

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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County streamlines garbage, recycling operations

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union County Government has been busy since taking over the Transfer Station – the commercial side in November and the residential side in February – making sure businesses, residents and visitors have a clean and orderly place to dispose of their trash and recyclables.

The county's takeover of residential trash and recycling collections came after multiple complaints about the general lack of cleanliness at Transfer Station facilities, previously run by Waste Management.

"They gave us an opportunity to find a solution," County Manager Larry Garrett said. And since assuming operations in February, the county has instituted several positive changes, with more in the works.

On the commercial side, individual customers can now pay their trash fees with debit or credit cards if they so choose. However, there is a 3% fee to cover the bank charge to the county for the use of cards.

And like garbage haulers and local builders, business owners who visit the Transfer Station several times a day or week can open a biweekly commercial billing account,

available to businesses that use the commercial side heavily.

Metal is being accepted on the commercial side, free of charge – old barbecue grills, refrigerators, anything metal.

However, customers must bring a letter from an authorized entity stating that the freon has been removed from old refrigerators. That's an environmental issue strictly regulated by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division and not just an arbitrary county rule.

If someone has a mixed load of trash and metal, they will be asked to discard the metal first before weighing so

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The new "Glass Only" recycling bin at the Union County Transfer Station.

Photo by Mark Smith

Isaiah 117 House to support children in legal system

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

HIAWASSEE – Kathryn Nelson, Executive Coordinator for Isaiah 117 House in Blairsville, spoke to a gathering of about 40 people at the Mountain Movers and Shakers' regular morning meeting on Friday, March 25, at the Sundance Grill.

Isaiah 117 House got its name from Isaiah Chapter 1, Verse 17, in the Christian Bible, which calls on people to "defend the cause of the fatherless," and Nelson is in the process of raising money to create a local facility to serve the needs of abused and neglected children in this

area. The organization was founded in 2015 in Tennessee by Ronda Paulson, who as a new foster parent saw the need to care for children in the custody of the state awaiting foster placement.

Paulson's vision is for children who have been removed from the custody of their parents or caregivers, to have a safe and welcoming place to go that will "help with what is inevitably a traumatic transition."

Thus began Isaiah 117 House, an organization that cares for children from infancy to age 17 who find themselves in the care of the state, directly addressing that limbo of awaiting placement with a

foster home or parent. "I want you to think about what images come to mind when you hear the words 'taken into custody, DFCS custody,' which is (Division) of Family & Children Services," Nelson said. "Or when you hear the words 'removal day' or 'foster care.'"

"Abused children," responded one woman.

Nelson then challenged her audience to think back to when they were children and to consider what it would have been like if they had been told they had to leave their home.

"You had to leave perhaps the only home you'd ever known," she said. "And because time is of the essence,

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Kathryn Nelson of Isaiah 117 House, center, with Mountain Movers and Shakers emcees Michael Borkman and William "Scotty" Scott on March 25.

Photo by Mark Smith

UCHS Band, Chorus give 'Superior' performances

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Congratulations to the Union County High School Band and Chorus programs for earning straight "Superior" ratings earlier this month in their respective Large Group Performance Evaluations.

Chorus performed March 7 and Band performed March 17.

Large Group Performance Evaluation is a Georgia Music Educators Association event where students travel to a designated location – in this case, Dawson County High School – to perform publicly before a panel of three judges.

Stage performances generally go first followed by sheet music sight-reading, and the exercise has been compared to taking a standardized test in front of an audience.

It takes months to prepare for such a feat, with practices beginning at the start of each school year.

This go-round proved particularly challenging for both groups, as the chorus had many younger students who had never experienced LGPE before, and the band chose more difficult music selections than in years past.

While the band has received Superior scores for seven years in a row now, the chorus has not performed in

the LGPE since 2019 due to COVID-19 concerns. Granted, chorus also earned a Superior score then, but to return from such a long hiatus with a powerful response is no small feat.

"The majority of my kids (had) never been to LGPE," Chorus Director Alicia Covington said, noting that many of them, however, had faced performance-related COVID challenges.

