move from Athens was an easy one," Jarrard said. "Blairsville was the next logical

step for my wife Meghan and I, as we wanted to start a family and felt the mountains were a perfect place to begin that journey.

"Even though I'm not from here, Blairsville has become my home. I've got family living here, family buried here, and I've made a family here – my daughter was born in Union General Hospital in 2016," Jarrard said.

Jarrard has covered the gamut in community news, and his editor knows first-hand that the young man is very dependable.

"Shawn doesn't hesitate when it comes to covering local news stories," Duncan said. "He heads out the door and comes back with the story. It's been an honor watching him progress."

Jarrard describes his time spent writing for the two newspapers as "the best job I've ever had."

"Why did I choose

to study news writing, then pursue a career in journalism? Since I was young, I've had a fascination with reading and writing," Jarrard said. "As an adult, I get paid to write about what's happening in communities that I care deeply about. What could be better than that?"

Jarrard said he is humbled by the opportunity to expand his professional role at these newspapers.

He continued, "I see my job as finding and reporting the news that's important and relevant to the people of these mountain communities.

"I've come to know a great many wonderful people in my three plus years as a reporter in the mountains, and I can't wait to embrace any and all challenges ahead in the service of Union and Towns county residents. These communities have given me much, and I am deeply grateful."

Jarrard is married to Meghan Jarrard, and they have a young daughter named Edwina.

Conley...from Page 1A

mission is to serve local governments by improving quality of life through economic development, community planning, information technology, and workforce development to support and enhance regional prosperity.

Basically, the GMRC exists for the betterment of the 13 counties of the Georgia Mountains Region, and Mayor Conley plays key roles in supporting the City of Blairsville and its neighboring municipalities through the GMRC Council.

Conley's first year on the GMRC Council was in 1999, when he was a member of the Blairsville City Council – he served in place of then Blairsville Mayor Doris Colwell.

He won election as Blairsville mayor himself in 2005, and has served as chairman of the GMRC Revolving Loan Committee since 2009.

The GMRC Revolving Loan Fund helps businesses in the Georgia Mountains Region to secure loans when conventional means of financing prove unobtainable.

And because he chairs a committee, he also sits on the GMRC Executive Committee, working closely with the GMRC executive director to approve expenditures, finalize monthly meeting details, analyze committee assignments and other duties.

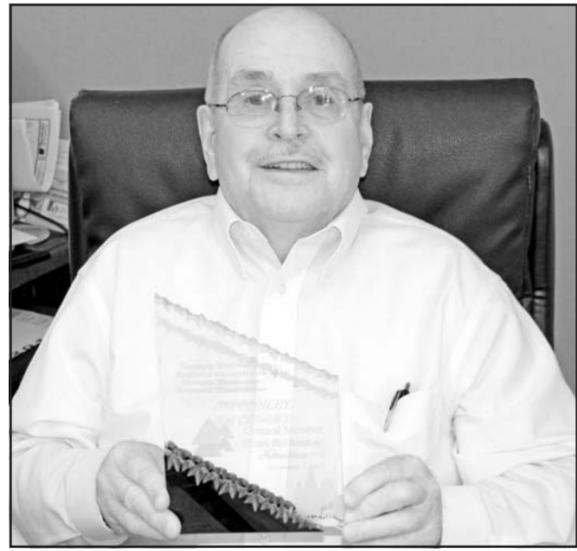
Fortunately, Blairsville City Clerk Kaye McCann saw the award sitting in the mayor's office when she returned from vacation in December – Conley hadn't told anyone about it.

Proud of his accomplishment, McCann took it upon herself to notify the Blairsville City Council and others that Mayor Conley had been named GMRC Council Member of the Year.

"I think it's awesome," said McCann. "The mayor does a lot of work here in the city, but he does a lot of work outside of the city as well, with the Commission and the Georgia Municipal Association. I think it's time that he was recognized for his hard work."

Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris sits on the GMRC Executive Committee with Conley, and he, too, is pleased with the council's choice for 2017 Council Member of the Year.

"Jim Conley received this award because he is dedicated to his job, he works with others well, and he appreciates, as I do, the role GMRC plays in working with and assisting our



Conley with 2017 GMRC Council Member of the Year Award inside his office at Blairsville City Hall. Photo/Shawn Jarrard

counties and cities," said Paris. "I am proud for him. He is very deserving of this award."

Union County Development Authority Executive Director Mitch Griggs also serves on the GMRC Council with Paris and Conley.

The GMRC area covers roughly 3,500 square miles, including Banks, Dawson, Forsyth, Franklin, Habersham, Hall, Hart, Lumpkin, Rabun, Stephens, Towns, Union and White counties.

According to its website, the GMRC "is a sub-state district created by local governments in 1962 under provisions of Georgia Enabling Law. The purpose of the GMRC

is to locally promote and guide proper development of human, natural, physical, social and economic resources in the Georgia Mountains Region."

Continues the website: "The GMRC is guided by a 44-member council and is composed of individuals appointed by the governor, lieutenant governor, speaker and one county-elected official, one city-elected official and one private sector individual from each of our 13 counties.

"City, county and private sector representatives are chosen by the cities and counties they represent. The council is responsible for all policy decisions."