

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Legal Organ of Union County

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Wednesday, February 9, 2022

White earns State Champ glory in two swim events

By William "Whitey" White
Guest Contributor

Union County High School swimmer Hunter White earned two state titles at the Georgia State Swim Meet on Saturday.

White qualified for the 50-yard Freestyle, 100-yard Freestyle, and 100-yard Breaststroke, but swimmers are only allowed to participate in two individual events, so he opted for the two 100-yard competitions.

During the preliminaries on Friday, he set personal best times and school records in both events to qualify for the Finals on Saturday.

In the Final events, White earned his first personal best and school record by winning the 2A Division in the 100-yard Freestyle, and he persevered through stiff competition to also win the 2A Division in the 100-yard Breaststroke, becoming UCHS' first two-event State Swim Champion.

White started swimming at just 8 years old, attending the University of Georgia Swim Camp eight consecutive years, where coaches from around the country helped him perfect his strokes and make him a faster and more efficient swimmer, but he owed his local coaches more than any.

Following his victories at state, White said he wanted to thank first and foremost the RAPIDS Swim Club Coach Barry Gay for pushing him at an early age to be his best. He also wanted to thank Coaches Kathy Mancuso, Emily Stafford, Megan Foster,

and especially Coach Kelly Helton, for their dedication to the swimmers and the team. He knows that there were many who went before him providing the motivation and desire to follow in their wakes.

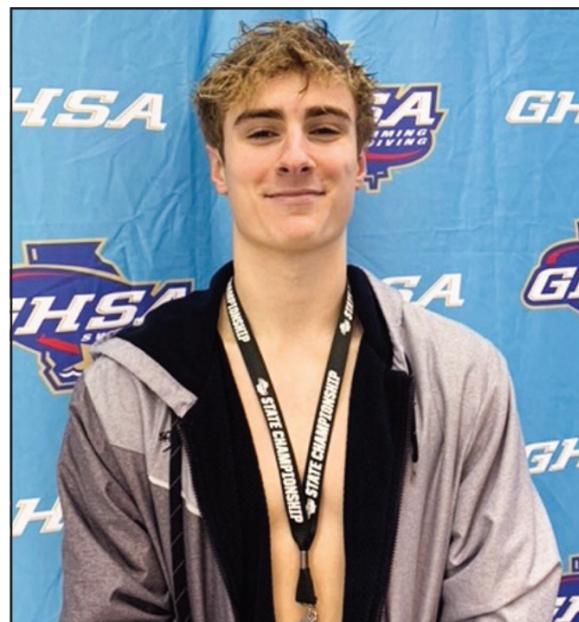
When asked, White said he wanted to make sure many thanks went to Tanner Gay, Grayson Blocker, Brian Williams, Steven Williams, Brendan Bowman, Luke Gambrell, Alden Wilkes, and many other swimmers who gave him the goals to shoot for, "because without them, I would not have had the target times."

While this was the culmination of his competitive swimming and graduation in May, he ended his career on top and is able to walk away with his objectives met, holding most of the Middle School records and several of the High School records. He knows that the future

of bright, with some very fast swimmers following in his wake, and he hopes that he has been able to provide motivation for them, as others did for me."

White leaves for UGA this fall to major in Cellular Biology in hopes of attending Medical School to become a Doctor of Orthopedics and Sports Medicine.

"Having experienced sports injuries and witnessed injuries among friends has helped me choose this career field so that I may be able to help others get back to the sport they love," White said. "I am extremely grateful to all those who helped me in my journey, from my coaches to my friends, parents and fellow competitors. Without each of them motivating me, I wouldn't have accomplishing this most incredible feat. Thank you to each and every one."



UCHS Senior Hunter White made his friends, family and community proud when he came in First Place for two individual events during the State Swim Meet on Saturday. Photo/Submitted

Whicker signs to play Truett McConnell volleyball



L-R: Sister Elyssa and mom Shannon look on proudly as Emma Whicker signs to play volleyball at Truett McConnell University. Also pictured: proud grandma Doris Bridges. Photo by Todd Forrest

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News Staff Writer

Union County High School volleyball stand-out Emma Whicker will continue her athletic career this fall at

Cleveland's Truett McConnell University.

Flanked by family, friends, coaches and teammates, Whicker finalized her college decision on the morning of Tuesday, Feb. 1, during a

signing ceremony at the UCHS library.

The Lady Panthers' senior finished her prep career last fall as the program's all-time leader in assists with

Union County takes over bagged garbage, recycling

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News editor@nganews.com

On Feb. 1, Union County Government took over full operation of the Transfer Station from Waste Management Inc., including residential bagged garbage and recycling at the main facility at 348 Deep South Farm Road as well as the Convenience Center on Georgia 325.

This is the conclusion of a process that started last year when Waste Management decided to vacate the commercial side of the Transfer Station. The county assumed control of commercial hauling last fall, completing safety upgrades there before re-opening in November.