Over the 2020-21 school year, students were able to sing in their classroom, but the experience was far removed from that of previous years, with kids having to stand 6 feet apart and sing in masks.

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The Union County High School Band in a recent practice session at the Schools Fine Arts Center, just prior to competing for the Large Group Performance Evaluation.

Photo/Submitted

Union County Sheriff's Office to host Job Fair April 9 & 13



The Union County Sheriff's Office has many opportunities available for area residents looking for an exciting career in law enforcement.

News Special
North Georgia News

The Union County Sheriff's Office is interested in hiring for several positions, male and female, including certified and non-certified Jail Officers starting at \$17 minimum an hour – and more for people with experience – with a path to become a certified Deputy Sheriff.

Both full-time and part-time positions are available,

and it doesn't matter if you are from Georgia or from out of state with an interest in working in Union County law enforcement.

If you are out of state and certified in another state as a Deputy or Police Officer, or retired with a valid law enforcement certification, the Union County Sheriff's Office can help you become certified in Georgia.

The State of Georgia recently modified its

certification standards to make it easier to transition to meet Georgia's certification mandate by removing the three-year maximum period from being active to simply requiring a valid certification and taking several courses.

And the Union County Sheriff's Office offers very competitive wages, insurance benefits, a 401K retirement plan, along with the Peace Officer Annuity and Benefit

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EMA completes collaborative tabletop emergency exercise

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Union County Emergency Management Agency must be ready to roll 24/7/365 for any emergency and is constantly training toward that end, with the latest effort regarding a multi-agency tabletop simulation exercise at Fire Station No. 1 on Thursday, March 24.

All that was missing were fire trucks, police cars and ambulances actually rolling down the road with lights and sirens.

In a real emergency, any number of city, county and state agencies come together, coordinate, communicate and deploy personnel, all under a high degree of stress and adrenaline, so mistakes, miscommunications and lost time are likely to occur when seconds count.

That is one of the major reasons constant training is necessary, and why the multi-month preparation for Thursday's exercise – and the exercise itself – was so important for local first responders.



Union County EMA Director David Dyer walking local first responders through a tabletop exercise March 24.

Photo by Mark Smith

For the hypothetical event at the heart of the exercise, first responders roleplayed a Friday afternoon automobile accident involving a car and a school bus with fatalities on US 129 North/Murphy Highway.

The scenario was picked because it would be a "perfect storm" emergency, given the location, day of the week, time of day, and type of accident in

the Union County area. "Mostly, today is the test of what we have put together in practice for the last several months," Union County Fire Chief and EMA Director David Dyer said last week. "This is just a tabletop exercise. There's no troops on the ground, no props, none of that."

"We're just sitting here

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Transfer Station...from Page 1A

they are not charged for the weight of the metal, as all trash on the commercial side is billed by weight. There is a dedicated dumpster just for metal.

On the residential side, there is ample space now for vehicles to pull between the roll-off dumpsters where bagged garbage is collected, thereby eliminating the front-end overflow that was occurring before the county took over.

The recyclables section at the Transfer Station has been completely cleaned up and simplified, with receptacles for: clear and solid plastic bottles that have been rinsed and had caps removed; mixed paper; aluminum cans; and corrugated cardboard that is dry and flattened.

There is also a shiny new dumpster just for discarded glass items, with no charge for depositing recyclables.

“The deal with corrugated cardboard is, once it’s wet, it’s damaged.” County Purchasing Director Pam Hawkins said. “If you try to recycle cardboard that’s damp or wet, it damages some of the other corrugated cardboard, and then the recycling place will not take it.”

Hawkins urged people not to let their recyclable cardboard get wet, saying that even a small amount of wet cardboard can ruin a whole load.

North Georgia Resource Management is currently taking the recyclables that the county collects, but Hawkins said that, at some point this year, “we’re going to start handling our own recycling, where we’re negotiating directly with the people that buy (recyclables).”

Garrett said the county intends to work with businesses that discard substantial amounts of corrugated cardboard or other recyclables in Union County to ease their process of discarding those materials.

“Our biggest goal is we really want to focus, in the next couple of years, on the

recycling side,” Garrett said. “We feel like that’s something people in our community are wanting, and we’re going to try to provide that for them.”

