

# North Georgia News

75¢

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## Families fill Meeks Park for Easter celebration

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

More than one Easter Bunny attended the annual egg hunt at Meeks Park on Saturday, April 12. Organized by the Union County Recreation Department, an estimated 1,500 people showed up to celebrate spring with their families.

Starting around 10 a.m., folks were treated to water and popcorn after making their way down to the usual hunting grounds of the lower ballfields. Along with a raffle for free Easter-themed goodies, free egg baskets were made available to children needing them.

But first, kiddos were happy to take part in the First Annual Bunny Run. Divided into two age groups, the little ones ran half a mile accompanied by parents, and their older counterparts were led by a tall bunny dressed in overalls down a mile-long circle to work out any pre-hunt jitters.

Not everyone participated in the run, though; there was an alternative option

that still offered an outlet for activity. A playlist had been put together and a small space behind the parking lot cleared so that kids of all ages could dance along.

Plenty of excitement remained for the main event after the running and dancing. As opposed to last year's plan of letting everyone loose at once, the eggs were laid out in multiple fields and along the banks of Butternut Creek, which helped families with multiple children of varying ages.

Once again sorted by age – 4 and Under, 5 to 8 and 9 to 12 – the basket-toting babes were bid to go when their group was called. And each time, there was a scramble to pick up the multicolored prizes.

As in years past, there were special golden eggs filled with jellybeans to pick out, and a few “obstacles” like tunnels or tubs were placed in the fields for the youngest groups. The older kids, trusted to be safe around the water, were allowed to venture out and hunt the eggs along the creek bank and park proper.

Some hauled back multiple baskets and others toddled along with just one, but it's safe to say everyone got to enjoy the bounty that day. After all, when the initial rush was done, volunteers stepped in to pick up any “unfound” eggs and hand them out to those whose gatherings were lacking.

The fun didn't end there, as the raffle numbers were called out next. Lucky winners received prizes like LEGO sets, puzzles and other toys, with an overarching spring or Easter theme among the mix.

Some parents even got caught up in anticipation, cheering when their number was called. Notably, there was also a sense of community, as people clapped in congratulations for those who took a little something extra home.

Faith and Tanner Wilcox brought 14-month-old Weston to his first egg hunt. The new parents divulged that since he had just started walking recently, they decided to put shoes on him that morning. But Weston had other ideas and decided to crawl for his eggs.

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When it comes to the annual Easter Egg Hunt tradition, the Union County Recreation Department goes all out for local children.  
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## City Hall to amend sign ordinance, invest in new CDs

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
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The Blairsville City Council and Mayor Buddy Moore discussed a variety of business in their regular monthly meeting on Tuesday, April 8, including an update to the city sign ordinance Moore described as fixing a couple “oversights.”

First, Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce President Steve Rowe offered an invocation, and former mayor Jim Conley returned for his second straight meeting since retiring at the end of February to lead the Pledge of Allegiance.

The revised sign ordinance will allow for more than one free-standing sign and wall sign for businesses with multiple street frontages, which solves an issue faced by businesses with double frontage, such as those between Georgia 515 and Young Harris Street.

Council members held a first reading of the revised



Blairsville Mayor Buddy Moore has settled into his new position at City Hall, pictured here in the April 8 regular city meeting.  
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

ordinance that evening, with a draft to be available in time for a second reading and enactment in the May city meeting. A hearing for public comments will take place beforehand at 6 p.m. on May 13 at City Hall.

In other news, a couple of the city's certificates of deposit are maturing this month to the tune of \$1.7 million invested from the General Fund, and

Moore asked the council to vote on reinvesting this money.

The council voted yes to taking out two \$1 million CDs with Bank OZK, which offered the most favorable rates. An additional \$300,000 will be added to the maturing amount to increase the investment total to \$2 million. One CD will be for seven months and the other

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## ‘Sorghum in the Mountains’ revives canceled tradition

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

A beloved annual tradition that celebrates local history and mountain culture will roll around for the 56th year – minus an isolated COVID interruption – the usual second and third weekends in October, albeit with a new name and under the direction of a different group of volunteers.

A defining event in Union County since 1969, the Blairsville Sorghum Festival was “permanently shut down” by its longtime organizers at the beginning of last month.

