

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, March 16, 2022

Seven qualify for School Board; District 5 unopposed



Tony Hunter, (I) (R)
BOE District 2



Will Nelson (R)
BOE District 2



Michelle Maloney (D)
BOE District 2



Joseph Goble (R)
BOE District 4



Jason McCarter (R)
BOE District 4



John Andrews (D)
BOE District 4



Patrick White, (I) (R)
BOE District 5

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

By the end of 2022 election qualifying at noon on March 11, seven residents had qualified for the Union County Board of Education, with three county-level seats up for grabs.

Patrick White of Suches qualified unopposed for District 5, while Districts 2 and 4 each had three people qualify. At this point, White is slated to appear unchallenged in the Nov. 8 General Election.

For District 2, incumbent Tony Hunter and Will Nelson will go head-to-head in the May 24 General Primary Election

to decide which will advance as the Republican candidate to face lone Democratic qualifier Michelle Maloney in November.

In the District 4 race, Joseph Goble and Jason McCarter each qualified for the chance to become the Republican candidate in May, and John Andrews qualified

for the Democratic Party. In November, Andrews will face the winner of the upcoming Republican Primary.

Qualifying for state and federal offices also took place last week at the State Capitol Building in Atlanta, fleshing out the rest of the ballots that will appear before Union County voters in the upcoming

elections. State-level qualifiers are as follows:

Enotah Superior Court incumbent judges Raymond George and Buck Levins qualified unopposed, and therefore are set to win their elections in the upcoming May 24 Nonpartisan Election.

Enotah Judicial Circuit

District Attorney – Republican incumbent Jeff Langley qualified unopposed for the May 24 General Primary and without a Democratic challenger for November's General Election.

District 8 State Representative – Republican incumbent Stan Gunter

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Governor vows to suspend 29.1-cent Georgia gas tax

By Shawn Jarrard
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Gas prices have risen precipitously since the beginning of 2021 for a complicated mix of reasons that range from general inflation to hostile political posturing from a federal government aligned with a green energy agenda.

Demand for oil and gas has been increasing globally for years, too, and especially recently, with Americans and others being eager to get out and about after a prolonged period of fear and a repressive mitigation efforts regarding COVID-19.

And on the home front, President Joe Biden banned oil



and gas imports from Russia on March 8 to further punish the former Soviet nation's economy following its invasion of neighboring sovereign state Ukraine.

As a result of these

and other factors, Americans everywhere are feeling pain at the pump; the national average gas price is at an all-time high and shot past \$4 at the local level last week.

See Gas Tax, Page 2A

Paris signs amended target range funding agreement

By Shawn Jarrard
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Good news, Union County shooting enthusiasts: last week, Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris signed the amended intergovernmental agreement between the county and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources for the Union County Target Range.

This is a procedural step to amend grant funding for the project from 75% to 90%, thereby reducing the local match to 10%, and Paris and the Union County Gun Club, including the latter's unofficial spokesperson Sheriff Mack Mason, are excited to announce

the update.

The new 10% local match amount was secured recently after Sheriff Mason asked State Sen. Steve Gooch to aid the county in going after the full grant amount.

Paris signed and sent the amended intergovernmental agreement to DNR Assistant Chief of Game Management Walter Lane, who is expected to return it to the county this week signed by the DNR commissioner.

Additionally, the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is in the process of finalizing a separate grant amendment to officially increase the federal passthrough

funding to 90%.

And once DNR receives and passes on the amended federal grant award to the county, expected to occur in April, the local bid process can start again, hopefully in time for construction to begin this year, and with a much lower local match than the original grant amount allowed.

"The original grant documents had the estimated construction costs for the gun range to be \$2.4 million, with \$1.8 million grant funds committed and a \$600,000 match from the county," County Purchasing Agent Hawkins said. "Union County had committed \$500,000 from

See Target Range, Page 6A

Smith champions at-risk kids with MEC, inspires as mason

By Shawn Jarrard
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Last week, the North Georgia News ran the first half of a feature story dedicated to highlighting Union County resident Wade C. Smith Sr.'s lifelong commitments to his fellow man.

Coverage published in the March 9, 2022, edition of the newspaper detailed Smith's early life and 29-plus year service to his country that began in 1951 when he joined the U.S. Army at just 17 years old.

This second article picks up the thread of Smith's journey in 1980, at the end of his Army career, which served as the beginning of his second career, in public education, with clear through lines of Freemasonry connecting his military endeavors and educational pursuits for children.

MOUNTAIN EDUCATION CENTER

By Christmas of 1979, Smith had convinced the Army that it was time he answered another calling – he was wanted back home to serve the children of this area. So, he officially retired from the military in January of '80 and returned to his beloved North Georgia Mountains.

"I was in education of one variety or another almost half of my military career," Smith said. "Every time they'd kick me out and wouldn't let me be in a combat arm unit, I'd go jump into the educational process again and teach, research or whatever.

"Knowing how many children we were losing who entered the ninth grade and never graduated – it was around 40%-60% at that time in these little North Georgia counties – I was determined, when I finished my military career, to

come back and jump into public education to see what I could do to create a more receptive educational environment for the at-risk student."

Smith could identify which students were at risk of not finishing their education by standing in the hallway of a school and watching what happened when the bell rang between classes.

"Those students who know who they are, who are getting a good education, have a good family background and moral support background," Smith said. "They will huddle around the teachers and just have a wonderful time.

"Students that are at-risk are going to get out just as fast as they can get out of that environment, will come out of the classroom and back up against the wall; and they'll stand at that wall until the bell rings and then go back in the classroom. That's the way you determine who's really at risk."

Armed with this insight and years of learning and teaching in the military, Smith's first foray into public education began at Woody Gap School in Suches in January 1980, where he experienced much success teaching for close to three years before becoming principal.

"I immediately went to work on the computer programs and the simulative systems, if you will, that I had looked at in the military," Smith said. "That is a wonderful way to teach any type of an educational process, whether that's math or science or whatever.

"In Woody Gap, when I went to work there, the teachers were lecturing like a typical teacher is taught to do in a university. You didn't have over 6, 8, 10 students in any one class at any time at Woody Gap, so I said, 'OK, I want a round table, and I want to put a computer or two at every table.'"

See Wade Smith, Page 6B



Smith founding the Mountain Education Center in 1993, Wade Smith has helped the thousands of at-risk children graduate with high school diplomas all over the region.