Resuming commercial operations under county management required an \$11



The Union County Transfer Station will soon be returning to more environmentally friendly front-loading dumpsters in place of these roll-off dumpsters that appeared on the residential bagged garbage side last year. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

increase in price per ton for local haulers, which still didn't completely cover operating costs, so the county knew it would have to take control. See Transfer Station, Page 3A

Sexton's ESP-90 process can 'control biological clock'

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News editor@nganews.com

Union County resident Eugene "Gene" Sexton has developed a completely natural process to prevent the decaying of wood, and the potential applications of his discoveries reach far beyond arboreal boundaries to have implications for all life as we know it.

Sexton calls the process ESP-90. The ESP stands for "Earth's Special Position," and the 90 signifies 1990, the year he finally isolated the steps necessary to create pristinely preserved wood using methods that are reproducible on any



Gene Sexton displaying some of his many wood-turned pieces at his home. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Snow Family thankful for Habitat home selection



The Snow Family, center, was overjoyed to learn last week that they had been selected to partner with the local Habitat for Humanity for the nonprofit's next home build, to be located near the county line in Towns County. Photo by Madelyn Bailey

By Jeremy Foster
North Georgia News Staff Writer

Habitat for Humanity Towns/Union Counties Inc.

thrilled a local family on Feb. 1 by welcoming them to a surprise announcement at the Habitat ReStore in Blairsville. Every year or so, the

local Habitat starts its selection process of partnering with a family to build a "forever home" and get them set up for

Commissioner discusses SPLOST funds, nixes public Q&A

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News Staff Writer

Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris led off his Jan. 31 regular meeting with a presentation on how his office has allocated Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax collections over the years. The meeting was rescheduled from its original Jan. 18 date after a few attendees decided earlier in the month not to comply with

Enotah Judicial Circuit Superior Court Judge Raymond George's masking order for the courthouse.

Judge George rescinded the courthouse mask mandate the week following the canceled meeting, citing improvements in local COVID case numbers.

Paris has been accused repeatedly of operating a "slush fund" with SPLOST collections, and in his Jan. 31 meeting, he responded to accusations and innuendos of misconduct made against his office by a small

group of activist citizens in the last several county meetings.

Purchasing Director Pam Hawkins presented an in-depth summary of the Union County SPLOST Program going back to 2007, saying that SPLOST-related projections are similar to budget projections in that they are educated guesses regarding future county needs.

The same goes for projected SPLOST revenues, which could actually be significantly more or less than projected due to unforeseen

fluctuations in the overall economy.

Hawkins said that all SPLOST projects in Union County are given equal weight, though some projects have been eligible for Tier One/Level One status, like a courthouse or jail.

"(As) stewards of the taxpayers' dollars," Hawkins said, "we must manage the (SPLOST) program based on actual distributions received from the Department of Revenue while fulfilling the

commitments as articulated within the voter-approved referendum.

"There has never been an abandoned project as listed on the ballot and approved by the voters. Union County has not abandoned any SPLOST projects per each approved referendum."

As previously reported, the Commissioner's Office has said that state law gives the county broad discretion in



Lamar Paris
Sole Commissioner

Vol. 113 No. 07
4 Sections 24 Pages
Weather
Thurs: Sunny Hi 55 Lo 28
Fri: Sunny Hi 58 Lo 37
Sat: Cloudy Hi 57 Lo 28

Arrests 2D
Church 3D
Classifieds 4A
Opinion 4A
Legals 4D
Obits 4C
Sports 2B

8 04879 149314 2

SPORTS
BASKETBALL
2/8 6 PM
Girls vs. Rabun Gap
Boys vs. Riverside
2/10 vs. Elbert Co. 4:30 PM

Iwo Jima Memorial Service
Feb. 21
See page 6A

Quilt of Valor Recipient
See page 1D

Pawentine's Day Safe Pet Project
Feb. 12
See page 2A

County Meeting...from Page 1A

prioritizing projects within the voter-approved categories on SPLOST referendums.

Furthermore, while some money has always gone toward the various project categories for each SPLOST as required by law, Hawkins said previously that the county has been well within its rights in assigning higher and lower funding priorities to projects in different categories.

In mentioning examples of the benefits of SPLOST projects to Union County's quality of life, Hawkins said Jan. 31 that the new Union County Sports Center now hosts "42 overall teams; these are small children under middle school age, with a total of 305 little players."

For more information, a Union County SPLOST Fact Sheet dated Jan. 18, 2022, is available at the Commissioner's Office. Specific questions will be answered by appointment by calling 706-439-6000.

Moving along, Projects Coordinator Renee Deibert

gave a presentation in response to questions asked in recent county meetings on the 2020 United States Census results applicable to Union County.

Highlights of Deibert's presentation on the latest U.S. Census Bureau data were: as of April 2020, Union County had a population of 24,632; the over-age-65 population of Union County was 33.7%; and there were 14,995 housing units in Union County.

Deibert also mentioned that, as of April 2020, there were 9,743 households – as opposed to housing units – in Union County, and as of that date, the owner-occupied housing rate was 77%.

"This information came from the U.S. Census Bureau website," Deibert said. "You can locate that same information and much, much more at data.census.gov."

IN OTHER BUSINESS

Paris accepted a contract with ClearGov, Inc. for \$30,400 to provide publicly accessible, web-based budgeting books that are transparent and easy to understand. The term of the contract is from Dec. 21, 2021, to Dec. 20, 2024, with more information available at cleargov.com.

