

North Georgia News

4 Sections 24 Pages

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Roundabout coming to Deep South Farm, Pat Haralson

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Local and state officials met on Thursday, April 21, at the intersection of Deep South Farm Road and Pat Haralson Memorial Drive to announce the impending construction of a roundabout there to improve safety and traffic flow in the increasingly busy area.

Funding for the construction of the roundabout will come from a combination of state and local funds, and the project is currently in its very beginning stages, with a potential completion date of late 2023 or early 2024.

The roundabout will be replacing the current traffic pattern, which features Deep South Farm Road ending in a one-way stop at Pat Haralson

Drive, requiring motorists coming from, say, Union General Hospital to turn either left or right from a stop to exit onto Pat Haralson Drive.

Hosted by the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce, the event was attended by Georgia State Sen. Steve Gooch, State Rep. Stan Gunter, Union County and Blairsville government officials, and Union General Health System leadership.

"We'll have a groundbreaking at a later date, but we want to thank (Sen. Gooch and Rep. Gunter) for securing the money to be able to do this," Chamber President Steve Rowe said.

Added Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, "We appreciate very much what (Sen. Gooch and Rep. Gunter)

do for us. Having said that, the county and the hospital are all going to be working together on this."

The projected need for the roundabout comes on the heels of rapid population growth in Union County, which increased about 16.4% between 2014 and 2020, per statistics compiled in the Georgia Regional Economic Analysis Project. And that trend has continued into 2022.

Population growth has been a boon for the Union County economy, but local stakeholders acknowledge that there have been some negative effects as well, such as road congestion, that have come along for the ride.

Everything is growing, including Union General Hospital, the Union General
See Roundabout, Page 6A



A design plan showcasing the new roundabout coming to Pat Haralson Memorial Drive at Deep South Farm Road.

Legacy of Teena Atkins will live on through loved ones

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

"Every little thing she did, she just looked after someone else. She took care of all the little details. She was just an amazing person." Such were the words of Teena Marie Atkins' husband David when contemplating everything his wife stood for.

The words of David Atkins serve as a fitting tribute to Teena's legacy following her passing at the too-young age of 55 on March 15 after an extended battle with COVID-19.

In losing Atkins, the Union County community has had to say goodbye to a beloved daughter, sister, wife, mother and educator who

gave her all in the service of others.

Such an abundance of care lent itself well to her long-standing occupation as an educator in multiple avenues, including most recently as the Union Site Administrator for Mountain Education Charter High School serving students from both Union and Towns counties.

And it was that selfless sense of dedication to others that caught the eye of David when he met Teena Chatham decades ago. He was so stunned, in fact, that he can still vividly remember what she was wearing that fateful first encounter.

"Boy, I took one look at her and I knew. It didn't have to be any length of time; I knew. She was the one," he

said, fighting back tears as he recounted a tale of "love at first sight."

They married young – David was 18, and Teena only 17 – holding their wedding at Ivy Log Baptist Church. The couple naturally fell into their roles as not just romantic partners but best friends.

David can still call to mind, in painfully vivid detail, the love of his life passionately studying scripture beside a window looking out on snow, or how, to commemorate their togetherness, whether during a big event or just a day out, Teena would take photos of their shadows together.

The two of them would often hold long, special conversations, but they also knew how to enjoy the simplicity of each other's

company in quiet hours.

"She was my best friend," reiterated David. "We were just the answer to each other. I know that people think that their love is so great, but we knew ours was. You know, you often hear that you don't know what you've got until it's gone, but I've known from Day 1 what I had."

Teena and David were married for 38 years and raised two sons, Daniel and Christopher, and have two grandchildren, Tate and Bo. She was a devoted family woman and cherished the intense bonds she developed at home.

But her other love, the Union County School System, was just as much a part of her family as the one

See Atkins' Legacy, Page 2A



David and Teena Atkins were married for 38 years. Gone too soon, Teena will be greatly missed by everyone who had the pleasure of knowing her. Photo/Submitted

School Board hears audit; Hill discusses ESPLOST



Charlie Llewellyn, Rosalie Jarrett, Peyton Seabolt and Stella Collins were honored in last week's School Board meeting for placing fourth in the State Horse Evaluation Career Development Event, pictured here with CTAE Director Josh Davis and UCMS Ag Teacher Katie Rittenhouse. Not pictured: Stella Collins. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Union County Board of Education met April 19, kicking things off with a work session in which accounting firm Mauldin & Jenkins, LLC

reported the school system's Fiscal Year 2021 Audit over Zoom call.