County accepts transfer of old Bill Elliott property

By Shawn Jarrard
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In a called meeting at the Union County Courthouse on March 7, the Union County Governmental Finance Corporation voted to transfer to Union County Government a piece of property the corporation was created to finance on behalf of the county more than 20 years ago.

And in a separate called meeting March 9, on behalf of Union County Government, Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris officially accepted a



Meet the new Union County Governmental Finance Corporation Board of Directors: Bo Wright, Robbie Colwell Weaver and Melissa Ekeberg. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Blackouts under investigation; problem likely resolved

By Shawn Jarrard
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Countywide blackouts plunged Union Counties into darkness twice on Thursday, March 10, and the cause is still under investigation, according to the Blue Ridge Mountain Electric Membership Corporation.

The first blackout occurred shortly before 7 a.m. that Thursday, with the second taking place about 12 hours later, just after 7 p.m. the same day.

Blue Ridge Mountain EMC took to Facebook Thursday

morning to offer information on the first blackout, explaining that the issue originated with the Tennessee Valley Authority, which supplies power to the EMC for its membership.

"B R M E M C is experiencing a major outage this morning due to TVA's loss of transmission to our system," the Facebook post read. "Our team is working diligently to switch to a redundant feed while we wait for TVA to restore transmission, but it may take several minutes for this switching to be completed."

The loss of transmission affected three Union County-based substations: Blairsville,



Nottely and Waldrop.

Power was restored in short order that morning, but the incident was followed by "a second transmission outage" around 7:20 p.m., which "disrupted normal life for nearly 17,000 residents ... in the Union County area, as well

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County Meeting Rescheduled to March 29
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UCS
UNION COUNTY MIDDLE SCHOOL
Students of the Week
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Mark Chesnutt and Tracy Byrd in Concert
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Qualifying...from Page 1A

qualified unopposed for the primary but will see a challenge from Democrat June Krise in November.

District 51 State Senator – Republican incumbent Steve Gooch qualified unopposed and without a Democratic challenger for November.

Qualifiers for the May 24 Republican Primary for the Office of Governor were incumbent Brian Kemp, Catherine Davis, David Perdue, Kandiss Taylor and Tom Williams, and for the Democratic Primary, Stacey Abrams.

Lieutenant Governor – Republicans Burt Jones, Mack McGregor, Butch Miller, and Jeanne Seaver, and Democrats Erick Allen, Charlie Bailey, Tyrone Brooks Jr., Troy Brown, Kwanza Hall, Jason Hayes,

Derrick Jackson, Rashid Malik, Renitta Shannon and Ryan Graham.

Secretary of State – Republicans incumbent Brad Raffensperger, David Belle Isle, Jody Hice and T.J. Hudson, and Democrats Dee Dawkins-Haigler, John Eaves, Floyd Griffin, Bee Nguyen and Michael Owens.

Attorney General – Republicans incumbent Chris Carr and John Gordon, Democrats Jen Jordan and Christian Smith, and Libertarian Martin Cowen.

Agriculture Commissioner – Republican Tyler Harper, Democrats Winfred Dukes, Nakita Hemingway and Fred Swann, and Libertarian David Raudabaugh.

Insurance and Safety Fire

Commissioner – Republicans incumbent John King, Ben Cowart and Patrick Witt, and Democrats Raphael Baker, Janice Laws Robinson and Matthew Wilson.

State School Superintendent – Republicans incumbent Richard Woods and John Barge, and Democrats Currey Hitchens, Jaha Howard, James Morrow Jr. and Alisha Searcy.

Labor Commissioner – Republicans Kartik Bhatt, Mike Coan and Bruce Thompson, and Democrats Will Boddie Jr., Thomas Dean, Nicole Horn, Lester Jackson III and Nadia Surrency.

Public Service Commissioner District 2 – Republican incumbent Tim Echols, and Democrats Patty Durand and Russell Edwards.

The Union County electorate will get a chance to vote on two federal-level offices as well in May and November:

U.S. Representative from the 9th Congressional District – Republicans incumbent Andrew Clyde, Michael Boggus, J. Gregory Howard, John London and Ben Souther, and Democrat Mike Ford.

U.S. Senate – Republicans Gary Black, Josh Clark, Kelvin King, Jon McColum, Latham Saddler and Herschel Walker, and Democrats incumbent

Raphael Warnock and Tamara Johnson-Shealey.

Also May 24, Union County voters will be asked to support or reject the continuation of the Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax, a 1-cent sales and use tax to be levied on purchases of local goods in support of the Union County School System.

ESPLOST is used by schools to build new facilities, renovate existing facilities,

upgrade HVAC systems, add to aging bus fleets, update technology and more.

Should voters approve the measure, the local sales tax will continue at its current 7% rate.

April 5 will be the earliest day to register to mail an absentee ballot for the elections in May, and April 25 will be the last day to register to vote in the General Primary/Nonpartisan Election.

Gas Tax...from Page 1A

According to GasBuddy.com, the average retail price of regular gas was around \$2.20 at the beginning of 2021. As of March 13, 2022, that price had soared to \$4.34, with no sign of slowing.

Additionally, the average price has jumped by nearly a dollar since early February, showing the real impact of Russian aggression on the world stage, though the trajectory has been upward for quite some time, undoubtedly worsened by the federal government's ongoing injection of unprecedented sums of money into the U.S. economy.

To combat some of the rising prices, Gov. Brian Kemp announced March 9 that he is working with the Georgia General Assembly to temporarily suspend the state's excise tax on motor fuel sales.

"In Georgia, the average price of a gallon of gas has increased from \$2.59 to \$4.06 (over 56%) since March of 2021," according to a press statement. "Researchers further estimate that the average American household could spend an additional \$2,000 a year on gas as a result of increases in fuel cost, on top of record-high inflation already impacting families.

"Gov. Kemp, in conjunction with Lt. Gov. Geoff Duncan and House Speaker David Ralston, will take measures to alleviate the burden placed on Georgians. The measures will take effect upon the governor's signature of HB 304 and remain in effect through May 31, 2022."

Kemp took aim at President Biden in his announcement, saying that, "to understand why we are in this current state of record-high inflation and costs to the average American family, people can simply track his first year of misguided policy decisions."

"Because of our strong, fiscally conservative approach to budgeting," Kemp said, "Lt. Gov. Duncan, Speaker Ralston and I can confidently propose a state motor fuel tax suspension to curb sky-high gas prices while also returning money back to hardworking Georgians through a tax refund and an income tax cut.