Recycling upgrades are planned for the residential garbage Convenience Center at Georgia 515 and SR 325. The equipment has been ordered but not yet received.

Garrett and Hawkins said that plan is now in the works and will likely generate income to help taxpayers with the cost of Transfer Station operations, though there is still a lot to be done to get that up and running.

Another new development at the Transfer Station is that the county is utilizing people who have been sentenced to community service by the courts to help folks with unloading trash, picking up loose nails and screws with magnets and other jobs when they are available.

“The trash business is a service to the public,” Garrett said. “You take a community service person over there working – they are giving their time back to the community. It’s a win-win for everybody.”

Of course, there is no guarantee that community service workers will always be available to work on site, but the service doesn’t cost the county anything, and these workers are an immense help when present.

Garrett and Hawkins also said they are aware that, given the proximity of the Transfer Station to an expanding regional medical center, as well as the routes trash and recyclable haulers must take to reach Georgia 515, something will have to be done eventually to make the routes safer and more efficient.

And due to the way Union County runs the Transfer Station versus Waste Management, the county has actually been able to take trucks off the road, lessening the traffic.

“One of the things I always want to brag on is the fact that, when Waste Management was running (the whole operation), it was always nasty, there was always trash everywhere,” Hawkins said. “It’s so much cleaner now.”

Added Garrett, “I think everyone can see the difference at the recycling area. It’s a lot cleaner and more efficient, and we’re proactively planning now for the future.”

Isaiah 117 House...from Page 1A

you had to leave in a hurry. You didn’t have time to grab your favorite blanket or your favorite stuffed animal, or a favorite photo of you and your grandpa that meant so much to you. You had to leave. Fast.

“You’re taken to an office space where you just sit and wait. There’s nothing to do at this office space. You’re hungry, but you hate to bother that nice lady that calls herself a case manager because she’s busy on the computer and on the phone saying words that you don’t really understand.

“Oftentimes, these same children are dirty, they’re afraid; and while situations at home are tough, they still miss momma. They still wonder what’s going on with momma,” Nelson said, painting a very real picture of what happens to children who are removed from abusive or neglectful homes.

“Oftentimes, these children have to spend the night on the office floor of this case worker until placement is found. So, what if, instead, this same child could come to a house. A house where there are shelves of children’s books and toys and puzzles. Fluffy couches and colorful pillows, affirming artwork hanging

on the walls. A playground outside.

“A place where trained and loving volunteers would remind this child that ‘you’re not alone,’ that ‘this is not your fault.’ And that is the first part of the Isaiah 117 mission: to meet the physical and emotional needs of children during a very traumatic time. So, we want to meet the needs of these children in those moments as they’re waiting to be placed.

“Secondly, we want to provide help and encouragement for the case workers. That’s a tough job, and they get a bad rap quite often. They’re painted in a very negative light, unfortunately. So, we want to help and encourage them in any way we can with the children; there will be an office space at the house for the case workers.

“Thirdly, we want to ease the transition for foster families, instead of a foster family being called at 2 or 3 (o’clock) in the morning, only to go the DFCS office and be greeted by a screaming, dirty, crying baby – we can help that situation ahead of time,” Nelson said.

Nelson’s territory encompasses the Enotah

Judicial Circuit. The Isaiah 117 House in Blairsville, which is Nelson’s mission, will be the first of its kind in Georgia. There are existing homes in Tennessee, Florida, Indiana and Texas, Nelson said, and they’re growing.

“So, we are in the awareness phase. We’re just trying to spread awareness. We’re just trying to let everybody know what we’re about,” Nelson said, adding that they are following into their fundraising stage.

And thanks to the generosity of attendees of the Mountain Movers and Shakers meeting that morning, Isaiah 117 House got a good start on their fundraising, as folks donated a total of \$962 – the most money ever raised at a single Movers and Shakers meeting.

Isaiah 117 House is hosting a fundraising luncheon and dinner in April, at which Isaiah 117 House Founder and Executive Director Paulson and others will be speaking.

For more information on Isaiah 117 House fundraising efforts, or to donate or contact the main office, please visit www.isaiah117house.com/unionluncheon.

UCSO Job Fair...from Page 1A

State Retirement program.

If you are interested, the Job Fair will be held on Saturday, April 9, from 9-11 a.m., and on Wednesday, April 13, between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m.

The Job Fair will take place in the Jury Assembly Room of the Union County

Courthouse at 65 Courthouse Street in Blairsville, in the lower level of the courthouse.

Potential candidates must have a High School Diploma or GED, possess a clean driving record, and also not have been arrested for a serious crime that may make you ineligible.

The Union County Sheriff’s Office is interested in seeing you. If you have any questions, please call 706-439-6066 for further information. Sheriff Mack Mason and staff members are looking forward to talking with you and other interested applicants.

Gold Dome Update: Week 10 - Crossover Day

By: Sen. Steve Gooch (R-Dahlonega)

This past week, the Senate experienced one of the longest and most critical days of the legislative session – Crossover Day. In this marathon voting session, the Senate considered over 45 pieces of legislation over the course of roughly eleven hours. The work did not end there, however, as we convened for three additional legislative days this week, concluding with Day 31 on Friday.

On Crossover Day, I sponsored two bills related to improving our transportation infrastructure across the state. Senate Resolution 643 recognizes the growing extent of electric vehicles travelling on Georgia’s roads calls for the creation of a study committee on the Electrification of Transportation to evaluate what changes could be made to our infrastructure to make it more conducive to electric vehicles, such as the implementation of public charging stations. As freight and logistics companies, as well as consumer vehicles alike, continue to move toward the adoption of electric vehicles friendly vehicles, our state must keep up in order to remain competitive in attracting business opportunities. I also sponsored Senate Bill 558 to update a number of the notification requirements for the Georgia Department of Transportation when it comes time to elect their board members.

On Wednesday, Govern-

nor Brian Kemp signed House Bill 910, the amended budget for 2022, into law. This budget prioritizes investments in the areas of public safety, education and healthcare while also returning nearly \$1 billion back to Georgia’s taxpayers through refundable tax credits. Additionally, the \$30 billion midyear budget also ensures that our teachers and other state employees receive a \$5,000 bonus for their critical work in maintaining our state’s most basic functions, even during a global pandemic. Work also continued throughout this week on the general budget for 2023, with Appropriations subcommittee hearings taking place. While work on these budgets is long and arduous, it is necessary to ensure that taxpayer dollars are spent in a fiscally prudent manner.

Later in the week, the Senate passed House Bill 1302, a measure we previously discussed as being incorporated into the budget. HB 1302 provides a one-time tax credit for all eligible taxpayers while filed a return in both 2020 and 2021. Single filers would be eligible for a tax credit of \$250, those filing jointly will be eligible for a credit of \$500 and those filing as a head of household would be eligible for a \$375 credit. Taxable nonresidents who would otherwise qualify for the credit would be prorated based on the ratio of taxable income to Georgia. This is another example of Georgia passing along our economic surplus back to the people of

Georgia.

On Thursday, the Senate granted final passage to an urgently needed measure to bring relief to all Georgians. With skyrocketing gas prices from the lack of domestic oil suppliers and because of the ongoing conflict in the Ukraine, Georgians are in desperate need of financial relief just to travel to and from work, school or to receive medical care. In an effort to ease the financial pressure placed on our citizens, the Senate passed House Bill 304, which would suspend the collection on the state excise tax on gasoline until May 22, 2022. While this will not bring down gas prices overnight, it will provide some degree of relief for those impacted by the unacceptably high cost of gasoline.

We only have nine legislative days remaining and, with Crossover Day behind us, we have our work cut out for us over the next few weeks. While we can no longer introduce Senate Bills with the hope they become law this year, there are still countless pieces of legislation awaiting action in both the Senate and the House. If you have any questions or concerns about any of these bills, please do not hesitate to reach out to my office.



Georgia State Senator Steve Gooch Senate Majority Whip

Families strengthen bonds in 'Daddy Daughter Dance'

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

After being canceled last year due to concerns over COVID-19, the annual Daddy Daughter Dance returned to

Union County on March 19, this time at a larger venue to accommodate the community demand for the family bonding event.