Certified Public Accountant Christopher McKellar revealed that the independent audit showed the system to be in excellent

financial health, and he thanked School Financial Director Karen Bundy for her assistance and hard work during the auditing process.

McKellar explained that while audits would normally
See School Board, Page 6A

Early voting begins Monday ahead of May 24 elections

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Advanced in-person voting for the General Primary Election and Nonpartisan General Election will begin next week in the Jury Assembly Room of the Union County Courthouse.

Early voting will run weekdays, May 2, through Friday, May 20, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., even during lunchtime.

People too busy to cast in-person ballots during the three weeks of weekday early voting will get a chance to participate in one of two weekend early

voting opportunities: Saturday, May 7, and Saturday, May 14, also from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the courthouse.

Election Day voting for both the General Primary and the Nonpartisan General Election will take place Tuesday, May 24, from 7 a.m.
See Early Voting, Page 2A

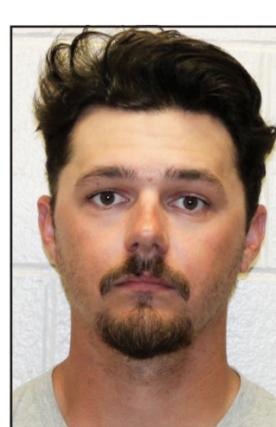
Local shootout results in two arrests and no injuries

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Two men were arrested on Friday, April 22, following a late-night shootout in which no one was injured, Union County Sheriff's Capt. Daren Osborn said.

Joseph Edward Barnes, 28, of Blairsville has been charged with aggravated assault, two counts reckless conduct, criminal damage to property in the second degree, possession of a firearm during the commission of a crime, and discharge of a firearm near a street.

Also arrested in connection with the gunfire exchange was Bryan Long, 37, of Blairsville, charged with aggravated assault.



Joseph Edward Barnes



Bryan Long

The violent episode occurred around 11 p.m. last Friday at a residence on Philadelphia Church Road, stemming from what local law

enforcement is describing as a "family squabble."

Capt. Osborn said that the following account is backed
See Shootout, Page 2A

High speed chase ends in death of driver, GSP says

By Shawn Jarrard
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One driver was dead and another has been arrested after fleeing from law enforcement in Union County and crashing separately in White County on Saturday, April 23.

According to Georgia State Patrol, Trooper First Class Matheson was patrolling Blood Mountain and the Richard Russell Scenic Bypass area when he attempted to conduct a



traffic stop on two vehicles that were speeding on State Route 348 near Lone Piper Road in

Union County.

"As TFC Matheson attempted to catch up to the two vehicles with his emergency lights and sirens activated, both vehicles failed to stop, resulting in a pursuit," GSP said Sunday.

The fleeing vehicles – a silver 2015 Mitsubishi Lancer and a black 2015 Dodge Challenger – continued southeast on SR 348 into White County.

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SPORTS BASEBALL

Best of 3

Thursday - April 28 @ Lovett

Time 5:30 PM (DH)

VOTE

Sample Ballots

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Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds Spring Events

See page 1B

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Atkins' Legacy ...from Page 1A

she made with David. Before becoming a co-principal at the Mountain Education Charter High School, Atkins worked at Union County High as an English teacher.

Principal C.T. Hussion worked with her for 10 years, and like many of her colleagues, the two became fast friends. He applauded her accomplishments as an educator who nudged her students to test their own boundaries.

"Teena always had a big heart for the kids, and I know a lot of people say that, but she really did," Hussion said. "The kids would run through a brick wall for her. They knew she cared about them. They knew it was more than just about learning, and for that, they really tried to learn."

"She even volunteered this past year, when we had the pandemic, to go down and help at the Success Center. We had a lot of kids there who were trying to recover their grades from COVID and learning at home, so she went down to work with those kids and was really successful."

Just as important to him were the casual conversations the two educators shared, Hussion said.

"So, she loved every fall to go up to Maine and

Massachusetts when the leaves changed," Hussion said, describing Atkins' favorite vacation spot. "She would always come back, and I'd say, 'Alright, let me see the pictures,' and she'd share them with me, and I'd live kind of vicariously through them and their trips."

It was indeed Atkins who helped Hussion prepare for his own vacation up North with his wife, planning an itinerary by picking out all the best places to get high-quality chowder and the comfiest bed-and-breakfast stops.

"She loved Maine and going there with David and made me want to visit there," said Casey Jones, Atkins' co-principal at MECHS. "And I will visit there one day. She loved it; she always talked about going there and looked forward to her trips back there."

