

# Board of Education...from Page 1A

on the task of supporting your children’s education and have done an amazing job. Our team has worked for several weeks to put together a curriculum plan that will best serve all students and families in our community as we finish out the school year.”

Hill went on to applaud everyone who has participated in the school lunch delivery program as well.

“(The school lunches have) been a tremendous lift to a lot of folks,” he said. “It’s very inspiring seeing our staff work shoulder to shoulder, and

there is no place I would rather be. I am blessed to work here at Union County schools.”

The board and Superintendent Hill also discussed the need for the schools to pick up laptops, hot spots, books and other property, as well as when to allow students

to have access to their lockers and other belongings that might remain at the school.

Hill responded by acknowledging Gov. Brian Kemp’s shelter-in-place order, suggesting they hold off on a decision until everyone has a better understanding of what state and local guidelines will be in place next month.

“Parents, please know

that we have placed and will continue to place your child’s needs first,” Hill concluded in his memo. “Our vision is ‘Success for ALL,’ and this plan is our best effort to ensure this happens for your child.

“We are so blessed to have the opportunity to work with such a dedicated group of educators that love and serve

your child on a daily basis.” In other business, the board and Hill discussed a curriculum plan for the remainder of the school year, covering students in grades pre-K through 12. The plan will provide the aforementioned enrichment activities and proficiency standards required to finish the year.

# Local Leaders...from Page 1A

surrounding this time of pandemic has produced an untold number of challenges at the local level, including for veteran community leaders like Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, who thought he’d seen it all in his five terms in public office.

Since his November 2000 election, Paris has made thousands of decisions with world issues seldom impacting the way he governs. But now, entering his third decade in office, Paris is undergoing on-the-job training once again.

“To say the COVID-19 pandemic has been earthshaking would be an understatement,” he said. “It’s frustrating, it’s nerve-wracking, and it feels like the weight of the world is on your shoulders. We try to consult with as many people we can before making decisions, but it’s still tough making those decisions.”

According to Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley, nobody can prepare for a worldwide pandemic, and anyone who says they were ready for it isn’t being completely honest.

“I couldn’t foresee anything like this happening, and I don’t believe that anyone across the county could have imagined it, much less prepared for it,” he said.

However, Mayor Conley has been pleased with the community response during the statewide shelter-in-place order. Despite personally working from home, Conley said that City Hall remains open, just not

to the public.

He also receives updates from city employees, most notably from Blairsville Police Chief Michael “Bear” Baxter, who has noticed a significant decrease in traffic since the implementation of the local and state restrictions.

“From what I’m being told, most people are following the governor’s stay-at-home order,” Conley said. “Of course, as the experts are telling us, mitigation is the best thing we can all do right now.

“We should separate ourselves, stay at home, work at home. If you do have to go out, obey the 6-foot recommendations.”

While everyone hunkers down at home, Paris, who considers himself a social butterfly, said the most challenging aspect for him personally is not getting to shake hands and accept the public’s feedback.

And while the community is usually friendly with his office, Paris acknowledged that he finds himself craving even negative feedback.

“I never thought I would say this, but I’m even missing complaints at this point,” Paris said with a laugh. “I’m like everyone else, though, I can’t wait for this to be over. I’m ready to get back to the restaurants and the community and be able to talk and joke with people.”

With all the international negativity surrounding the pandemic, Paris said he’s

grateful to have a front-row seat to a different side of the story, one where community members come together in a time of crisis, and he doesn’t expect anything to change that in Union County.

“You’ve got a lot of folks that are doing small things, like donating to our health care providers, making masks and just helping each other out,” he said. “I know that Tommy Townsend has converted his (Granddaddy Mimm’s Moonshine Distillery) into making hand sanitizer, and they’ve donated quite a bit of it.

“There are also a lot of cases around the county of people helping each other that aren’t made public, and I believe we will continue to see that.”

Conley’s main priority, of course, is serving the people of Blairsville. If anyone is struggling or has a question, he encourages them to call City Hall, and his office will do its best to find the necessary assistance.

In the meantime, both Conley and Paris recognize the frustration of not being able to work, but they urge the community to continue following the shelter-in-place regulations.

“We understand that some people have to get out,” Conley said. “We all have to eat, we all have doctor’s appointments, but we want the community to know that we have their best interests at

# Crime Down...from Page 1A

time,” said UCSO Maj. Shawn Dyer, who received a promotion at the beginning of the year to third in command at the Sheriff’s Office. “We figured that the domestic issues would be up, and they may end up going up before it’s over with, but so far, we’re doing really well on it.”

