

Happy Easter

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75¢

North Georgia News

2 Sections 24 Pages

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Easter celebrated with egg hunt at Meeks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Union County Recreation Department held its annual Easter Egg Hunt on Saturday, March 23, kicking things off around 3 p.m. at the lower ballfields of Meeks Park. Originally, the family-centric event was scheduled to begin at noon but was delayed over weather concerns. As it happened, the weather was fine, and kids and their families enjoyed the clear blue sky as they celebrated early Easter festivities.

Popcorn and water were available for free, and nearby, the Easter Bunny himself sat on

a bench for photo opportunities. More bunnies, albeit plush and super huggable, were waiting on the raffle prize table for someone to take them home at the end of the day.

The balloon art station was particularly popular, and just about every egg hunter went home with a sword, flower, bunny or other springtime animal. That said, the real prizes were lying in the fields and hidden along the surrounding creekside.

Sarah Riley brought her three little ones, 1-year-old Gwen, 3-year-old Miles and 5-year-old Conan. 2024 marks the third Meeks Park Egg Hunt they've been to, although the

two boys were no less eager to hop to collecting.

Between the two, they guessed that there were 1,022 eggs in one field, and 1,028 in the other.

"I'm going to try to get as many as I can," promised Conan.

Their baby sister had a lot to say also, but mom Sarah chalked it up to Gwen wishing she was old enough to do the hunt, too.

The Riley family wasn't alone – attendance was impressive this year, with the parking lot filled and lines quickly building, collapsing and reforming at different stations as the afternoon wore

on. As he does every year, Union County Commissioner Lamar Paris made an appearance.

"(Rec Director Scotty Thompson) and all the crew have done a great job," said Paris, commending the Rec Department for its organizational efforts. "Thank y'all all very much for being here with your beautiful kids – what a day."

Harmony Grove Baptist Church Senior Pastor Scotty Jarrard helped the audience honor the true meaning of Easter, leading them in a brief prayer before the hunt began
See Happy Easter, Page 6A



Young resident Luke Steele showing off the humble collection of eggs he gathered at the egg hunt on Saturday.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Adams, Collins and Wasko come out on top at UCHS



L-R: Congratulations to UCHS seniors Ella Collins, Ellie Adams and Lilly Wasko for earning the Top Three ranks for their graduating class.

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com
Union County High School is celebrating academic

excellence this year with the announcement of their Class of 2024 Valedictorian and – new this year – Co-Salutatorians. The valedictorian and

salutatorian of each graduating class are the Top Two students based on select criteria, including outstanding GPA.
See UCHS Top Three, Page 2A

Marsh, Webb earn highest honors at Woody Gap



Woody Gap Class of 2024 Salutatorian Aidan Webb and Valedictorian Jennifer Marsh are currently working on their big speeches for graduation in May.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer
SUCHES – As the school year creeps steadily toward its close, the Top Two academic achievers of the Woody Gap Class of 2024, Valedictorian Jennifer Marsh and Salutatorian Aidan Webb, are looking forward to graduating with the rest of their class and to what awaits them in the future.

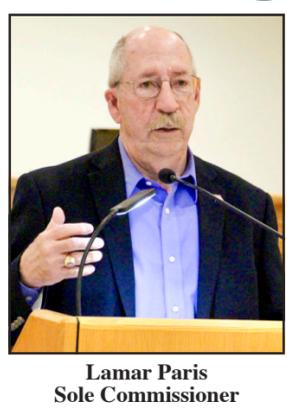
One of Marsh's earliest memories of Union County is the community helping her and her mother move in when they came to Suches from McDonough. Now, as class valedictorian, she believes she couldn't have done it without their support – including her teachers and classmates.

Through it all, too, has been Marsh's mother. In fact, she calls her mother "the most consistent thing" in her young life, which has contributed

Range, Fisher Field and recycling highlight meeting

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com
Members of the public received an update on the Union County Target Range amid a flurry of business conducted by Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris in his regular monthly meeting on Thursday, March 21.

Paris amended the Intergovernmental Agreement between the county and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources setting fees at the range. Once the range opens, the fee for annual membership to be obtained through the county will be \$200 for individuals and \$300 for a family, and for people who do not purchase a membership, the daily usage fee will be \$5 for people 15 and under and \$15 for everyone 16 and over.

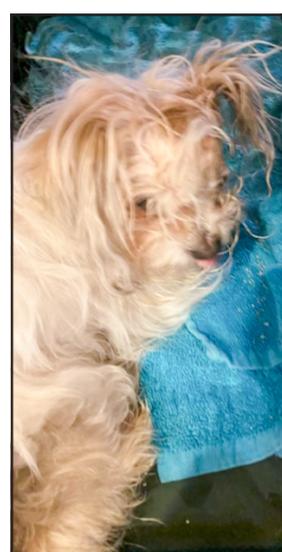


Lamar Paris
Sole Commissioner

Cash reward being offered in animal abuse incident

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer
With the help of concerned residents, Castoff Pet Rescue is offering a \$3,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of whoever injured and dumped a dog near the organization's Thrift Store in Downtown Blairsville earlier this month.

Late in the evening of March 11, a tiny dog was dropped off on the sidewalk near the Castoff Pet Rescue Thrift Store at 19 Cobalt Street, Suite C. Unfortunately, no cameras in the shopping strip or other nearby locations caught the act.



