

Graduation...from Page 1A

enforced during filming. At the same time, all senior speeches are being recorded for editing into the graduation video for viewing on May 22.

Each senior is being allowed one carload of family members to attend the filming of their diploma presentation and any speeches they may deliver.

Parents are allowed to photograph their child walking across the stage, but everyone must wear facial coverings. Seniors may remove their masks temporarily while accepting diplomas.

Hill added that on May 22, UCHS is also conducting an on-campus fireworks display and a senior processional

through Blairsville.

The procession will begin around 7:45 p.m. at First Baptist Church and will end at UCHS. Family members may be in the vehicle with their graduate, but only one vehicle per senior is allowed. Fireworks will wrap up the evening at the conclusion of the graduation video.

At Woody Gap, the school will offer a somewhat-normal graduation for its six-member senior class.

The ceremony will be moved outside the gymnasium to the school parking lot for seniors and their families. Additional spectators will be allowed to view the exercises from across the street at the

Suches Community Center.

“Mrs. (Carol) Knight and her staff have done a great job, and they are going to make sure everyone stays safe,” Hill said. “Luckily, with only six graduates, we’re able to provide a little more leeway with the exercises.”

In financial news, Hill and the school board is closely monitoring a 14 percent budget shortfall expected next year stemming from cuts in state funding due to economic impacts of COVID-19.

Hill also anticipates an additional decrease in federal funding of at least 14 percent, despite those figures not yet being available.

“Right now, and I can’t stress this enough, we don’t know what these cuts are going to look like,” Hill said. “We’ve had extensive superintendent meetings trying to determine (the amount).”

“We’ve spoken to senators, representatives and the appropriations committee. Still, we’re not going to know what the number looks like until the state adopts a budget and the Georgia Department of Education sends us an allotment sheet (later in the summer).”

“We also anticipate an equal or greater cut in federal funding. The problem there,

that budget doesn’t come out until the end of September. If the federal cut is equal to state at 14 percent, we’re looking at a budget decrease ranging from \$2.5 million to a little over \$3.2 million.

“That is a severe cut and a more significant cut than what we saw during the recession between 2008-2010.”

With the uncertainty surrounding the FY21 budget and beyond, Hill said the school is playing it extremely safe with spending at the moment.

“We’re trying to be careful and make wise

decisions, but it’s difficult to make these decisions when you have no idea what the cuts are going to look like,” he said. “By the time we get the allotment sheet, which is what we go on, we’re looking at July or August before we can even begin developing a budget.”

Hill said the process of finalizing the budget would likely take another eight weeks, but it’s not just Union County – every Georgia school system is in the same boat.

“It takes us about two months to develop a budget once we get the allotment sheet

and go through the process,” he said. “You have your initial budget presentation, your tentative budget, and then you have to host a series of public hearings for comments on the budget.”

“So, we won’t be able to adopt a budget until after the school year begins. But this isn’t just affecting Union County or just K-12 education. It’s affecting every educational agency; it’s hurting higher education and everyone across the state, so it’s very concerning.”

Early Voting...from Page 1A

increase in absentee voting is a welcome addition in 2020.

And now that the state is finally ready to resume electoral proceedings amid one of the strangest election seasons on record, people who do decide to vote in person should expect longer than usual wait times, as social distancing measures will be implemented.

For the General Primary, voters will be selecting candidates for various local, state and federal offices to lead their party of choice in the Nov. 3 General Election, and winners of the Nonpartisan Election will be sworn into office in 2021.

Sample ballots listing all candidates in the June 9 election appeared in the May 6 edition of the newspaper, and these ballots can be found at mvp.sos.ga.gov.

It should be noted that the Special Election to fill the remaining term of retired U.S. Sen. Johnny Isakson will take place in November and will not appear in the General Primary Election.

Early voting for the General Primary will run weekdays between Monday, May 18, and Friday, June 5, during which time locally registered voters can cast their votes at the Union County Courthouse from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., even during lunchtime.

The one exception will be Memorial Day, or Monday, May 25. There will be no voting in Union County on Memorial Day, as the courthouse will be closed in observance of the federal and state holiday.

Voting will take place inside the Jury Assembly Room on the courthouse’s bottom floor, though people will not be entering the courthouse through the regular security screened entrance. Instead, voters will

be using a clearly marked separate entrance closer to the voting area.

Entry to the courthouse proper will be blocked off from the early voting area, so that people with regular courthouse business will have to enter through the lower main entrance.

Hand sanitizer will be provided by the Union County Government, and all election equipment will be regularly cleaned by employees of the Registrar’s Office and poll workers.

Voters who find themselves too busy to vote during the scheduled weekdays can participate in one weekend day of early in-person voting on Saturday, May 30, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the courthouse, also during lunchtime.

Since this is a primary, voters will need to declare a political party to receive a ballot.

Those who voted early for the Presidential Preference Primary will receive a ballot without presidential candidates, while people who didn’t get to vote in that election will receive a ballot with them.

Registered voters who will be at least 18 years of age by Election Day will be eligible to vote during General Primary early voting, though Monday, May 11, was the registration deadline for voters looking to participate in the June 9 election.

Absentee Ballots marked for the May 19, 2020, General Primary Election are good for the June 9, 2020, election. The election date was changed after the ballots were printed.