Jones worked with Atkins for three years, but considering the closeness of their friendship, he felt it was more like 20. When he thinks of Atkins, he thinks of a friend who guided her colleagues, inspired her students and served as a rock to anyone in need of a shoulder to lean on.

One of Jones' favorite stories about Atkins illustrates those qualities in how special she wanted those around her to feel, regardless of who they were or what was happening in their lives. The story revolves around a day school student named Ray who wanted a haircut.

"So, I went over and got him a haircut and came back and let him in the gym," Jones said. "I called Teena and said, 'Hey, let us in over here,' and when she opened the door and saw him, she said, 'Ray, you look so handsome.' And I just remember his face lit up. Hers was lit up as well."

Smiling himself at the recollection, Jones added, "I just always thought if you could bottle his smile and her smile in that moment, you could save the world."

Ray and other students like him were "what (Atkins) woke up for every morning," said Jones. And 17-year-old Abbigayle Owens was no exception.

Despite past public perceptions about the second-chance Mountain Education Center, Atkins helped Owens and her grandmother see that it wasn't a place of punishment

but a destination for learning and respect.

"I wanted to come to night school, and my grandma was not for it at all," Owens said. "So, Dr. Atkins pretty much told my grandma it was a different environment. It wasn't like how it used to be when my mom went to school here. She made it seem like it was just another day at school."

From then on, Owens thought of Atkins' classroom as a sanctuary, saying the administrative leader and teacher "would go out of her way to make sure you were comfortable. She made it OK to be here."

Furthermore, Owens said her assignments never felt burdensome, as Atkins ran her classroom with attention to love and individuality, which in turn made Owens feel especially cared for.

"Before she got sick, she was supposed to sit down with me and help me, one-on-one. She had a plan for me to graduate," Owens said through grief.

"Hopefully, I will walk this year," Owens added, while conceding that "once she wasn't here, it made me not want to come anymore."

Ultimately, however, Owens is comforted by the belief that Atkins will be there to see her graduate, if not in person, then in spirit, as the departed educator was always sure to still be there for people regardless of her ability to be there physically.

Even after beginning her fight with COVID-19, Atkins' mind and her heart were elsewhere – with her students, her colleagues, and with people she could continue to help from her hospital bed. David remembers this most clearly.

"Our last night at Union General, she had me log onto the computer because she wanted me to help her approve time sheets for her employees because she didn't want her employees' pay to be late," he explained. "There she was fighting for her life, but she was worried about making sure none of them were going to be late on getting paid. That's just the kind of person she was."

Not long before she died, Atkins experienced increased strength and was, for a time, improving. But her health took a dramatic downturn, and it

was a shock for everyone when she was suddenly gone.

Peggy Pyle, another of Atkins' coworkers, was in disbelief at her passing.

"The last time she was at school was at a faculty meeting. Gosh, if I'd have known that was the last time I was going to see her..." Pyle said, before taking a moment to pause and gather herself. "I mean, I texted her and emailed her and stuff while she was sick, but I didn't see her in person. We just thought she was going to get better."

Within the hallways of the MEC, the topic of Atkins' death is a fresh, widespread wound that runs deep for most and is too painful for some to confront so soon after its infliction, with many students and staff not yet ready to talk about the loss.

"I heard from my grandma first," Owens said. "Right after she told me, I got on Facebook and saw what had happened. It broke my heart."

But life goes on through the heartache, just as Atkins would have wanted, and she continues through her memory.

Despite her absence, there's no denying that her presence persists in the hearts of her family, friends, coworkers and students. She meant the world to all who knew her and imparted to them lessons about grace, patience, acceptance, and perhaps most of all, mercy.

Angie Burns maintains that Atkins was the best authority figure she had ever met or worked with. Casey Jones learned to consider reacting with a gentle touch when students lash out in frustration. Emily Cobb looked within herself and decided to nourish her own good qualities.

Because of her, folks in school leadership positions will practice mindfulness when confronted with pain. Because of her, students will persevere when they feel the entire world is against them. And because her light shined so brightly, like the lighthouses she photographed up North, she will continue to shine through the wisdom she left behind.

It is in this sense that Teena Atkins is not really gone. She fulfilled her purpose before God called her Home, and her legacy is a continuation of that purpose in those who knew her. In Owens' words, "she's still important" – and always will be.

Shootout...from Page 1A

up by home surveillance footage from the scene of the shooting.

