

North Georgia News

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GA 515 final phase awarded for construction

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Progress continues to widen Georgia 515/US 76 between Blairsville and Young Harris to four lanes, with the last of three construction phases having been awarded last week by the Georgia Department of Transportation.

Construction company AIS Infrastructure announced Jan. 29 that the state had accepted its bid, resulting in a successful contract to build Phase III of the massive project. Phase III will stretch from Young Harris Street inside Blairsville city limits to Earl Shelton Road in Union County.

"This \$110,976,976 contract involves the

widening and reconstruction of approximately 4.39 miles of roadway, transforming the existing three-lane rural section into a four-lane divided rural roadway with a 32-foot grassed depressed median," AIS Infrastructure said.

Continuing, "Within the Blairsville city limits, our team will also design and construct a five-lane urban roadway with sidewalks, three special-design retaining walls, and incorporate trout stream restoration efforts. "This project is set for completion by Nov. 30, 2027, and reflects our continued commitment to delivering innovative infrastructure solutions."

When AIS Infrastructure begins work, all three phases

of the project will finally be under construction, with a total project completion estimate of 2028 provided previously by GDOT.

The project has been on the books since 1999, initially consisting of a single construction phase to both straighten and widen roughly 8.5 miles of the highway between Blairsville and Young Harris city limits.

After bids came back too high in 2023, GDOT divided the project into three phases to bid out separately, with the same ultimate goal for the roadway, that is, to future-proof the corridor by reducing both traffic congestion and crash frequency.

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Phase III of the GA 515 widening and relocation project should begin soon. Pictured here is the starting point of the work to be done inside Blairsville city limits, near Home Depot.

'Temporary' traffic lights installed at intersection



A GDOT employee inspecting the installation of a new traffic light at Gainesville Highway and Shoe Factory Road on Tuesday, Jan. 28.

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Last week, the Georgia Department of Transportation installed traffic lights at the intersection of Shoe Factory Road and Gainesville Highway, just south of Blairsville city limits.

Historically, both north and southbound drivers on

Gainesville Highway have continued straight at the intersection while motorists on Shoe Factory Road wait at a stop sign to turn left or right onto the highway once traffic clears.

But not for much longer – as soon as the new lights are activated, they will be a big change previewing even bigger changes coming to the

intersection.

The traffic lights are meant to be temporary, as GDOT plans to build a roundabout there in a project that has been in the works for a while now but is still in its early stages; roundabout construction is expected to begin during the state's 2027-2028 fiscal year.

Because of the impending yet extended construction timeline putting the roundabout several years into the future, the state wanted to go ahead and improve safety and congestion at the intersection.

"We've noticed a build-up of traffic there," GDOT District 1 Communications Officer Nathan Johnston said. "So, between now and when we get the roundabout installed, (we will have) traffic signals to help with that free flow of traffic."

At press time, the lights were covered and awaiting the installation of electricity at the intersection. As soon as the lights are powered, there will be a 30-day "burn-in" period of red-flashing lights only to monitor the functioning of the equipment to ensure there are

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UCFD challenges locals to support cancer research



L-R: Fire Chief David Dyer presenting a donation check to Relay For Life volunteers Wendy Holden, Sue Upchurch and Cathy George, with Fire Capt. Justin Blanchard and Battalion Chief Richard Jones.

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The Union County Fire Department made a sizeable contribution toward life-saving cancer research last week by presenting a \$10,000 check to Union County Relay For Life, the local fundraising affiliate of the American Cancer Society.

Relay Chair Wendy

Holden and fellow volunteers Sue Upchurch and Cathy George accepted the donation and expressed their immense gratitude to firefighters on Thursday, Jan. 30.

Fire Chief David Dyer said the Fire Department has an internal charity team composed primarily of career staff that raises money each year for worthwhile local causes, with

past giving including efforts like the Shop With A Cop for Christmas Program and even Relay For Life.

This year, firefighters wanted to re-focus their fundraising on Relay For Life because a family member of one of their own had been battling cancer, experiencing tough treatments, stress and

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Law enforcement agencies warn of police impersonator

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Area law enforcement agencies took to Facebook last week to warn the public of a man impersonating a police officer to pull over motorists, though no suspect had been apprehended by press time.