"With this latest measure, we are making it even more clear that in Georgia we are going to empower families to keep their money in their own pockets."

Kemp's March 9 announcement lacked any mention of the Russian war in

Advanced voting, aka absentee in-person voting, for the May 24 elections will begin on Monday, May 2, and run weekdays for three weeks through Friday, May 20, with two Saturdays of early voting.

The 2022 General Election will be held on Nov. 8 and will feature the election of political party candidates who clear the primary round of voting.

Ukraine, which has definitely exacerbated the situation at gas stations – and by extension, pocketbooks – across Georgia and America.

On Friday, March 11, the Georgia House of Representatives voted unanimously to approve HB 304, which State Sen. Steve Gooch said Sunday is on a fast track for approval this week by the Georgia Senate, after which Kemp has pledged to sign the bill into law as soon as possible.

According to the Georgia Department of Revenue, Georgians pay 29.1 cents in state excise taxes per gallon of gasoline and diesel, which is the price reduction residents can expect when HB 304 is signed.

The American Petroleum Institute lists an additional 8.85 cents per gallon in "other state taxes/fees," and the U.S. Energy Information Administration reports 18.4 cents per gallon in federal excise taxes, for a total of 56.35 cents in total state and federal taxes/fees per gallon in Georgia.

There is a similar effort being discussed by Democrats in the U.S. Senate to suspend the federal gas tax amid the ongoing crush of rising fuel prices, though, according to national reporting, party members are split due to the impact such a reduction would have on revenues that affect federal highways and bridges.

Blackouts...from Page 1A

as a small number in Cherokee County and Fannin County."

"Both outages yesterday were attributable to TVA's loss of transmission, the source of which is still under investigation," the EMC said Friday. "Following the morning transmission outage, TVA employees immediately responded and began investigating the cause of the outage.

"It was believed that a protective device had

failed, leading to the outage. Investigation continued into last evening, and during efforts to isolate the suspect device, the second transmission outage occurred.

"Power was restored to affected customers by a little after 8 p.m., and isolation of the suspect device was completed."

Importantly, the EMC said it expected "no further disruptions from this issue,"

before apologizing for the inconvenience to members.

ATVA spokesperson also apologized for the inconvenience Monday and said that, "Moving forward, we will replace the equipment to ensure it does not happen again."

Local law enforcement worked traffic at signals that went down during the power outages, and one motor vehicle accident occurred at the intersection Kiutuestia Creek Road and Georgia 515 Thursday evening, though first responders said injuries were minor.

Second Amendment: Good Guys, Bad Guys, and Guns

By State Senator Steve Gooch

As Majority Whip, my job is to make sure that at least 29 of the 34 Republicans in the State Senate are pressing the green button to vote yes on a bill that makes it to the floor. When I arrived at the State Capitol last Monday morning, I might have had my easiest day of the 40-day legislative session. Monday was "Gun Day," and I had no trouble getting my fellow caucus members in their seats for three bills aimed at protecting our Second Amendment rights. They all came loaded for bear.

During the pandemic, a lot of issues had boiled up. Street violence and property destruction was called "mostly peaceful protests." Left-wing radicals called to defund the police, and some idiotic politicians did just that. All this unchecked chaos had emboldened criminals. Good people watched in horror and thought to themselves, "Who is going to protect me and the people I love?"

First-time gun ownership skyrocketed, with millions of new people taking their personal protection seriously. This spike in gun purchases, at best, put a strain on the system, and at worst, exposed how gun-grabbing politicians and local bureaucrats can make convenient excuses in their veiled attempt to obstruct law-abiding citizens from exercising their right to self-defense. On Monday, our caucus went straight after these unnecessary barriers.

The signature effort was Senate Bill 319, the Georgia Constitutional Carry Act. This bill eliminates the requirement for a permit to legally carry a weapon. Basically, if you legally purchase a weapon or legally possess a weapon, you are a Lawful Weapons Carrier. Good people, law-abiding Georgia citizens, will have more freedom to defend themselves, and the bad guys, the criminals who don't give a darn about getting a carry permit, won't have an advantage. The underlying carry permit system stays in place for those who want to legally carry a firearm in other states with reciprocity.

Senate bill 319 passed on a party-line vote, with all Republicans voting in favor of the bill. We also passed Senate Bill 259, which had several pro-Second Amendment provisions. It will protect privacy rights for gun owners by stopping backdoor gun registries through the creation of multi-jurisdictional databases. The bill will further fight back against government

overreach by keeping local governments from prohibiting the discharge of a firearm on private properties of more than 10 acres.

The final piece of SB 259 was regarding the disposition of confiscated weapons by municipalities. Some local officials have been holding on to confiscated weapons to use as a prop in making overly broad political statements. The bill requires damaged or illegal weapons to be destroyed and remaining firearms to be auctioned at least once every 12 months. For weapons not sold or destroyed, they can be transferred to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation for experiment or training.

While expanding rights for responsible gun owners, we also sent a strong message to the criminals on Monday. SB 479 will enact harsher punishments for convicted felons possessing multiple weapons. Convicted felons will now be charged with illegal possession of a firearm for each gun in their possession of instead of just one count no matter how many guns the felon



Georgia State Senator Steve Gooch Senate Majority Whip

has. By increasing the penalties on those breaking the law, we can further crack down on illegal gun ownership and empower responsible gun owners.

The debate over our Second Amendment rights had a clearly framed argument for the day. There are "good guys" in this world, the hardworking, taxpaying, freedom loving, law-abiding citizens. And there are "bad guys" who have forfeited certain rights through their own criminal behavior. Unfortunately, the liberals continue to associate all guns and gun owners with crime when crimes are obviously committed by individual people. Our caucus focused on people. We want to empower the good guys to exercise their God-given right and keep guns out of the hands of the bad guys who wish to do us harm.

Property Transfer ...from Page 1A

quitclaim deed from the corporation transferring said property, which was originally purchased for the benefit of the county from Bill Elliott in 2001.

The meetings rectified a longstanding “unfortunate oversight” by the county, as the transfer should have taken place following the final debt payment in 2011.

All told, the property cost taxpayers roughly \$1.2 million with interest, and the corporation continued leasing the property to the county at no cost after the debt was paid.

County Clerk Jennifer Mahan, who is the ex-officio secretary for the corporation and executive assistant to Paris, said she realized last year that the transfer needed to take place after filling a series of open records requests for resident Mike Sims.