Named Justice following her death, this dog is believed to have been the victim of terrible abuse for whom caring residents hope to find justice.
Photo/Submitted

Note to Readers on Mail Delivery Issues:

The North Georgia News has become aware of multiple subscribers having not received their newspapers in the mail in recent weeks.

It has been widely reported in statewide media that the U.S. Postal Service

has been experiencing delivery issues since opening its new processing center in Palmetto,
See Delivery Issues, Page 7A



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UCHS Top Three...from Page 1A

For UCHS, make that the Top Three students, as the 2024 co-salutatorians tied for second-highest GPA.

These exceptionally bright seniors are Valedictorian Ellie Adams and Co-Salutatorians Ella Collins and Lilly Wasko.

Ellie Adams felt “blessed” upon learning that she had earned the highest rank in her class, and the accomplishment is not something she takes for granted.

Having moved here from the small town of Baker, Florida, midway through her freshman year, Adams didn’t enroll at UCHS until she was a sophomore. And she came from “a really small school,” so she had no specific expectations for how well she would do next to her classmates.

“It was a new environment, but everyone was extremely welcoming, so it was an easy transition. We were very impressed with the school,” Adams said, describing her family’s decision to relocate to Blairsville as an “act of God” based on an opportunity the Adamses received.

Her Christian faith is incredibly important to her, and

Adams credits God with gifting her the drive and ability to work hard and succeed.

“I knew that God had given me the capability to do well in school, so I never wanted to waste that, and I just enjoy doing my best,” Adams said of her accomplishment.

Adams thanks her family – parents Joshua and Natalie and three siblings – “for being crazy supportive and always encouraging me.” She is also grateful to the school staff for assisting in both her education and transition to Union County High.

“And especially Coach Paige Dyer,” Adams said. “I had her class first semester coming here, and immediately, she was like, ‘You’re coming to run Cross Country for me.’ So, that really helped get me in, meet some people and just get involved.”

In addition to Cross Country, Adams also runs Track, and she stays active in her youth group at Harmony Grove Baptist Church while counseling for Canal Lake Bible Camp over summers.

She will be getting a head start in college this fall due to the Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment credits she has earned, with a tentative plan to attend the Christian private Truett McConnell University in Cleveland after graduating in May.

Whichever college she chooses, Adams hopes to pursue education studies and/or Christian ministries with an eye toward traveling on overseas mission trips. But her ultimate goal is to be a mother someday.

“I’ve always loved, loved kids, and my mom has been a major part of my life,” Adams said. “My dad was always the one who worked, and mom stayed home with the kids. Mom is like a genius, so it’s not a lack of education or ability, but it was always her goal to raise her kids.

“I love kids, and so I want to be a mom and I want to raise my own kids also.”

Ella Collins said she’s happy to share the title of “Co-Salutatorian” with one of her classmates and is grateful for the opportunity to showcase her dedication to school.

“I’ve just always really cared about my grades and worked really hard,” Collins said. “I’ve taken all Honors/AP/Dual Enrollment classes, and just had to really balance my schedule with my extracurriculars.”

And her hard work has paid off. When she makes her way to the Georgia Institute of Technology this fall, Collins is optimistic that the entire year’s worth of college credits she has earned will transfer, and she eagerly anticipates starting as a Yellow Jacket sophomore.

There, Collins plans to graduate with a Computer Science degree, and after gaining some industry experience, she aspires to return home to start a business with her father William, a software engineer who is very excited about his daughter’s future.

“I’ve grown up with him doing that, and I really like his lifestyle,” Collins said. “He works from home; he has a very flexible schedule. At first, I didn’t really know if I was into it, but I started sitting down with him and seeing what he was doing, and it just seemed very interesting.

“And then, with (the rise of Artificial Intelligence) and everything, that’s really interested me. At Georgia Tech, you basically pick two areas you want to study within your

Computer Science degree, and I’m definitely going to pick AI for one of those.

“AI is fast-growing, and it’s going to affect every industry, and I definitely want to be a part of that because I think it’s the next big thing.”

As a busy competition dancer and regional dance teacher, Collins will continue to pursue her passion for dancing at Georgia Tech, with tryouts for the Goldrush Dance Team coming up next month.

“I’ve been dancing since I was 4 and competing since I was 6 or 7,” Collins said. “I’m also a dance teacher, started doing that two years ago. So, I teach and I dance, and (my sister Adalyn and I) go to competitions every other weekend, sometimes multiple weekends in a row. I love it.”

Collins would like to thank her parents for helping her get where she is today and supporting her on-the-go lifestyle, offering a special shout-out to her mom Jessica for going above and beyond to assist in her dance studies over the years.

“They’ve always instilled in me how important grades were, and how important it is to either get an education or a good job,” Collins said. “They’ve always put that in my mind, so it really is in my mind now. I feel like they made me the hard worker that I am.”

Added Collins, “I also want to thank Jesus, my Lord and Savior, for giving me such a good life and great parents that have supported me, and for allowing me to be healthy and happy and be salutatorian.”

Like her fellow top seniors, Lilly Wasko is excited about her accomplishment. She actually thought she was in third place for a while until school administrators pulled her aside to let her know she had tied for salutatorian, and she attributes her success to having a strong work ethic.