"Joseph Barnes lives with Mr. Long's sister (on Philadelphia Church Road)," Capt. Osborn said. "Long has evidently been harassing his sister in the past quite a bit, and he was driving up and down Philadelphia Church Road back and forth the other night."

"So, Mr. Barnes took action. He went outside and fired a 9 mm pistol up in the air about three times. Philadelphia Church Road is a dead-end road, so Long went up to the dead end and his sister followed him."

Long and his sister argued, which did not lead to any charges being filed, but as Long returned from the dead-

end, he allegedly fired three shots from inside the vehicle as he approached the house, Osborn said.

In the meantime, Barnes had gone inside the home to retrieve an AR-15 rifle; when he heard the shots coming from Long's vehicle, Barnes allegedly fired upward of 20 rounds and possibly more at the truck as Long drove it up the street and past the house, Osborn said.

At least three bullets struck the truck, and multiple rounds also lodged in a nearby home on Old Blue Ridge Highway, hence the reckless conduct charges against Barnes, Osborn said.

The owner of the home that was hit in the barrage of bullets called 911 to report the

shootout, and the Union County Sheriff's Office arrived shortly thereafter.

Instead of leaving the scene after the shooting, Long had pulled over at the home on Old Blue Ridge Highway, where deputies spoke with him before making an arrest, and Barnes was arrested at the home on Philadelphia Church Road, Osborn said.

"We've still got a lot to look into with this investigation," Capt. Osborn said, noting that he would be following up with the community should the investigation lead to additional charges.

The above individuals have been charged only and are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. Both men were still being detained at the Union County Jail at press time.

Early Voting...from Page 1A

to 7 p.m. at the 11 pre-assigned precincts of Union County.

To view the Republican and Democratic sample ballots to see which political party candidates are running in the General Primary, and to read the various political party questions directed at the electorate, check out the inside of this week's newspaper.

Also included on the political party sample ballots are candidates for the Nonpartisan General Election, which will feature a separate ballot option for individuals wishing to vote nonpartisan only.

All voters will need to have an acceptable form of identification to cast ballots, such as a government-issued driver's license or identification card.

Voters looking to mail their ballots may pick up the two-sided "Application for Georgia Official Absentee Ballot" from the Union County Registrar's Office located at 65 Courthouse Street in Blairsville or print one by accessing the "My Voter Page" at <https://mvp.sos.ga.gov/>.

The "My Voter Page" website contains other valuable information, such as registration status, precinct information, downloadable sample ballots, mailed

absentee ballot status and voter participation history.

"Absentee ballots may be requested any time between 78 and 11 calendar days prior to Election Day," per georgia.gov. Absentee ballot applications can be returned by mail, fax, email as an attachment, or in-person to the Registrar's Office no later than Friday, May 13.

People who have voted absentee-by-mail in the past will need to submit a new application this election cycle if they want to receive an absentee ballot in the mail.

When mailing a ballot, voters may list their Georgia ID or driver's license number instead of copying their ID, or if they do not have a state-issued ID, people may submit the last four digits of their Social Security Number.

Voters are encouraged to request and return their absentee ballots early to give their ballot "enough time to travel through the mail and resolve any issues that may arise when voting by absentee ballot," per georgia.gov.

Folks wanting to utilize the official drop box to turn in their absentee ballots can find it in the Jury Assembly Room during early voting hours. Voters may also drop completed absentee ballots off at the Registrar's Office

through 7 p.m. on Election Day.

Appearing alongside candidates on the May 24 ballot will be the Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax continuation referendum.

Union County voters will be asked to support or reject the continuation of ESPLOST, a 1-cent sales and use tax to be levied on purchases of local goods in support of the Union County School System.

ESPLOST is used by schools to build new facilities, renovate existing facilities, upgrade HVAC systems, add to aging bus fleets, update technology and more. Should voters approve the measure, the local sales tax will continue at its current 7% rate.

April 25 was the voter registration deadline to participate in the May 24 elections.

The 2022 General Election will be held on Nov. 8 and will feature the election of political party candidates who clear the primary round of voting next month.



Paris honors Confederate history, talks county alcohol changes



Lamar Paris
Sole Commissioner

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

In his April 21 meeting, Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris recognized Confederate Memorial Day, held a first reading to amend the county Alcohol Ordinance, approved an updated Local Emergency Operations Plan and renewed the Air Methods medical helicopter agreement.

Regarding Confederate Memorial Day, Paris signed a proclamation inside the Union County Courthouse that evening designating April 26 as a day to “honor, observe and celebrate the Confederate States of America.”

