

Schools...from Page 1A

with other area superintendents and in consultation with the district's COVID Task Force of local medical professionals.

In addition to greater emphasis on social distancing and decreased attendance at

indoor sporting events for the time being, the schools have decided to institute a temporary mask mandate for teachers and students.

The Board Office has encouraged but not mandated

masks previously, and compliance has been high in the schools without a mandate.

However, due to COVID prevalence in the area, the district is now moving to mandate masks, though the mandate will only last until community spread improves.

Students will be able to request a face shield at school instead of a standard mask, and those who decide not to wear masks can temporarily transition to online learning. Families can request masking exemptions on a case-by-case basis.

Board members were not required to take any action in their Jan. 4 called meeting but simply discussed the recommended measures that evening.

It was Julia Barnett's

first public meeting as a school board member. Barnett is chief nursing officer of Union General Health System, and she provided valuable insight to guide the recommendations.

Most school districts in the Pioneer RESA have decided to temporarily transition to online only, and some are even doing online-only classes while maintaining sporting events, though this is not a route Union County will be taking, as officials here believe education must come first.

As such, school leadership has decided that Union County Schools "will not enter athletic competitions with schools/districts choosing to provide online learning as the only possible option for students because of increased community-related COVID-19 concerns."

Importantly, Superintendent Hill said his team will continue to monitor the situation daily, which, if things worsen, may require the schools to switch to online-only learning, especially if the district becomes overwhelmed with staff absences.

As of Friday, Jan. 8, Union County Schools had 25 faculty and staff out for reasons of COVID, with 4 positive testers and 21 quarantined for exposure. This total number of staff absences was down from 30 at the start of the week, among 454 districtwide employees.

Fortunately, the schools are able to maintain in-person instruction at present due to the controlled nature of the classroom environment, though, again, the situation could change at any time if staff

outages increase.

With sports having resumed this week, albeit with a limited schedule due to some competitions being canceled and fewer spectators – no visiting team fans allowed – the schools are planning to offer livestreamed middle and high school games, with "more information (to be) forthcoming."

"The Union County School District will re-evaluate each week and make adjustments as needed," the Board Office said in an Athletic Notifications Document linked on Facebook. "However, schedules are subject to change at any given time based upon the current situation."

"We thank you for your understanding as we work to keep our students, staff, and their families safe."

Meredith...from Page 1A

brought the weapon "just to let those that are protesting (know) not to get violent," in reference to riots that occurred in major American cities following the death of George Floyd.

The self-described "fifth-generation Atlantan" is known for having promoted the #QAnon conspiracy using billboards in metro Atlanta, according to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. QAnon holds, among other things, that there is a secret global group plotting against the U.S.

"I sincerely believe the New World Order, Cabal, Deep State – whatever you want to call it – wants society to devolve into a race war so that it's much easier to take over," Meredith told the North Georgia News at the June 5, 2020, BLM rally.

According to court documents shared by the AJC, FBI agents approached Meredith at his D.C. hotel on Jan. 7, 2021, where he was found to be in possession of "hundreds of rounds of ammunition" and two firearms – one of them the same style rifle he'd brandished in Hiwassee.

He told the agents he knew the firearms were not allowed in D.C., so he'd put them in a trailer attached to his truck located in the parking lot of the hotel, court documents show.

Meredith then revealed that he'd been to the nation's capital for a previous rally in November and that he had attended a protest outside of Gov. Brian Kemp's residence in Georgia as well.

Furthermore, he admitted to sending text messages to friends and showed them to the FBI. One of these texts read that he was "thinking about heading over to (Pelosi's) speech and putting a bullet in her noggin on Live TV [purple devil emoji]."

court documents show.

Among the other messages Meredith sent was one in which he claimed to be "headed to DC with a shit ton of 5.56 armor piercing ammo," and another saying he was going to "run (Pelosi) over while she chews on her gums," court documents show.

After one of his friends admonished him for threatening Pelosi, Meredith responded that he was, in effect, waging "psychological warfare."

"I've been on the radar for a while now, they (know) I'm harmless," he'd said, just as another exchange saw Meredith predicting that "within 12 days, many in our country will die."

Meredith told a friend who had expressed concern that he was "locked in my hotel room...high [smiley face with hearts emoji]." During the consent search of his room, federal agents seized "a box of suspected THC edibles and a vial of Testosterone Cypionate/Propionate."

Pertaining to his charge of "making interstate threats to Speaker Nancy Pelosi," Meredith was using a cellphone in D.C. to send text messages on Jan. 7 to "an individual located outside of Washington, D.C.," court documents show.

He may also be facing charges from D.C.'s Metropolitan Police Department, which ran a records check Jan. 8 and found that Meredith did not possess a registration for any firearm in the District of Columbia.

CNN reported Friday that Meredith was being detained "at least until a court hearing next week."

Three more men were charged Saturday, making 16 people at press time facing federal charges in relation to the events at the Capitol.