But Blairsville will have a sorghum festival after all this year, dubbed the “Sorghum in the Mountains Festival.”

Not wanting to see the festival disappear, and despite the challenges involved, the



Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce, Union County Government and other groups and individuals have

rallied to keep the tradition alive.  
Chamber President

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## Blairsville man arrested for sexual exploitation of children

By Shawn Jarrard  
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The Union County Sheriff's Office arrested a Blairsville man last week for allegedly downloading sexually explicit images of prepubescent children.

UCSO Sgt. Marc Pilote used his connections as a member of the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force to conduct the investigation, which resulted in the April 10 arrest of Gary Hayes Patterson, 64, on 12 felony counts of sexual exploitation of children.

Commonly referred to as ICAC, the Task Force is a collaborative law enforcement program that brings invaluable state and federal resources to bear in tracking down offenders who would abuse or exploit



Gary Hayes Patterson children online.

In the past, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation handled local ICAC activity. After assisting with a couple of GBI cases in 2020, Sgt. Pilote

made it known he wanted to step up his ability to handle tips that led to criminal offenders here, so he joined the Task Force that December.

Fast forward to 2025, and that is how Pilote came to arrest Patterson.

The investigation stemmed from a cyber tip filed by Google earlier this year after the massive internet company flagged dozens of illegal images in the possession of one of its accountholders, who turned out to be Patterson.

Google filed its tip with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which determined the images were accessed on a Georgia-based device, and the tip was forwarded to the GBI.

As the coordinator  
See Child Exploitation, Page 2A

### News Special

ASHEVILLE, N.C. – On Tuesday, April 8, a federal jury returned a guilty verdict against Stephanie Miranda Neace, 32, of Blairsville, Georgia, for the 2023 kidnapping and robbery of an elderly victim, said U.S. Attorney Russ Ferguson of the Western District of North Carolina.

Neace's co-defendant, Jordan Nathaniel Hedden, 31, of Murphy, North Carolina, pleaded guilty to kidnapping last November and was set to be sentenced after press time on Monday, April 14.

“This was a frightening crime against an elderly victim who was just trying to help out of the kindness of her heart,” U.S. Attorney Ferguson said last week. “People who commit crimes like this affect how we treat one another, and we are committed to bringing them to justice.”

According to court documents, trial evidence and witness testimony, on Nov. 30,



Stephanie Miranda Neace

2023, the victim, a 71-year-old female, was driving from Georgia to North Carolina when she saw the defendants walking.

The victim offered the defendants a ride because it was cold outside. The defendants accepted the ride, and soon after they entered North Carolina, Hedden instructed the victim to drive to his car.

When they arrived at the location, a car was not there.



Jordan Nathaniel Hedden

Hedden then ordered the victim to stop the vehicle, and when the victim refused, Hedden forced the victim to stop the car and get in the back seat. Hedden then took over driving.

According to evidence presented at trial, the victim began to cry and Hedden yelled at her and told her to shut up. Trial evidence showed that Hedden appeared to be high and agitated and became  
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# Ira Weaver American Legion Post 121 and District 9 to host VA Claims Clinic

Unsure if you need to file a claim?  
Need help starting a claim?

AMERICAN LEGION

Unsure if you need a supplemental claim?  
Need a Claim?

Register at  
legionpost121.org  
NLT 20 May 2025

Presents  
VA Claims Clinic

29 May 2025  
Pat Haralson Civic Center  
165 Wellborn St  
Blairsville GA 30512  
9:00am – 3:00pm  
Walk in anytime throughout the day, but please register

If you're a Veteran  
this event is for you

American Legion Post 121 in Blairsville in concert with American Legion Post 248 from Blue Ridge and America Legion Post 23 from Hiawassee are hosting a VA Claims Clinic for any veteran that would like to attend. The purpose of the VA Claims Clinic is to provide an opportunity for any Veteran, spouse or widow to speak with a representative from the Veterans Benefits Administration or the Georgia Department of Veterans Services to initiate or follow up on a claim or benefit. If you are unsure how to start a VA claim or if you are unsure if you qualify for a VA claim this event is for you.