Wasko said her parents, Kelly and Brett, and her friends and coworkers have been instrumental in enabling her to achieve her goals.

When she’s not spending long hours studying to join the top of her class, Wasko enjoys her job at Paris & Company, the restaurant owned by Sid and Nina Kurrimbukus at Crane Creek Vineyards.

“I’m on a vineyard, and I get to see a pretty view every day, so that’s always nice,” said Wasko, who usually pulls Friday, Saturday and Sunday shifts. She has been working at the restaurant since the summer after her freshman year.

In fact, most of her family works there, as the Kurrimbukuses are family friends with whom Wasko’s mother worked previously at Brasstown Valley Resort before they started their own restaurant and hired Lilly, her mom and brother.

Like her classmates, Wasko has pursued a rigorous academic course load, so she will be starting her post-secondary education as a

sophomore with college credits earned in High School.

She will be moving to the Atlanta area to attend Kennesaw State University to study either nursing or physical therapy. The latter has piqued her interest professionally since she started interning five days a week at the Union General Wellness Center to shadow a physical therapist.

“I’ve always loved science and math – that’s my go-to – and I just kind of settled on nursing,” Wasko said of her decision to enter a healthcare field. “My grandmother was a nurse, too, so it’s something I’ve just grown up around.”

One reason she chose KSU is because she doesn’t want to stray too far from home, “especially since it’s my first time on my own – and my mom wanted me to stay close.”

But after graduating college, Wasko said she’ll likely be settling in a larger area, as Blairsville “is just a little too quiet” to raise a family, and she’s already leaning toward Colorado as a potential destination.

Wasko is a little nervous about delivering a graduation speech in front of the community and all the people she’s grown up with, especially considering she thought she was going to rank third in her class, which doesn’t come with a speech, though she is looking forward to the milestone.

The Class of 2024 is the first group of seniors to fall under an amended School Board policy requiring grade calculations for honor graduates and top students to take place at the end of the first semester senior year instead of being finalized just before graduation.

Doing it this way gives a valedictorian and salutatorian more time to work on their big graduation speeches and celebrate their successes with family and friends before moving on to the next phases of their lives.

The valedictorian/salutatorian announcements used to happen at the end-of-year Senior Honors Night after all the second-semester grades came in, so making the determination early also relieves some of the end-of-year time crunch for school staff and graduating students.

UCHS Principal Carol Knight said having co-salutatorians is unusual; when grades came back recently, the High School reached out to the Georgia Student Finance Commission for guidance on handling a tie, and when no feedback arrived, they simply decided to name co-salutatorians.

“We have a very strong senior class this year,” Principal Knight said. “These three students have worked very hard to get to where they are. And congratulations to their families, because this is a significant reflection on their dedication to their daughters and their education, too.”

AARP Tax Aide Free Tax Preparation



AARP Tax Aide is providing free tax preparation in Blairsville on Wednesdays from 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. beginning February 7 through April 10. Location is the Brackett Community Room, behind United Community Bank, 177 GA-515, Blairsville, GA.

This service is by appointment only. Please call (770) 403-7959 for reservations.

Other AARP Tax Aide locations are: Blue Ridge on Fridays from 10:00 - 2:00; February 9 - April 12 at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, 7 Ewing Street, Blue Ridge; Ellijay on Mondays from 10:00 - 2:00; February 12 - April 8 at the Gilmer County Library, 268 Calvin Jackson Drive, Ellijay.

Blue Ridge and Ellijay are also by appointment only. Please call (770) 312-2258 for reservations at these locations.

Woody Gap Excellence...from Page 1A

was very proud, too.”

Marsh was surprised to make the cut, but the achievement wasn't totally unexpected.

“I had been hoping for (valedictorian), and I'd been watching my class rank like a hawk,” she said.

Her favorite subject is music, though she's also involved in organizing the yearbook. Following graduation, she hopes to major in nursing at Western Carolina University. Having watched her mother battle chronic illness, Marsh is inspired to make a difference with patients in need.

“I want to be a nurse that people wouldn't feel afraid to speak up to, and make them feel like they're cared for,” she explained.

Aidan Webb came to Union County from Forsyth County when he was in seventh grade and has undoubtedly found his place here. Earlier in the year, he earned the title of

STAR Student alongside STAR Teacher Jason Serrano.

As for becoming salutatorian of his class, Webb said the accomplishment wasn't necessarily a conscious one.

“I was just doing my work, now I'm here,” said Webb, adding that he was inspired to keep going by the extraordinary staff at Woody Gap. In particular, he wants to thank Principal Wendy Reynolds for supporting him along the way.

Following graduation, Webb plans to attend Kennesaw State University where he'll pursue a degree in computer science. He doesn't see himself returning to Suches once he's completed secondary education, though he believes in going “wherever the wind takes (him).”

Explaining how his interest in the field of computers started, Webb said, “I took a (computer science) class across the mountain online, and I thought it was interesting. I had

fun with it.”

For now, he's enjoying wrapping up his studies in math alongside extracurriculars like band and various sports such as basketball and tennis.