The first warning arrived on Jan. 29 after a report of the impersonator came into the neighboring Cherokee County Sheriff's Office in North Carolina.

Describing the suspect as "a white male, smaller in stature with brown hair," the Sheriff's Office said the man was reportedly driving "a black Dodge Charger with tinted windows and a tinted tag cover" on US 19, just south of NC 141, when the incident under investigation occurred.

"The suspect was wearing a gray and dark blue uniform with a vest containing a radio and handcuffs," the post continued, advising drivers to keep an eye out for the distinctive county patch worn



Last week, UCSO posted an image of its uniform patch for people to be able to recognize in the event they are illegally pulled over by a law enforcement impersonator that is thought to be roaming the area.

by its patrol deputies. "Non-uniformed members will have a clearly visible badge and rarely conduct traffic stops, but do occasionally," the Sheriff's Office said. "The same applies

to Alcohol Law Enforcement. "If you are ever concerned for your safety, please call 911, indicate by a turn signal and travel to a well-lit area."

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McGraw remembered for passion, local involvement



Allyson McGraw's portrait accompanied a lovely bouquet of flowers during a Celebration of Life in honor of her passing in December.

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The late Allyson McGraw was defined by a love that transcended family and friends to permeate deeply into her community, as was made loud and clear during her

Celebration of Life Ceremony at the Old Union County Courthouse on Jan. 25.

McGraw, 75, passed away Dec. 1 following a brief illness, leaving behind a colorful legacy painted with an outstanding amount of love and dedication. Everyone in

attendance could agree that while the pain of her passing is great, all who cared for her are better for having known her.

Born on Jan. 10, 1949, to Vivian Stephens and Claude Cook Jr. in LaGrange, McGraw later attended the University of

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UCFD Challenge...from Page 1A

other hardships associated with the terrible disease.

On top of the close-to-home reasons for supporting Relay For Life in 2025, Dyer said that firefighters are twice as likely as the average person to be diagnosed with cancer, so helping to fund cancer research is a natural fit for the Fire Department.

“Cancer risk for firefighters come from exposure to burning materials, chemicals, exhaust fumes, hazardous materials fumes,” Chief Dyer said. “Just a regular structure fire releases hazardous gases.

“We wear (self-contained breathing apparatus), but a lot of times, we can still get exposed to some of those things, so that’s what’s contributed to a lot of the firefighter cancer. Plus, there’s stress, lack of sleep and strange hours that is probably a contributing factor to some of that.”

After handing over the check, Chief Dyer issued a communitywide challenge to others to meet or beat the Fire Department donation, which the Relay For Life volunteers emphatically embraced.

“Private donations like this have helped us to keep the fight going against cancer,” Holden said, noting that 2024

through last week had resulted in \$25,000-plus being raised.

For decades, Relay For Life volunteers have hosted the group’s namesake outdoor event as their primary fundraiser, to include a friendly competition between teams organized by individuals, businesses, churches, the hospital, first responder agencies and others to raise the most money.

In addition to the fundraising element, the annual Relay For Life brings the community together amid the hustle and bustle of daily life, uniting neighbors in having a good time for a meaningful cause with heartfelt traditions like luminaria dedications.

But volunteers were unable to marshal the necessary manpower to host Relay For Life last year, and it’s looking the same for this year.

Sadly, three of the group’s key members have died in the last three years – Vee Laffoon in 2022 and Barbara Richardson and Allyson McGraw last year – so the already small group of volunteers is even smaller now, with just five active members.

Even so, Union County Relay For Life volunteers remain committed to raising funds by partnering with caring groups like the Fire Department and others while

hosting smaller initiatives until the annual relay can return, hopefully in 2026.

Residents can support Relay For Life right now by participating in the local Daffodil Days 2025 Flower of Hope Project: “Surprise a friend, family member, or ‘adopt’ a group with a beautiful bouquet of 10 fresh-cut daffodils for a \$5 donation to the American Cancer Society.”