The members of American Legion District 9 know that the VA process is a daunting,

hard nut to crack and working with other Service Organizations like the DAV and VFW, want to help any Veteran that needs it. The claims clinic is on 29 May 2025 from 9 AM to 3 PM at the Pat Haralson Civic Center in Blairsville. You can drop in anytime during that period to see a claims representative but please register at legionpost121.org.

To make the most of this opportunity at a minimum bring your DD214. If you've worked with the VA in the past and you are considering a Supplemental Claim or an appeal, bring a copy of the VA decision for the previous claim. Bring an official photo ID and if you're a surviving spouse bring the death certificate of the military member. If

you don't have a DD214 and you have copies of old Orders, bring those too. Basically, bring anything and everything you may have to prove your service to the military and anything that might help with the claims process to include medical records. Register for this free event at the Pat Haralson Civic Center on 29 May 2025 at legionpost121.org.

The Legion Family, which consists of the Legion, Auxiliary, the Sons and the Riders, never stop with the goal of supporting Veterans at every opportunity and supporting the 4 Pillars of the American Legion.

If you're a Veteran or related to one, come check us out, you won't be disappointed.

## Sorghum Tradition...from Page 1A

Steve Rowe said the name change is due to the "Sorghum Festival" already being in use – or, rather, "reserved" by the former organizers of the event, the Blairsville Sorghum Festival Club.

If possible, Rowe said the newly organized effort would gladly accept the help of original club members to work alongside the chamber and other community members and organizations to make the event a success another year running.

"Any of the previous group that wants to come and help, they're more than welcome and we'd love to have them come and help," Rowe invited.

Regardless, Rowe revealed that guests can expect a similar experience to years past.

"We do understand that if you change, you're going to lose some people," he said, detailing a healthy respect for upholding tradition and educating locals and tourists alike about Appalachian

heritage and history.

Admission should be "about the same" price, and while sorghum syrup will certainly be involved in the festival, Rowe said particulars are still being hammered out as to who will produce it and whether there will be live cooking and bottling in Meeks Park.

With plans to keep the layout and idea largely the same, Rowe hopes to invite more bands to the stage for entertainment, though he wasn't ready to reveal any specific musicians last week.

The culturally symbolic games, too, like pole climbin' and rock throwin', will return, but hopefully with more additions; Rowe similarly clarified that it was too early to provide examples of new games at this point.

When it comes to putting everything together, Rowe likens the chamber's role to being "record keepers." Still, he appreciates the involvement of people like Blairsville Police

Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter and groups such as the Union County Historical Society. The Rotary Club of Union County has also expressed an interest in assisting.

"It's definitely a community (project), and that's what we're trying to set it up for going forward so that it is a pure community event that is not just one group," said Rowe, which will hopefully make the festival more sustainable and increase local organizational buy-in.

At present, Rowe said that one of the main focuses is to inform returning vendors that the festival will return this year, and there's been a push to stoke the interest of new merchants. Along with that, there's a major need for volunteers to help ensure everything runs smoothly.

Anyone who is interested in having a hand in the revival, whether as a vendor or a volunteer, should contact the chamber at 706-745-5789 or visit [www.visitblairsvillega.com](http://www.visitblairsvillega.com) to register.

## Child Exploitation...from Page 1A

for the ICAC Task Force in Georgia, GBI utilized its resources to narrow down the point of possession to a device in Blairsville before passing the tip on to Task Force Member Pilote of the Union County Sheriff's Office.

After going through a search warrant process with Google and completing additional investigatory steps, Pilote and a team of law enforcement officers arrived at Patterson's home last Thursday to search it and take him – and some of his electronic devices – into custody.

Pilote said the dozens of images downloaded by Patterson did not appear to contain local victims. Further, Pilote said there is no indication to date that Patterson has personally abused any children.

Patterson is presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. He remained in the Union County Jail at press time with a \$120,000 bond.

Sgt. Pilote credits the Task Force with enabling swift arrests in cases involving the internet, where it can be

difficult to isolate offenders given the global nature of the technology: "The network, the resources, the training – ICAC is absolutely phenomenal."

