

For City Council members, show must go on despite virus

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Not so long ago, the regular monthly meetings of the Blairsville City Council occurred in person. With COVID-19, however, teleconferenced gatherings have become the new “regular.”

Aside from this redefined

normal, the May 5 city meeting hewed closely to tradition, with Mayor Jim Conley opening the meeting, City Attorney David Barrett offering an invocation, and Councilman Buddy Moore leading everyone in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Councilmembers Moore, Tony Dyer, Rhonda Mahan, Betty Easter and Mary Ruth

Cook unanimously approved two main agenda items regarding the services of Engineering Management Inc., the city’s longtime engineering firm of choice.

The first item involved an \$8,000 contract with Engineering Management Inc. to develop “Risk Assessment and Emergency Response Plans.”

These plans will work to identify vulnerabilities in the water system and establish clear prevention/mitigation efforts to shore up local infrastructure.

With the 2018 passage of the “America’s Water Infrastructure Act” in Congress, the Environmental Protection Agency is requiring these plans for community water systems serving populations greater than 3,300.

Blairsville Water currently serves about 2,200 active meters, though “there’s no way to really know how many people those accounts serve since we don’t know how many people live at each location,” according to City Hall.

The city has until June 30, 2021, to complete its risk assessment plan, and until Dec. 30, 2021, to complete the emergency response plan.

Item two from the May 5 agenda dealt with the approval of Department of Transportation utility aid funding in the amount of \$1,285,634, as well as \$58,000 in EMI engineering fees for the water and sewer relocation project that’s to coincide with GDOT’s 515 widening/relocation project between Blairsville and Young

Harris.

Estimated costs for the water and sewer relocation is \$2,762,738, and according to City Hall, GDOT will cover \$1,285,634 of those costs in the form of utility aid.

The city’s portion of the project is the remaining cost of \$1,477,104, and the council will decide funding options in a future meeting. It was not known by press time when the project would begin.

Also in the meeting, the council discussed next steps in terms of departmental operations and opening City Hall in the midst of the pandemic.

“We’re not changing anything about the way that we’re operating the departments at this time, correct?” Councilwoman Mahan asked.

“We’re not going to change a thing,” Conley said. “We’re going to re-look at everything come June.”

Currently, City Hall remains closed to the public for safety reasons, but city staff continue to be available via phone and email. For more info, visit <http://www.blairsville-ga.gov>.

In other news, Councilman Dyer asked if the city



Mayor Jim Conley

had experienced a decline in revenue. City Clerk Kaye McCann said the city had not seen a significant drop in Local Option Sales Taxes, though she anticipates a decline in revenue from late fees due the city, which were waived in April and could be in May.

“At this point, I think everything is status quo and on target,” McCann said.

“Sounds good,” Dyer said. “I for one can appreciate the way everybody has handled this – the city employees, the mayor and everybody. So far, so good, it sounds like.”

Retired Educators...from Page 1A

to know that the community supports them, which it sounds like they do,” said Association President Rick Maddox. “We are all retired educators, and we know how hard their work is.”

“I have a daughter who teaches in another county, and she has put in way more hours than she would have had to do in the traditional classroom. Teachers during this are extraordinary.”

“In the spur of the moment, they have turned head over heels their method of delivery to the students, and they have shown that they are creative and very knowledgeable with the technology, and we are just proud of them.”

On-campus instruction ended in Georgia around mid-March, meaning that, virtually overnight, teachers had to prepare for an online learning environment. It certainly hasn’t been easy, but the teachers and students have worked together to make online instruction a success story.

The Retired Educators support all the faculty and partners of the school system, finding it remarkable how the system has adapted to this unique situation for the benefit of the students.

“This is not only about the teachers, it is about everyone that is helping,” Maddox said. “The school bus drivers, and those lunch ladies that are preparing for kids that I know that need these lunches. They went all over the county delivering these things, and there is the essential office staff that helped make all of that possible. This is just an extraordinary time for education in our county, and I am proud of it.”

For three hours Thursday, the Retired Educators spread out on all sides of the Historic Courthouse to be seen from every angle, thereby maximizing their outreach initiative for local teachers.