To order daffodils, people may contact Wendy Holden at snickers13@windstream.net or 706-781-4166. The deadline to participate is Feb. 28. Flowers will be ready for pick-up on Monday, March 17, from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. in the Fellowship Hall of First United Methodist Church.

Of course, Relay For Life is looking for more volunteers, so folks seeking a way to give back to their community and forward the vision of “ending cancer as we know it, for everyone,” may contact Holden as well.

“Cancer affects every family in the whole wide world, and that’s why it’s important to keep the mindset there so the funds can help fight it,” Holden said, providing an excellent reason for residents to join and support the volunteer effort.

Police Impersonator...from Page 1A

Two days later, on Jan. 31, the Towns County Sheriff’s Office announced that “an unknown individual has been reported in multiple counties surrounding our area pulling over cars and approaching citizens impersonating a law enforcement officer.”

TCSO revealed that the man had reportedly been using “a single emergency light” to stop people and that the tinted tag cover was “to conceal their tag.”

“So far, this has been reported in Cherokee County (North Carolina), Towns County and in the Union County area as well,” TCSO said.

In a follow-up post on Saturday, TCSO said it had investigated two potential instances of the impersonator being present in Towns County, concluding that these reported

incidents – including one involving a picture of roadside activity – were actually “mistaken identity.”

“One incident is one sitting on the side of the road and the other involving a male in a black Charger pulling over a car,” TCSO said, noting that it had no all-black Dodge patrol cars in its fleet. “Both incidents have been cleared.

“The first was found to be a (Georgia State Patrol) Trooper, and the second was the one in which the picture is being circulated. This was a Towns County Deputy in a marked patrol car wearing a uniform conducting a lawful traffic stop.

“At this time there has been no incidents involving a black charger in Towns County. In (North Carolina) there has been an incident of a male

pulling over a car in a black Dodge Charger or a Black Tahoe.”

The Union County Sheriff’s Office issued a warning last Friday, too, and concurred with TCSO in a follow-up post on Saturday that “there have been no further incidents involving a black charger in either Union or Towns County.”

Also last week, the Blairsville Police Department shared a post by the Hiwassee Police Department warning the public about the original incident in Cherokee County, North Carolina.

Generally, motorists are advised to pay attention to the official patches worn by each respective law enforcement agency and to call 911 if they are ever in doubt during a traffic stop.

Essential Tips for Safe Debris Burning this Spring

Spring is coming, (I promise)! It always has and this year should be no exception. Spring is the time for us to emerge from our winter hibernation, shake off our winter coat and start cleaning our yards to get rid of all the debris, leaves, limbs, and pine straw that has collected since last fall. The usual method to do this is to pile it in the yard, light a match and watch it burn. While this debris burning is easy, quick, and smells good, it is also very hazardous for our houses. All it takes is one spark from the burn pile to fly up and land on a leaf covered roof and you can be the subject of a 911 call which brings the bright red rucks with flashing lights, sirens, and water hoses. How embarrassing and devastating!!

A glowing ember from your burning pile can travel up to a mile with the right wind and land where it is not detected and cause a fire that you or your neighbor may not be aware of until it’s too late. Ask California! Debris burning is Georgia’s #1 cause of wildfire, and it accounts for over 50 percent of all wildfires in the state and burning leaf piles in your yard is the most common cause of these wildfires. Debris burning for a hand piled 6’ x 6’ pile, now does not require a burn permit from the Georgia Forestry Commission but be sure that you are in compliance with the GFC STAR 5 rules for burning to prevent getting a ticket from the GFC if it gets out, because you can be held liable for suppression costs if you are not within the rules.

Burning forests, agricultural fields or land clearing requires direct GFC notification and their approval before you can strike the match. Burning of household garbage is prohibited and not permitted by the GFC and the fire department. A major cause of wildfires is burning with improper weather conditions. Permits for big burns are obtained by calling your local GFC county office or dialing 1-877-OK2-BURN. It’s free and releases you from liability if your leaf pile turns into a raging inferno. Fires should not be initiated before 8:00 a.m. and should be completely extinguished before dark.