And the influence of ICAC goes beyond providing tremendous resources to local investigations. As a Task Force member, Pilote looks forward to hosting yearly presentations for students at Union County Schools, to arm them with information on how to protect their privacy online.

Regarding the Patterson case, Pilote would like to thank everyone involved, from the Task Force to his fellow deputies as well as the Georgia Department of Natural Resources Law Enforcement Division, which lent a game warden for the search and arrest.

A father himself, Pilote said cases like this strike uncomfortably close to home. It's a tough job; he must review all reported images to see if such tips fall into the "contraband" arena. But what he has found across multiple cases has only reinforced his aims to prevent harm to children.

"That makes it very challenging, but by the same token, it makes that drive even stronger to hammer these guys," Pilote said of arrests that end up in conviction. "It's not for the faint of heart."

"Luckily, we're not inundated where we have to look at this stuff every single day, but it's not easy to be looking at it period – you're talking about the innocence of a child."

One of the many reasons UCISO takes crimes involving sexually explicit images of children so seriously is that the seeking out of such images can act as a "gateway" behavior, potentially escalating to physical abuse, and none of the above is tolerated in Union County.

"We're proud to have the capabilities to go after these type crimes and the resources to make these arrests," Sheriff Shawn Dyer said. "The more that we can catch early, the less likely we are to have somebody that goes farther than just using their computer. Just don't do this is you're going to live here."

## Elderly Kidnapping...from Page 1A

paranoid that the victim had a tracking device.

At one point, Hedden stopped the vehicle, and he and Neace searched the car and the victim herself for tracking devices. Then, they took the victim's phone and disabled it. Hedden also demanded money from the victim, but the victim only had \$2.

Fearing for her safety, the victim told the defendants to take her to an ATM, and the defendants agreed. During the drive into Tennessee, Hedden made the victim promise that she would not identify them to the police.

During the drive to the ATM, the victim convinced Hedden to let her withdraw money from a gas station ATM instead of a bank. The victim

also told Hedden that she would give the defendants the money if they let her stay behind safely at the gas station.

When they arrived at the gas station, the victim took her purse and her car key fob. She told Hedden to turn off the car so the headlights could not be seen from the people inside the gas station, and Hedden complied.

As the victim and Hedden were walking toward the gas station, the victim began to run to the door and scream for help. Hedden ran back to the car, attempted to use it to flee but was unable to start the car without the key fob.

Hedden and Neace then fled on foot and escaped into the woods but were apprehended days later.

Neace was convicted of kidnapping, which carries a maximum prison sentence of up to life imprisonment. On Nov. 13, 2024, Hedden pleaded guilty to kidnapping. Both Hedden and Neace are currently in custody and were awaiting sentencing at press time.

Robert M. DeWitt, Special Agent in Charge of the FBI in North Carolina, joined U.S. Attorney Ferguson in making the announcement on April 9, during which Ferguson thanked the FBI for their investigation of the case.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Don Gast and Alexis Solheim of the U.S. Attorney's Office in Asheville are prosecuting the case.

# City of Blairsville...from Page 1A

for 13 months.

An issue came to the city’s attention recently in which both Fellowship of the Hills Church and River City Bank were charged nearly a thousand-dollar minimum bill for a gallon of water going through their sprinkler systems’ fire-line meters. The council voted to adjust off these amounts.

Separately, the council approved a change to the city’s Master Fee Schedule to alleviate this problem for water customers with fire sprinkler systems, which, additionally, will act as further incentive for businesses to install potentially life and property-saving sprinklers.

Speaking of water, Blairsville Water Treatment Plant Superintendent Danny Dillard told the council his department was investigating a major leak in the system.

“The plant is running well, but we’re losing a tremendous amount of water,” Dillard said, asking that everyone keep on the lookout to report water running where it shouldn’t be, potentially from the square area to south of town.

Moore said the city was considering investing in zone metering, which would allow the Water Department to narrow down the location for such leaks “so you don’t have to search the whole system.”

W a t e r / S e w e r Maintenance Superintendent Curtis Corn said he would be contacting the Georgia Rural Water Association for help locating any leaks.

Over at the Wastewater Treatment Facility, Superintendent Jody Cook said the plant continued to operate well even with the increased flows from recent torrential rainfall.