Sims has been following the status of the property for over a decade, and after it came to his attention in 2021 that the transfer had still not taken place, he began preparing

for a legal challenge to ask a Superior Court judge to compel the corporation to turn over the property.

In researching Sims’ records requests and coming across the lease agreement for the property, Mahan and Deputy County Attorney William Mercer said they concluded that the corporation needed to go ahead and divest itself of the property.

As background, Paris started the domestic nonprofit corporation in 2001 to secure 10-year, low-interest financing to purchase the 9.392-acre piece of land located off the Glenn Gooch Bypass.

“Soon after I took office,” Paris wrote in a 2007 Q&A column in the North Georgia News, “I knew that the county would need additional real estate in order to have property available for future government facility expansion, and this property happened to be available at a good price.”

“On advice of our county attorney, the Finance Corporation was set up to allow

the funds to be borrowed to purchase this property without having to go to the tremendous expense and cost of holding a special election and setting up a bond referendum.”

Over the years, the property has been developed to accommodate the Department of Driver Services, the local Health Department, and the Union County Sports Center and Pickleball Complex.

Everyone agreed in last week’s called board meeting that the property transfer was a long time coming, including the volunteers serving on the Governmental Finance Corporation’s Board of Directors: Bo Wright, Robbie Colwell Weaver and Melissa Ekeberg.

These individuals – all working Union County residents – were approached in January by Paris’ staff at the Commissioner’s Office to compose a new Board of Directors for the purpose of approving the transfer. They were chosen for their expertise in the areas of law and finance.

Wright is the Chief Operations Officer for the Office of Finance & Operations at Young Harris College; Weaver is a local attorney; and Ekeberg is a financial consultant. All three directors stated last week that they volunteered their services to be more involved in their community.

The trio is replacing the original board, the directors of which had expired terms and had not met in many years, with one of the original directors having passed away in 2010.

According to the Articles of Incorporation, “the sole member of the Corporation shall be the Commissioner of Union County” – presently Paris – to be designated CEO with no “benefits or any rights or interests in or to any of the assets or properties of the Corporation.”

The commissioner is listed in the bylaws as one of the directors on the four-person board, but due to his position as president with no rights or interests in any assets owned by the corporation, Paris was unable to affect the transfer himself or vote to do so.

It is Paris’ responsibility, however, to appoint directors to the corporation’s board, and he did so in his Jan. 31 county meeting with the intent of calling a meeting to ask the board to transfer the property. He supplied the new directors with documentation to study the matter prior to the March 7 meeting.

After Paris made his appointments but before the board met to transfer the property, the commissioner and the corporation became the subjects of a “Petition for Declaratory Judgment” filed by Sims on Feb. 11 in the Union County Superior Court Clerk’s Office.

At issue for Sims are statements Paris made years ago publicly pledging to transmit the property to the county once “the debt is paid in full.”

Further, the Articles of Incorporation for the Union County Governmental Finance Corporation and the “Master Lease and Option Agreement” for the property clearly outline conditions under which the property was intended to be transferred, such as “upon payment in full” of the debt.

So, to hold Paris and the corporation accountable for the transfer, Sims filed his civil petition last month to ask a judge to force the issue of turning the property over to its rightful owner, the Union County Government, and therefore, the residents of the county.

The petition by Sims may become moot now that the transfer of title and deed has been initiated, effectively resolving the issue at hand by removing the cause for a declaratory judgment against the county.

Sims has decided to withhold comment on the matter pending resolution of his petition, which he will not be withdrawing.

For the county’s part, Attorney Mercer filed both an answer to Sims’ petition and a motion to dismiss it last week.

As to why the transfer was not done sooner, Paris said the business of the corporation was essentially put on the backburner and forgotten after the final payment was made in 2011, hence the “unfortunate oversight” as described above.

And while the county contends that its decision to initiate the transfer was due to Sims’ open records requests prompting officials to dig into the matter for the first time in years, Sims believes action was spurred by his communication directly to Paris last October

that the issue “may yet come before the courts.”

This property is the only asset ever held by the corporation, though Paris said he hopes the board will ultimately decide to keep the nonprofit open in case similar financing opportunities come about to benefit the county in the future, thereby avoiding legal expenses of setting up another corporation. No such opportunities are on the table at present.

About a dozen members of the public attended the called meeting March 7 to witness the business of the new Board of Directors, and Mercer answered questions by attendees.

Resident Linda Pittman asked about the Urban Redevelopment Agency established by the county years ago to finance construction of the Union County Community Center.

In an arrangement similar to that of the Governmental Finance Corporation, Pittman said the Urban Redevelopment Agency should have already turned the Community Center property over to the county, as the URA bond has been paid off “for several years now.”

“I’m just making sure that that’s not going to be another oversight,” Pittman said, to which Mercer replied, “I will definitely look into it now to make sure it won’t.”

Also in the meeting,

the board chose from among themselves Bo Wright to serve as vice president of the Board of Directors. Wright will preside over meetings moving forward.

For the final piece of

business that day, the board set its annual meeting to take place on April 11 at 4:30 p.m. in the Grand Jury Assembly Room of the Union County Courthouse. By press time, there was no business on the agenda.

The MASONIC TRESTLEBOARD: History of the Grand Lodge of Georgia F&AM, Part 3 of 3

(Part 3) With the exception of Solomon’s No. 1, all of the above Lodges are extinct. Social Lodge, originally No. 18, Augusta, Georgia, now also No. 1, was chartered in December, 1799. Georgia has 402 Lodges and 32,773 members.

Freemasonry has existed continuously in Georgia since 1734 and the Grand Lodge of Georgia, F. & A. M., has existed since 1786.

The Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons for



the of Georgia was incorporated with perpetual duration on February 6, 1796, by an Act of the General Assembly of Georgia passed for that purpose and has been delivered down to the present day.

Union County Middle School February Students of the Month



Samantha Combs and Ryker Lambert



Katryn Mason and Aidan Elliot



Sue Ellen Scott and Sebastian Stevenson

Congressman Clyde celebrates 80th Birthday of Seabees



Serving as the color guard for the March 5 Seabee Gala were cadets with the Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps of the Mountain Area Christian Academy. Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

YOUNG HARRIS — U.S. Rep. Andrew Clyde of Georgia's 9th Congressional District was the special guest speaker at the U.S. Navy Seabees 80th Anniversary Birthday Gala on Saturday, March 5, at the Ridges Resort, with about 160 veterans, their spouses and guests attending.

