

North Georgia News

3 Sections 26 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Legal Organ of Union County

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Wednesday, May 1, 2024

4-H Shotgun Team enjoys banner shooting event

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Union County kids tasted victory multiple times over on April 20 when the local 4-H Modified Trap Shotgun Team hosted a District Qualifying Match.

Students from Dade, Gordon, Madison and Rabun counties joined the local 4-H'ers at around 9 a.m. in the competition field off Thomas Farm Road, with all enjoying a great show of support from the family members and friends who came out to cheer them.

Shooters were split into two divisions: Juniors for middle school students and Seniors for the high schoolers. From there, the students divided

up further into teams of the same age group, with four or five students on each team.

To understand what goes into Modified Trap shoots, one must pay attention to the setup. The shooter stands on one side of a large sheet of plywood while a trap machine called a wobbler is set up on the opposite side.

Hidden from view, the wobbler slings clay discs called skeets in random directions when the shooter gives the signal to "pull." The targets might sail left or right, up or down, but they'll always fly away from the shooter. Marksmen must think fast and adjust their aim accordingly.

When it's their turn, kids

See 4-H Shotgun Team, Page 4A



Union County 4-H Modified Trap Shotgun Team juniors and seniors in the recent District Qualifying shoot.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Woman from Union County murdered in Andrews, NC

News Special

ANDREWS, N.C. – On April 22, the Cherokee County Sheriff's Office responded to a call at 56 Poplar Cove in the Andrews community of Cherokee County.

Upon arrival, responders found Windy Thompson, originally from Blairsville, deceased and suspected a homicide had occurred.

The late Thompson's vehicle was missing from her residence.

The Cherokee County Sheriff's Office and the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigations conducted an investigation and identified Benjamin Fowler, a resident of Cherokee County, South Carolina, as a suspect in the

homicide.

Detectives with Clay County Sheriff's Office initiated contact with the South Carolina law enforcement.

On April 24, the South Carolina authorities received information that Fowler had committed suicide in the late Thompson's missing vehicle. It was confirmed that the deceased was in fact Fowler and the vehicle in which he was found was in fact the late Thompson's missing vehicle.

Sheriff Smith extends his "deep appreciation to the men and women in law enforcement within our agency and within our partner agencies."

He sends his gratitude to the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigations, Cherokee



Windy Howard Thompson
County NC Communications Center and Cherokee County Sheriff's Office in South Carolina, all of which helped bring this case to a very quick conclusion.

Law enforcement cooperation leads to arrest of fugitive

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

A Union County fugitive from justice is now behind bars after multiple area agencies cooperated last week to bring him into custody.

Billy "Bosco" Chance Schmeltz, 41, of Blairsville, had been on the run from law enforcement since March 27 after he allegedly burglarized a home near where he was staying in the Choestoe area.

"We received information from the Towns County Sheriff's Office that Schmeltz was at a business in Fannin County," the Union County Sheriff's Office said

on its Facebook page April 26.

"We quickly notified Fannin County with this information, and they were able to take Schmeltz into custody within minutes of us receiving this information.

"We would like to thank both the Towns County Sheriff's Office and the Fannin County Sheriff's Office for their assistance in capturing this individual."

The burglary in question occurred on Sunday, March 24, at a small cabin owned by a part-time resident who was not home at the time, UCSO Capt. Daren "Bear" Osborn said.

When the security camera feed at the property



Billy "Bosco" Schmeltz
was interrupted that Sunday, the property owner drove up the

See Schmeltz Captured, Page 2A

Fugitive from Union County arrested in Central America

By Shawn Jarrard
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A former Union County resident wanted by local and state law enforcement was arrested internationally last week on charges of aggravated assault and aggravated sodomy.

Last November, the Union County Sheriff's Office requested assistance on the case from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, which quickly put out a BOLO for Landon Padgett, 25, originally from Florida.

"The GBI case agent was able to track him to Florida and then ultimately to Honduras," GBI said Friday.

"With the help of Interpol, the State Department and the U.S. Marshals Service, Padgett was arrested in Honduras on April 18, 2024, and was returned to the United States on April 20, 2024.

"Padgett remains in custody and will be booked into the Union County Detention Center when he is returned to Union County."