The state has worked to fix instructions that came with many absentee ballots saying that each voter should

have received two envelopes with their ballot: one to place the ballot in for privacy and another to place the enveloped ballot in for mailing.

However, the ballots don’t actually come with two envelopes. Instead, people should fold the included piece of paper around the ballot for privacy before inserting the ballot into the mailing envelope.

By the end of last week, the Registrar’s Office had received and entered more than 5,900 absentee ballot applications out of some 18,000 active registered voters, with about 1,300 absentee ballots having been cast at that time.

Absentee ballots are due at the latest by 7 p.m. on Election Day, on Tuesday, June 9.

If people want to fill out their ballot applications/ballots and drop them off in person, they can do so using a specially marked box affixed outside the upper entrance to the courthouse.

People who did not receive an absentee ballot application due to either having a P.O. Box or experiencing a change in address since initially registering to vote can call the Registrar’s Office at 706-439-6016.

For more information on applying for an absentee ballot, visit the Secretary of State’s Office website at sos.ga.gov, or call/swing by the Registrar’s Office at 65 Courthouse Street.

Voters can access mvp.sos.ga.gov ahead of the election for information on voter registration status, mail-in application and ballot status, poll location, registration information on file with the county office, sample ballots and more.

Traffic Detail...from Page 1A

James has been making the most of his new enforcement role by rotating between different areas of the county to target people speeding, driving on the wrong side of the road, and committing other traffic offenses.

Currently, his efforts are concentrated on the southern and eastern parts of the county, which have proven to be hot spots of activity for both cars and motorcycles in recent weeks due in large part to out-of-towners cruising the mountains during nice weather.

In the Suches area alone, James has pulled over a variety of high-end sports cars joyriding the curves in and around Woody Gap.

“They’re making a racetrack out of the roadway,” James said.

Mason is hopeful that James’ dedicated patrol presence will help make a dent in both the number of traffic infractions and the large amount of motor vehicle accidents in Blairsville and the county, especially as the weather continues to improve and the economy works toward rebuilding.

“We have way too many wrecks in Union County,” Mason said. “Last year in Union County, there were 973 traffic accidents. That’s unacceptable.”

“The majority of the time, it’s someone who is not paying attention or exceeding the speed limit and losing control. This year alone, there have been 265 traffic accidents in Union County.”

Each individual traffic citation and accident results in a call/case number being assigned, which in turn counts toward the overall call volume that is up over 7,300 for the year already. Typical calls for service range between 911 hang-ups and burglary alarms to traffic stops and wrecks.

“We’re on target to be right at 20,000 calls in the course of the year, even though a lot of activities are currently shut down,” Mason said, noting that these numbers are pacing the high call volume of the last two years.

“Burglaries, thefts and drug arrests are down, but calls for service continue to come in,” Mason said. “That’s OK – it’s what we’re here for.”

For his part, James said he wants people to know he’s out there, and that they should slow down, stay on their side of the road, not run stop signs, etc.

He’ll be enforcing the law in a brand-new black 2020 Dodge Charger. The manufacturer’s suggested retail price is \$29,995, but the Sheriff’s Office bought it for \$23,200 through a law enforcement incentive program. And the purchase was made at no cost to local taxpayers.

“It was bought solely with drug seizure money,” Mason said. “This was not the drug money from the bust a couple of weeks ago. That \$24,400 is still in the civil asset forfeiture phase in the court.”

“Over the course of the more than seven years I’ve been in office, we’ve taken right around \$1 million in seizures. All this is aimed at safety. We don’t bust dope dealers to take their stuff, that’s just a part of it.

“If you have someone in your family or in your network that has a drug problem, have them reach out for help before they wind up arrested. Drug addiction and alcoholism are serious problems, and most people are unable to just quit on their own.

“It sickens me to see families torn apart and lives destroyed, or even worse, lives lost to addiction, which is a demon of society.”

According to the office of Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, last year, Union County Probate turned over \$116,600 in fines generated by the activities of the Sheriff’s Office and other law enforcement efforts. These

finances help to offset costs to local taxpayers.

That number was even higher in Union County Superior Court, where \$616,950 in fines were assessed during criminal sentencing procedures in 2019.

“However, I would caution against anyone being given the impression that (figure) is a collectible amount,” District Attorney Jeff Langley said. “Generally, our small fines are collected, but large fines imposed on persons also sentenced to lengthy prison sentences are rarely collected in full. At least \$200,000 of last year’s total would fall into that category.”

Sheriff Mason was quick to point out that all Road Patrol deputies, Civil Process deputies, and even Animal Control deputies aid in traffic enforcement duties.

Also, no money from traffic fines comes directly to the Sheriff’s Office, as it is collected by Probate or Superior Court and delivered to the commissioner’s office to be deposited in the county’s general account.

Given the two figures above for Probate and Superior Court, the efforts of local law enforcement have resulted in more than \$500,000 being collected for the county in 2019, all with the goal of maintaining safety in Union County.

Mason stressed that “we’re not out writing traffic citations so fines will be paid,” but that “the effort is to save lives and property.”

Activity from the Blairsville Police Department is not figured in any of the facts or figures above, as the city has its own case numbers and municipal court proceedings.

Memorial Day Parade cancelled



Due to continued concerns over the virus we have decided not to have a Memorial Day Parade and Ceremony for Blairsville for 2020.

Everyone should still take personal time to remember the sacrifices and losses of our military that day.

*Bob Spaulding, Manager,
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