"This decision by staff (to contract for ClearGov services) was based on some confusion from the public in understanding the budget this year," Paris said.

The county's budget data will go live on ClearGov.com sometime in the next three months after all the necessary data is compiled. County Government will be joining Union County Schools and Blairsville City Government in utilizing the site.

Paris accepted agreements with CRSA Probation Services, Inc. for probation services to Union County Superior Court and Union County Magistrate Court. There are no costs to the county for these services.

He also approved Rushton & Company to perform the 2021 audit of the Union County financial statements as well as another single audit. The cost of this agreement will not exceed \$59,500 for the financial statement audit and \$5,000 for the single audit.

The financial statement audit is the regular annual county audit. A single audit is required when the county receives more than \$750,000 from the federal government during its fiscal year. Funding from the CARES Act and ARPA in 2021 made a single audit necessary again this year.

Paris accepted an agreement with CorrectHealth Union, LLC for inmate health services at the Union County Jail. This is a renewal of a 12-month contract effective Jan. 1, 2022, through Dec. 31, 2022, for a total of \$155,573.33, reflecting an increase of \$3,794.47 over 2021.

The commissioner appointed Denise Kelley to the Union County Board of Health for the term of Jan. 1, 2022, to Dec. 31, 2022.

He also approved an emergency resolution accepting the material terms related to the July 21, 2021, National Opioid Settlement Agreements.

About three years ago, Union County joined the State of Georgia, many other states, and hundreds of counties and municipalities in a lawsuit against opioid supply chain participants to hold these companies accountable for their distribution practices and the alleged falsehoods they propagated surrounding opioid safety and distribution, Paris said.

"Our hope is to get some financial compensation at some point, but after three years, it's still too early to tell if that will actually happen," he said.

Paris approved a resolution to fix the qualifying fees for upcoming Board of Education candidates at \$130 for the 2022 election cycle. Three Union County School Board seats are up for election.

Resolutions R-2022-02 through R-2022-04 were approved, appointing Financial Consultant Melissa Ekeberg, CPA Bo Wright and Attorney Robbie Colwell Weaver as the Board of Directors of the Union County Governmental Finance Corporation, or UCGFC.

Formed in 2001, the UCGFC was the entity through which 10-year, low-interest financing was secured by the county to purchase the Bill Elliott property where the Department of Driver Services office, Health Department, Pickleball Complex and Sports Center now sit.

That loan was paid off in 2011, and no new business has come before the UCGFC since,

but county staff feel it prudent to keep the corporation open for potential future opportunities. Bylaws require a board of directors to meet at least once a year and be renewed periodically.

Nine new Union County Business Licenses were approved for short-term rental properties. The purpose of the licensing is solely to collect hotel-motel taxes.

Former paramedic Millard "Zeb" Blanchard served as the guest speaker on the agenda. He discussed mask use related to COVID-19, saying that only N-95 masks or similar are effective and that cloth masks do not work. He also said the pandemic is not over and asked people to remain vigilant.

No public attendees were allowed past the viewing gallery that evening, so instead of speaking from the main podium used by the commissioner, as is usually the case for guest speakers, Blanchard delivered his comments from a microphone-free podium staged in the audience.

In his Commissioner's Comments, Paris publicly thanked the Union County Road Department, Sheriff's Office, Blairsville Police, Fire Department, E-911, Union General EMS, and the Health Department for their assistance during January's particularly cold winter weather.

He also thanked the Georgia Department of Transportation for keeping state roads clear.

Though he loved the snow when he was younger, Paris said he hates the snow now because he doesn't like getting up at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning to go check the roads for driving safety. He doesn't have to do that, but he does anyway.

Q&A CANCELED

Paris closed the meeting without the usual question-and-answer session, prompting an outcry from several residents who have been critical of his office in recent meetings. About a dozen attendees gathered to briefly protest the turn of events outside the courtroom meeting place.

Regardless, Assistant Union County Attorney William Mercer made clear in the December meeting that Paris could choose to not hold Q&A, even if such a decision was heretofore unprecedented.

"After the official business, the commissioner may or may not open up a question-and-answer session," Mercer said Dec. 16.

When reached for comment as to why the public was unable to ask questions at the end of the meeting last week, Paris expanded upon the reasons he gave that evening, noting that the format change for the Jan. 31 meeting was specifically "time related."

"First, the agenda for the meeting was lengthened between the original Jan. 18 meeting and the Jan. 31 meeting," Paris said. "Items were added to the agenda within that span of time, creating an anticipated longer county meeting altogether."

"Secondly, at previous meetings, members of the public asked specific questions that we attempted to address at this meeting. Two staff people gave special reports to address that information on the evening of Jan. 31. One report focused on SPLOST revenues and expenditures, and the second report focused on the 2020 census data. These special reports also added to the length of the county meeting."

"Thirdly, a resident asked to be placed on the agenda to speak on a specific topic: mask

mandates and mask use. When residents ask to be placed on the agenda to speak, this activity also adds to the length of the county meeting.