As the case remains active, additional information was not available at press time, though the GBI said there would be additional charges for Padgett.

He has been charged only and is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.



Landon Padgett

General Primary Election early voting began Monday

By Shawn Jarrard
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In-person early voting for the General Primary/Nonpartisan Election began Monday, giving primary voters the chance to select political party nominees to appear on ballots in November.

On the Republican side, there are just three county-level seats featuring primary opposition: Sole Commissioner, Sheriff and District 1 School Board.

Only one Democrat qualified for local office – as Sole Commissioner – and candidates for all other county contests qualified unopposed, though there is Republican Primary opposition in the race for District 8 State Representative.

Also appearing on ballots will be state party questions to help each party set political priorities moving forward, as well as nonpartisan candidates.

Election Day for the upcoming primary is Tuesday, May 21. There will be three weeks of early voting for this election running weekdays



With the General Primary/Nonpartisan Election in May, the new Union County Voting Center will be hosting its second election since facility construction wrapped up last year.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

between Monday, April 29, and Friday, May 17.

Early voting will also include two weekend voting opportunities on Saturday, May 4, and Saturday, May 11.

All in-person early voting takes place from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. inside the new Union County Voting Center at 33

Roscoe Collins Drive, located across from Union County High School off the Glenn Gooch Bypass.

General Primary/Nonpartisan voters who decide to wait until Election Day to cast their ballots will need to head to their predetermined

See Early Voting, Page 2A

Sen. Gooch, Rep. Gunter give General Assembly updates

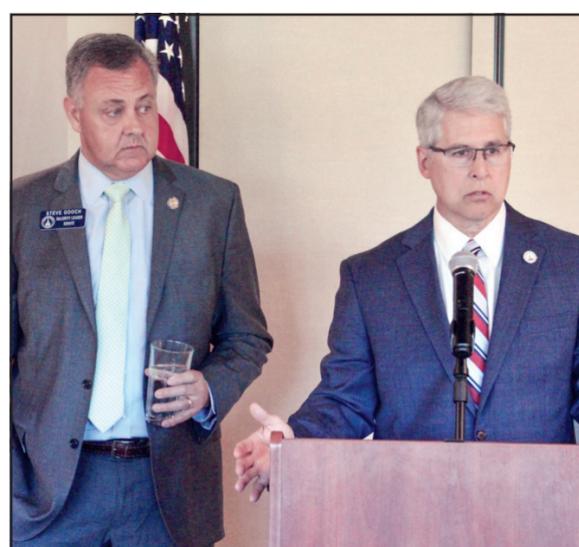
By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

District 51 State Sen. Steve Gooch and District 8 State Rep. Stan Gunter joined the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce inside the Community Center on Thursday, April 25, to deliver news from the most recent legislative session of the Georgia General Assembly.

The General Assembly gathered to conduct 2024 business over 40 days between Jan. 8 and March 28, introducing, debating and passing bills governing a variety of state laws.

One session highlight from Sen. Gooch included passage of a property assessment cap "to match, not to exceed, inflation from the previous year." The bill will keep property values from shooting up double-digit percentages from annual reassessments alone, as they have in recent years.

Gooch also gave an economic forecast for the state, saying that "we do see some revenue drops coming," but he noted that Georgia has



Georgia Sen. Steve Gooch and Rep. Stan Gunter offered remarks in the annual Legislative Wrap-Up Breakfast by the Chamber of Commerce last week.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

benefited from a record surplus, enabling lawmakers to continue reducing the state income tax rate for the third time in two years.

On the state's finances, Gooch said that Gov. Brian Kemp would soon be signing a record \$36.1 billion budget

for Fiscal Year 2025, to include additional funding for school districts, public safety and road projects around Georgia.

Offering a preview of an upcoming local project, Gooch said that the state will be installing a roundabout at

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TRACK
State Sectionals
5/4 10:30 AM
@ East Jackson

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Early Voting...from Page 1A

voting precincts between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. on May 21.

Union County has 11 voting precincts: Blairsville, Jones Creek, Choestoe, Owlton, Coosa, Pat Colwell, Dooley, Suches, Gum Log, Trackrock and Ivy Log.

For people voting absentee-by-mail, ballots may be requested at the Voter Registration Office inside the Voting Center now through Friday, May 10. Absentee ballot applications can be returned by mail, fax, as an email attachment, or in person at the Voting Center.