In so doing, he encouraged residents, under the local leadership of Smith’s Legion Chapter #2699 of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, to participate in activities “that commemorate and honor our shared history and cultural inheritance.”

“Smith’s Legion Chapter #2699 is named for and honors the memory of the local unit which fought in the War Between the States and its first commander, Sumner J. Smith (1823-1869),” according to the proclamation.

“Members of the unit’s Cavalry and Infantry Battalions were recruited from North Georgia Counties, including Union, Towns and Fannin.”

Paris also held a first reading of a series of Alcohol Ordinance changes, which were arrived at with assistance from Deputy County Attorney William Mercer and much work by the Union County Alcohol Board.

Attorney Mercer detailed the changes in the meeting. The biggest amendment to the ordinance deals with removing stipulations requiring permitting – a distinct process from licensing – for everyone involved with serving, selling or handling alcohol for licensed businesses.

Union County is one of the few counties in the state that requires “every individual who (touches) alcohol in any way to get a permit through the county; that includes bus boys, stock boys, people that work cash registers, waitresses, bartenders, licensees – everybody.”

Permitting has simply become too much of a burden on the lone alcohol enforcement officer in the county, who, aside from issuing alcohol permits, has other responsibilities like checking on licensing issues.

“There are more than 1,000 permits he has to deal with every year,” Mercer said. “And because of that, he stays in his office pretty much all the time ... processing permits for everyone, (which typically requires background checks and training and must be renewed every year.)”

Added Mercer, “The county’s been doing that for years, but what (permitting)

effectively does is, it’s stopping our only enforcement agency from going out and making sure that our licensees are actually in compliance with the ordinance.

“The (Alcohol Board) thought it over (and) considered we could get rid of those permits for individuals.”

Mercer stated further that permitting “stood in the way for certain individuals being able to get employment,” as people who did not meet the requirements of the process for whatever reason had to file an appeal that may or may not be granted by the Alcohol Board.

“Taking (permits) out entirely, it doesn’t stand in anybody’s way for employment now,” Mercer said. “It frees up our one alcohol enforcement officer to actually go and enforce the ordinance as it stands, but we did put some provisions in its place.”

“The board and the commissioner do agree, and I would agree as well, that training is important for anyone who has to touch alcohol, (like trying to spot people with fake IDs and not selling to people who have overconsumed, etc.).

“So, if you’re going to have an alcohol license, any time you hire someone new, before they can touch alcohol, you have to put them through an approved training course within 14 days of their employment, and you’ve got to keep a record of that.”

Continuing, “Everyone, even the licensee, is going to have to renew their training before July 30 of each year ... and we are recommending that licensees do a background check (on their employees) ... but that is 100% up to the employer.”

A full list of Alcohol Ordinance amendments is available at the Union County Commissioner’s Office.

Should anyone wish to provide public input on the amendments, there will be a public hearing regarding the changes on May 17 at 5:30 p.m. inside the courthouse, and the second reading and adoption of the amendments are set to take place at the next regular county meeting on May 19.

The ordinance changes will affect only the county and not the City of Blairsville.

In other business, Paris said it was time to update the county’s Local Emergency Operations Plan, which must take place every four years. The purpose of the plan is “to provide a comprehensive framework for countywide emergency management.”

Paris welcomed local Emergency Management Agency Director David Dyer to speak on the update.

Dyer described the plan as the “master plan” outlining how everybody involved in responding to any emergency – county government, public safety, private industry, etc. –

“would respond to and recover from a manmade or natural disaster.”

“If an emergency happens in Union County right now,” Dyer said, “we would activate this plan, and it refers to a whole lot of other plans that are very specific in detail (regarding different emergency scenarios like tornadoes and winter storms).”

He went on to say that the changes in the plan include different formatting required by the Georgia Emergency Management Agency and revisions to tighten up the language of the plan, which is available in its entirety at the Commissioner’s Office.

Moving on, Paris accepted the annual agreement between the county and Air Methods Corporation to provide emergency air medical transportation for all county residents.

The renewed agreement will run between June 1, 2022, and May 31, 2023. The cost of the agreement “is not to exceed \$76,765, and the county will only be responsible for half of that amount,” with the other half being paid for by Union General Health System.

Effectively, the plan allows residents in need of medically necessary life flights to receive transportation to any number of nearby trauma centers at no individual cost so long as the helicopter is operated by Air Methods, which houses a chopper at Union General Hospital.