"It is important to understand that most other counties have their meetings during the daytime. I have always felt this limits the availability of meetings to those who work during the day. Therefore, I have opted to hold Union County Commissioner meetings at 6 p.m. – hoping the timing would provide everyone with an opportunity to attend."

"While it does open county meetings to those who work, it causes the staff in the Office of the County Commissioner to have to work past their normal working hours. They understand the importance of making the meetings available to as many people as we can, so working late is just part of the job. However, I also make it a goal to try to keep the meetings at 45 minutes in length. I respect the time of our residents who come to hear county business."

"The bottom line is this: the purpose of the county meeting is to handle county business. The official agenda items are the priority. If we have time for questions and comments, that's great; however, if the length of the agenda doesn't permit questions and comments, then we have other ways of addressing the concerns."

"During each and every meeting, we tell meeting attendees to write their questions on a pad located in the back of the room. We also explain that residents can call my office for answers. They can make an appointment to sit down and speak with someone to get answers as well."

"Whether our residents provide their questions in writing – whether they call or come in – we will make every effort to provide the information requested. My office has already met with several people who simply wanted to understand certain aspects of what we do and how we do it. That's what we do."

"So, it is true that we ran out of time at the Jan. 31 county meeting. It might happen that way again. It does not, however, impact the ability of Union County citizens to gain access to the information they seek."

Paris has made other adjustments to the way public comments are delivered, including reducing the speaking time from five to three minutes for agenda presenters, and restricting questions asked during Q&A to business conducted in each meeting.

These changes are coming as a way to address "people being meanspirited and mean-acting" during meetings, Paris said in December. For reference, county meetings have featured contentious interactions between Paris and some members of the public for many months now.

"We're going to adjust our meeting until we finally get to the point to where we're going to have civil meetings," Paris said. "As long as we still have people that are not being civil, then we're going to make adjustments to make sure the meetings end up that way."

The North Georgia News contacted the Georgia Press Association last week and confirmed that governments do not have to allow any public comments at all, with such being fully at the discretion of elected officials.

However, the Georgia Press Association did advise that residents may contact their state representative or senator to request the introduction of a bill requiring at least some minimum time for public questions or comments.

Pawlentine's Day at Safe Pet Project



Safe Pet Project invites you to bring your furry Valentine for a photo in our Kissing Booth. This event will be on Saturday, February 12th from 1 PM to 4 PM in our Thrift Store. We are located at 307 Cleveland Street, Unit O in Blairsville. The store is in the back side of the building where Enterprise Rent-A-Car is located. You can turn on Cook Street, right across from North Georgia News. Suggested donation of \$5.

We are also having an event at Granddaddy Mimm's Distilling Co. on March 19th at 1 PM. To purchase tickets or for more information, please visit www.safepetproject.org/events/

All the proceeds from

our events and thrift store benefit pets in our community through low cost spay/neuter, vet assistance and free micro-chipping. As additional funds are obtained these services will be expanded to address other important needs.

On January 22nd, we had our Free Microchipping event where we micro-chipped 90 pets. Our goal is to help pets be returned to their home should they get lost. Our next project is to purchase an ID Tag Machine to be able to engrave tags for a low cost.

If you would like to know more about our organization, please visit our website www.safepetproject.org or visit our Thrift Store from Monday through Saturday, 10 am to 4 PM. Phone number (706) 400-7076.

We need your support to help keep the pets in our community safe and healthy.

Georgia Chamber president forecasts economic future

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Georgia Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Chris Clark was the keynote speaker at the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce Eggs & Issues Breakfast Meeting and Tourism Forecast at the Community Center on Wednesday, Feb. 2.

“We spent all of last year coming out of COVID-19,” Clark said. “We traveled the state, we talked about the future of Georgia’s economy, the impact of COVID. And we asked about 50 different questions of tens of thousands of business leaders around the state.

“We took their information, and what they said was important to keep this economy going, and we (organized) it into the information we’re going to share with you today. That’s led to our policies that we’re taking before the (Georgia) General Assembly.

“It’s our strategy right now. It’s our partnership with the (Georgia) Department of Economic Development.”

Clark’s presentation covered what the future holds for Georgia but was tailored to fit Northeast Georgia concerning what’s in store for this area economically.

“Here’s what we heard, here’s the formula right now in the state of Georgia that we need to focus on if we want to continue to grow the state’s economy,” Clark said.

“It’s no different here than it is in any other state, in any other business. Everyone has a labor shortage right now. The difference is, we’ve got a strategy, and there’s things you can do to win the ‘War for Talent,’” he said, speaking of the current labor shortage.

“No. 2, we have to continue to innovate in our economy and diversify in our economy. You’re heavily tourism-related up here, but you’re diversifying that with manufacturing, health care; we need more of that.

“And the third area is, we’ve got to invest in infrastructure of the future. Here’s the good news: if we do those three things effectively, if we have real strategies locally and at the state level, we can grow the state’s economy about \$70 billion a year every year going forward.”

Clark said Georgia currently ranks about 16th in the nation for economic diversification, is the eighth largest state in population, and the seventh largest economy.