Voters returning absentee ballots can use the official drop box inside the Voting Center during early voting hours; mail them back in plenty of time to be counted after polls close on Election Day; or drop them off in person at the Voting Center through 7 p.m. on Election Day.

Monday, April 22, was the registration deadline to vote in this election.

Candidates qualified in March for the May 21 General Primary/Nonpartisan Election, and there is a runoff date of June 18, which may be necessary in the sheriff's race that has three Republican candidates, as a candidate must receive a majority vote to win.

Primary winners will move on to the big General Election that is slated for Tuesday, Nov. 5. Just one local contest will feature opposition in November – the office of Sole Commissioner – during

this presidential election year.

Oct. 7 is the deadline to register for the General Election.

Residents may visit <https://mvp.sos.ga.gov/s/> for voter registration status,

mail-in application and ballot status, poll location, registration information on file with the county, sample ballots for upcoming elections, provisional ballot status and more.

Schmeltz Captured...from Page 1A

following day from the Atlanta area to see what was going on, only to find that his cabin had been burglarized, Osborn said.

Someone had pried a window loose to gain entry and stolen many items from the cabin, including the security system, a coffee maker, solar power equipment, pillows and more; even pieces of outdoor furniture went missing, Osborn said.

The Sheriff's Office quickly developed a person of interest in the case, as Schmeltz had prior run-ins with law

enforcement and was known to frequent a Twiggs Road residence located about 100 yards from the burglarized property, Osborn said.

When investigators pulled into the nearby residence on March 27 to speak with Schmeltz, they saw him loading items into a vehicle. As soon as he realized that deputies had arrived, Osborn said Schmeltz took off on foot and disappeared into the woods.

There, investigators recovered approximately

\$10,000 worth of stolen items, which were verified from photographic records kept by the owner of the cabin, Osborn said.

Schmeltz is facing felony charges of first-degree burglary and theft by taking. At the time, he also had outstanding warrants for failure to appear in court and parole violation, according to the Sheriff's Office.

He has been charged only and is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

Reece Heritage Farm presents Brent Key on May 3rd and Fiddler Wyatt Espalin on May 4th

Reece Heritage Farm presents a new performer to the farm, Brent Key, Saturday, May 3rd, 1-3 p.m. at the pavilion.

"So I guess music is in my DNA, lol. I am a descendant of Frances Scott Key who penned a popular little ditty that everyone knows "Star Spangled Banner," which was originally titled "In Defense of Fort Mchenry," written as a poem for said named Battle in Baltimore, MD. I am also part Cherokee as my great great grandmother was a Cherokee Native. I've always had a love for music but only started playing and singing later in life, in 2020 I started a band called Struck By Lightning which is still strong in our area as SBL 2. In 2023 I began a solo entertainer project as Georgia's Native Son and am now BMK Music Entertainment which is my Facebook page. I play everything from old Rock Classics, Country, Rock, Blues and some in between. Everyone seems to love the variety of music I play. I hope everyone and the patrons of Reece Farm will come out on May 3rd to enjoy some tunes and have a good time."

Solo Singer-Songwriter. Fiddler Wyatt Espalin will be at the Reece Heritage Farm Saturday, May 4, from 1 until 3 p.m.

With the Ocoee River in East Tennessee as the backdrop, and North Georgia on the horizon, Wyatt Espalin's debut album, Songwriter/Singer (2015), was born. En-



Brent Key

tertaining audiences in his hometown of Hiawassee, GA as early as age eight, Wyatt's passion for music was obvious, even from the music barn stage built by his grandfather on the campground where Wyatt was raised. He and his brother Matt were known as "The Fiddling Brothers." While Matt hung up his fiddle and bow after high school, Wyatt was just getting started. Armed with a guitar and a desire to write songs, he paired with his friend, Cobi Ferguson to form the acclaimed Americana duo, Trees Leave.