Dyer has noticed the same trends in the city of Blairsville, where he serves as Assistant Police Chief also. He said drug crimes in the county are “running about the same,” but that thefts and related crimes have certainly decreased.

“We’ve got a lot more people staying at home, and when you’ve got everybody at home, that reduces your burglaries, because they’re not going to break into a house there may be somebody at,” Dyer said.

And since fewer people are out and about, automobile accidents are down as well, at least since the middle of March, which is when mitigation efforts to slow the virus’ spread really started kicking into gear.

Lower crime and fewer automobile accidents show that many people are willingly complying with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s recommended social distancing guidelines, as well as Gov. Brian Kemp’s shelter-in-place order that’s been in effect since April 3.

Blairsville Police Chief Michael “Bear” Baxter said that the present moment is actually “the slowest it’s been in my career” in terms of crime, but that, regardless of the slowdown, the Police Department continues to operate at full capacity to keep people and property safe.

Furthermore, the chief said he’s thankful for the community for all it has done for law enforcement in recent weeks.

“Individuals and businesses have brought us food – we’ve had masks donated to us, we’ve had goodies donated to us,” Baxter said. “That means a lot to us, especially right now.

“I think everybody’s at an all-time low, and I just want to say that our department appreciates everything the

community – the general public and business sectors – have all done for us. And it’s not just us; the Sheriff’s Office has also had that type of feedback from the public, and that is important.”

Sheriff Mack Mason is equally grateful for the people of Union County, who have been doing their parts to assist law enforcement efforts toward maintaining the peace in a time of such tremendous uncertainty.

“I want to thank the community,” Mason said. “These are hard times right now. We’re going through something that we haven’t experienced before, and I’m hoping and praying that it will soon pass and we can get back to a norm. I also want to echo Chief Baxter in thanking the many citizens and business owners for all the food, as well as other items, they have donated.

“In the meantime, the Union County Sheriff’s Office is still up and functioning, and we will deal with whatever complaints or issues or crimes that we have to. But we do want to thank people for hunkering down, sheltering in place, and behaving themselves more or less.”

Less crime produces fewer arrests, translating to fewer people being locked up locally. This is crucial during the pandemic, because crowded jails all across the country have shown to be especially vulnerable to COVID-19 outbreaks.

There’s also evidence of locally lowered rates of recidivism, or repeat offending by convicted criminals, as fewer probationers have been finding their way back behind bars lately.

Aiding current jail population management efforts is an ongoing initiative first implemented last summer by local law enforcement, the Georgia Department of Community Supervision and the Enotah Judicial Circuit, including the Superior Court and District Attorney’s Office.

The initiative includes bi-monthly hearings for inmates being held locally on probation violations, enabling the courts to resolve numerous

probation cases on a more regular basis so inmates may be released on new terms or quickly moved onto their next level of incarceration.

So, less crime coupled with probationers being fast-tracked through the system either to state prisons, correctional facilities or rehabilitation programs have meant even fewer inmates at the local jail, which also frees up space for people who do commit crimes during the pandemic.

In recent years, due to the jail’s limited size, it has been necessary for Union County to spend thousands of dollars per year to house inmates in neighboring county facilities to the tune of \$35 a day per inmate.

Combining 2017 and 2018 figures, Union County spent more than \$400,000 to house inmates elsewhere, and the jail set an inmate housing record in April 2017 after a string of 57 arrests made over a two-week period temporarily brought the total inmate count to 111.

The last time the 54-bed Union County Jail featured a surplus of inmates was in September, when it had a count of 62. This figure dropped to 51 in October, and it has been kept in check ever since. As of press time, the jail had 27 inmates.

Interestingly, even as traffic flow has decreased on Union County’s roads of late, the issuance of speeding tickets and other traffic citations has increased in the county, as the crime slowdown has enabled deputies to devote more time and energy to patrolling and enforcing traffic laws.

The Sheriff’s Office has more than 25 radar units in service, and while the state has relaxed enforcement regarding tag expiration dates due to the interiors of tag offices being closed to the public, the county is definitely still enforcing all other traffic laws.

Last Thursday afternoon, Sheriff Mack Mason pulled over two speeding motorists back to back, one going 90 mph and the other going a whopping 116 mph.

And some of the speeders have been out-of-towners driving recklessly through the mountains; in Suches last week, a deputy pulled over a McLaren, a Lamborghini and a Lotus for speeding, all in the same day, and all three vehicles belonged to people from counties south of here.

In other crime news, on April 17, the Sheriff’s Office Narcotics Division executed a sizable meth bust in the Tate Road area of Union County, to include multiple arrests, the seizure of \$24,300 in cash and possible land seizure. More details will be available in next week’s edition of the newspaper.