Burning permits are

not required for Hand Piled Natural Vegetation including leaf piles on the premises where they fell. Existing small garden spots, existing small clearings to plant vegetables and flower gardens, vegetative debris disposal from storm damage, weed abatement, and disease and or pest prevention require you to notify the GFC and get a permit. This permit does not include the burning of debris generated by machine clearing of an area for establishing a garden spot or other clearings.

If your unpermitted fire gets out and damages your neighbor’s house, you can be held liable, or if it burns your house, your insurance company may not pay, but if you have a permit, you have a get-out-of-jail-free card. You can also be held responsible for suppression costs if you cause a wildfire and do not have a permit including bulldozers, hot shot crews, and air tankers which do not come cheap! So, think before you burn and get a permit for the big stuff and adhere to the STAR 5 rules for a small leaf pile in your yard. It’s the cheapest insurance policy you can get.

Here are Smokey’s Safe Debris burning tips: Comply with Local Regulations: Contact GFC in advance to confirm that burning is allowed and to find out if permits are being issued that day. The call must be made on the day you plan to burn, and it is only good for that day. You must call each day you plan to burn. Check the Weather Forecast - Weather fluctuations, such as sudden gusts of wind, cause debris burning to spark a wildfire. Contact the GFC on the day you plan to burn to find out if the weather is safe enough to burn, and if it is not, they will not issue a permit. Choose a Safe Burning Site - A safe site will be far away from power lines, overhanging limbs, buildings, automobiles, and equipment. It will have vertical clearance at least three times the height of the pile, as heat from the fire extends far beyond the actual flames that you see. It will have horizontal clearance twice the height of the debris pile. Prepare the Site Correctly: The ground around the burn site should be surrounded by gravel or dirt for at least ten feet in all



Frank Riley
Executive Director of RC&D

directions. Keep the surrounding area watered down during the burn.

Most Important - Remain With your Fire until your fire is completely out. To ensure the fire has been completely extinguished, drown the fire with water, turn over the ashes with a shovel and drown it again. Repeat several times. Check the burn area regularly over the next several days and up to several weeks following the burn, especially if the weather is warm, dry, and windy.

I once burned a large debris pile (with a permit), covered it with dirt to put it out at the end of the day, and we had several rains, and 6 weeks later when I uncovered the mound, it was still burning inside, so you must monitor it until you are completely sure that the fire is out.

Keep it Legal - It is illegal to burn plastic, tires, and most other waste products not from a tree or shrub. It is illegal to burn any kind of building materials including lumber and the burning debris can only be natural material.

For more information on debris burning, burn permits, and wildfires, contact your local Georgia Forestry Commission office – 706-781-2398, US Forest Service district office – 706-781-2593, local fire department, or the Chestatee/Chattahoochee RC&D council at www.chestchattred.org, or www.gatrees.org.

GA 515 Final Phase...from Page 1A



Phase II of the project continues between Earl Shelton Road in Union County and Sampson Road in Towns County. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Phase I is about 46% complete and will result in a two-lane rural bypass of 1.25 miles in length running around the west side of Downtown Young Harris, beginning with a roundabout at Brasstown Creek Road and ending with a second roundabout at Timberline

Drive. GDOT has estimated the bypass should be done by September 2026, but the project was put on hold last summer after Native American petroglyphs were disturbed during construction following an apparent miscommunication

about the presence of the ancient stone carvings. Fortunately, the state has arrived at a resolution and has set a meeting with the appropriate tribal authorities to discuss the issue on-site this Friday, according to GDOT District 1 Communications

Officer Nathan Johnston. The meeting will include archaeological planning to ensure this does not recur, and Phase I construction is expected to resume within weeks. Also last summer, the state's subcontractor, C.W. Matthews Contracting Co., damaged two water lines belonging to Young Harris during bypass construction, Mayor Andrea Gibby said, putting the city in a position of having to ask GDOT to pay \$2,493 to cover repairs and water loss. Gibby said the state claimed that "the insured is not the proximate cause of this accident or loss" – a contention disputed by the city. And this issue has been resolved, too, as C.W. Matthews decided last month to pay the amount requested

from the state in a spirit of cooperation with the city. Phase II of the project encompasses the 3.2 miles of Georgia 515 between Earl Shelton Road in Union County and Sampson Road in Young Harris, currently listed by GDOT as 7.82% complete. GDOT greenlit Phase II for construction by Vertical Earth Inc. last May, but the company had to wait until the fall to begin roadside clearing because of federal regulations around protected bat species that could possibly roost in the trees. Estimated to be done by August 2027, Phase II will feature straightening and widening of 515 to a four-lane divided highway with a 32-foot depressed median and 10-foot shoulder, to include a 6-foot paved shoulder to

accommodate bikes from both directions. A new bridge is being built across Brasstown Creek at the county line, parallel to the existing bridge. Traffic will eventually be diverted onto the new bridge, at which point the old bridge will be demolished and replaced with another new bridge to form twin bridges over the creek. As Phase II gets further along, GDOT will implement eight detours to tie sideroads back into the highway. On top of the tens of millions of dollars in combined right-of-way and engineering costs, the three construction phases of the project figure to a hefty sum: Phase I, \$26,916,958; Phase II, \$64,085,296; and Phase III, more than \$110 million, according to GDOT.

McGraw Remembered...from Page 1A

Georgia and earned a master's degree in Family and Consumer Science.

In 1984, she and her husband Charles "Charlie" McGraw Jr. moved to Blairsville to open the Appalachian Locksmith Service; she had no idea how much of a presence they would become in their new community.

Until she retired in 1996, McGraw served as a UGA extension agent in multiple counties, including in Union, where she met now-retired agent Mickey Cummings and worked with local students – like Harmony Grove Baptist Pastor Scotty Jarrard – through the 4-H program.

Cummings and Jarrard offered some of their fondest memories of McGraw, which intersected with the county extension office.

For example, Jarrard associates the 4-H pledge with the way McGraw lived, noting how she devoted her head to clearer thinking, her heart to greater loyalty, her hands to greater service and her health to better living.

"She's instilled these things in all of us," Jarrard said. "We are so blessed to have such a giant in our lives."

Cummings shared stories of McGraw caring for students, whether that meant imparting wisdom or making sure they had a ride to and from 4-H camp. She gave freely of her time, her finances and her advice as needed.

With her involvement in multiple nonprofit organizations, some of McGraw's cohorts also appeared and offered words of support and memories that elicited tears and laughter alike.

For her part, Sue Upchurch, who worked extensively alongside McGraw in the Union County Relay For Life effort of the American Cancer Society, remembers her friend as a fiercely caring individual dedicated to community.

Freya Jones agreed, sharing that she met McGraw 30 years ago when she started working for the University of Georgia. Jones will be forever grateful for McGraw's support during difficult times and the care McGraw showed for her own children.

"I miss her terribly," Jones admitted, adding, "She was gone too soon, but my life has been forever enriched, and I will be forever grateful that I



In last month's Celebration of Life for Allyson McGraw, Michael McGraw of Gainesville spoke lovingly of his grandmother, noting how he came to realize that day just how much she meant to this community. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

had Allyson McGraw." An emphatic cry of "amen" came from the audience at that statement.

Years ago, McGraw helped Jeanne Tallent make the Glenda Gooch House a reality for families facing some of the most difficult days of their lives. Tallent befriended McGraw when she first moved to Blairsville, and the two remained lifelong friends who supported each other through personal hardship – especially when McGraw lost her husband.

"I couldn't stand the thoughts of Allyson being home alone at Thanksgiving and Christmas, so I called her up and told her to come eat with us, and she went several times," Tallent recalled.

Kathie McMillan of the Blairsville Kiwanis Club revealed that McGraw had been on her second term as president – an unusual but welcome feat. Typically, leaders only take one term, but "no" wasn't in McGraw's vocabulary, enabling her to gladly serve another, McMillan said.

Kathryn Nelson shared memories of McGraw helping her establish Isaiah 1:17 House in Union County. As she did with most of her endeavors, McGraw approached the challenge with gusto, eager to introduce children in need to love.