Navy Seabee Island X-3 Cmdr. Ed Crenshaw, who marshalled the event this year, said it was the largest Seabee birthday event he could remember, and he kicked off the program after a buffet dinner prepared by the Ridges Resort kitchen staff.

Crenshaw introduced former keynote speaker retired U.S. Navy Capt. Bruce Geibel of the Seabees. Accompanied by his wife Sandra, Geibel was awarded a Quilt of Valor by volunteers with the Misty Mountain Quilters Guild.

Following the Quilt of Valor Ceremony, Crenshaw introduced the guest speaker. The Honorable Andrew S. Clyde, accompanied by his wife Jennifer that evening, is a retired U.S. Navy Seabee Commander.

"Tonight, we pay tribute to the United States Seabees on their 80th birthday. Happy Birthday, Seabees," Clyde said to enthusiastic hoots and hollers. "Back in 1942, during the island-hopping campaign in the Pacific, the Navy very quickly realized that they needed a very competent and flexible combat zone construction capability.

"We needed skilled workers who could rebuild (destroyed enemy assets) so our side could use them

again. And out of that need, the Naval Construction (Battalion) was born. And so, we are called Seabees. Our motto: 'We build, We fight.' And that's what we do."

Segueing into current events, Clyde said, "As I speak tonight, Russia is waging war in Ukraine, plunging Europe into the darkest hour since World War II. As members who have served proudly in the military, I think you need to know where our country stands in this matter.

"On one side, we have seen tragic videos of war crimes surface on social media. And on the other, encouraging news of heroic Ukrainians basically saying, 'Give me liberty or give me death.'

"And that's what we are seeing. They have tasted liberty and a little freedom from oppression for the last almost 30 years. And now they realize just how precious (that freedom) truly is. What we have seen for almost 250 years, they have seen for about 30.

"And they want it. They don't want to give it up. I think it was exemplified by (Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's) comment to President Biden when he was offered evacuation from Kyiv. Zelenskyy's response was, 'The fight is here. I need ammunition, not a ride.'"

The congressman said that, while he has been pleased that President Joe Biden joined many European nations in imposing sanctions on Russia and offering beneficial military aid to Ukraine, "it is frustrating to watch this administration's approach to the invasion."

"Just as it was frustrating to witness the abysmal failures in Afghanistan that

tragically resulted in 13 fallen American heroes," Clyde said. "If there is something I am sure we can all say that we've learned from our time in the service, it's that you should never underestimate your enemy, and you never surrender your battle plan.

"You never tell the enemy that (an) option is gone. When you do, then you have diminished the leverage that you had. And that is a critical mistake that has happened already. In Iraq, initially, we said we would never violate a mosque by searching it. So, what did the terrorists do? They hid all their weapons and bombs in mosques. Of course. "We should have learned that lesson, but unfortunately, our president displayed our strategy for all the world to see, and for Putin to exploit without a second thought."

Switching gears, Clyde said that national security has many facets, including "energy independence," which he noted "adds to national security."

"After our energy independence was destroyed by the current administration on Day 1 in office — and a great example of that was the cancellation of the Keystone XL Pipeline — we were left to purchase over 635,000 barrels of Russian oil every solitary day," Clyde said.

"At \$115 dollars a barrel and climbing, we're sending over \$73 million every single day to Russia to fill Putin's war coffers. Just think of that," said Clyde, adding that Russia President Vladimir Putin's troops in Ukraine are only costing him an estimated \$20 million a day.

"That's beyond a crisis," Clyde said. "We are partially financing the war against

Ukraine by purchasing Russian oil. And this must stop immediately."

It should be noted that, the Tuesday following Clyde's remarks in Young Harris, President Biden announced that the U.S. would be banning Russian oil and gas imports.

But instead of actively seeking to boost oil production at home to get a jump on filling the supply gap, the Biden administration immediately began making overtures to Russia-ally Venezuela, which is run by an authoritarian regime currently facing harsh U.S. and international sanctions.

"We need to put Americans first by fully unleashing the domestic energy production of this country and get back to being energy independent like we were just over one year ago," Clyde said. "We need to produce energy in America because it will greatly decrease the world's influence over us."

"And right now, the 'Green New Deal' mentality of the current administration says solar and wind and everything else is top tier, and oil and gas needs to go away. That is a recipe for disaster in this country."

"Another thing we can do is pray. Pray for peace. Pray for the Ukrainian people. And for our American troops in Europe, including the 3,800 soldiers that deployed from Georgia last week from Fort Stewart.

"Earlier I said that you need to know where our country stands. Make no mistake: America stands with Ukraine. Remember, the United States serves as a beacon of hope, prosperity, liberty and democracy for millions of people around the world.

"Freedom from oppression is a right for every solitary person on Earth, a right many of us here tonight valiantly fought for on behalf of the American people — our people — and our nation.

"May God bless each and every one of you, and every service member on active duty tonight. And especially the Seabees and the United States Navy on their 80th birthday. God bless you."

Next, retired U.S. Navy Reserve Command Master Chief Petty Officer James R. McKinney, of the Seabees, took the floor as keynote speaker, initially saying he was much more comfortable giving fatherly advice to new recruits than being a keynote speaker, which garnered several laughs.

McKinney recalled his service history, mentioning his initial reserve experience and subsequent deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan with Navy Mobile Construction Battalion 14, after which he transferred to his observations post-Afghanistan.

"After (the Afghanistan) deployment, we started downsizing the military," McKinney said. "I don't know why we think that's a great thing, to downsize our military, but we did.

"We cut our reserve battalions from 12 to five. We cut our reserve regiments from four to two. On the active-duty side, they lost two battalions and two regiments. What this did to us was it changed the way that we do our deployments.

"People like me, master chiefs, were no longer needed to go overseas. We have become part of a joint task force. We were working jointly, now, with everybody. They no longer wanted full battalions to go overseas.

"So, what we do now is, we have small (detachments). They have specific skills, and they are task-tailored for whatever job it is they need to do.



U.S. Rep. Andrew Clyde and wife Jennifer at the 80th Seabee Birthday Gala on Saturday, March 5. Photo by Mark Smith

And they go with whatever unit they need to support."

McKinney said the Seabees can do a lot of things, like building runways for unmanned aerial vehicles or supporting Special Forces, and to win the hearts and minds of indigenous peoples in their deployments, they can build schools, women's clinics and whatever else is needed.

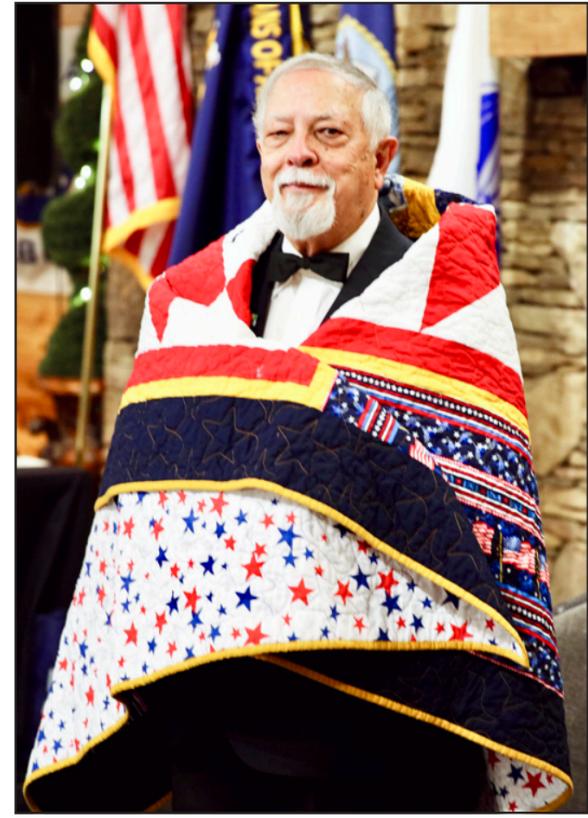
"I can tell you this: I know that we have the very best of our citizens serving in our armed forces" McKinney said, "whether it's Army, Navy, Marine, Air Force, Coast Guard, whether it's active-duty or reserve. They are willing to put all of it on the line for this nation and what we stand for.

And I am proud to have served next to them."

Finally, after all the speeches and ceremonies, Pastor Richard Hoibraten, a retired Seabee, led gala attendees in a rendition of "The Song of the Seabees," circa 1943, and the cutting of the birthday cake with a ceremonial saber.

The gala event continued with music by DJ Bill Grove and dancing, a silent auction, and closing comments by Island X-3 Cmdr. Crenshaw sometime around 11 p.m.

Serving as the color guard for the event were cadets with the Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps of the Mountain Area Christian Academy.



Retired U.S. Navy Capt. Bruce Geibel of the Seabees received a beautiful Quilt of Valor in the March 5 Seabees Birthday Gala. Photo by Mark Smith

Target Range...from Page 1A

the general fund, with the \$100,000 being 'in-kind' match.

"After only receiving one proposal last year on this project that was well above the \$2.4 million estimate, and knowing how construction costs had escalated in the last year, the architects who designed this project did a new updated construction cost estimate.

"With the new

construction cost estimate being \$3.8 million, the new amended intergovernmental agreement states that the Department of Natural Resources will pay up to and not to exceed \$3.42 million of approved construction costs, and the county's match will be approximately \$380,000 from a combination of direct funding and in-kind services.

"Once the project is re-bid and proposals are in, the

county will have a better idea of what the total project cost will be, but the 90% grant funding will definitely cut down on the county's match requirement."

Key features of the range, to be located on a 14-acre piece of U.S. Forest Service land off SR 180 between mile markers 18 and 19, include independently operated rifle and pistol ranges, sound abatement, full-size bathrooms, climate-controlled meeting and supply rooms, ample parking and more.

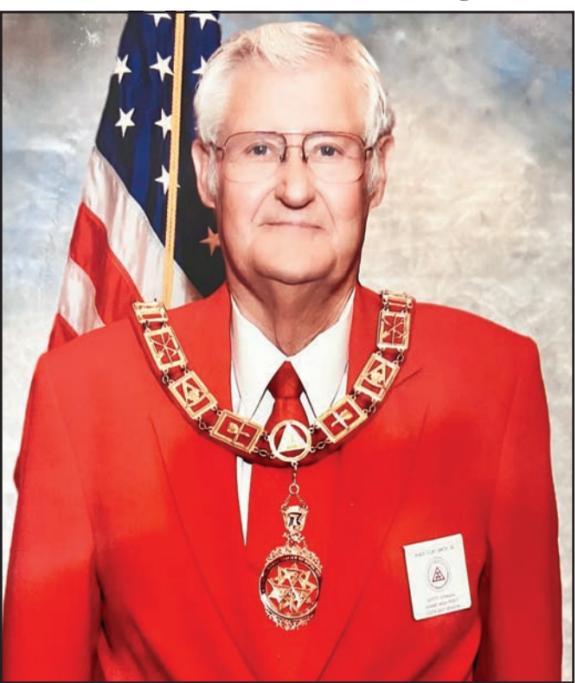


The overall site plan for the Union County Shooting Range Complex to be built off Georgia 180. Photo by Mark Smith

Brasstown Concert Association presents Djoukil

The Brasstown Concert Association presents Djoukil, a Gypsy Jazz ensemble from France in Django Reinhardt's style, on Sunday, April 10, 2022 at 2 pm., John C. Campbell Folk School's open-air, covered Festival Barn, Brasstown, NC. Tickets only at the door: adults \$15, any student \$10. Folding metal chairs are available, but your own is encouraged. For more information, call (828) 389-4210, Like us on Facebook, and see full articles.

Wade Smith...from Page 1A



Smith during his tenure as the Deputy General Grand High Priest for the South East Region of the General Grand Chapter Royal Arch Masons International, 1992-1995.

Within this new setup, Smith had the teachers sit and talk with students who were gathered around, walking them through, for example, algebra problems on the computer. This helped students focus with more one-on-one guidance from their teachers.

"All of a sudden, Woody Gap went to the top on the academics within the state," Smith said. "Woody Gap was a beautiful training center. You could do just about anything over there because of the number of students and number of teachers, so you could handle all this individualized stuff like that."

After seven years at Woody Gap, Smith transferred to Union County Middle. He spent a year as principal there, and though he did not get to incorporate many changes due to his short tenure, he expelled much energy trying to get teachers to start thinking more about how to help at-risk students.

When the principal position opened at Union County High, Smith took the job, attempting for about seven years to "turn the regular educational system around and cause (the powers that be) to be more receptive and concerned about the education of the at-risk student."

"There, I found out it's almost impossible to change the trajectory of the educational process," Smith said, noting the difficulty of implementing unorthodox practices focused so heavily on at-risk students, especially within a legacy educational environment such as Union County High School.