Combining electric guitar with traditional bluegrass roots led to a noticeably unique sound and a growing fan base. Having years of touring under their belts and two successful albums, Run (2008) and The Gospel of Hurt (2010), it was time for Cobi to settle down, and Wyatt to find a new setting fit for a more personal level of songwriting. So alone began his sabbatical to the Ocoee



Wyatt Espalin

River. While working as a raft guide and caring for his ailing Granddaddy, Wyatt began writing the songs for his debut album. His songs have garnered much attention winning the New Songwriting competition at the acclaimed L.E.A.F. festival in 2014. Performing solo or traveling with a revolving set of talented musicians as Trees Leave, Wyatt Espalin has found a way to continue writing and performing these songs that have longed to be free; to be pardoned, like the river.

Bring your lawn chairs and enjoy music! Free! Donations welcome. The farm is also a beautiful venue for your special day with affordable rates. We now have trout stocked in Wolf creek (please follow all Georgia Fishing rules).

Check out our "BHR Farm Village" cabin rentals on VRBO! 706-745-2034; 8552 Gainesville Hwy., Blairsville, GA; FB: Reece Heritage Farm, www.reecefarm.org.

Blairsville's Veterans Commanders Group seeks entries for Annual Memorial Day Parade and Ceremony



The Blairsville – Union County Memorial Day Parade Committee invites you to participate in this annual parade which starts at 10:30 AM on Saturday, May 25, 2024.

The theme this year is "Honoring our Korea Veterans: The forgotten war that never ended." We will be grateful to have two Korean War Veterans, one who survived the 1950 battle at Chosin Reservoir, North Korea (known as the "frozen Chosin"), as Grand Marshals.

Any church, business, civic organization or other group can participate in the parade to support the theme. Whether it's a decorated float, vehicle, or anything else, participation is key to properly supporting our Veteran community and remembering those that gave the ultimate sacrifice. However, at the minimum, entries are asked to respectively display our American flag. This year all entries will be judges for 1st, 2nd and 3rd place overall.

As in year's past, the parade route will begin at the old gymnasium, past Union County War Memorial Park, turn right on Cleveland Street and wind around the old courthouse onto Blue Ridge Street. It will then turn left at the public library and head back to the

Union County War Memorial Park. Also, please join our Veterans at the park for a Memorial Day ceremony that will begin shortly after the parade.

Even though this is an election year, Memorial Day commemorates U.S. men and women who died while in military service. The committee asks that everyone put aside all political issues and advertising

and honor our fallen heroes with a large turnout showing a sincere display of American patriotism.

For more information on how to participate in the parade fill out the form below and return to the Leon Davenport Veterans Center, 78 Blue Ridge Hwy., Blairsville, GA 30512 or contact the committee at ga.iraweaver121@gmail.com.

Honoring Our Korea Veterans



The forgotten war that never ended

Memorial Day Parade Saturday, May 25 • 10:30 am Downtown Blairsville

Name of Entrant: _____

Contact name: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Please indicate number of the following types of entries:

_____ Float (Length: _____)

_____ Vintage Car/Truck (Type of vehicle: _____)

_____ Other (specify: _____)

Please no throwing of candy or other items along the parade route

If your civic organization, church, business or other group wishes to participate in the Memorial Day Parade, please fill out this entry form and email it to: ga.iraweaver121@gmail.com

Please have your entry checked in between 8:30–9:30 am in front of the old recreation gym at 371 School Circle, Blairsville, GA 30512

Sponsored by all Union County Veterans Organizations

Authorities searching for woman reported missing

News Special

YOUNG HARRIS – On April 17, the Towns County Sheriff's Office received a report of a missing person. Tanya Michelle Sorrells, 47, of Young Harris, was last seen on Sunday, April 6, at a residence in the Gumlog Road area.

Sorrells had withdrawn money from her personal banking account and told a relative she was going to Columbia, South Carolina.

A phone ping was conducted on her cellphone and showed her phone was indeed in the Columbia, South Carolina, area.

At this time, Sorrells has been entered as a missing endangered person into the National Crime Information Center Missing and Unidentified Persons System, as well as the Georgia equivalent. Due to some mental health issues, a Mattie's Call was issued.

The investigation is active with the assistance of the Georgia Bureau of Investigations.

TCSO is asking the public for assistance in locating Sorrells. If anyone has information regarding her whereabouts, please contact the Towns County Sheriff's Office at 706-896-4444.



Tanya Michelle Sorrells

4-H Shotgun Team...from Page 1A



Union County students learn many valuable life lessons in 4-H shooting sports, housed under Project SAFE, which stands for "Shooting Awareness, Fun and Education."

