

North Georgia News

4 Sections 20 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Destiny Gibson earns STAR Student for 2023

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Destiny Gibson worked her way up to the top for years. Through her passion for learning, clever test-taking skills, and no small amount of perseverance, she recently found herself in the lofty position of STAR Student for the Union County High School Class of 2023.

And it's quite an achievement, because in order to make the grade for the STAR program, a student must score the highest among his or her classmates on a single test date for the SAT while being at the top of their class based on GPA.

Her accomplishments even before earning the honored

title were nothing to shake a stick at, either, as she's been a dedicated member of the Union County Color Guard for four years and captain of the team for two.

Also a member of the Beta Club and the Student Council, Gibson credits her history with the STEM Program for playing some part in her interest in biology. Of course, there are other reasons behind Gibson's inclination toward science.

The synergy between Gibson and UCHS Biology Teacher Dixie Conger was apparent the moment Gibson delivered the news directly to Conger's classroom on Friday. The STAR Student and her chosen STAR Teacher shared a hug immediately, each excited for the other.

As Gibson, Conger and their entourage, including Principal C.T. Hussion, Chamber President Steve Rowe and Chamber Director of Operations and Marketing Crystal Wagner, made their way to the front office for an interview and pictures, the STAR Student and Teacher walked along like best friends locked in conversation, complete with giggles.

It's no stretch to call them that; they've bonded over a shared interest of biology, and while Conger finds that many of her own thought patterns are shared by Gibson, the latter has been inspired to go into the medical field thanks to Conger's anatomy classes.

"I chose one of the few people out of all the teachers I have met in my many years of schooling who doesn't speak

at their students," Gibson said, explaining her decision behind crowning Conger as her STAR Teacher. "She cares about her job, she's passionate about what she teaches, but she also has a relationship with her students. She is very influential to many, including me."

In her own way, Gibson was influential to Conger, too, because "ever since sophomore year, teaching Destiny - she's always been mature, driven, goal-oriented."

"She was easily able to digest the information as I was teaching it and found it interesting," Conger recalls, appreciating how invested Gibson was in conversations about the curriculum and its lessons.

"One of my favorite
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2023 UCHS STAR Student Destiny Gibson and STAR Teacher Dixie Conger. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Residents avoid serious injury in trailer fire Sunday

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

With the help of neighbors, a man and a woman escaped a fire that destroyed the mobile home they were renting in Buck Gibson Trailer Park off Old Blue Ridge Highway on Sunday, Jan. 22.

Union County Fire Stations 1, 2, 3 and 4 responded to the blaze, which was "toned out" by 911 dispatchers at 7:47 a.m.

Fire Chief Dyer said that, since they were not dealing with a rescue situation and the home was almost fully involved in fire, firefighters took a strictly external defensive stance to put the flames out as quickly as possible, spending the next several hours hitting the structure with water.

The cause is still under investigation, but no foul play



This home burned to the ground inside the Buck Gibson Trailer Park on Sunday. Photo/Submitted

is suspected.

Dyer said the residents were awake at the time of the fire and, in addition to noticing the smoke, were alerted by smoke alarms previously installed via the Fire Department's free

Smoke Alarm Program.

One of the residents was transported via ambulance for treatment at Union General Hospital, though Dyer noted that no one appeared to be

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Land use, Elections Facility highlighted in county meeting

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

In his Jan. 19 regular meeting at the Union County Courthouse, Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris held a first reading of the revised Land Use section of the county's Code of Ordinances, which is getting its first update since initial enactment in 2004.

The revisions are aimed at "fine-tuning" current standards to ensure new park development - that is, campgrounds, mobile home parks, manufactured home parks and the like - is both safe and reflective of the longstanding character of the community.

Residents are invited to review the 16-page first draft of the revised section, which can be obtained at the Commissioner's Office or on the home page of <http://www.unioncountyga.gov/>. Revisions are highlighted in yellow for additions and use strikeouts for deletions.

A public hearing to solicit community feedback has been scheduled for Tuesday, Feb. 21, from 5-7 p.m. inside the courthouse, and people may also contact the Commissioner's Office by calling 706-439-6000 or emailing commissioner@uniongov.com.