Paris said that there are other medical helicopter companies that offer life flight coverage should residents opt to purchase separate memberships for those services, as the odds are good but there is no guarantee that an Air Methods helicopter will be the one providing transport.

In his Commissioner’s Comments, Paris announced that the ALDI Grocery Store had broken ground on construction at the intersection of Farmers Market Way and Georgia 515, with a potential completion date of October 2022.

He also announced the start of construction on a new Convenience Center for bagged household garbage and recyclables, to be located in the north end of the county off Moccasin Road near Fire Station No. 4. He expects that to be completed in about three months’ time.

Construction is nearing completion on the new addition at the Union County Senior Center consisting of a new meeting room, restroom and utility area to augment the many opportunities and programs the center makes available to the county’s senior residents, Paris said.

Also to serve the north end of the county will be Fire Station No. 13 at the entrance to the Hidden Harbor subdivision up Murphy Highway. Paris said the SPLOST/American Rescue Plan-funded station will soon be going out to bid for construction.

“(It) will be not only a Fire Station down there, but it will also have the ability to be an ambulance station,” Paris said. “Not only will we be providing a Convenience Center on that end of the county, now we’ll be able to provide a Fire Station, and when the hospital has a need, it’ll be set up for ambulance service there, too. So, it saves a lot of time getting people going back and forth.”

Paris discussed the plans for a roundabout to be installed at the intersection of Pat Haralson Memorial Drive and Deep South Farm Road at the Union General Hospital, which is covered in detail in a separate article in this week’s edition of the North Georgia News.

The commissioner also spoke on Windstream being awarded more than \$11 million in federal grants to build fiber

optic internet in Union County. He said fiber expansion by Windstream and Blue Ridge Mountain EMC could result in up to 95% of county households having fiber internet access in the next few years.

High Speed Chase...from Page 1A

“When the vehicles reached State Route 75 Alt, both vehicles turned northbound,” GSP said. “At the intersection of SR 75 Alt and State Route 17, the black Dodge Challenger turned south (right) and silver Mitsubishi Lancer turned north (left).”

“TFC Matheson continued pursuing the Mitsubishi Lancer northbound on State Route 17. As the vehicle attempted to negotiate a curve to the right at a very high rate of speed, it crossed the centerline and struck another vehicle, a Nissan

Murano SUV, head on.

“The Mitsubishi came to a final rest over the guardrail at the bottom of the embankment. (The Nissan) came to a final rest in the roadway and was lightly struck by a third vehicle on the passenger side door area.

“The driver of the fleeing vehicle succumbed to his injuries at Northeast Georgia Medical Center. The driver of (the Nissan) received serious injuries and was transported to Northeast Georgia Medical Center as a result of being struck by (the

fleeing vehicle).

“The Specialized Collision Reconstruction Team was requested to assist in the investigation.”

While on the scene of the Mitsubishi crash, the Helen Police Department notified GSP that the black Dodge Challenger had crashed in the City of Helen, and Trooper Matheson took charges on that individual.

“Names of all parties will not be released at this time, as this is an ongoing investigation,” GSP said. “Next of Kin Death Notification is pending.”

School Board...from Page 1A



UCHS student John Kluth came in First Place in the SkillsUSA state cabinetmaking competition, pictured here with CTAE Director Josh Davis and Construction Teacher Charley Cattanaach. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

be discussed in December or January of each year, the distribution of federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief grants complicated the usual scheduling.

Speaking of finances, Superintendent John Hill wanted to clear up apparent misconceptions stemming from information shared on social media regarding the Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax, which is up for renewal in the May 24 General Primary Election.

Hill said the ESPLOST sales tax only allows a single percent of eligible local purchases to go to the school system for capital projects, and rather than squandering its finances, the system has used the funds appropriately, as borne out during the audit presentation that evening.

He then offered a lengthy list of projects paid for by ESPLOST, which has been repeatedly supported by voters over the last two decades. Hill's list included but was not limited to:

The High School Vocational Building, Fine Arts Center, the Agriscience Facility, the C-Wing addition at the High School, and most recently, new renovations being performed on Blairsville campuses and at Woody Gap School in Suches. Hill also said that no ESPLOST money goes to increasing staff salaries. Instead, the funds go toward ensuring student safety and increasing opportunities for local school children, and the superintendent became emotional when defending the system's financial choices.

"You hear people gripe about security – how do you put the price on the safety of a student?" Hill asked. "I can't put a numerical value on that. I can tell you how much a bus is. I can tell you precisely how much it costs per foot to run fencing, flooring, paint, ceiling, lights."