2022 marks the 10th year of the popular dance, according to Michelle Stepps,

Administrative Assistant for the Union County Recreation Department, which hosts the dance.

In years past, the dance took place at North Georgia Technical College, but thanks to the Union County Sports Center opening at the end of 2020, the Rec Department had a new ideal place to host the county-sponsored event.

"Every year we increase the number of guests, but we continually sell out. It's a lot of work getting everything together, but this is what makes it worth it," she said while keeping a watchful eye on a gaggle of girls running past the sign-in table that Saturday.

An additional 100 guests were invited this year, making up a total of approximately 370 individuals. The demographic included families from all over Union County, whether girls brought their fathers or, in some cases, their grandfathers.

"And we could just do a regular dance, but having the



The 2022 Daddy Daughter Dance at the Union County Sports Center was a hoppin' good time for local fathers and daughters March 19.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

dads involved makes it more special," added Stepps. Indeed, the dance offered an excellent opportunity for bonding, as dads and daughters shared more than just the dance floor that evening.

The Purple Gym was converted into a dining hall with tables decorated with red, white and blue carnations – flowers as pretty as the dance made the girls feel. Amazing Grace Catering supplied food and drink, and dance partners sat down for a snack or quick rest throughout the event.

One such duo was Jack Cochran and his daughter Sadie. As it turned out, they knew what to expect better than many other guests, as Cochran has made it a tradition to take his little girl to the dance every year.

"Ever since she was little, I've always brought her," Cochran said. "Up until COVID, we've come pretty much ever since she was about 3."

For her part, 10-year-old Sadie views the now-family pastime as a chance to spend more quality time with her father.

"You bond with your mom because mothers (are around their) kids and daughters (more)," she said, explain-

ing that while she and her father are close, it can be hard to schedule dedicated time together between his work and her school.

Luckily, a lot of families found a way to fit the occasion into their busy schedules. For instance, Keith Jones and his 9-year-old granddaughter, Kahlilah Ziegler, don't get to see each other too often, since Jones works as a semi-trailer trucker.

But Jones was pleasantly surprised by his wife and his own daughter's plan for some quality time.

"Well, her mama and my bride have actually been scheming on this for quite a while," Jones said.

Kahlilah's family found the dress she wore that night when she was 2, and all these years later, she was finally old enough to wear it to an event at which she could shine.

Making the dance even more thrilling for its younger participants was the limo ride, giving a more formal feel to the evening.

Two limos fitting up to 20 people each were hired from Georgia Limousine to take the girls and their fathers on rides around the parking lot.

Georgia Limousine driv-

er Jim Killian said he enjoyed the occasion just as much as the parents and children; he has driven at birthday parties and other events, but this was his first time driving for Union County's Daddy Daughter Dance.

"I've made a lot of friends up here," he said, pointing out a particular "little ball of fire" who took a spin in his limo earlier. "I hope y'all have me back again next year."

And while the dance was plenty of fun for all involved, there were some important takeaways behind the festivities, too.

Pete Rotko, attending with his daughter Lillie, was not the only father to pick up on these takeaways, espousing his belief that the annual dance serves as an opportunity to demonstrate for the girls what respect looks like.

"Let the dads show the young girls how their boy-friends are supposed to treat them," Rotko said. "I think it's very important."

There was another message, too, about not staying out too late, and by 9 p.m., fathers were carrying their sleepy-eyed little girls out of the Sports Center to head home with memories to cherish for a lifetime.



Guests of the Daddy Daughter Dance received true red-carpet treatment with luxurious limo rides around the parking lot that Saturday.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Superior Ratings...from Page 1A



Members of the 2021-22 Union County High School Chorus.

Photo/Submitted

"We kept performing, we kept singing, but it's not the same," Covington said.

In pursuit of similar safety precautions, the band dealt with similar challenges, with Band Director Will Stafford saying, "We basically had to mask the kids and the instruments," referring to bell covers.

As one might imagine, it was rough going, and both the teachers and their students found that such restrictions were taxing; practicing music from a Zoom call just didn't have the same feel as doing so in-person.