Approximately 40 people

have been arrested and charged in Superior Court as well, for offenses including but not limited to "unlawful entry, curfew violations, and firearms-related crimes."

"The lawless destruction of the U.S. Capitol Building was an attack against one of our nation's greatest institutions," Acting U.S. Attorney Michael Sherwin said Friday. "My Office, along with our law enforcement partners at all levels, have been expeditiously working and leveraging every resource to identify, arrest, and begin prosecuting these individuals who took part in the brazen criminal acts at the U.S. Capitol."

"We are resolute in our commitment to holding accountable anyone responsible for these disgraceful criminal acts, and to anyone who might be considering engaging in or inciting violence in the coming weeks, know this: you will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law."

Other complaints have been submitted regarding the Jan. 6 riot, and investigations are ongoing to uncover everyone who was involved.

"Today's charges are just the beginning of the FBI's ongoing efforts to hold those responsible for the criminal acts of violence and destruction that unfolded during the U.S. Capitol Building breach on Jan. 6," FBI Director Christopher Wray said. "To be clear, what took place that day was not First Amendment-protected activity, but rather an affront on our democracy."

"The FBI, along with our local, state and federal partners, is committed to ensuring that justice is served. We will continue to aggressively investigate each and every individual who chose to ignore the law and instead incite violence, destroy property and injure others."

Senate Seats...from Page 1A

of the electorate voting in the Jan. 5, 2021, elections, though it was still an excellent turnout for a runoff.

Statewide, Ossoff finished almost 50,000 votes ahead of Perdue in the contest featuring more than 4.4 million ballots cast. For the Senate Special Election, Warnock enjoyed an even wider lead over opponent Loeffler with

87,723 more votes.

Both Democrats beat their opponents with a wide enough margin to not warrant any recounts in Georgia.

For the Public Service Commission District 4 runoff, Republican Incumbent Lauren "Bubba" McDonald Jr. defeated Democratic challenger Daniel Blackman by 38,133 votes. In Union, McDonald earned

11,598 votes to Blackman's 2,386 votes.

This concludes the 2020 election cycle, which was one of the more challenging in recent memory thanks to the pandemic, multiple recounts, concerns over election integrity and more. Fortunately, the dedicated Election Board Registrar's Office and poll workers made it all possible.

Hamilton Gardens are a legacy within a legacy

Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge is called a legacy garden because of a gift from Hazel and Fred Hamilton. The Hamilton's donated their extensive collection of native azaleas and rhododendrons to the citizens of Towns County in 1980. Their legacy continues today as the Garden is flourishing and attracting visitors from all over the United States and abroad. The new legacy gift is from the American Rhododendron Society, Azalea Chapter of Georgia, who offered to create a special section containing many varieties of native azaleas propagated by their members. Members of this group travel to various locations in the southeast, collecting seeds and stems from an assortment of native azaleas and rhododendrons. From there, they work diligently to bring these new plants to planting size, which takes up to three-four years of care. The Georgia Chapter members have waited a long time for Hamilton Gardens to be ready to establish and maintain this new legacy garden.

The 2020 January storm which hit the Gardens with a destructive vengeance, actually provided an unexpected gift. The loss of some 8,000 square feet of canopy at the entrance opened up a whole new section, the perfect spot for the new garden. In addition to the loss of the overhead canopy which covered this area, a significant



number of rhododendrons and azaleas were destroyed in the storm. The area sits on a slope, has good drainage, newly available sunlight, and is visible from the main trail. It has been cleared of all remaining brush, tilled, and will be planted this fall. There will be approximately 40 new native azaleas and rhododendrons added to the new ARS, Azalea Chapter Legacy Garden. And there is room for more! Two members of this group, John Kohli and Mike Bamford, have been extremely generous in assisting with repairs of the main irrigation system (remember, the original system is 38 years old) and they are supporting the installation of a zoned irrigation section for the new garden. Truly another gift to the Gardens and to the community.

Another unexpected opportunity presented itself this year with a contact from the ARS, Canadian Society. Ham-

ilton Gardens has been selected as a test site for Canadian grown native azaleas to see how far south they can survive without succumbing to a specific type of mold. North Georgia, Zone 6 B, is as far south as they will test. The Society will ship seven varieties, two per variety, in early spring, 2021, to be planted at Hamilton Gardens. Exciting times for a garden which was on the verge of disappearing a short four years ago. Stay tuned for progress reports and plan to visit in the spring; you won't be disappointed.

Follow us on Facebook, info@hamiltongardens.org, call 706 970-0011.

Grace Howard, Executive Director Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge, Inc.

American Red Cross Volunteers

Make a difference in your community! As a volunteer with the American Red Cross, you can help families recover after a home fire, train individuals in first aid and CPR, support America's military families, or take on any number of other roles that make our communities safer, stronger and more resilient. Get started at <https://www.redcross.org/local/georgia/volunteer.html> or call your NWGA chapter office to ask about volunteer opportunities 844-536-6026.