Airport Manager Dan Firebaugh reported that airport activity was up year-over-year – a welcome trend – and he said the Experimental Aircraft Association Blairsville Chapter 1211 would be hosting a pancake breakfast to benefit the Young Eagles Program on April 26.

The breakfast will run from 7-10 a.m. at the airport that Saturday, with a suggested donation of \$15 for the meal, and all-comers are welcome. People can stick around until about 10:30 a.m. to watch Young Eagle flights, which



**New Blairsville City Councilman Brock Gordon on April 8, in his second regular meeting since swearing in at City Hall.**

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

foster enthusiasm for aviation among youths ages of 8 to 18.

Firebaugh also made “a big announcement” for Thursday, May 8, which is when the Georgia Airports Association will be honoring the Blairsville Airport by including it in the annual State Legislator Airport Tour.

Around 10:30 that morning, six state lawmakers will be flying in as part of the tour, and Firebaugh will be making a presentation with information such as history, recent and future projects at the airport, and regional economic impact.

City Attorney Marvin Harkins gave a legislative update, noting that a bill limiting financial liability for cities involved in lawsuits did not pass out of the Georgia General Assembly this month, but he said the bill “made it most of the way through” and could be passed next year with further refinements.

Revisiting unfinished business from last month, the council continued its consideration of a potential sewer expansion east of city limits on Georgia 515, which would be a considerable expense to the city.

“If we decide to do it, it will benefit everybody out through there, including the (Blairsville Cinema),” Moore said. The discussion remained largely unchanged from the March meeting, with no action taken, and Moore said, “We’ll keep looking at things.”

Mayor Moore called

on Matt Leonard of Lucky Dog Restaurant Group and Mike Cook of the Union County Historical Society to preview a unique fundraiser for the Historical Society: the Blairsville Music & Seafood Festival.

A family-friendly affair geared toward children, the festival will feature historical re-enactments, peach cobbler cooked in the 1861 Payne Cabin, gold panning, potentially ongoing construction of the Collins Cabin “so the kids can learn how these cabins were built,” lots of live music, a bouncy house, guest speakers and, of course, plenty of seafood.

The festival will roll out over three days at the Butt-Mock House in Downtown Blairsville: Friday, April 25, from 4-8 p.m.; Saturday, April 26, from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.; and Sunday, April 27, from 12-4 p.m. Entry will cost \$5 for adults, with children getting in free.

Contained within the consent agenda of items allowed by ordinance but needing final council approval, council members voted to approve a Temporary Special Event License for Blairsville Restaurant Grits & Greens to operate a beer garden during the festival April 25-26.

The Blairsville City Council meets the second Tuesday of each month at 6 p.m. inside City Hall at 62 Blue Ridge Street. The public is encouraged to attend.



# Easter Celebration...from Page 1A



**To the delight of local children, the Rec Department added to the fun on Saturday by holding a raffle for Easter and spring-themed prizes.**  
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

“This is the most excited I’ve seen him in at least a week,” Faith pointed out, expressing an interest in returning next year – hopefully when Weston is a little more confident in his shoes.

The Sena family, meanwhile, have been coming to Meeks Park for about three years now, bringing their daughter and niece to hunt eggs as part of their Easter tradition. The two girls, 5 and 6, tasted victory last year when they took home the golden egg, and though they didn’t find one this

year, they did enjoy two baskets full of colorful, candy-filled goodness.

Lucas and Courtney Rogers brought their three daughters, with 9-year-old Chloe being the oldest. While it was not their first egg hunt ever, the Blue Ridge locals enjoyed their first hunt in Meeks Park.

“This was incredible, very organized,” Lucas observed, with Courtney expressing appreciation that the event was “safe for the kids.”

“I liked it,” Chloe said, readily holding up the raffle

prize she won – an Animal Crossing LEGO set.

Easter means a great deal to the Rogers family, and they are thankful to the Union County Rec Department for putting the event together. That said, they also made time to note the true reason behind the holiday.

“Church is very important, family is very important,” said Courtney, with Lucas positing, “You can take everything from me in this world, but you can’t take my salvation.”



**A mad dash for candy-filled eggs ensued at the Colwell Fields of Meeks Park on Saturday.**  
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks