

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Legal Organ of Union County

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Officials urge calm as anxieties surge over coronavirus Schools close following governor's guidance

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

On Monday, March 16, the Emergency Management Agency of neighboring Towns County reported that a resident had been transported Sunday night to Northeast Georgia Medical Center from Chatuge Regional Hospital with "suspicious symptoms."

"County officials were made aware of the transfer and circumstances late last night," the EMA said on Facebook. "Steps have been taken to mitigate any further exposure possibility."

"Two (Towns County) EMS employees will be on isolation pending test results. Please remember this is only a suspected case at this time. More information will be posted as available."

The transported individual – who was tested for the virus Monday morning – is a teacher at Towns County Elementary School, which was in session through Friday, March 13.

"Results for the test can take up to 72 hours, and we will inform everyone as we get more information," Towns County Schools said Monday. "Please understand that this is NOT a confirmed case of the virus."

"Elementary school employees were informed to stay home and keep their distance from parents, grandparents and elderly populations until the test results come back. Our suggestion is the same for parents and students who were in the elementary school last week."

"This is not a time for panic, but a time for wisdom. Be smart, keep your distance from other people, wash your hands religiously, and monitor yourself and children for any symptoms. Working together as a community, we can minimize the effects of this virus in Towns County."

"Once we learn the results of the test, a decision on what school will look like for the next three weeks will be made and passed on to you."

Beyond even the emptying of store shelves and shuttering of local institutions, these announcements on Monday brought home the larger international news story that is coronavirus, as officials at every level, both domestic and abroad, continued to take the virus threat seriously.

In the U.S. alone, the disease has affected everything from the stock market, professional sports and elections, to local communities and policies by area schools, governments, hospitals and first responder agencies.

And across the planet, long held social norms and customs have been swept up and largely discarded, cementing the virus' cultural status as a happening of historic proportions.

It may sound mundane, but coronaviruses are actually quite common, representing one of the major sources of "the common cold." This "novel" disease, however, is a particularly contagious new strain of coronavirus known as COVID-19.

People who contract the virus may experience a fever, cough and shortness of breath two to 14 days after exposure, though symptoms of COVID-19 seem to be mild for most people.

However, all available information indicates that the elderly and/or chronically ill people with weakened immune systems are disproportionately at risk for dangerous and even deadly flu-like symptoms and respiratory complications caused by the virus.

All Union County stakeholders with access to governmental and health care levers have been closely monitoring the rapidly changing situation and coordinating behind the scenes to stay on top of any response to a potential local outbreak, with

policies being fleshed out and adopted to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to the most vulnerable members of the community.

Out of an abundance of caution, Union General Health Systems decided on Friday to close their Union County Nursing Home, along with Towns County's Chatuge Regional Nursing Home, "to visitors and all public until further notice."

Additionally, Union General announced Monday it was halting all public visitations to its hospitals in Union and Towns counties, as well as putting into place special screening and entry procedures for patients exhibiting coronavirus symptoms.

People should contact their physicians for questions about elective surgeries and procedures.

Union General has also indefinitely closed its Wellness Center, though the hospital said that, once it determines the length of the shutdown, "all members will have that time added to the end of their membership."

Hospital Administrator Leslie Daniel described the hospitals and nursing homes' level of preparedness for the people in their care as "high" last week.

"With the current



Gov. Brian Kemp declared a public health emergency on Saturday, March 14, a day after President Trump declared a national emergency.

situation, we are fluid on this issue to ensure that all staff is educated on our specific plan."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta recommend that people call their health care providers for medical advice if they think they've been exposed to COVID-19 "and develop a fever and symptoms," and people should also contact Union General Hospital at 706-745-2111 prior to visiting with coronavirus-like symptoms.

Union County School District has joined a growing list of educational institutions, including other school systems,

colleges and technical schools around the state and nation, in closing its campuses for at least one week and perhaps longer to slow down the spread of the disease, with faculty and students expected to work from home.

The local school closings came as a result of the constantly evolving circumstances on the ground last week. It was a decision school leadership made in consultation with the federal and state Departments of Education, the Pioneer RESA and area school superintendents, as well as guidance from Gov. Brian Kemp.

"If you feel that it is prudent, you should consider

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Secretary of State postpones Presidential Preference Primary

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ATLANTA – In light of the public health emergency posed by COVID-19, the illness caused by the coronavirus, in-person voting presents increased risk to voters and poll workers. Gov. Kemp has declared a public health emergency and President Trump has declared a national emergency.

"Events are moving rapidly, and my highest priority is protecting the health of our poll workers, their families, and the community at large," Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger said over the weekend.

Maintaining the integrity of the election depends on the talents of poll workers who are in the high-risk group, because their average age is over 70. So, concern for their health is a central consideration in this decision.



Brad Raffensperger
Secretary of State

"Our priority is to protect the health and safety of all Georgians and to ensure that as many Georgians as possible have an opportunity to vote," said State Sen. Nikema

Williams, the Chairwoman of Georgia. "Continued in-person voting could compromise both goals."

"Georgians who have already cast their vote in person or by mail for the March 24 primary will be able to vote again in the May 19 primary for the elections already scheduled for that date. If Georgians who have already cast their vote for the March 24 primary do not vote again in the May 19 primary, their votes for the Presidential Preference Primary will still count."

Secretary Raffensperger has represented that all votes already cast in person and all absentee ballots will be counted, and every Georgia voter that has not yet had a chance to cast a ballot in the March 24 elections will be able to do so on May 19, along with

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Blairsville DDA Board buys Haralson lot back from Cockerham

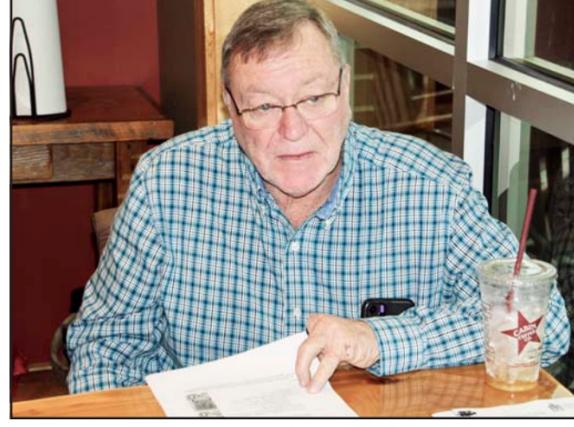
By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

In an effort to move forward with its downtown parking lot plans, the Blairsville Downtown Development Authority Board has re-purchased the Haralson property parcel across from Foodland Grocery that it sold to local entrepreneur Steve Cockerham in 2018.

The deal closed in the middle of last week, with the DDA buying the property back at essentially the same price the board originally sold it to Cockerham for, which was \$225,000.

Now that it has reacquired the lot, the board and City Hall can begin work in earnest on the parking lot, which was being held up before, as grading and other work needed to be coordinated between the development of Cockerham's property and construction of the adjoining parking lot.

DDA Board members met on Tuesday, March 10, at



Paul Thompson, DDA Board Chair Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Cabin Coffee to discuss the property and other matters. In the meeting, they decided to pursue quotes on the parking lot design.

The board is hoping to secure at least 175 spaces for the parking lot, as well as public restrooms and a handicap ramp leading from the parking lot to street level on Pat Haralson

Memorial Drive. Initially, the plan was to use dirt excavated during construction on Cockerham's property to level out the proposed parking lot.

Now, the DDA is leaning toward leaving the reacquired Haralson parcel alone in case it decides to sell the property to

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Blairsville native Hood expands artistic horizons in Nashville



Back (L-R): Ben Vaughn (WCM), Dann Huff, Will Overton (WCM); front: Brandon Hood

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Producer/songwriter Brandon Hood of Blairsville, Georgia, and producer Dann Huff of Nashville, Tennessee, have launched an artist development company in a joint venture with Warner Chappell Music.

Blairsville, Hood is the son of Calvin and Kathy Hood of Union County. He landed in Nashville in 2005 to pursue a degree at Belmont. During his time there, his guitar and production skills caught the attention of Dann Huff, who signed him to his first-ever publishing deal.

Hood's songs have been recorded by Rascal Flatts, Sam Hunt, Jessie James Decker and more, and he's currently producing records for Drake Milligan, Hannah Dasher, and Tim Dugger, among others. Hood is managed by Mary Lauren Teague at Dotted i Entertainment.

Through the partnership
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Suches book swap dedicated as 'Betty Belanger Library'

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

SUCHES – When lifelong librarian Betty Belanger, 84, passed away peacefully at her home on Nov. 16, she left behind her a great many memories shared with her beloved mountain community – and also a wonderful public library.

That's why it was so important for Belanger's family and friends to hold a special ceremony at the Suches Community Center on Saturday, March 14, dedicating the Betty Belanger Library in her memory.

"A large part of her life was in the library," said Betty's husband Roger. "She graduated from Emory with a degree in library science, and she worked in libraries all her life until she retired."

"She worked at college libraries, she worked at city



L-R: The late Betty Belanger's daughter Ann and husband Roger outside the family matriarch's namesake library in the Suches Community Center on March 14.

libraries, school libraries, and worked in the library here at Woody Gap School. Her ashes were buried in the mountains that she loved."

With her passion for reading, Betty Belanger purposefully spent much of her life educating others about the

importance of books.

"She loved to read, and she taught me how to read and gave me a love for books throughout my life," said Ann Belanger, daughter of Betty and Roger. "I really appreciate everybody being here and

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