

North Georgia News

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Winter storm causes downed trees, power outages, property damage

By Shawn Jarrard
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A winter storm blasted a large portion of the South on Saturday, resulting in felled trees and downed power lines across many states and throughout the region.

The Jan. 11 storm system ushered in severe thunderstorms, torrential rain, high winds and even tornadic activity in some areas, with multiple national news agencies citing as many as 11 storm-related deaths in neighboring states, though no injuries were reported in Union County.

Locally, the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC worked around the clock beginning Saturday evening to restore power to approximately 14,000 meters in its five-county area, or roughly 30% of the membership, making steady progress over the weekend toward getting

people's lights back on.

Fortunately, there were no injuries reported locally as a result of the storm, though a particularly dangerous situation did occur when the storm snapped two poles — one at North Georgia Technical College and one at Meeks Park — that were supporting power lines across Georgia 515.

A woman traveling on the highway drove over the downed power lines, causing her vehicle to become entangled. An EMC line crew was able to free the woman's vehicle and secure the scene without incident, and the EMC resumed work the next morning to replace the snapped poles.

Most of the damage and power outages came from broken power poles and trees falling on power lines, the EMC said Sunday. Forty line crew members forming eight additional crews arrived

as mutual aid from several surrounding EMCs to help with the extensive repairs.

Damage was evident all over the county, beyond just the untold number of downed trees blocking backroads and interrupting power and phone services.

An airplane had been picked up and flipped onto its top at the Blairsville Municipal Airport. The Fairview Baptist Church sign was demolished by the wind. A tree lay uprooted on the side of Old Blue Ridge Highway at Sidmarie Road.

Shane and Jamie Payne's equipment and hay barn on John Abernathy Road had been lifted and blown over by high winds that effortlessly uprooted many of the large poles used to secure the shed in the ground.

Business signs blew down or off their hanging brackets in the downtown
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A Blue Ridge Mountain EMC line crew sets up at Meeks Park on Sunday to install a new power pole in place of the one that snapped at North Georgia Technical College. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

UCES graduates 210 fifth-grade students from D.A.R.E. program



D.A.R.E. is an important program that teaches kids how to avoid drugs and violence. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
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The Union County Elementary School graduated 210 fifth-grade students from the D.A.R.E. program on Friday, Jan. 10, in front of family and friends at the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center.

D.A.R.E. stands for Drug Abuse Resistance Education, and it's an important program that instructs students in how to make better life choices and avoid the influences of drugs, alcohol and violence over their lifetimes.

Students participate in the program as a group effort, with each student writing an essay at the end of the program as part of a contest highlighting knowledge gained in D.A.R.E.

Out of the selected top essays of the entire class, one

student is picked to read his or her essay aloud to the audience during graduation and accept an award for the best overall essay.

This year's big essay winner was Jaxon Totherow, who spoke on the addictive nature of substances and the negative impacts they have on the lives of addicts.

"I bet one thing that no one wants to be or has thought about being is a drug addict," Totherow said. "I've never heard anyone say that when they grow up, they want to be an addict."

"I don't think anyone would choose to be a drug addict, but for a lot of people, this choice has been made for them simply because of their decision to try drugs. When this happens, they usually end up locked up in jail, where they have no choices and are told

what to do.

"A lot of people have what is called an addictive gene, and because of this gene, they have addictive tendencies. Before you know it, one cigarette turns into a two-pack-a-day habit, and one drink turns (someone) into a full-blown alcoholic, or one pill turns into an addiction to heroin."

The D.A.R.E. program is a joint effort by the School Resource Officers of the Union County Schools Police Department. Officer Jeff McConnell leads the program with assistance from teachers and administration of the elementary school.

"Students, as we begin your D.A.R.E. graduation here this morning, I want you to realize that seven years from now, you will all be sitting here
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Arby's, Popeyes make progress; returning councilwomen swear in



Blairsville City Councilwomen Betty Easter, Rhonda Mahan and Mary Ruth Cook swore in to new terms of office on Tuesday, Jan. 7. Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Arby's Restaurant, Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen and LongHorn Steakhouse are all continuing to make progress in Blairsville-Union County.

Darren Harper of Visit Downtown Blairsville announced in the Jan. 7 meeting of the Blairsville City Council that Arby's had requested a minor extension on its closing date, with the contract expected to close this month.

Harper signaled a high degree of confidence in the deal

moving forward, saying that, once it closes, "then they have the ability to go ahead and start construction."

Work on Popeyes is finally resuming, with Mayor Jim Conley saying that building signage would arrive on Jan. 20 and that the franchisee was hoping for a mid-February opening.

The restaurant has experienced various delays due to construction and equipment delivery issues. Also, the franchisee is facing staffing issues at two other locations he's opening, and the delays

there have caused delays in Blairsville, so it's possible the local opening may be delayed further.

In LongHorn Steakhouse news, construction on the restaurant is moving right along. No open date has been announced, but stakeholders are shooting for a first quarter 2020 completion window.

Returning Blairsville City Council Members Rhonda Mahan, Betty Easter and Mary Ruth Cook, who won re-election in November, swore in for new terms of office on Jan. 7.
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Local officials, GDOT discuss safety improvements at intersections



L-R: Larry Garrett, Emily Dunn, Jason Dykes, Steve Gooch, Jim Conley and Lamar Paris. Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Blairsville and Union County have experienced quite a bit of growth over the last couple of years, and with it has come a need for improved

city and county transportation infrastructure.

That's why local stakeholders met with Georgia Department of Transportation officials on Monday, Jan. 6, to discuss a number of possible infrastructure upgrade

projects.

Participants included State Sen. Steve Gooch, Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, County Manager Larry Garrett, Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley and GDOT
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Knights of Columbus champion life at Georgia Mountain Pregnancy Center



L-R: Paul Zock, Ron Chmiel, Kathy Davis and Greg Bohling at the Georgia Mountain Pregnancy Center. Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
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Knights of Columbus Council 11746 gathered at the Georgia Mountain Pregnancy Center near Union General Hospital to dedicate a brand

new, state-of-the-art ultrasound machine.

The Blairsville-based facility serves Union, Towns and Fannin counties in Georgia, and Cherokee and Clay counties in North Carolina, though Center Director Kathy Davis

said no woman would ever be turned away, no matter where she lived.

Joining Davis were several members of Council 11746 from St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church, which
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