She attended meetings until physical limitations prevented her from doing so, but Nelson noted that McGraw continued to support the group

by bringing gifts to case workers.

McGraw's family members also made an appearance, such as her grandson Michael McGraw of Gainesville, who tearfully thanked everyone for welcoming his grandparents with open arms, and in doing so, becoming an extended part of the family.

"On the day she died, we sat in that waiting room saying, 'We should have done more to make her move back south,'" said Michael, expressing a desire to have the family care for their matriarch. "Listening to what all of you have said today tells me Hell would have froze over before we got her out of here."

According to McGraw's obituary, "During her career and life in North Georgia, Allyson was an instrumental volunteer in many professional and civic organizations, including The American Cancer Society, 4H Club, Relay for Life, American Heart Association, and Habitat for Humanity among many more.

"She was on the council for the Georgia Mountain Research and Education Center and the Union County Retired Educators Association as well as a founding member of The Glenda Gooch House.

"At the time of her passing, Allyson was President of the local Kiwanis Club for the past three years and was President of the Union County Retired Educators for the last two years."

DAR recognizes Literacy Promotion with local Award Presentation

Old Unicoi Trail Chapter, National Society Daughters of the American Revolution presented a National Literacy Champion award to the Towns County Schools Literacy Bus. The presentation was made by Pam Greene, Education Chair of the local DAR Chapter. Receiving the award on behalf of the Literacy Bus was Stephanie Moss, recently retired from the position of Curriculum and Staff Development Director for the Towns County Schools.

According to the DAR Literacy Committee and Barbara Weaver, Chapter Regent, literacy always means "helping others to read and write, but it can encompass much more. Teaching is the heart of literacy, and anything you do to help someone use their skills through electronic access to resources is also Literacy Promotion. Change the world, one learner at a time!"

The DAR promotes historic preservation, education, and patriotism and represents over one million Daughters. A woman 18 years or older who can prove lineal descent from a patriot of the American Revolution is eligible to join. If you are interested in membership or to attend a Chapter meeting email oldunicoitrail@gmail.com.



Retired educator Stephanie Moss attended the Jan. 6 Towns County School Board meeting to receive a literacy award from Pam Greene on behalf of the Old Unicoi Trail Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution. Photo by Shelly Knight



Towns County Schools Literacy Bus

'Polar Bear Plunge' a first for Vertical Church

By Shelly Knight
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

On Saturday, Jan. 25, Pastor Phillip Kight and about 40 other participants bravely leapt into the icy waters of Lake Nottely at the TVA Boat Ramp Beach in a fundraising campaign for Vertical Church.

Still others looked on while enjoying the warm cinnamon rolls and hot cocoa provided by the Food Ministry Food Truck. There were even bonfires to warm everyone up after the dip into the water, which was a balmy 44 degrees that day.

"Today is our first ever Polar Bear Plunge to help raise money for our building campaign," Pastor Kight said. "Ninety percent of the donations we receive will go toward our building fund, and the other 10% will go to the Jones Creek Food Pantry. They do amazing work in our community, and we are really proud to be able to support them and what they do."

As for the primary purpose of the fundraiser, Kight said the church is trying to pay off the debt on its building in Blairsville, which formerly housed the Skillet Cafe.

"When we bought the building, we created some debt, and our goal is to be debt-free," Kight said. "We believe that when we are debt-free, we will have more money to go out and serve in our community – that's what I feel like a church is supposed to be doing."

Vertical Church has several plans in mind to be of greater service in the area, especially since there are "certain things our community needs, like childcare."

"Childcare is a big need," Kight said. "We'd love to do some kind of daycare or something that would specifically serve in our community to help parents find a cost-affordable option for daycare. So that's on the vision board (for Union and Towns counties)."

The church has two locations serving people in the mountains, one in Blairsville at 223 Wellborn Street and another in Hiawassee at 1460 US 76.

Kight has been pastor of Vertical Church since 2021 but has been on church staff since 2019. He graduated from Lee College in 2012 and had a stint in the business world, but his calling turned out to be in ministry.

"I love it here," he said. "Our church is very kind and loving and supportive, and I am very fortunate that I get to be here. Most of the 'plungers' are from our church, but we do have some who've heard about what we're doing and want to be a part of it and support what's going on."

"You've got to be a little bit crazy to want to jump in the lake, and then you drum up sponsors. We wanted the event to be fun, but anyone can jump in. This is an amazing turnout."

The Polar Bear Plunge was concocted by the church's

Building Campaign Chairman Chris Milhous.

"This seemed like a great idea in July, but the last couple of weeks, maybe not so much," joked Milhous on the cold January morning of the plunge. "The thought here was to do a fun event that anybody could do, and the support from the church has been outstanding."

Milhous reviewed logistics before the plunge, taking a head count, introducing the nurse on standby and highlighting other safety procedures. Plungers were warned against hypothermia and given a rundown of the symptoms, just in case.

The unique event was quite a success, as the church raised over \$16,000, and talking with the brave souls who took a dip afterward was enlightening.

"I do these every month," said 60-year-old plunger Frank Stapleton. "This is the first one of the year. I'm going to do them at least until I'm 90."

"It was awesome," attested plunger Rick Jones. "These people are amazing. It's all about loving each other and loving the Lord. I'm having a blast. I mean, as cold as it is, I'm a little numb right now, but it was wonderful."

"Gosh, how do you even explain it?" said plunger Hannah Graham. "It's the craziest thing I've ever done. I did it for the Lord. And actually, I feel pretty good, like my body kind of needed it."

For more information on the church, visit <https://www.vcotm.org/>.



Dozens of people participated in the Polar Bear Plunge by Vertical Church at Lake Nottely on Jan. 25.
Photo by Shelly Knight

Traffic Lights...from Page 1A

no failures.

During the monthlong "burn-in," the intersection will effectively be a four-way stop, including traffic coming from the commercial property directly across from Shoe Factory Road.

If everything is working properly at the end of the 30 days, the traffic lights will be switched over to normal functions of green, yellow and red traffic control signals.

Given the "temporary" designation of the lights, there will be no left-turn signals at the intersection, and the speed limit in that area will not be changing.

Blue Ridge Mountain Electric Membership Corporation received word about the project on Monday, Jan. 27 – the day GDOT began work on the lights. BRMEMC Administrative Services Director Erik Brinke said the EMC created a work order the following day and staked the job last Wednesday, which was when the state finished its part of the installation.

The EMC sent an invoice to complete the work to the county on Thursday, and County Manager Tony Hughes said the Commissioner's Office submitted payment that same day. Brinke said Friday evening that the EMC would commence construction as soon as the payment is received.

A date when the lights would go live and start the 30-day clock on the "burn-in" period was not available by press time, but Brinke



GDOT marked the placement of new power poles to hang traffic lights at the Gainesville Highway/Shoe Factory Road intersection on Monday, Jan. 27.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

assured the public that the EMC has placed "a high priority on this project, and we will do everything in our control to ensure its timely completion."

GDOT decided to install a roundabout there after conducting a traffic study examining safety, congestion and efficiency.

According to the state, roundabouts offer improved safety by reducing the number of points where vehicles can cross paths and eliminating the potential for right-angle "T-bone" collisions and head-on crashes.

"Another safety improvement is promoting lower vehicle speeds, giving drivers more time to react," per GDOT. A preliminary design concept commissioned by the county last year showed a

25-mph speed limit inside the forthcoming roundabout.

Additionally, GDOT says roundabouts reduce congestion by deploying a "yield-controlled design" that translates to "fewer stops, fewer delays and shorter queues," and "can save on long-term costs by not requiring the same maintenance and operational costs as traffic signals."

GDOT also points to the potential for landscaping and beautification of roundabouts and says that they "significantly reduce pollution, noise impacts, and fuel consumption."

The total cost of the roundabout is currently estimated at \$3.5 million, but that is subject to change. Johnston said, adding that, as of now, the state is expected to pick up the construction tab with no local match required.



Vertical Church was thrilled with the turnout for its first ever Polar Bear Plunge fundraiser at the TVA Boat Ramp near Nottely Dam.
Photo by Shelly Knight