Added Hill, "I cannot tell you how much the cost of a human life is. And that's a fact. Those are things that continuously have to be addressed in this school district, and as long as I work here, they will be."

That is not to say Hill doesn't understand the other side of the tax. He has seen in his own family via his grandmother what retirees struggle with when living on a fixed income, he said, noting that, to straddle that fine line fairly, the schools must operate with empathy.

"We hold each other

accountable (on spending) because we think about those people that we grew up in a community with," Hill said. "They took care of us as children, and we take care of them as older folks."

"I'm really proud of the fact that we do the best we can every day. Are we perfect? Absolutely not. There was one man that was perfect, and He walked on Earth, and His name was Jesus Christ. And it wasn't John Hill or Derrick Pruitt or Mike Patton, OK?"

"But we do the very best we can every single day when we get up to serve those children right there because there's nothing more important in this community. And that's a fact. You don't find that fact on Facebook; you find it in our schools. And thank the Lord that we've got such supportive parents so we do a good job through your kids."

In other business, Career, Technical and Agricultural Education Director Josh Davis introduced CTAE Finalists during the Awards and Recognition part of the meeting.

Union County Middle School, under Ag Teacher Katie Rittenhouse, boasted a group of four girls who won Fourth Place overall at the state level several weeks ago at the Horse Evaluation Career Development Event.

It should be noted that because of late entry, the girls only had six opportunities to practice yet still walked away with high placements.

Rosalie Jarrett won Fifth Place overall for the entire contest, and Charlie Llewellyn and Peyton Seabolt tied for 17th Place. While unfortunately not present for the board recognition, Stella Collins was nonetheless awarded a Certificate of Achievement for her accomplishments.

Also awarded was Union County High School student John Kluth under Construction Teacher Charles Cattanaach.

Only in his first year of the SkillsUSA Program, Kluth managed to win the impressive title of First Place over the entire state in cabinetmaking. Because of his achievement, Kluth has had at least 20 job offers.

In June, Cattanaach will be taking Kluth to the SkillsUSA National Conference to compete once again. Hopes and expectations are high that he will "bring home the gold" a second time.

Next, Union County Middle School Principal Pat Donaldson introduced an overnight field trip request to

the board for up and coming eighth-grade students to participate in a Georgia Studies trip in place of a Washington, D.C. trip, with funding to be provided by two fundraisers.

"We have decided to go with the Georgia Studies trip because, one, our eighth-graders will be in Georgia History Class next year... (and there's the obvious concerns of going to D.C. right now," Donaldson said.

Featured destinations will include Warm Springs' Little White House Museum, Andersonville Prison and Museum, the Marine Science Center at Tybee Island, and a train and boat ride in Okefenokee Swamp.

The city of Savannah will also feature heavily in the field trip and will give students a chance to go on the Massie Heritage Tour, visit places like the First African Church and Fort James Jackson, explore a haunted mansion, and have dinner at The Pirates' House.

Impressed with the scope of the experience, board members approved the trip unanimously.

One public speaker signed up to address the board and was called up toward the end of the meeting. Lifelong Blairsville resident and parent Luke Colwell discussed the importance of continuing the ESPLOST in May, and he focused on the tax's impact on the schools.

"I know that we're going to have no choice but to expand our school system," said Colwell, citing an increase in traffic and the greater sizes of his children's classes as evidence of local growth. "Instead of having our property taxes raised, I believe the ESPLOST is the best way for us to be fiscally responsible."

Colwell said his main motivation in supporting ESPLOST is to continue providing better services not just to his own two – soon to be three – children, but to give every student a chance to thrive in settings that are safe and effectively equipped to teach.

Setting up trailers to accommodate growth, in Cowell's mind, just won't do.

"I had a basketball coach tell me one time, 'You never stay the same. You're either getting better or you're getting worse,'" Colwell said. "Well, I think Union County's not one to want to get worse. We're one to improve and get better."

The School Board meets the third Tuesday of each month starting at 6 p.m. at the Union County Board of Education Office.

Roundabout...from Page 1A



Local and state officials gathered for the roundabout announcement last Thursday on land the hospital will be donating to house the new intersection design. Photo by Mark Smith

EMS Station, and the Union County Transfer Station, all of which happen to be located on or near Deep South Farm Road, which adds to the demands of an ever-busier intersection at Pat Haralson Drive.