Speaking about tourism, certainly the biggest industry in this area, Clark said the state will see a 34% increase in robotics used in tourism in the next five years.

“Think about that from a restaurant standpoint,” he said. “You’re going to see a lot more technology integrated into tourism. Just like all of



Chris Clark
Georgia Chamber President

our manufacturers invested in automation over the last two years, you’re going to see that happen in the hospitality sector.

“Health and wellness will drive hospitality visitation. Millennials are ranking health and wellness, and sustainability and eco-friendliness as the two top things they are looking for,” Clark said, adding that they will want to see proof of that when deciding where to stay.

Moving along, Airbnb short-term rentals have been changing the nature of the accommodations market, Clark said, with hotels adopting Airbnb and other platform approaches to adjust how they do business.

“Bottom line is, everything that you do (from) a tourism standpoint going forward is going to be based on a platform,” Clark said, adding that innovation and economic diversification is the name of the game in today’s hospitality market.

Changing gears, Clark said Georgia needs to spend \$1.5 billion dollars a year for 30 years “just to get our roads and bridges and railroads up to speed for the demand that’s on the system right now, today.”

“Because you’re ordering everything online, there literally aren’t enough curbs, and our roads aren’t built for the truck traffic that’s coming into your neighborhoods and going into downtown Atlanta to deliver stuff now. We don’t have a system built for that,” he said.

Telecommunications is another issue of concern. Last week, Gov. Brian Kemp announced \$430 million dollars’ worth of new

investment in broadband and Wi-Fi infrastructure in rural communities, much of which is headed to Northeast Georgia.

Kia has recently changed its name, Clark said, from Kia Motors to just Kia, because within five years, they won’t be making gasoline engines any longer. Eventually, gasoline engines won’t be available from anyone because all new vehicles will be electric.

The point being that the energy industry is changing radically and will impact everything from the local economy to global politics, not the least of which is American infrastructure.

Health care infrastructure needs to be addressed as well, Clark said, which was proved out by the COVID pandemic.

“We used to think of health care as a service,” Clark said. “I think COVID showed us that it’s more than that. It’s infrastructure in our communities.”

Lastly, Clark addressed the shortage of skilled labor, the effects of the dynamic changes driving that shortage, and what, given the new parameters, Georgians can do to reverse that trend.

Readers are encouraged to access the Georgia Chamber of Commerce website at www.gachamber.com and scroll down to the “War for Talent in Georgia” link for further reading on that subject.

The breakfast meeting was catered by The View Grill Manager Matt Leonard and his staff, who served two kinds of quiche, scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, French toast, grits, a fruit medley, and biscuits and gravy.

Transfer Station...from Page 1A

of the entire concern to break even, County Manager Larry Garrett said.

Essentially, Waste Management continued profiting from the residential side of the Transfer Station after turning over commercial garbage handling to the county, which the county had to manage at a loss even after increasing the price for commercial customers.

This created an untenable situation for taxpayers in the minds of county officials, who came to understand that the residential bagged garbage and recycling side of the Transfer Station was the “moneymaker.”

So, in order to cover costs for offering commercial trash services, thereby making the enterprise revenue neutral and self-sustaining, the county notified Waste Management several weeks ago that it would need to take over the residential bagged garbage side as well, Garrett said.

Union County owns the Transfer Station and Convenience Center properties, which Waste Management was simply partnering with the county to manage, so transitioning total management to the county was a straightforward process that began in January.

With the retention of several Waste Management employees, residents will continue to see familiar faces when they drop off their household garbage, and Garrett said county management will come with additional benefits for Transfer Station customers.

Now that the county controls both sides of the Transfer Station, it will have greater oversight of the entire grounds to directly address quality control issues such as cleanliness, which has been a problem of late, instead of having to go through Waste Management for resolution.

After monitoring the situation over the next few months, if revenues come in strong enough, the county is hopeful that it will eventually be able to drop prices across the board, as the local government is providing a public service and not trying to turn a profit like Waste Management.

For the time being residential garbage prices will remain the same, raised by

Waste Management in the fall to \$1.25 per small bag and \$1.75 per large bag, and all else will continue as usual with the county at the helm, including the same operating hours.

The county is committed to improving garbage services for customers, Garrett said, and aside from new signage and contact numbers for the Transfer Station, the only change people should notice right away is a more consistently clean environment with upgrades expected over time.

Next steps for the Transfer Station include the return of front-loading dumpsters to replace the roll-off dumpsters currently in use on the residential side. The new dumpsters have already been ordered but are delayed for supply chain reasons and should be available soon.

Garrett said the county will also be offering glass recycling this year at the Transfer Station’s Recycling Center, a service that is already being offered at the Convenience Center on Highway 325 adjacent to the Saddle Club Horse Arena.

Additionally, the county will be using SPLOST funds in 2022 to erect a new Convenience Center for household garbage and recycling, to be located on the north end of the county near Fire Station No. 4 on Moccasin Road in the Ivylog area.

SPLOST funds are used to purchase equipment like dump trucks and backhoes, and the county will be utilizing SPLOST to conduct building

projects like the Convenience Center and to upgrade facilities as needed, including for access drives and safety improvements.

Unfortunately, Garrett said the county has had to discontinue its longstanding Neighborhood Recycling Program, in place since 2006.

The program has relied over the years on volunteers collecting recyclables within their individual communities, usually at a volunteer Fire Station or voting precinct, for pickup by the county, though COVID-19 caused many volunteers to drop their collection duties.

Furthermore, detainees crews that have historically assisted in picking up neighborhood recyclables have been repeatedly sidelined due to COVID, so county workers with duties elsewhere, like the Road Department, have had to pick up the slack during the pandemic.

Primarily for these reasons, the county has decided to terminate the Neighborhood Recycling Program, and Garrett is hoping that the addition of the new Convenience Center as well as future locations will alleviate the concerns of people who would prefer that the program continue.

Snow Family...from Page 1A

long-term success.

Announced in last Tuesday’s celebration, this year’s family partner is Brandy Snow, mother of sons Wyatt and Elijah. At the ReStore, surrounded by her new friends from Habitat, Snow was overcome with joy and emotional testimony.

“I am nervous but very excited for this opportunity,” said Snow, a Union County native. “This means everything to me, and mainly stability to have a home for the rest of our lives.

“Our current living situation has been very challenging, but I would like to let everyone in our great community know that if anyone has a need, Habitat will come together for you and encourage you the whole way through.

“Never be afraid to accept humility when you need help the most, and just please stay positive and never give up.”

Habitat is a nonprofit organization that partners with future homeowners to build safe, decent and affordable homes for working families.

Getting started in a home can be exceedingly difficult for families that have struggled to secure adequate housing in the past, especially given the current rise in limited housing availability.

Qualifying homeowners must be able to afford the house being built for them, with Habitat greatly facilitating the ownership process, from assisting with loan paperwork to recruiting volunteers to build

the home at cost.

Since beginning in 1996, the local Habitat has succeeded in building homes for more than 20 families in Towns and Union counties, and the Snow family is a welcome addition to the mix.

Charlotte Randall is the Vice President of Operations for Towns/Union Habitat for Humanity, and she said the local chapter is “overdue for a build.”

“We do this with the help of volunteers and experienced home builders and contractors,” Randall said. “The families that we help get houses at cost, so they still hold a mortgage, but they get the house at cost rather than us profiting from them.

“We had approximately 20 families fill out the application (this go round), and our selection process considers certain factors based on dire need and is income-based as well.

“We do have to take into account credit score, as we are now servicing our loans through the USDA. Candidates need to display two years of financial stability showcasing their intention to improve their overall financial health.

“The house will be located right on the Union/Towns County line, and many things are in place already to start the build.

“We would like to thank one of our sponsors, Marina Station, for hosting a spaghetti dinner on March 2 for kicking off the family selection fundraiser, with more details to come for that.

“As of now, this project is an annual process, but Habitat has a plan and is looking at new and different ideas to be able to do more in the future.

“We also have a Helping Hands program that is helping families that may need assistance with weatherization and other things that have to do with their house.

“We have done six Helping Hands projects this past month, which is more than we did throughout all of last year, so we are really trying to kick that off.”

Referencing the local Habitat’s motto here – “a hand up, not a handout” – Randall said those selected must have a good ability to partner with Habitat and be able to put in volunteer work that equates to 400 “sweat equity hours” toward the construction of their home.

“Our ultimate goal is to become more of a community focal point for resources in the county to help with any number of needs, whether it is food, housing and whatever people may need,” Randall said. “We want everyone to know that we are here to help.”

For information on how to volunteer or to seek assistance for yourself or a loved one, call 706-745-7101, email operations@townsunionhabitat.org, and visit the website at townsunionhabitat.org.

And to donate to the home building fund, people may call, email or stop by the Habitat ReStore at 225 Wellborn Street in Blairsville.

ESP-90...from Page 1A



Jim's Smokin' Que Owner Zachary Edmonds, pictured here slicing prime rib, says that when it comes to smoking meats, the best firewood comes from Gene Sexton and his proprietary wood-drying process.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

day of the year. Basically, Sexton appears to have tapped into a previously undiscovered aspect of nature dealing with Earth's position relative to the magnetic field of the Sun. He has applied his unique insights to devise a multi-step process that can counteract decay in drying wood and, theoretically, all living cells by "controlling the biological clock."

Both public and private entities have attempted for decades to uncover the secret to Sexton's wood-drying method – a secret with which he is not willing to part unless he is sufficiently compensated for the years of hard work he has

committed to the endeavor.

He developed the process in the 1980s researching ways to dry wood while avoiding the usual imperfections that arise during decay – splitting, cracking, insect damage – and Sexton said he has been able to apply his knowledge in other astonishing ways, like boosting plant productivity.

In 2002, Sexton filed a U.S. patent application for a "compound magnetic compressor" that enables him to mechanically reproduce the conditions he uncovered in the natural world to "enhance" plant seeds, resulting in heartier, more productive crops that are much less prone to cellular

degradation.

Sexton has managed to entice both the U.S. Department of Agriculture as well as private industry leaders like Taylor Guitars and Louisville Slugger, with obvious major implications for the timber industry, though to date, he has had no takers willing to step out on a limb to purchase his process and knowledge.

He has sent samples of his dried wood for study by various experts over the years, and they repeatedly come away baffled by what he is able to accomplish.

Somehow, Sexton quickly achieves seemingly impossible low moisture levels without using chemicals or salts, vacuums or microwaves, solar energy or kilns, and he said his process does not involve altering trees while they are standing.

Instead, he said he gets his results by utilizing the magnetic field that interacts with the electricity generated in living cells: "I have directly connected physics with biology."

Several national and international publications have taken a keen interest in Sexton's research in the past, including Popular Science Magazine and Woodshop News, which have run feature articles on his mysterious process.

"Something is definitely happening to the wood, but I can't for the life of me figure out how he's cheated Mother Nature," said Kent McDonald in Popular Science in 1992, when he was working as a



Sexton grows, harvests and processes this cherry firewood on his own property before supplying it to Jim's Smokin' Que.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

wood scientist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin.

Sexton was even involved with Patrick Spielman, a world-renowned author of more than 65 woodworking books who was collaborating with Sexton to promote ESP-90 prior to his death from an apparent heart attack in 2004.

And though Sexton won't let on how he "cheats Mother Nature," he will say what is happening at a basic level – the halting of fermentation, which is the "decomposition of complex organic compounds." Of course, for the right price, he will gladly disclose his methods to any dedicated business partner who comes along, including entrepreneurs who may want to buy the rights to ESP-90 and his decay-defying process for its potential impacts in all biological disciplines.

At 82 years old, Sexton is still going strong. To this day, he harvests his own wood using the same chainsaw he bought in 1968. But time eventually catches up to every man, and he hopes someone will want to acquire this knowledge "before I get my wings."

For the sake of Debbie, his wife of 45 years, and the decades she has supported him through his research and experimentation, he is willing to wait until the right person comes along to purchase the process, which he says is so simple a 10-year-old could learn it.

"I can do what I'm doing right in front of you, and you'd never figure out how I did it," Sexton said. "That's one thing I really like about it. I can walk into the woods and cut a tree and process it, and you'd never know I was doing it, because I'm not using any chemicals or anything like that to do it. I'm just taking advantage of the magnetic field."

But just because the process is simple does not mean it is easy to intuit. He developed ESP-90 during years of research that took him away from his 13-year career with General Motors in 1979, and he has been pursuing his research full-time ever since with positive results.

Sexton spent all of the '80s gaining greater understanding of elemental forces he first took notice of while working for GM. It has been a highly iterative process that he continually tweaks to make even more robust.

He's had many run-ins with financial success using the process, one of which actually brought him to Union County about 28 years ago. Sexton was living in Tennessee at the time when a Georgia-based funding partner asked him to relocate to the Peach State.

Born in Omar, West Virginia, the U.S. Army veteran lived in several places before settling down in Tennessee in 1989 to further his research. For his move to Georgia, he

chose Blairsville because he liked the area and there were a couple homes on the market to choose from.

So, how did all this start? Sexton has always been fascinated with wood. He took on woodturning as a hobby in his youth, granting him special insight into the varied conditions of harvested wood from which to make changes in the ESP-90 process.

Throughout his lifetime, his passion for woodturning has resulted in tens of thousands of pieces crafted at his lathe – bowls, chalices, lamps, decorative artwork, yo-yos, baseball bats, and everything in between – which he has alternately given away and sold to turn a buck.

And while he does not have any formal education related to wood, forestry or anything else, he has become an acknowledged expert in such matters, having familiarized himself and worked with an untold number of tree species in his 82 years.

In pursuit of a buyer and continued development of his process, Sexton has relied on his wife to maintain a steady living for the family. He has certainly contributed, doing contractor work in the past and crafting wood-turned items for profit, but he is still awaiting his big pay day.

Over the past several years, Sexton has taken to supplying ESP-90 treated cherry firewood he grows and harvests on his own property to Jim's Smokin' Que, which owner and chef Zachary Edmonds credits with giving him a market edge by making his smoked meats taste that much more sublime. Open every Thursday-Saturday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m., Jim's Smokin' Que on US 129 South always has lines going out the door, and pre-orders keep restaurant staff busy six days a week.

So, it is no wonder Jim's was recently ranked one of the best barbecue establishments in the country on TripAdvisor.com, and has appeared in multiple high profile magazines write-ups, with the flavor imparted by Sexton's wood undoubtedly playing a role in that success.

"He sells the best wood of anybody around here," Edmonds said. "I know he has some kind of process that he does to it, and I really don't ask – it's just, whatever he does to the wood is perfect."

"We only burn wood between a certain moisture content, and the way he dries it is just fantastic. If you can knock two pieces together and it sounds like a Louisville Slugger hitting a baseball, that's good, and that's what his wood sounds like."

"Another observation would be the bark. Sometimes you get wood where the bark is starting to separate when it dries out, and insects get in it, and it kind of rots from that

ring right under the bark. All of his wood is just super tight and super close – it never loses any bark."

Edmonds said Sexton's firewood burns with a greater consistency than other wood he has encountered in his career, which has included stints at Fresh Air Barbecue as well as his own former restaurant in Jackson, and he hopes to continue using the specially dried cherry for years to come.

"I keep telling him that he doesn't have to tell me how he does it, but he needs to write it down and leave it for me in case something ever happens to him," Edmonds said.

Much of the process boils down to timing, Sexton said, as he has a secret method of calculating exactly when to cut a tree to stop decay in its tracks.

Every once in a while, and without even knowing it, someone may get lucky and accidentally recreate the right conditions to get ESP-90-like outcomes, but Sexton's process is a tried-and-true method to get consistent results on demand, and not just for wood.

He said he can also calculate, for example, when to mate two animals to produce a prime specimen, or how to make the perfect wine by applying his knowledge to the brewing process.

Ultimately, if he is correct about his process and its potential uses, the applications for ESP-90 are endless. Indeed, if ESP-90 can "enhance" all living cells, then the entirety of the biological sciences and beyond, including the medical field, could be revolutionized from what he knows.

Sexton is aware that this is a tall order for most people to understand or even believe; that is why, for decades now, he has been trying to sell the process for specific market applications. After all, he has solid proof that it works, at least for wood harvesting and crop productivity.

And what would it take for him to part with the knowledge he has amassed over four and a half decades of research?

"I don't want to sell wood, and I don't want credit for ESP-90," Sexton said. "I don't care if somebody else gets the legacy for this. I'll sell them what I have, and they can have the legacy. What I want is for my wife to be able to live well until she dies, and I'd like to drive a fine automobile before the end."

To inquire about ESP-90, give Sexton a call at 706-745-0991 or email him at bullit1940@hotmail.com. He has pledged to work indefinitely with any potential buyers to further their understanding and continuation of the process.

"Nobody will ever know everything about anything," Sexton said. "But that shouldn't keep us from trying, right?"

Whicker...from Page 1A



Senior Panther Emma Whicker was joined by athletic department representatives of both Union County High School and Truett McConnell University during her signing ceremony last week.
Photo by Todd Forrest

549. She also departs with the single-season assists record, dishing out 347 during her junior campaign of 2020.

"When I toured (Truett McConnell's campus), I toured it twice, and both times it felt like home to me," Whicker said. "Everyone was so welcoming, especially the girls on the team, and the coaches and teachers were so nice, I just loved it. It's a Christian school, and me and my family are really big in our faith."

As the Lady Panthers' setter over the past two seasons, Whicker anchored back-to-back Area 8 Championship squads and helped Union County reach consecutive Class AA/A Final Four appearances in 2020 and 2021.

Now, Whicker will spend the next four years at Truett, where she plans to major in nursing.

"In my first year at Truett, I want to make an impact on the team," she said. "Whether I play or don't get to play, I just want to establish myself and get started with my career."

After graduation, I'd like to work in the E.R. at Erlanger in Chattanooga (Tennessee)."

Whicker becomes just the second Lady Panther to accept a volleyball scholarship, joining Izzy Zamora, who signed with Young Harris College fresh off the program's first Elite Eight berth in 2019. And while Zamora remained close to home, that wasn't always a given in Whicker's case.

"I looked at Coastal Carolina, Western Carolina and Kentucky, but I chose Truett because it felt like home," Whicker said. "Being close to home and close to my family means a lot to me. I don't want to miss anything because I'm too far away."

According to Truett McConnell volleyball coach Mark Corbin, Whicker's talent and work ethic are what caught his eye.

"I first met her at a showcase for potential student-athletes, and that's where I got to know her," he said. "She is a hard worker, plays very well and has a great attitude."

Obviously, coming to Truett McConnell takes a certain kind of person, and everything about her fits what we are.

"We are a Christian college, and that's the type of place she wants to be. So everything – her talents and character – it all came together, and she is a great fit for us."

In closing, Whicker credited her coaches, past and present, and thanked her parents for helping her achieve her goals.

"I want to thank Coach (Megan) Swanson for showing me how to play and helping me develop a love of the game," she said. "I want to thank Coach (Seth) Merritt for always being there for me for four years. I want to thank Coach Mitch (Castille) for teaching me some new tricks."

"I want to thank all the girls that coached me when I played over at (the White County Recreation Department) for getting me started. Last but not least, I want to thank my mom (Shannon) and my sister (Elyssa) for always supporting me."

Marine Corps League Detachment to commemorate 77th Anniversary of Iwo Jima



Iwo Jima Memorial, Young Harris, GA

On Monday, Feb. 21, the 783rd Detachment will pay tribute to those who fought in the Battle of Iwo Jima by hosting a memorial service at the Towns County Recreation & Conference Center at Foster Park in Young Harris at 10 a.m.

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 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 Towns 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.

The memorial ceremony will be attended by various Veteran Service Organizations and local citizens. The National Commandant of the Marine Corps League [Johnny Baker, USMC – RET] and Marine Corps League Commandant Dept. of Georgia [Larry Heard – USMC Veteran] will be in attendance. The ceremony will feature a tribute to CPO Clarence "Bud" Johnson who passed away on January 1, 2021, from complications brought about by COVID. Keynote speaker will be Jimmie J. McKeral, Jr. [USMC – RET].