"I never managed to get very far with that at the High School," he conceded, "even though I was constantly walking and talking."

His plans may not have played out at the level of Union County Schools, but he never gave up on his vision of assisting the students requiring the most help with finding success in education, which he knew required establishing a specialized program focused exclusively on individual needs.

"I convinced the Counselors, Principals, Superintendents and Boards of Education of Union, Towns and Fannin counties to permit me to set up a program that is totally designed for the at-risk student," Smith said. "That program is individualized, self-paced, or mastery learning, or competency education."

"There's a half a dozen titles for it, but it's all the same thing: the student controls the progress of learning."

Smith was able to convince the Georgia Department of Education to let him start the new program following about six months of research and three visits to Atlanta, and thus, in 1993, the Mountain Education Charter High School was born.

He promised the Department of Education that he would "parallel or exceed the regular high school student performances." In pursuit of this endeavor, Smith identified several key elements that made the venture possible.

For starters, he needed to acquire the appropriate materials to provide an individualized learning environment for children, classroom items like computers and multiple curriculums to help students find the right fit.

Second, he asked to have total control over the teacher selection process, where he would be the one hiring teachers who wanted to teach extra in the evenings after having taught all day in the regular school system.

"So, you get that type

of teacher who is absolutely convinced that any student they touch, they can educate," Smith said. "With that mentality, it's phenomenal what happens."

Added Smith, "Now, you've got a teacher that is absolutely, totally convinced that those students are OK, and they're all smart – all we have to do is just help them get there."

"Then, (we retrained) those teachers: Don't dare lecture ever to anyone; walk from chair to chair and work on each individual as they progress through the materials they're learning at that time."

"That was a hard process, incidentally, to convince teachers to do that until they saw what the results were, what really happens."

Smith stressed the importance of the evening aspect of the Mountain Education Center, as he was able to recruit from among the best working teachers to pull extra duty at MEC, and he helped students be even more productive by getting them jobs during the day.

So, while their peers in regular school were in class, MEC students were working and making money, which came with the added benefit of reducing the level of competition at-risk students faced for evening jobs that day school students were working after classes let out.

This allowed them to contribute to their community by working jobs and earning steady paychecks while simultaneously concentrating on their studies.

"Every course that student needs, you set up an individualized folder for them," Smith said. "And when they walk in, 'OK, I'm going to work on algebra tonight,' and they get their algebra folder and materials and sit down and go to work. The teacher comes around, looks over their work, and helps them and discusses it with them individually."

"The beauty of this is that each student is going to learn as much or more as the day student, because they can't progress to another section until they master the previous section in their folder."

According to Smith, when at-risk students move through lessons at their own pace, new feelings of confidence begin to emerge, and they realize, perhaps for the first time in their lives, that they, too, are smart and can excel in their studies.

"And the teachers are telling them how smart they are," Smith said. "The way I would teach my teachers: 'You have a magic wand. When you put that magic wand over that student's head and say, 'You're smart,' they'll be smart the rest of their life. It's all in what you convey. You are the magic in this process.' So, you build the teachers up like this at the same time to get that buy-in."

Another key aspect to educating students the Mountain Education Center way is an emphasis on safeguarding the teacher/student relationship by keeping negative interactions out of the classroom, so disciplinary actions are always handled by an administrator and school counselor.

"If a student has done something to disrupt a class or whatever it was that the teacher didn't like, then we will get the student to acknowledge that there has to be a consequence for their actions and work with whichever parent or guardian is taking care of that at-risk student," Smith said.

The benefit to this approach is multifold. Students receive early behavioral interventions with lessons about responsibility to themselves and others, and parents get to play a more active role in

shepherding that process along, which makes for a better school and home life for all.

"Working closely with parents is crucial," Smith reiterated, "particularly concerning 'problem' students, as doing so brings in a more personal investment from households in furthering the best interests of each child, since parents must know what is going on to help guide children's efforts."

In addition to working one-on-one with parents, Smith hosted school-sponsored cookouts to bring teachers, parents and students together to promote culturally positive learning environments at home and on campus, creating a fundamental shift in the way guardians interacted with educators.

"You have a big meal and talk to whoever that other significant person is about how their child has progressed and how wonderful it is, and say, 'Thank you for what you're doing to help them get a high school diploma,'" Smith said.

This creates positive school associations for parents and guardians, which in turn fosters positive school associations and greater expectations for students at home, and all because the learning process has become one in which at-risk students are encouraged in every regard.

"Up to that time, most of these at-risk students have yet to hear how smart they are, or have been disregarded as bad students," Smith said. "So, you're totally flip-flopping the paradigm of this process."

In reality, Mountain Education Center became an entire community of services for at-risk students, as Smith made a place for probation officers, mental health professionals and health department personnel so families had access to all the resources they needed to be successful.

Of course, sometimes children just need to spend a brief time with Mountain Education Center before returning to regular school, so Smith arranged with area school superintendents to allow kids to return if they wanted once they were "socially, emotionally, academically on track."

To date, the Mountain Education Center has been a resounding success. What started with just three school systems in 1993 has grown to include 18 sites throughout North Georgia, serving ninth through 12-graders from 22 counties year-round for afternoon and evening classes.

"We graduated three students the first year," Smith said. "The next year, we graduated about 14 or 15. We went from just a few students to the second year having 1,500-plus. Enrollment went to 1,800-plus in the 2000s; it's been between 2,000 and 2,500 students ever since and was even up to 3,400-plus students last year."

"This program is not only educating but graduating between 300 and 350 students every year that would not get a high school diploma if it wasn't for the Mountain Education Center. And those students are just as well educated as any other students because they've mastered this material, and many of them go on to experience success in the postsecondary educational arena."