"When kids are shut in for a year, they kind of lose some self-confidence," Stafford said.

Not only that, but Union County High differs from other groups in that its musical teachers don't have audition groups, meaning LGPE is a required event for the entire class – a time for every student

to shine, even if they have never been on stage before.

These are some of the many reasons why it is such a big deal that both musical classes came away from the 2021-22 Large Group Performance Evaluation with perfect scores.

"We're getting that family atmosphere back together because we've been having to be separated for so long," Covington said. "The kids are doing really well, being able to sing together."

"I think that's what is so important about the fine arts," agreed Stafford. "The social aspect of what we do is a huge thing, and we didn't have that during online learning at all. And then, even when we came back, we really didn't have it. Kids were 6 feet apart with masks on – that's not socializing."

But now, after coming out on top, band and chorus

students are starting to find themselves and their music again. According to Stafford and Covington, the event has helped restore some faith to burnt out and anxious young musicians.

For example, while other local musical programs have withered due to COVID restrictions, UCHS Band and Chorus have persevered. Students still come to practice and continue to take their art very seriously. There's a bigger push than ever to return to some level of normalcy, and if nothing else, the students have proven their adaptability.

Fittingly, Covington and Stafford could not be prouder of their thriving culture, for which they do not want any credit.

"It's about these kids; it's really not about us," Stafford said. "These kids work really hard. I mean, we're not the ones in there performing. They're doing it all."

EMA Tabletop...from Page 1A



It was "all hands on deck" during the March 24 EMA training exercise, featuring agencies from E-911 to Union County Schools Police and more.

Photo by Mark Smith

going through an imaginary exercise; if this scenario happens, if this issue comes up, what's our procedure, how are we going to handle it, and will it work?

"And then, if the real thing were to happen one of these days, we can sit down and say, 'OK, we have these policies in place.' So, we're doing it before it happens, and we won't have to create procedures under stress when the actual event, or one like it, occurs."

Last summer, leadership at Union County Schools contacted Union County EMA and asked how they might handle a situation that involved reunifying students as the result of a horrific emergency.

In response, the EMA created the school bus scenario, then expanded on it and developed a tabletop exercise that involved the participation of local, county and state first responder agencies, including representatives from Union County Schools.

Rather than jumping into the exercise without any preparation, as many agencies do, Dyer's EMA team decided to hold a preliminary seminar and three workshops between January and February in preparation for the actual exercise in March.

That preparation

facilitated a level of learning for everyone involved that would likely not have occurred otherwise, resulting in each agency knowing what their sister agencies were doing, and when, so everyone had a better chance of not getting out of sequence or duplicating efforts.

During the timed exercise, each participating agency communicated with other agencies as the scenario progressed, with participants taking notes on what they did and how their actions affected the other agencies and the outcome of each step of the scenario.

"Each individual discipline or division or organization will have their own policies and procedures for this sort of event," Dyer said. "The Fire Department will have their procedures, EMA will have theirs, the school will have theirs."

"So, each participant will go back to their respective organizations to discuss and possibly adjust their master emergency plans based on what they learned in the exercise today."

"What the Union County EMA will do is write up an after-action report and turn it in to the Georgia Emergency Management Agency for an exercise drill. We're required

to do a number of exercises each year."

And the hours of preparation that each participant contributed was evidently worthwhile, as few questions were posed by the various cooperating agencies during the Q&A period at the conclusion of the exercise.

"I think this was an amazing exercise," said Assistant Superintendent Dr. David Murphy of Union County Schools. "It required every agency that would be responding (in this scenario) to coordinate and participate and learn more about what each other agency is doing."

"We get so caught up in our own micro-scopes of responsibility that we don't take that telescopic view. And this requires everybody to say, 'Oh, when I do this, it creates an issue somewhere else, or a cascading event.'

"So, it really does help us all get on the same page, because this is transferrable way beyond bus accidents to any kind of a school situation, whether it be an intruder or, God forbid, an active shooter."

"This transfers to so many other opportunities that would require this level of communication with all of these agencies," Murphy concluded.