“They need the recognition,” said Patti Everett, member of the Retired



Retired educators came together on the Blairsville Square Thursday to thank working teachers during Teacher Appreciation Week. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

Educators Association. “They do a wonderful job, and this has been hard on them.”

“I just think it’s great that we are doing this for them. My daughter-in-law and my grandson are teaching now, and my granddaughter is in education at North Georgia, so I know how hard they are working through this.”

For teachers, adapting to this school year has been a team effort that required everyone to share and prepare to help students learn.

“The beginning of the year started off with a bang, and then the pandemic struck, and we were no longer face to face with our students,” said Camie George of Union County High. “Fortunately, our school system provided students and teachers with the necessary technology to have a seamless transition from in-person education to educating online.”

“It was probably smoother than one would anticipate, only because of the preparation by Union County Public Schools and the teachers helping each other prepare for what we knew was coming.”

“Personally, I would not have been nearly as successful with teaching online if it weren’t for my colleagues.”

Of course, that team effort reaches outside of Union County Schools to incorporate the parents, students, and others community members who helped make the transition possible.

“The parents have been supportive, as well as the private sector businesses in the community,” George said. “The Chamber of Commerce and multiple businesses have just risen to the occasion to ensure success for our students, and it has been absolutely incredible.”

“I would say all stakeholders, including the parents, students, businesses, school administration, and teachers have worked together, and we would not achieve the success that we are achieving without all the stakeholders being involved.”

Added George, “As for the Retired Educators, they are continually supportive of the current education system, especially teachers, because they have walked in our shoes and they know that it can sometimes be a very challenging job. We are more than grateful to the retired teachers who have paved the way for us to be successful.”

Mathews...from Page 1A

Of course, it wasn’t an easy process, as progression from applicant to Fulbright Finalist is an extremely tedious journey that takes approximately one year to complete.

After applying in the spring of 2019, Mathews had to write a pair of essays explaining why she would be a good fit for the program. In January, Mathews learned she was among the Fulbright semi-finalists, and finalists were eventually chosen in April.

“It was a very lengthy process, and you have to make yourself look good on paper,” she said. “The essays come with specific requirements, like, why that particular country, what connection you have to the country, why you learned the language in the first place, how it will benefit your career, and what kind of cultural exchange you can offer while you’re there.”

“It can be very complicated, so they take quite a long time (with the review). The essays were due in October, but I had help from people at North Georgia. It’s a national program, so I was competing with every other entrant across the country that was applying for Belarus, and I was one of four finalists chosen to go.”

Unfortunately, her trip to eastern Europe is on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but Mathews remains optimistic that she will get the go-ahead in the winter.

“I got an email that our departure was postponed until January, which cuts the grant in half,” she said. “I’m hopeful



Mathews during a mission trip to Belarus last summer. She will return to Belarus in January as part of the Fulbright Student Program.

that will change, but as of right now, I won’t be leaving until January.”

In the meantime, Mathews is back in Blairsville and is employed remotely with Universal Translation Services.

“They post jobs online, and if you see a job you like, you can accept it,” she said. “They have software that shows the different projects that need translating, and they’re accepted on a first-come, first-serve basis.”

Mathews said she owes a lot of credit and appreciation to everyone who has helped her on her path to becoming an official “Fulbrighter,” first and foremost her parents.

“They were my biggest supporters, and I couldn’t have done it without them,” she

said. Mathews also had plenty of praise for the university’s Dr. Anastasia Lin, assistant vice president of research and engagement, and she also credited her longtime Belarusian friends.

“Dr. Lin was very critical in helping me get the Fulbright scholarship because it can be very complicated,” Mathews said. “And I have to thank the Ryzhkov family as well. They have really helped me by answering any questions that I have and taking me to Belarus with them.”

The old Russian saying that “100 friends is better than 100 rubles” perfectly sums up Mathews. And for someone blessed with such a charitable disposition, she will have no problem making friends, whether in Blairsville or Belarus.

“I love speaking different languages, but Russian is my favorite,” Mathews said. “I especially love helping people and teaching them English. They get excited when they see me.”

“They say, ‘Please teach me some words.’ I also love meeting new people and learning about new cultures and getting to experience them firsthand instead of learning from afar.”