While there is no confirmed graduation date yet for Woody Gap, Marsh and Webb must both prepare speeches to address their class. They already both have some ideas of the kind of sentiment they want to capture with those memorable parting words.

For Webb, it's about wishing his classmates “luck on their journeys.” Meanwhile, Marsh advises that her fellows “live in the moment” and learn to savor “the little things.”

Hoping to further inspire her classmates, Marsh spoke for herself and Webb when she added, “I feel like we both came from somewhat rough conditions, and we still managed to get here and be successful.”

Justice for Justyce...from Page 1A

A 4-pound dog had no injuries below the head and was determined to be young. Her condition and the fact that she was dumped led Stevenson to believe she was a victim of abuse, even if the exact manner of abuse could not be determined.

Rendered blind, traumatized and suffering physically, the pup was humanely euthanized due to the severe extent of her injuries and the risks of surgery outweighing the benefits.

Ward shared the event on social media, hoping that somebody would recognize

the dog or had seen it dropped at the shopping center. The post caught the attention of resident John Liberto, who has generously offered a \$3,000 reward for information that leads to arrest and conviction.

Shea Bernard and Sherry Walker also offered to add to the reward, joining the public reactions that tended toward outrage and sorrow.

Ward, meanwhile, believes that whoever is responsible for dropping the dog must have known the shopping center well, intentionally avoiding the

cameras and any reflective glass.

For now, Ward said she has approached Union County Animal Control, which is in the process of opening a case. The dog's condition and abandonment automatically mean whoever is found guilty will face felony charges of extreme animal cruelty.

Despite the tragedy, Liberto, Ward and the staff of Nottely Oaks decided to honor the dog by giving her a name posthumously. Not only does it grant her some dignity, but the chosen name also serves to create a legacy: Justyce.

“Blairsville is a peaceful community, and someone who is just a scumbag like this does not deserve to walk amongst us. It's unacceptable. Someone's got to be punished,” Ward said, expressing fear that the responsible party might repeat the offense or graduate to human targets.

Anyone with information is encouraged to call Ward at 706-994-5055 or Castoff Pet Rescue at 706-487-4539. Tippers may remain anonymous.

Military Time
History of World War I
Part 10 of 20
By: Whitey White



Battle of the Isonzo

The First Battle of the Isonzo took place in the late spring of 1915, soon after Italy's entrance into the war on the Allied side.

In the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo, also known as the Battle of Caporetto (October 1917), German reinforce-

ments helped Austria-Hungary win a decisive victory.

After Caporetto, Italy's allies jumped in to offer increased assistance. British and French—and later, American—troops arrived in the region, and the Allies began to take back the Italian Front.

River City showcases monthlong Youth Art Show

On Thursday, March 21, River City Bank held a reception showcasing the art of local students. That afternoon, parents and guardians brought their kids to the bank to meet up with art teachers and River City staff, enjoying some light refreshments and a chance at winning prizes.

The event was part of a monthlong display in honor of March being Youth Art Month. This is the second year in a row of what River City, its customers who come in to admire the art, creative students and proud parents hope will evolve into an annual event.

Bank Vice President Katie Mashburn approached Union County Schools and asked that about 20 to 30 pieces from Primary, Elementary, Middle and High School art classes be donated for the gallery for roughly 120 pieces total, each one as unique as the artists who crafted them.

In fact, there are a multitude of mediums hanging up and sitting on exhibit in the River City lobby through March 29, so people still have a chance to see the local youth art this week.

Watercolors hang above pottery and colorful sculptures, while across the room sit pictures made from cut-out pieces of construction paper. Portraits drawn in the striking style of Tim Burton peer with wide eyes down at handmade plush characters, and much more.

“The first-grade teachers read a book to their class ... and the kids had to draw a character from the book,” explained UCMS Art Teacher Katie Davis. “All of my art kids chose one and sewed them like stuffed animals,” she added, saying the students will eventually get to take home their new cuddle buddies.

One artist, 10-year-old Isabella Liberatore, had a hand-drawn picture of a turtle



Union County third-grader Helena Payne showing off one of her handmade puppets at the River City Youth Art Reception last week.

displayed among the works of other primary students. Proud Grandpa Sonny Fincher said his “Munchkin” was very excited about her work being on display. She was happy to take a moment away from her snack to confirm that art is her favorite subject.

Helena Payne also had some of her artwork on display, but she brought more to show off as well. Her mother, Kasey Lostis, explained that the third-grader likes to make puppets of fantastical creatures – usually dragons – out of cardboard, sometimes including accessories like strings of pearls. She particularly enjoys painting them and has made many in her own time to play with.

Meanwhile, Walker Seabolt really likes raccoons, hence the inspiration for a piece he came up with in response to an assignment asking students to make artwork demonstrating patterns. A furry bandit in a stylish hat cheers against a swirling background reminiscent of the setting sun, with bright yellow smiley faces contrasting the brown spots speckling the central subject’s

dark mask. The bank’s Market President Scott Nanney addressed everyone around the middle of the evening, explaining that the project means a great deal to him because his mother is an artist, and in raising him, she instilled a deep respect for creativity.

Though he admits the ability to produce art “passed him up,” Nanney is “fascinated” by those who can and looks forward to seeing what the community’s young artists will accomplish down the road.

“I think we need to get a bigger building next time,” he joked, though he fully believed attendance had grown since the reception’s first iteration. “It’s like standing room only, right? But I really appreciate everyone supporting our artists here.”

Along with that, Nanney was quick to emphasize that the focus was, as always, on the community – above all, the young artists whose work is on display through this Friday.

“This is not about us; we’re just a vessel for this stuff to get out, especially the kids,” Nanney said. “That’s what it’s about.”



Drew and Decker Tinsure had fun showcasing their artwork thanks to River City Bank’s Youth Art Month outreach.

Happy Easter ...from Page 1A

to commemorate the special occasion that falls on Sunday, March 31, this year.

“We’ve got to remember that the most important part about Easter is our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ,” said Jarrard in a preface to the invocation. “Because of Him, we have freedom to come to the Lord in prayer.”

Despite the Riley brothers’ guesses, more than 6,000 eggs were set out by Rec Department volunteers, and at 4 p.m., it was time to get the ball – or rather, the eggs – rolling.

Usually, this involves dividing the children up into appropriate age groups and allowing them to head into their allotted field to pick up eggs at staggered times.

This year, there was some confusion regarding the lineup. What resulted was a veritable free-for-all when some children ran into the fields before being given the go-ahead, leading to them mingling among other age groups.

Some of the hunters weren’t able to reach the eggs during the initial charge and either went home with barely any eggs or none at all. This was remedied by Recreation Director Scotty Thompson.

For the first time, there was a second, smaller-scale Easter-themed event, at the Union County Sports Center, for the little ones who weren’t able to bring something home; on Monday, March 25, at 5 p.m., Thompson made true on his promise to make sure “everyone got some eggs.”

Happy Easter, Union County!



The Easter Bunny delighted and entertained children during the egg hunt over the weekend. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



Rec Director Scotty Thompson had a good time emceeing the March 23 Easter Egg Hunt at Meeks Park. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Appalachian Veterans Memorial Park about to become reality



Artists' rendering of the Appalachian Veterans Memorial Park

By AVMP Marketing Manager
Derek Nagel

Two years ago this month, Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris met with members of the AVMP Board of Directors at Meeks Park to discuss building a veterans park on a 1-acre tract of land he donated on behalf of the county. Due to the scope of construction and the overall cost, undertaking such a project has proven to be incredibly difficult, but fortunately the members of the Board had a “can do” attitude, the tenacity to see it through to its conclusion, and the sheer

will to make it happen regardless of the obstacles.

In about three weeks or so, Ben Bass of Ben’s Concrete Creations will begin pouring concrete once the grading is completed. His team will be constructing a 60’ diameter compass rose, and if you’ve ever seen his work, you know it is going to be spectacular. In addition to this concrete compass rose, there will be six 11’ tall monuments representing each branch of the U.S. military, erected in the order of when that branch was founded. Along the meandering trail, there will be smaller monu-

ments emblematic of Blairsville’s many Veteran Service Organizations, complete with an array of flags.

I typically do not like to editorialize, but words cannot describe how truly exciting and surreal this is for me personally. The park project has been the most important and meaningful project I have ever been involved with in my entire 52 years on this earth. Including myself, Rob Mawyer and Nancy Kunz are the only non-veteran committee members who have given hundreds of hours of their time to assist veterans causes. The other members of the board include: Project Manager Ed Crenshaw, Secretary Dan Wickersham, Treasurer Jim Reed, Chief Architect Mike Streckert, Construction Manager W. Keith Hunter, Communications Director Chuck Honaker, Government Affairs Coordinator Richard Hoibraten, and of course, the man who truly helped make this possible, our Sole Commissioner, Lamar Paris. The individual skillsets and affiliations of our committee was a key factor in bringing this park to fruition.

In addition to our many struggles tackling a project of this magnitude, the dedication and professional expertise of our Board of Directors was able to see it through. The cost of this project is in the neighborhood of a quarter million dollars, an almost insurmountable figure to procure in a small town. Fortunately, we were blessed with several

corporate and individual sponsors such as the Rotary Club of Union County, Nottely Marina, Modern Mountain LLC, Blairsville Printing, our Congressman, the Hon. Andrew Clyde of Clyde Armory, every VSO (Veterans Service Organization) in Blairsville, United Community Bank, River City Bank, Budget Blinds, Harmony Grove Baptist Church, Cherokee Guns, NERA (Naval Enlisted Reserve Association), and our largest donor to date, Leon’s Floors. My apologies if I’ve left anyone out, but do know your contributions are very much appreciated and have not gone unnoticed.

Along with these gener-

ous sponsors, we want to give a big thank you to the community for their purchasing of commemorative bricks. The sale of these bricks totals nearly \$20,000, and we’re eternally grateful to each and every person who bought a brick, a raffle ticket, or simply donated when they saw us at a festival or other special event.

The Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce, the county, and the city have all been extremely helpful. Last summer the Chamber facilitated a large donation via an event they sponsored at Noontootla Creek Farms. We’re also very grateful to Vulcan Materials Company

for their commitment to donate several tons of concrete, and Ricky Rich Grading for their commitment to donate gravel and manpower to prepare the site prior to pouring concrete.

Stay tuned for further announcements and the official press release announcing dates of the ground-breaking ceremony and ribbon cutting that will be jointly performed by both the Union County and Fannin County Chambers of Commerce.

To view all of the architectural drawings or to purchase a brick, please visit TheVeteransPark.org, or contact Derek Nagel at (706) 970-4466.

Delivery Issues...from Page 1A

Georgia, last month.

Since then, the North Georgia News has heard from many readers that newspapers and other mailed items have gone undelivered, including absentee ballot applications and bill payments.

In an attempt to address the issue, the North Georgia News reached out to the U.S. Postal Service to ask about specifics regarding delivery problems and when people can expect them to be corrected for mail that is processed out of town.

A USPS spokesperson responded:

“The Postal Service plays an important role in the community, and we are committed to providing the best service possible. While a vast majority of mail in the

Atlanta area is being delivered in a timely manner, local management has been made aware of the concerns of some local customers regarding their mail delivery and are working quickly to resolve any issues.

“We sincerely express our apologies to our customers who may have experienced a deviation from our normal dependable service and appreciate their patience. Customers are reminded that, if they need assistance with mailing or shipping concerns, they have a variety of options for reaching us, including contacting a manager or supervisor at their local Post Office, calling 1-800-ASK-USPS (1-800-275-8777), or visiting our website at www.usps.com.”

County Meeting...from Page 1A



Paris welcomed volunteers with the Towns-Union Master Gardener Association as well as Ag Agent Jacob Williams in his March county meeting.

and permanent bridgework at Fisher Field Road.

Negotiations were expected to continue over the weekend with Garrett meeting other property owners there to discuss securing the remaining right-of-way.

Also in the March 21 meeting, Paris accepted an agreement with Carter Engineering Consultants, Inc. to create a site development plan for a new building at the Transfer Station that will house a new two-ram baler. The agreement "will not exceed \$18,900."

"We estimate the (Request for Proposal) will be put out within two months for the construction of the building," Paris said.

He also accepted a notice of award to purchase the new baler for \$496,050 from Rise Equipment, LLC, which will be paid for using SPLOST proceeds. The large two-ram baler will be replacing three smaller balers currently being used inside the recycling building at the Transfer Station.

The new baler will be much more efficient, and increased storage capacity in the new building will enable the acceptance of a wider range of recyclables, like #3 through #7 plastics. Plus, the county will be saving money by not having to send certain recyclables out for processing.

Transfer Station Director Matt White attended the meeting to talk about the project and said that the county is hopeful the new building and baler will be in operation by the start of 2025, and he believes the cost of the baler will pay for itself after four years' worth of recyclables sales.

Paris accepted a contract with CivicPlus to provide software called NextRequest, which is dedicated to processing open records requests made by members of the public. The cost is \$8,242.50 for the remainder of the year and \$10,788 for 2025.

"This software will allow Union County to securely accept, process, track and fulfill records requests digitally," according to the meeting agenda.

County Clerk Jennifer Mahan said much research went into selecting this particular software to streamline record request processing that to date has gone largely through her in multiple formats – email, phone call, in-person, etc.

The process to manually complete records requests is timely, requiring careful readings for redactions, sometimes across hundreds of pages of material.

This software will expedite the process for the Commissioner's Office, other county departments and the public by providing an online record request and delivery tool that sends requests immediately to the appropriate department and automatically redacts sensitive information.

Mahan expects the software to be in place by May 1 via a link on the county website. Certain requests should be cheaper, too, as delivery of documents that once had to be printed and redacted by hand will now occur electronically, eliminating per-page charges for digital records.

Residents will still be able to request open records the traditional way if they choose, and the county will facilitate delivery however people request, though the new online tool will be the fastest method going forward, Mahan said.

Paris accepted \$215,380 in grant funding from the Georgia Department of Transportation to buy two new shuttle buses for County Transit. As Union previously provided matching funds during one pandemic year without receiving buses, the state is not seeking a match in 2024.

"We still have not been given a delivery date for the buses, so I hope we're not back here saying the same story next year," Paris said.

The commissioner welcomed his niece Lyric Brogden for a proclamation recognizing April 2024 as "Donate Life Month," highlighting the desperate need for organ, eye and tissue donation, as "a new patient is added to the national waiting list for an organ transplant every 10 minutes."

Brogden shared her experience of receiving a life-saving liver transplant 28 years ago after a health emergency. She now advocates for organ donation and asked residents to help her spread the word about the importance and need regarding such precious gifts of life in a time of nationwide shortage.

Paris also wished the U.S. Navy Seabees – the nickname for "CBs," that is, Construction Battalions – a Happy 82nd Birthday with a patriotic proclamation retroactive to March 5.

And he welcomed several members of the Towns-Union Master Gardeners Association to proclaim March 16, 2024, as Master Gardener Appreciation Day. Volunteer Master Gardeners give of their time to beautify the area, control pests, educate residents and much more.

For his last official business that evening, Paris re-appointed Andrew Burks and made a new appointment of Tsali Bentley to the Board of Directors for the Union County Development Authority. Their terms run March 6, 2024, to March 5, 2028.

Paris then turned the floor back over to Mahan to talk about the Electronics Recycling & Document Destruction event on April 13 from 10 a.m. to noon at the Sports Center, and the April 20 Clean-Up Day from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., with cash prizes for teams that collect the most trash.

Paris accepted an agreement with Geo-Hydro Engineers, Inc. "for construction materials, testing and special inspection services for the Fisher Field Bridge replacement," not to exceed \$19,500.

"The new bridge will accommodate heavy traffic, gas trucks, construction-type vehicles, and fire and emergency services," Paris said. "However, during the engineering process, it was discovered that existing soil conditions wouldn't support a typical foundation for a new bridge.

"Therefore, there will be a significant amount of construction, and the contractors will have to drive steel I-beams down to bedrock, approximately 40 feet.

"This agreement is for all of the engineering and testing requirements to guide the contractors throughout the construction and verify that what they require for support is actually put in place.

"It's a tough thing you run into, and it's the first time we've run into something like this, but things happen when you've got over 600 miles of roads in the county – and that doesn't count all the right-of-way and the work you've got on the side of those."

Additionally, the county said last week that the prefabricated replacement bridge for Fisher Field Road will be delayed about two weeks past its original delivery date of April 29, as the manufacturer has reported materials shortages.

As for the ongoing process to secure right-of-way to install the new bridge, County Manager Larry Garrett said the county had received right-of-way permission pertaining to one of four parcels required to complete the temporary

and Lois Wiley are new members. Our theme this year is "Watch Beta Sigma Phi Grow and Bloom," which we have taken to heart.

Iota Iota's next meeting will be April 16th at Branan Lodge at 5:30 pm. Iota Iota a chapter of Beta Sigma Phi provides fellowship with a variety of women, community involvement, cultural enrichment and just plain old fun. If you would like to find out more about Iota Iota chapter, contact Kathy Ross the Vice President at kfeross@gmail.com.

Iota Iota a chapter of Beta Sigma Phi held their monthly meeting on March 19th at Branan Lodge. President Helen Teboe called the meeting to order and led the members in the Opening Ritual and Pledge of Allegiance. Robin Zimmerman and Jeanee McJilton decorated the hostess table in St. Patrick gala. Using the St. Patrick theme there was fruit, cheeses, sandwiches, veggies, spinach dip and chips. We all feasted on the delicious food prior to starting the meeting. Hostess prizes were won by: Jan Valencia, Marie Fer-

titta, Sally Shuck and Kathy Ross who graciously gave her prize to our guest Kathy Adams. At each members place setting Jeanee McJilton had a cute Easter container that held an egg full of chocolates and a shamrock.

Vice President, Kathy Ross introduced our guest, Kathy Adams. Our March service project was to collect items that Hope House could use. There was a table full of items.

At the conclusion of the business meeting a Pledge Ritual was held for Jan Valencia, Jennifer Weber, Marie Fertitta

Iota Iota a chapter of Beta Sigma Phi March 19th meeting



Members of Iota Iota at March meeting with donations for Hope House

Iota Iota a chapter of Beta Sigma Phi held their monthly meeting on March 19th at Branan Lodge. President Helen Teboe called the meeting to order and led the members in the Opening Ritual and Pledge of Allegiance. Robin Zimmerman and Jeanee McJilton decorated the hostess table in St. Patrick gala. Using the St. Patrick theme there was fruit, cheeses, sandwiches, veggies, spinach dip and chips. We all feasted on the delicious food prior to starting the meeting. Hostess prizes were won by: Jan Valencia, Marie Fer-

Remembering Reece: The value of staying at home

Byron Herbert Reece wrote poetry with dirt on his hands and worked in the dirt with words rambling through his head. His love for the land cannot be understood by those who occupy a piece of real estate until the value rises, but is more than understood by families that hold tenaciously and gratefully to land passed along from one generation to another. The farm on which Reece worked rooted him to a place, and it also was the muse that stirred his creativity. The titles "farmer and writer" speak of the identity of his soul. The two were indispensable in his life.



Byron Herbert Reece

On those occasions when he wandered to other places, there was something within him which pulled him back with the drawing power of a magnet. He was a farmer who could not leave his land untended, and he was a writer whose words came forth to that page from the freshly plowed dirt, the running waters, and "a valley green with corn."

The generations that came after Byron Herbert Reece were wanderers. Instead of knowing the value of staying

at home, living within inter-generational families, and earning a living by the sweat of the brow, those that came after were diminished by a growing disconnect from the land and the creation. Reece's poems have a way of drawing our spirits back to a place where they can once again be nurtured by the smell of the earth.

Guest columnist Bill Strickland, a recent new member of the Byron Herbert Reece Society, is a South Georgia farmer and recently published novelist and poet. He is a noted author of "JourneyNotes" since 2008 and his recently published novel "The Last Supper." For over a decade and a half, he has been a farmer and can identify with Reece's love of the land and his passion for writing.

The purpose of the Byron Herbert Reece Society is to preserve, perpetuate and promote the literary and cultural legacy of the Georgia mountain poet and novelist, Byron Herbert Reece. Jerry Gill, Chairman

House Bills: School Choice & Certificate of Need Debate

It's striking how much our debates over two of Georgia's most important structural challenges are really the same argument with different jargon. I'm talking about school choice and certificate of need.

Ultimately, both come down to whether one believes the elements that have sparked such dynamism and vibrancy in other sectors can also apply to education and healthcare.