Gavin King
Building Department

The land use regulations for parks are extensive, governing site planning, expansions and modifications, permitting, landscaping, residency, utilities, density, entrance design and more, and residents are encouraged to review the document if they wish to suggest changes in the coming weeks.

Until the revised ordinance can be enacted, an "Emergency Moratorium" is in place restricting new construction of parks and multiple dwellings on single parcels while the county works to finalize regulations for such developments.

Paris first imposed the moratorium in March 2022

after being contacted by the Building & Development Department, which at the time had grown concerned about increased interest in nontraditional developments like shipping container homes and yurts in addition to more conventional parks.

"The first reading gets it out there, (with us) knowing that there's going to be several things probably that will need to be changed or corrected on that first reading," Paris said, noting that he hopes the revisions can be finalized soon so he can lift the park development moratorium that he has extended multiple times, including in a Jan. 12 called meeting.

While in effect, the moratorium prevents "applications for the development or expansion of campgrounds, mobile home parks, manufactured home parks, recreational vehicle parks, tiny home parks, park model parks or any other similar type of development."

The public-facing language of the moratorium as concerning "parks" caused some confusion prior to the regular meeting, as it was not immediately clear that, for example, people could not add mother-in-law suites or second

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Underwood, Seabolt ascend to Homecoming Royalty

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Seniors Eli Underwood and Jaycee Seabolt are your 2022-23 Union County High School Basketball Homecoming King and Queen following their coronation on Friday, Jan. 20.

Underwood and Seabolt

took their place among UCHS royalty ahead of the Friday night games vs. Providence Christian. The reigning king and queen, Caleb John and Emily Byers, were both on hand to crown the top vote-getters among the student body.

Seabolt is the daughter of Jason and April Seabolt. She is a member of the Beta

Club, Technology Student Association, Student Executive Council, the United Community Bank Junior Board of Directors and the UCHS softball team.

Underwood is the son of Chad and Amy Underwood. He is a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Beta Club, Spanish Club, Key Club,

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(L-R) 2022 Basketball Homecoming Queen Emily Byers with 2023 Queen Jaycee Seabolt, 2023 King Eli Underwood and 2022 King Caleb John on Friday. Photo by Todd Forrest

Saying goodbye to the Matriarch of Stonehenge Senior Living

News Special
North Georgia News

Barbara Morris, the founder and matriarch of Blairsville's own Stonehenge Assisted Living, passed away peacefully on Sunday, Oct. 23, 2022, surrounded by her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren in Fayetteville.

What will never pass away is her entrepreneurial and loving spirit, which is still felt by the residents, managers, staff, and anyone associated with bringing their services to the Stonehenge community today.

Originally from Liverpool, England, Barbara came to the United States with her six children in 1970 with the dream of owning her own business, which she always thought would be a bed and breakfast. Her dream came true in 1990 when she purchased the "Stonehenge Bed and Breakfast" on Murphy Highway.

Within a few short



Barbara Morris

months, the bed and breakfast evolved into an assisted living, taking in residents from the local community needing 24-hour care. The original building was expanded to accommodate the growing resident population and eventually housed 21 residents with a full staff. This was the beginning of Stonehenge I.

At this time, Barbara's

vision for Stonehenge began to change. She always had a waiting list, and sometimes the wait was as much as three months. It really broke her heart when she had to turn people away, so she very quickly began the process of applying and started construction of a new home, Stonehenge II.

Barbara's vision had evolved into building a village of homes to take care of the growing needs for the elderly seniors. The city of Blairsville was of great assistance to the needs of Stonehenge and contributed so much in order to achieve this goal. People in this area are down to earth, extremely hardworking, and tender-hearted.

Within a few short years, with the leadership of Barbara's son and daughter-in-law, Mitch and Linda Thompson, Stonehenge became a small village consisting of three homes: Stonehenge I, II and III.

Today, the Stonehenge village is comprised of five

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Homecoming County Meeting...from Page 1A

...from Page 1A

United Community Bank Junior Board of Directors, Student Leadership Council, Chick-fil-A Leadership Academy, Mr. UCHS Senior Superlative, and a member of the UCHS basketball and track-and-field teams.

Seabolt and Underwood were joined on the court by fellow 12th-graders Darla Aaron, Jett Busbee, Taylor Carroll, Ivie Chapman, Hunter Fleming and Courtney Foster.

The junior representatives were Ryan Barnett, Eli Decker, Lane Lance, Kendra Mason, Zander Rotko and Morgan Warren.

Representing the sophomore class were Katelyn Brown, Jude Ellis, Houston Henry and Ariel McCarter. The freshmen representatives were Lila Holland, Marques Gatewood, Kaitlyn Jones and Holden Payne.

homes to their land during the moratorium period.

Development of raw land for primary dwellings is not restricted by the moratorium. However, under the new regulations, “unrestricted residential sites” would be limited to “one dwelling and one secondary dwelling per parcel” once the revised ordinance goes live.

For such sites, the two allowable dwellings “may be any combination of house, garage apartment, RV, manufactured home, mobile home, AHS, tiny home or park model RV which meet specifications determined by the Department of Health and are not part of a common development, campground, park or similar type development that has covenants or restrictions regulating this.”

As listed above, the revised ordinance adds categories for “tiny homes” and “alternative habitable structures,” or AHS. Examples of the latter include geodesic domes, yurts, glamping units “and platforms associated with similar type camping shelters” to be used for “transient or temporary occupancy.”

Building Department Director Gavin King spoke on the proposed changes in the meeting.

“Chapter 44 of the Land Use Ordinance is a lot of what that says, of land use, and it’s nothing new,” King said. “The ordinance was originally implemented in 2004.

“So, 19 years later, here we are today talking about making some revisions to that, to add some additional terms, some additional trends that we see and have a lot of interest in here in this area, along with our surrounding counties, things that they’ve been faced with.”

King attended a meeting of North Georgia commissioners and county managers in 2022, where he learned “some of the things that they were being faced with and asked as well as what we are,” with an eye toward anticipating the challenges that come with new types of development.

A top priority of the Building Department is safety, King said, like regulations surrounding Fire Department access and the proximity of multiple dwellings to one another, as higher structure density increases the risk of fires spreading in an area that is already at greater risk of wildfires.

“When we’re talking about a small dwelling unit (like a geodome, yurt or tiny home), how many of those can we put on a minimum lot size? What is the spacing on those?” King said. “(These are) things that we’ve not been faced with in the past.

“So, that’s one of the reasons that we saw fit to do some updates to incorporate a lot of these modern terms that

we’re seeing and hearing about, treehouses being one of those.

“Back in the summer, there was a 10 or 12-week stretch that not a week went by that we were not getting questions about treehouses to live in, (people) looking at buying property and building tree-homes – how many of those can we put in there? There’s a lot of concerns with that.”

For years, Paris has advocated for controlled growth to allow for the inevitability of development while preserving as much of the local aesthetic desired by longtime residents that also draws new people here in the first place.

One way he has worked toward managing a controlled growth strategy in recent years is by implementing development moratoriums, the first of which he put in place between 2019 and 2021 to guide the development of multi-family housing.

And the move-in rate has only quickened since the COVID-19 pandemic, compelling Paris to implement additional moratoriums over the last year as the county attempts to navigate the development tastes of new residents and others.

There are currently three development moratoriums in place, one each for parks, cryptomining facilities and short-term rentals, with corresponding regulations being drafted for all – a development-controlling method preferred by Paris over zoning, which he said he will not do in response to an attendee question.

The county will hold a second public hearing on the proposed Short-Term Rental Ordinance on Feb. 9 from 5-7 p.m. inside the courthouse. The latest STR Ordinance draft can be found on the county website for people to review before the hearing, at which they will get a chance to speak.

Not everyone is happy with the ordinances on offer; multiple short-term rental owners have contacted the North Georgia News to express their concerns that the proposed ordinance could effectively cripple the heretofore unregulated short-term rental market in Union County, with a view that short-term rentals bolster the important local tourism industry.

Also in the Jan. 19 county meeting, the commissioner extended the Emergency Moratorium on the issuance of short-term rental licenses for an additional 90 days, effective Feb. 10 “or until repealed by the adoption of new regulations or ordinances.”

Paris also awarded a major construction contract to Winkler & Winkler, a general contracting firm based in Blairsville. The company submitted the lowest of two bids to build the new Elections Facility for \$1,853,816.