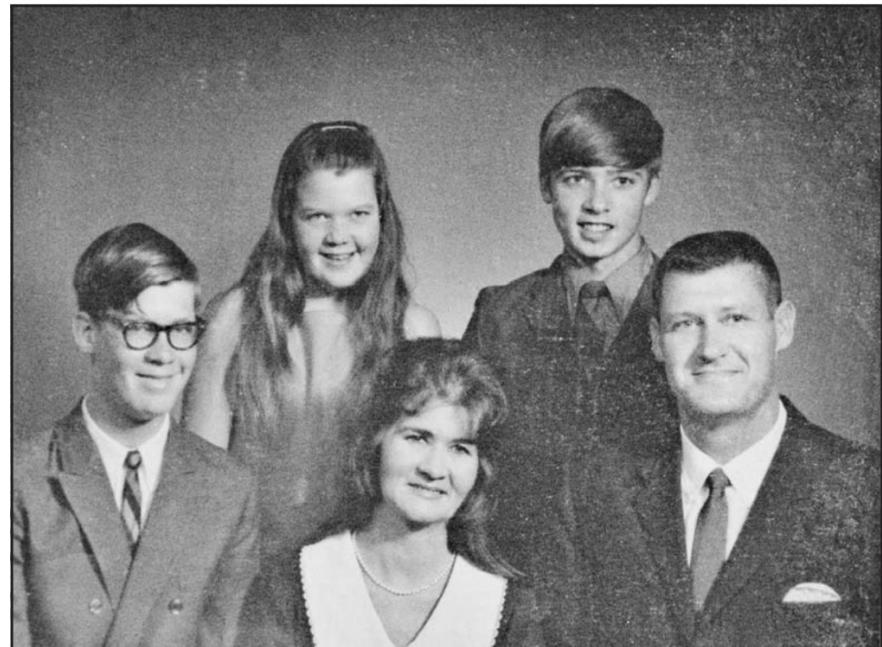
The value of effectively reaching at-risk students cannot be overstated, as the impact of doing so compounds over time, such that the economic floor of an entire region can be lifted, thereby helping to shrink generational poverty and improve conditions for everyone in a community.

"Every time you wave that magic wand and tell a student how smart they are and give them a diploma, nine times out of 10, it's proven they will never get on the welfare system," Smith said. "If you let them walk away without the high school diploma, better than 50% of them are going to wind up being on the welfare system."

"So, the more you can graduate, the better you raise the economic stability of your county. That's my goal. As I indicated, when we started here, we were failing about 40%-60% of our students, who were walking away and never getting a high school diploma."

"Nineteen years later, when I gave up the MEC as a superintendent, all of my counties up here at that time were between 82% and 92% graduation rate. That is a sea change; that is a change in the paradigm of the whole community."

Smith retired from MEC around 2011 after 19 years steering the program he created to save at-risk students by investing in them and making them believe in themselves enough to become productive



Wade Jr., Lynne and Michael with parents Wade and Pat Smith. This photo was taken when Smith was at Command and General Staff College in 1970.

members of society.

Ultimately, he hopes the community takes the reins and continues to make good on that investment. After all, he was himself an at-risk student who never finished high school, and though he was fortunate enough to find tremendous success in life, he knows all too well the risks facing students who fall through the cracks, and he recognizes their amazing potential if nurtured.

"I would like our entire community to become more involved with our at-risk students and the Mountain Education Center so that we can better serve and better educate every one of our children in these beautiful North Georgia Mountains," Smith said. "That is my hope and desire and prayer."

And while he remains involved with MEC by championing the school and monitoring its progress, in retirement, he has been able to devote more of his time to pursuing community service via his other lifelong passion – Freemasonry.

SMITH IN MASONRY

Smith has been involved in numerous community initiatives like the Lions Club and other service organizations. But his commitment to Freemasonry is where he has made some of his most impactful contributions.

His history with Freemasonry originates in his military days, back in 1959 when he was on his way to Officer Candidate School. In his 60-plus years of service in association with the fraternal organization, Smith has held a variety of high-ranking positions.

On the Scottish Rite side, he is a Past Wise Master in the Chapter of Rose Croix, having earned his 33rd Degree – the highest honor given in Freemasonry.

Smith also served as Most Excellent Grand High Priest of the Grand York Rite of Georgia in 2009, and currently, he serves on the Entertainment Committee of the 2021-2022 Grand Council and as the Secretary Emeritus and Grand Treasurer for all three Grand York Rite bodies in Georgia.

He has held dozens of other titles with various organizations in his experience with Masonry, including as Deputy General Grand High Priest for the South East Region and General Grand Master of the First Veil for the General Grand Chapter Royal Arch Masons International.

As a Freemason, Smith kickstarted an extraordinarily successful child identification program that would eventually

be rolled out nationwide, with a purpose of creating a kit of personally identifying information for families to provide to law enforcement should a child go missing.

And because the brotherhood of masons acts as a network of people with a common interest in creating a better world, Smith has been able to leverage connections far and wide to raise money for plentiful local initiatives, including at the Mountain Education Charter High School.

Assisting him in these efforts were Georgia legislators Ralph Twiggs and Guy Middleton – both masons – among countless others.

"I have used my masonic connections to do things for the community over and over," Smith said. "I don't care what position you hold out in public life, in Freemasonry we are all brothers. I can walk into any mason's office any time and say, 'Please let me talk to you.'"

Additionally, Smith has been integral in welcoming many masons to the cause, including re-establishing Freemasonry in Europe in the aftermath of World War II, with such recruitment efforts relying on inspiring others to join.

"A Mason can never ask anyone to join, because we firmly believe, if we're doing the right thing as a brotherhood of man under the Fatherhood of God, then people will want to join," Smith said.

One of the most important efforts undertaken by Georgia Freemasons is the Macon-based Masonic Youth Home for at-risk children, for which Smith served nine years as a trustee.

"They asked me to come down there and set up an individualized, self-paced program for the children who

couldn't succeed educationally otherwise," Smith said. "Children were leaving the Masonic Home and not getting a high school diploma. So, we've got a 'little MEC' down there right now."

"When a child comes into the Masonic Home, he or she is going to be one, two or three years behind academically, socially and emotionally. What my homeschool program down there does is help that child get back on track (with one-on-one care and attention) to get them ready to be assigned to one of the regular day schools."

Freemasonry has been a through line for much of what Smith has accomplished for his country and the area, and his experience in the military, in education and the masons all share one thing in common: an incredible faith in God and the values of Christianity, which he has put forth in the service of bettering his fellow man and doing good in the world, especially for children.

The veteran and community leader has come a long way in 88 years, starting out as a child of the Depression and forging a path to making real differences in the lives of children in depressed circumstances. And he has done it by staying true, always, to whatever mission is at hand.

"My cardinal principle is to do no harm to anyone," Smith said, "and do your best absolutely to elevate anyone that you associate with, to cause them to be a better person and do better in life, and to do anything you can to support and assist in that process."

The North Georgia News thanks Smith for his brave service to our country and for his championing of children far and wide, both as a Freemason and the founder of the Mountain Education Center.