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

are called up to shoot at 25 targets. Depending on their age, the number they hit determines whether they make the cut to move on to the State Tourney in Rock Eagle, set to take place May 11. Juniors must shoot 16 targets, and seniors must tag at least 20.

"Many of these kids that may not reach the (qualifying) mark, they're new," said local 4-H Extension Coordinator Timothy Jennings. "They've been shooting for maybe three months, and so what (Head Coach Keith Herbert) does a lot is get them from shooting nothing to shooting qualification to get to State."

Out of the 55 students from the participating counties at the match, Herbert kept an eye on about 21 of them. Assistant Coach Aaron Dills took turns with Herbert joining the Union students up at the plywood when it was their turn to shoot, primarily operating the wobbler.

In the end, Union County conquered the scoreboards. First, Second and Third Place winners were chosen for both divisions, and Union County teams won not one but two spots for both age groups.

First Place for the Junior Division was Union Junior Team 1, made up of Austin Sayama, who also received the High Individual Award in the Junior Division; Isaiah Owenby; Niah Abruscato and Mason Stephens.

In Second Place was Union Junior Team 2, consisting

of Malachi Lee; Aria Mederos; Teddy Guay and Ellianna Payne. Junior Division's Third Place spot went to Rabun County competitors.

As for the Senior Division, First Place went to Union County Senior Team 1 with Kade Dills; Doocoa Seabolt; Jack Hyatt; Ethan Norton and Crews Chastain.

Second Place for the Senior Division went to Union County Senior Team 2, including Alex Henson; Olivia Temples; Reid Norton; Caleb Lee and Mason Davenport. Third Place went to shooters from Gordon County.

Matthew Elliott shot as an individual.

As his final competition

as an Extension Agent, Jennings was blown away by how overwhelmingly Union County students "swept" the competition, making that day's match especially worthy of remembrance.

"I'm very proud. We've been hosting the District Qualification Match for probably 15 years," recalled Jennings. "This is the first year that we've swept – basically, we have First and Second (Place) high schoolers, First and Second (Place) middle schoolers."

"I think they did great, fantastic," said Herbert after the competition, immensely proud and congratulating his students for a job well done. "All the kids did real well."



Assistant Coach Aaron Dills works with Head Coach Keith Herbert to get the students ready for competition, with regular team practices starting in February. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Legislative Updates...from Page 1A

the intersection of Gainesville Highway and Glenn Gooch Bypass in the next few years, with a temporary traffic light to be erected there soon in advance of construction.

Gooch also touted Georgia being named the No. 1 state to do business “for the 10th consecutive year,” attributing that success largely to the favorable tax climate and transportation infrastructure available in Georgia.

To protect the state’s business-friendly status, however, Gooch said that the General Assembly will keep working on its tort reform agenda in coming sessions.

According to the Congressional Research Service, “A tort is an act or omission that causes legally cognizable harm to persons or property. Tort law, in turn, is the body of rules concerned with remedying harms caused by a person’s wrongful or injurious actions.”

In Georgia, the tort law environment is out of balance in favor of people bringing lawsuits, Gooch said, contributing to increasing costs of insurance in many sectors, from corporate liability coverage to personal insurance premiums paid by motorists and homeowners.

“We’re having trouble getting insurance companies to stay in Georgia,” Gooch said, listing the Peach State as one of just four states in the nation to allow “direct action,” where injured parties can sue insurance companies directly.

Added Gooch, “Don’t get me wrong – I believe every victim should be compensated fairly. But we have runaway jury verdicts in this state and around the country that are causing these premiums to go through the roof.”

Another example of tort reform deals with “premises liability,” in which a property owner can be held financially liable for torts that occur on their premises, and Gooch said he and his fellow lawmakers will be pursuing “a common-sense solution to the problem.”

Rep. Gunter led off his portion of the event with talk of the “fast-paced” lawmaking process in Atlanta, describing an environment filled with lobbyists, protestors, visitors

and more, with the busiest days being “Crossover Day” for bills changing chambers and “Sine Die” for bill voting.

Touching on tort reform, Gunter said that it’s an incredibly complicated subject, which is why it has taken so long to achieve progress, despite Gov. Kemp having named tort reform as a priority.