To be erected next to the

Sports Center, the Elections Facility will serve as the headquarters for both the Union County Board of Elections and Voter Registration Office, which are now housed in two different places.

Construction of an adjacent multipurpose gym facility will be bid out separately in February, and it will be able to augment the Elections Facility by accommodating early in-person voting that has historically taken place inside the courthouse.

Paris also said it’s possible that two or three voting precincts may be able to be consolidated at this location in time for the next round of countywide voting in 2024.

Total costs to build the Elections Facility and multipurpose gym are currently estimated at around \$4 million.

As detailed in his Commissioner’s Comments, Paris announced that he had been elected as president of the Association of Tennessee Valley Governments for 2023.

The primary purpose of the ATVG is “to improve communication and understanding between local governments and the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA),” Paris said on ATVG.org.

“With nearly 1,000 local governments being served by TVA, we strive to advocate on behalf of our membership,” Paris said. “ATVG represents local governments in Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia.”

Another attendee asked Paris if the federally-owned TVA intended to adopt policies reminiscent of the so-called Green New Deal, a far-reaching set of progressive proposals criticized by its many opponents as utopian, unrealistic and harmful to Americans.

Paris said that TVA seemed interested in promoting policies that were in demand by the public but not tied to the Green New Deal.

Following the regular meeting, the Commissioner’s Office announced a called meeting of the Urban Redevelopment Agency Board of Directors. The meeting will take place on Monday, Jan. 30, at 5 p.m. inside Courtroom A of the courthouse.

Two business items are expected to appear on the agenda: 1) a vote to transfer the Union County Community Center property to Union County Government; and 2) a decision as to whether the URA should be dissolved.

The meeting will resemble those of the Union County Governmental Finance Corporation from March and April of last year, which resulted in the transfer of the old Bill Elliott property to Union County Government and a vote to keep the corporation active for future opportunities.

An Update From the Gold Dome: Weeks One & Two

By: Sen. Steve Gooch
(R – Dahlonega)

On Monday, January 9, 2023, the Georgia General Assembly officially gaveled in to kick off the 2023 Legislative Session. The Georgia Constitution requires that the Georgia General Assembly convene on the second Monday in January and is limited to a term made up of 40 non-consecutive legislative days. The first week of session typically encompasses ceremonial motions as a number of new leaders were sworn into office including Lt. Governor Burt Jones, President Pro Tempore Sen. John F. Kennedy (R – Macon) and 10 incoming freshman Senators. I am pleased to announce that I will be serving as Majority Leader for the Senate Majority Caucus for the 2023 Legislative Session. I am honored that my Republican colleagues in the Senate have chosen me to serve in this role and look forward to supporting a strong conservative policy agenda for all Georgians. I anticipate that the 2023 Legislative Session will be a historic one with new leaders and new faces in the Senate Chamber and I look forward to this great opportunity to forge new partnerships and build on the work of our predecessors to continue to grow our state.

Last week, the official Inauguration of Georgia’s 83rd Governor, Brian P. Kemp and our state’s Constitutional Officers took place at Georgia State University.

Kicking off this legislative session, I am proud to be a sponsor of Senate Bill 1 which will prohibit the requirement for proof of COVID-19 vaccination status for employment by state government agencies. Also prohibited by SB1 are the mask mandates that have

been forced on our children by school boards and administrators. It is fitting that this is our first bill of a session we are entering with the strong intent to restore the freedoms of Georgians. I am also a sponsor of Senate Bill 3 which orders state agencies to regularly assess degree requirements for state employment and reduce the number of positions which require a four year college degree as a condition of employment. In this era of record low unemployment rates, we look to strengthen the ability for government to cut red tape and ensure employment opportunities for job-seeking Georgians.

This past week, much of the General Assembly’s time was devoted to Joint Hearings of the Senate and House Appropriations Committees. “Budget Week,” as we call it, is a time for the heads of Georgia’s state agencies and departments to present their budget requests to the General Assembly for review. These hearings are often long, but are critical in ensuring that your taxpayer dollars are spent as responsibly as possible. Here are some of the highlights from the past week’s hearings.

In the Amended FY 2023 budget, the Governor recommended a regulated surplus of \$100 million be used for income tax reductions for all taxpayers for the 2022 tax year. If passed, a \$250 tax cut would be issued for individuals filing jointly and a \$500 tax cut for joint filers. I strongly support this item. The government does not spend its own money, it spends your money so to return those dollars back to the taxpayer is of utmost importance. In the FY2024 budget, the Governor recommends a \$2,000 cost of living

adjustment for state employees and teachers across Georgia.

This week, we will reconvene in the Senate Chamber Monday through Thursday for legislative days 5-8. We also plan to get back to work in our committees to assess legislation brought before us. If you have any questions or concerns related to the budget or any potential legislation that may come up this year, please do not hesitate to contact my office. I am here to serve you.

Sen. Steve Gooch serves as Majority Leader of the Senate Majority Caucus. He represents the 51st Senate District which includes Dawson, Fannin, Gilmer, Lumpkin, Union and Pickens Counties and a portion of White County.

He may be reached at 404-656-7872 or via email at steve.gooch@senate.ga.gov.

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 844-536-6226. NT(Oct13Z)CA



Georgia State Senator Steve Gooch Senate Majority Whip

UCHS STARS...from Page 1A

characteristics of Destiny is that she is a genuine person outside of being an academic student," Conger continued. "I feel (it) is kind of rare today to meet someone who is as kind, caring, (and) who can have great conversations."

For that reason, Conger feels that it truly is an honor to have been selected as 2023 STAR Teacher by a student "who saw (her) as more than a teacher."

As for next steps, Gibson wants to begin her post-high school journey by earning a degree at the Georgia Institute of Technology before going on to specialize in obstetrics and gynecology.

Even when she moves on to the next chapter in her life, Gibson will always remember where she started, adding, "My parents came from very little and made a lot for my life, so I think that's very important. It's a very inspirational thing to look at."

Before she gets there and carries on the torch, however, she wants to offer some parting advice for the upcoming seniors following in her footsteps.

"It's easier to prepare less for the questions, more so for the test," explained Gibson regarding the SAT. "There's a strategic way to approach standardized testing to do the



STAR Student Destiny Gibson embracing her STAR Teacher Dixie Conger after informing her of their joint honor Friday.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

best you possibly can, and that is how you prepare for those types of things."

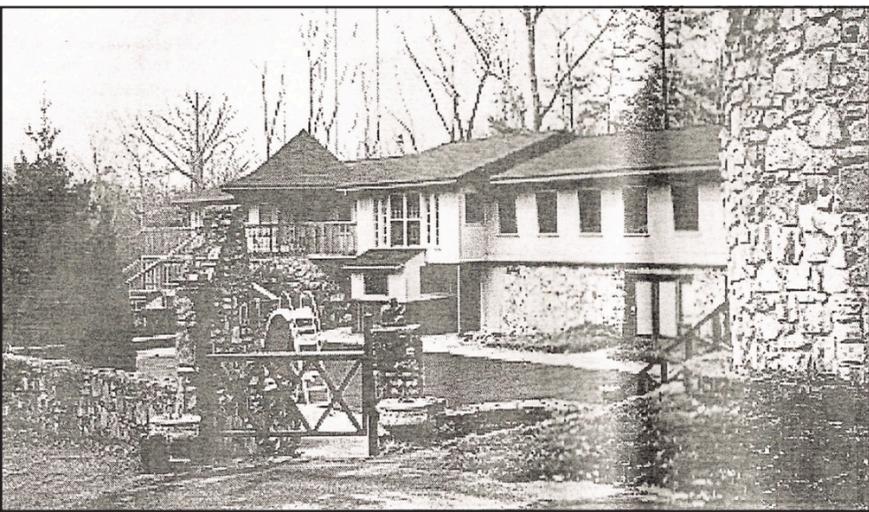
While it's important to focus on the content, there are a few other things to keep in mind.

"So, you never leave anything blank. Just skip if you don't know and go back to it. Be fast paced with it. Prepare for the test well, meaning sleep, eat breakfast—it makes a difference. Bring a snack, water; I like to chew gum," added Gibson, saying that chewing gum while studying and taking the test helps.

The dynamic duo hope to keep in contact after Gibson graduates this May, but they'll be spending a little more time together before the last hurrah in the upcoming Evening with the STARS hosted by the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce.

The STAR Banquet will be held on Feb. 9 at 6 p.m., upstairs at the Union County Community Center located at 129 Union County Recreation Road. The event will feature additional honors in recognition of the stellar achievements of other local students.

Barbara's Legacy...from Page 1A



Stonehenge Assisted Living when first started by Barbara Morris in 1990.

buildings with no more than 24 residents in each home. This allows for a small, loving family atmosphere that has become the Stonehenge brand.

The Stonehenge village is licensed for a total capacity of 94 residents at present, and Barbara's heart and soul are felt all over the property in the quality-of-care model and her philosophy of bringing quality of life into each of the homes.

For Barbara's family, Stonehenge became the

destination for her grandchildren and great-grandchildren to gather for family events and celebrations.

And for some of her family, it became an opportunity to serve the growing Stonehenge family as staff members in one capacity or another, like Mitch and Linda Thompson's son Russell, who is the Chief Operating Officer and liaison to the resident families, which gave Barbara great pride in her grandson.

"Our combined

experiences as family and staff of Stonehenge have been woven into a beautiful tapestry that has become the legacy that our mother sought when arriving to the United States," Mitch said. "Mum, you will live forever in our hearts and forever in the heart and soul of Stonehenge."

The family-owned and operated assisted living is located at 168 Stonehenge Drive in Blairsville. For more information, visit <https://www.stonehengeseniorliving.com/>.



Stonehenge Assisted Living today, expanded to a five-building campus.

Marine Corps League to host 78th Anniversary of Iwo Jima Memorial Ceremony on Feb. 20



On Monday, February 20th Unicoi Detachment #783 will pay tribute to those who fought in the Battle of Iwo Jima by hosting a memorial ceremony at the Towns County Recreation & Conference Center at Foster Park in Young Harris, GA. The indoor event will commence at 10 a.m. Cake and Coffee will be served immediately afterwards. All Veteran Service Organizations, Veterans and the general public are invited to attend.

The Battle of Iwo Jima resulted in the capture of 216 Japanese soldiers and 18,844 KIA (out of 22,060 men). American forces suffered more than 26,000 casualties, including 6,800 dead. In the bloodiest battle in Marine Corps history, 27 Medal of



Towns County's Iwo Jima Memorial

Honors were awarded for action on Iwo Jima. Of the 27 medals awarded, 22 were Marines and 5 were Navy sailors, four of whom were Hospital Corpsmen.

Foster Park is home to Town's County's Iwo Jima Memorial; the only one of its kind in the State of Georgia. The sculpture, which was officially dedicated to all veterans on Nov. 11, 2015, depicts the 1945 raising of the American flag upon Mount Suribachi during the Battle of Iwo Jima.

The unique memorial was the idea of the late Towns County resident, Clarence "Bud" Johnson, Chief Petty Officer, U.S.N. [Ret], who served as Chief Quartermaster aboard the U.S.S. Silverstein and witnessed the raising of the U.S. flag from the ship's bridge.

The exhibit was created by sculptor Al Garnto, a kinetic artist from Blairsville, GA and commissioned by former Towns County Commissioner Bill Kendall on Sept. 11, 2015.

Trailer Fire...from Page 1A



Union County Firefighters wrapping up suppression efforts at a trailer fire on Jan. 22.

Photo/Submitted

seriously injured in the fire.

"We hate that people lose their home or property inside the home, but saving lives is the most important thing—property can be replaced," Dyer said.

The regional chapter of the American Red Cross assisted the occupants of the home with temporary lodgings Sunday.

It was the second local fire of 2023 to result in the total

loss of a home, the first being an unoccupied vacation rental off Georgia 325 from Jan. 13.

"Fire moves quickly, and today, with all the synthetic materials in these homes, a fire can get rolling fast," Dyer said. "You've got a lot of heavy, black smoke (in these fires), so it's very important to get out as fast as you can before you get overwhelmed."

"That's why our smoke

alarms are very important, so kudos to them for having smoke alarms. If this had happened in the middle of the night, those smoke alarms would have been what alerted them."

Smoke alarms are proven to save lives, and people can take advantage of the free local installation program by visiting <http://www.unioncountyg.gov/fire-department/smoke-alarm-request-form/>.