With the major uptick in vehicles traversing that intersection due to hospital growth, a greater volume of ambulance calls, and a remodeled Transfer Station, it has become increasingly perilous to turn from Deep South Farm Road onto Pat Haralson Drive.

This situation has not gone unnoticed by the county or state, and especially not by Union General Hospital, where incoming and outgoing ambulances can be held up by heavy traffic. And this is to say nothing of the rising likelihood of automobile accidents at that intersection.

To make the project possible, Union General Health System is donating the land the roundabout will be constructed on.

"It's going to take the money, probably in the million-dollar range, that we're going to get from the state," Paris said. "And then we've got about another \$1.5 million that we're going to have to come up with through the county."

Gunter said he and Gooch worked together to obtain the funding.

"The money has been secured through the state (for this roundabout project)," Gooch said. "It's called a GTIB Grant – that's Georgia Transportation Infrastructure Bank, (which is part of the Georgia Department of Transportation)."

Union General Health System CEO Kevin Bierschen spoke at the event, highlighting hospital developments that are now in progress and necessitate the improvements at the intersection.

"A little bit about what's going on at the hospital," Bierschen said. "We have a (new) medical office building. Most of you have seen it. It's going to be a 40,000 square foot, three-story building. It's going to house orthopedics on the first floor, OB on the second floor, and Piedmont (Heart) is going on the third floor."

"We've also been approved for adding on to the hospital, which is going to be about 40,000 square feet. We're adding four stories on the end of the hospital where the helicopter is currently parked."

"We've got a lot more people using the hospital. I think last year we had 2,000 more hospital visits. We had our

highest OB – we did about 623 deliveries last year. Our volume is going up here."

County Manager Larry Garrett said the roundabout project has been in the works for about a year, with conversations having been driven by the desire to make it easier and safer "to get people in and out of the hospital, especially when they started this new construction."

The groundbreaking will probably take place in the next two to three months, Garrett said, adding that the county is waiting on final project drawings before moving onto construction.

"As you can tell, we've got a lot of work to do – water, power, sewer, telephone, fiber," Garrett said, noting that all of the abovementioned infrastructure runs underground to supply the hospital complex. "Everything that goes through our town is right here on this corner."

He also said that the biggest challenge will be moving the utilities without disrupting hospital operations, estimating that the roundabout project should take about a year and a half to complete after breaking ground, though a more accurate timeline will be available in the coming months.

Reece Farm presents Mountain Gypsy Music April 29th

Reece Farm presents Curtis and Kim Jones, Mountain Gypsy Music on Friday, April 29th! Bring your lawn chairs to the pavilion and enjoy their music for two hours 1-3 PM. Free admission, donations appreciated!

Curtis Jones reins as the most highly respected flatpicking guitarist on the planet, expanding on the legacy forged by musicians such as John Coltrane, David Gilmour, Doc Watson and Tony Rice. Jones is often called by fans and critics alike, "The world's fastest and cleanest" acoustic guitarist, an extraordinary technique that he both teaches and brings to his contemporary guitar performances and productions. Speed is only a small part of what Curtis can do though. He efficiently plays 22 instruments and is self-taught on all! Through his pure guitar mastery, he has created a new style of Music - "Mountain Gypsy Music" allowing his abilities to weave in and out of Bluegrass, Jazz, Rock, Flamenco, and World Music. It is more original than anything that has been heard since Django Reinhardt!

Kim Jones is an artist, singer, and songwriter. Her vocal influences growing up were Wynonna Judd, Patty Loveless, Janice Joplin, Bobbie Gentry, Bonnie Raitt, and Stevie



Curtis and Kim Jones

Nicks. Her Musical influences include Jaco Pastorius, Richard Wright, Bill Evans, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, and McCoy Tyner. She sings and plays upright Bass with Curtis' Bluegrass band- Primal Roots, performs with Curtis in their Mountain Gypsy Music duo. Kim has been singing her whole life but has only just begun to perform in front of Audiences within the past few years. Kim plays and sings with emotion and delta blues style soul. When asked about her goals through music, her response is "I just want to share it. It's in here, deep down inside, and I

wanna let it out!" Bring your lawn chairs! Free admission, donations welcome!

Byron Herbert Reece was a farmer and a writer, and his books are available in the gift shop. The farm is set up as a legacy to him & his family with exhibits, farm animals, local books and crafts. There is also a hiking trail from the farm to Vogel State Park.

Open Wednesday thru Saturday 10 until 4; free admission; 8552 Gainesville Hwy., Blairsville, GA; 706-745-2034. FB: Reece Heritage Farm, www.reecefarm.org.