“We had a bill in ... the Judiciary Committee on direct action, and there was a gentleman from the insurance industry that came up to speak about the bill,” Gunter said. “I asked him point blank, if we could give you everything you want in this bill, will it reduce the cost of insurance in the state of Georgia? He never would answer my question.

“And I think that’s the goal that the governor is trying to get to. He wants to lower everybody’s insurance rates, make it more affordable for everybody, and I agree with that.”

Gunter cited “the seatbelt rule” as another example of tort reform in which the fact of an injured person not wearing a seatbelt in a car accident is inadmissible in civil court proceedings, even though a jury can apportion fault to the parties involved, and “that needs to change,” he said.

Also passed this session were a \$1,000 increase to the dependent deduction for state income taxes; a homestead exemption increase from \$2,000 to \$4,000, to include a call for a referendum in November to raise that amount to \$10,000; and an immigration enforcement bill.

Pertaining to immigration, the new bill makes it a crime for county sheriffs whose offices arrest illegal immigrants to refuse to notify or turn them over to ICE, including those with active warrants. The bill also creates “stiff” financial penalties for sanctuary cities.

Another bill that passed this year and was signed by the governor last week is the Georgia Squatter Reform Act, which criminalizes people entering and staying in homes that do not belong to them.

The new law speeds up evictions for squatters by turning what was once



L-R: Luke Hetland of Lt. Gov. Burt Jones’ Office; Chamber President Steve Rowe; Rep. Stan Gunter; Blairsville Mayor Jim Conley; Sen. Steve Gooch; UCDA Director Mitch Griggs; and YHC President Drew Van Horn were just a few of the people to attend the breakfast.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

considered a civil proceeding into a criminal process, and Gunter said that, while he doesn’t believe this is a problem here yet, “it’s coming.”

Also passed was a bill to create an Adult Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation Multidisciplinary Team for each judicial circuit to establish new resources to protect elder and disabled adults from receiving physical, financial and other abuse, including from scammers.

Regarding the controversial Senate Bill 115 on fishing, hunting and traversing navigable streams – signed into law in 2023 – the legislature this year passed an amendment removing language that confused people over whether they still retained private ownership of their waterways.

Essentially, the amendment goes a step further to protect private property owners from unauthorized people being on their land while keeping streams classified as “navigable” open to the public for specific uses.

It’s a complicating issue that relies on balance to protect both private and public interests,

and Gunter said it could become even more complicated after an upcoming “study of navigability of Georgia,” which will potentially change the list of streams that are classified as

navigable.

Gunter recently announced that he has metastatic prostate cancer that has spread to a bone in his shoulder, but he is receiving

medical treatment and said that his prognosis is good. If re-elected this year, Gunter said he feels confident he will be able to fully execute the duties of the office.

The Mountain Shelter Board thanks community



The Board of Directors of the Mountain Shelter would like to thank the community for the support you have provided to our Shelter and to our Thrift Stores over the years. As you know, the dogs and cats of Union and Towns County are now, as they always have been, our top priority. We would like to congratulate the staff of our Shelter who recently underwent an unannounced visit from the Georgia Department of Agriculture and received a 100% rating. We’re proud of our staff and they made us even prouder with that rating.

As you may also know, we operate two thrift stores, one in Towns and one in Union County. You have most generously supported these stores by shopping in them and by donating to them. You have helped us provide the dogs and cats with first class care while they wait to be adopted.

We recently realized we have to make some changes at the Blairsville Thrift Store. It is an older building, and it’s time to do some repairs and remodeling. During the time that we deal with repairing and remodeling the store, we will remain open, though there may occasionally be reduction in hours. We hope you will understand.

We know the community will continue to support

the animals in our care as it always has. Please observe the times we will be unable to accept donations and make your donations instead to our Hiawassee store, Safe Pet Thrift Store, or Cast Off Pet Rescue Thrift Store. In the meantime, we still need your help. Volunteers would be appreciated, and we will happily accept any monetary contributions you may be moved to make.

We are excited about the plans we have to broaden and expand our services to the animals of these counties. Please be patient with us as we work through this remodeling. We know that the future will lead to even greater opportunities to serve the community and the dogs and cats who live here.