So it was fitting that a pair of bills to address these issues – albeit incrementally – were debated simultaneously under the Gold Dome this past week.

The House on Thursday took up Senate Bill 233, which would create Promise Scholarships for students trapped in some of Georgia's worst schools. Concurrently, the Senate considered House Bill 1339, which would make modest reforms to some aspects of Georgia's restrictive CON laws.

Both measures won enough votes to keep proceeding. There will be time later on to weigh each bill's merits. Today, let's focus on how the two topics, taken together, show us how lawmakers, market participants and the general public view systemic changes.

While the two issues seem so disparate, they're quite similar. In each case, state law tips the scale toward existing service providers – traditional public schools and hospitals. Yes, the law allows for some innovation: Public charter schools are an example in education, as are ambulatory surgery centers in healthcare. But the freedom to innovate is limited.

That's why existing service providers are the loudest voices against change. In no way can they defend themselves solely on their track record: Georgians fall woefully short of national standards by a host of measures for educational achievement and health status.

And it's not for lack of spending. Georgia has grown per capita spending on K-12 education and healthcare over the past 30 years at a clip comparable to the national average: slightly faster for education, somewhat slower for health-

care. (If you think the latter is related to Georgia's refusal to expand Medicaid, think again: Per capita healthcare spending has grown faster in Georgia than nationally since 2010, the year Obamacare was passed.)

So why do these existing service providers receive such deference from lawmakers?

Start with fear mongering. In any debate over these topics, it won't take long for opponents to claim that school choice will "destroy our public schools," while CON reform will "put our rural hospitals out of business."

Never mind that we have ample experience with both – in a limited way in our state, and in much broader ways in other states – and nowhere have such fears come to pass. On the contrary, we can see the opposite happening. For example, Florida has dramatically improved student achievement in its public schools as it has expanded school choice, while also seeing the development of new healthcare facilities within a few years of paring its CON laws.

But some lawmakers have difficulty imagining such things when their vision is limited to what they already know. Services such as K-12 education seem to many like a zero-sum game: Allowing more over here means less over there. But experience in every other walk of life – including education and healthcare in states that have embraced reforms – shows that's not true. Competition and innovation are good.

Tellingly, existing service providers are the ones who consistently show an understanding of just how much things could change. Public

Kyle Wingfield
President and CEO
Georgia Public Policy Foundation
www.georgiapolicy.org

schools and hospitals alike know reforms would lead to more alternatives: That's precisely why they oppose them. They could adjust to the competition; they'd just prefer not to. They'd rather throw their political weight around to avoid having to compete.

It works, because school superintendents and hospital CEOs are among the most prominent voices in any community. Schools and hospitals are often the largest employers in their communities, particularly in rural areas. Lawmakers know that, too. But they often forget there are always more students and parents than school employees, and more patients and families than hospital employees.

If we ever have more lawmakers who can see beyond the status quo, we'll have a chance at meaningful change.

Dementia Caregivers Support Group

If you are caring for a person with dementia, join us for our monthly meeting for conversation, education, and support. The Towns County Support Group meets the first Tuesday every month at 1:30 at McConnell Memorial Baptist Church in Hiawassee. For more details call Alzheimer's Association at 800-273-3900 or email Shannon Larsen at shannon.larsen@homestead-hospice.net.

The Berrongs with crew at the Mountain Home Music Theater

Coming to the Former Mountain Home Music Theater April 6 at 7 PM, The Berrongs with crew. Larry Berrong: piano, banjo, fiddle. Jimmy Hooper: lead guitar. Tim Burch: bass. Dale Nicholson: guitar and mc. Marilyn Berrong: sings and does the

sound. No charge for admission. We appreciate donations for Christian Financial Ministries. 2½ miles west of Hiawassee on Hwy 76. Look for the red building. For more information, call Bob Louder at 678-386-2640.

2024-2025 Pre-K & Kindergarten Registration Open February 12 to March 29, 2024

Pre-K and Kindergarten School Registration for the 2024-2025 school year:

Monday-Friday, February 12th to March 29th, 2024 from 8:30 AM - 2 PM at the Union County Primary School. Pre-K seats are filled on a first come first serve basis.

Please call 706-835-4321 or email registrar@uc-schools.org for information and to place your child's name on the waiting list.

Your child must be four (4) years old for Pre-K or five (5) years old for Kindergarten on or before September 1, 2024. You must be a Union County resident for your child

to be enrolled in Kindergarten, and a Georgia resident to be enrolled in Pre-K.

NOTE- Students who are currently enrolled in the Union County Schools Pre-K program at Union County Primary School will NOT need to register for Kindergarten.

Below is a list of 6 (six) required documents for new enrollment. Please bring these items with you to ensure your child's registration is complete.

1. Birth Certificate
2. Social Security Card
3. Georgia Immunization Certificate (DPH Form 3231)
4. Certificate of Vision, Hearing, Dental, and Nutrition Screening (DPH Form 3300) (Completed by the health department or a physician)
5. Two Proof of Residency documents with physical address and name (Examples include: rental agreement, utility bill, homeowner's or renter's insurance bill, property tax notice, mortgage payment document, etc.)
6. Complete the online registration forms at this link: <https://www.ucschools.org/parents/student-registration>

Failure to supply all the required documents will delay your registration.