

North Georgia News

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Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Countywide real property digest up 26% in '23

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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Property assessment notices will be hitting mailboxes soon, and average assessed values are up significantly for the third straight year.

The countywide gross digest of all taxable real properties has gone up about 26% for 2023, which means that the notices will be reflecting higher property values for most residents, with 83% of the 23,306 real property parcels in the county seeing an increase.

Caused by still-rising property sale prices, the current increase comes on the heels of a 22% uptick in home values in 2022, which was preceded by a 30% increase in 2021,

reflecting the pandemic-era trend of people with means relocating here from more congested urban areas.

Importantly, Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris has committed to rolling back the 2023 county millage rate "to minimize any tax increase," and School Superintendent John Hill said he does "not plan on recommending a tax increase" when it comes time to set rates later in the year.

Union County Chief Appraiser Susie Phillips said assessments should be mailed starting this week. On these assessment notices, people will see their 2023 property valuation as well as a property tax estimate.

The tax estimate will not be an accurate reflection

of actual 2023 property tax bills that will come out this fall after new millage rates are set. This is because the estimates calculated on assessment notices use last year's millage rate, which will be changing this year.

If both Union County Government and Union County Schools accept their respective rollback rates, there should be no net increase on most people's property tax bills.

Every year, the Tax Assessor's Office is mandated by the state to update property assessments to keep assessed values in line with recent market sales, thereby establishing current fair market values for all real property, i.e., land, buildings and related improvements.

Members of the Union County Board of Assessors met with Stan King and Kurt Tangel of GMASS to go over the revaluations in a presentation at the Union County Courthouse on Wednesday, May 31.

As a result of the meeting last week, the Board of Assessors accepted the new assessment figures and authorized the mailing of notices.

Georgia Mass Appraisal Solutions & Services, or GMASS, is the third-party appraisal service the county has contracted with since 2019 to get local property values updated to actual fair market values as required by the state.

GMASS originally came on board four years ago to See Assessments Up Again, Page 2A



GMASS CEO of Appraisal Services Stan King led the May 31 meeting to update the Tax Assessor's Office on changes to the current year gross digest. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Scottish Fest & Highland Games return to Meeks

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

As the Blairsville Scottish Festival and Highland Games return for the 18th year this weekend, guests can expect old favorites and new attractions alike, ensuring that there's a wee bit of everything to see and do.

The Festival and Games

will take place at Meeks Park on Saturday, June 10, and Sunday, June 11. Festivities begin at 9 a.m. on both days, to include a Sunday worship service. Things will wind down at 5 p.m. on Saturday, and the 2023 festival will wrap up at 4:30 p.m. on Sunday.

Once again, kids ages 5-12 will have a chance to participate in their own athletic

competition in the Children's Area near the playground, and parents must register before 1:30 and remain close by until the games begin at 2 p.m., with instruction starting at 10 a.m.

Also this year, little lads and lasses will get to meet Princess Merida from Disney's "Brave" on Sunday from 1-3 p.m. in the Children's Area.

See Scottish Festival, Page 3A

Union County 4-H takes Second Place at state



The Union County 4-H Shotgun Team. Bottom, L-R: Kade Dills, Ricky Maier, Will Henson, Andrea Jeong, Ella Martin, Alex Henson, Josh Davis, Jakob Duke and Phillip Jones. Top, L-R: Coach Stan Lunsford, Coach Shannon Rankin and Coach Gene Margelli. Not pictured: Jack Hyatt and Jacob McCann. Photo/Submitted

By Gene Margelli
4-H Shotgun Coach
News Special

It was 5:30 a.m. on Friday, May 26, the start of Memorial Day Weekend, and our 4-H Shotgun Team was heading to Savannah. There was no lake time on Nottely that weekend!

Our team competes in Trap, Skeet and Sporting Clays, with 10 seniors on the team

represented by ninth- through 12th-graders, and two juniors in grades six through eight.

The plan was to arrive at the Forest City Gun Club and practice in the afternoon for the two days of competition.

Saturday morning started out with heavy rain, gale force winds and cool temperatures. We experienced several weather delays, but our Senior Team got their 100 rounds of trap and

the two juniors completed 100 rounds of sporting clays.

Due to weather conditions and safety concerns, the afternoon competition was canceled. We knew Sunday was going to be a long day, as we had to complete in two more events.

Our Senior Team competed against 43 other teams from various counties. See 4-H Shotgun Team, Page 3A

Gunter offers legislative overview in morning meeting

By Shawn Jarrard
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editor@nganews.com

HIAWASSEE — House District 8 State Rep. Stan Gunter visited with the Mountain Movers & Shakers on Friday, June 2, to provide an after-action report on the most recent Legislative Session of the Georgia General Assembly.

The 40-day session lasted from Jan. 9 to March 29, and Gunter said that this year's assemblage "wasn't that controversial" compared to last year, which heralded the passage of bills focused on parents' rights in education and the teaching of "divisive concepts and ideologies."

"We have a new crop of Republican legislators and also Democrat legislators," Gunter said of the session, "and the new Democrats that came in I have found to be very pleasant people to deal with considering what we've had to deal with before."

Gunter highlighted "Sine Die," which is always the last day of the legislative session and features a marathon of back-and-forth negotiations



State Rep. Stan Gunter in the June 2 meeting of the Mountain Movers & Shakers. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

between members of the state House and Senate to get bills passed before time runs out each year.

The state representative referenced a couple of bills that demonstrated the chaotic nature of Sine Die, explaining first the process that bills must take before they receive a vote on the last day.

"If (bills are) sitting in a committee and have never been voted on, they're dead (on Sine

Die) — can't do anything with those," Gunter said. "But if they're out of committee or got a vote in committee, even if it was voted down, they are still live bills."

Gunter said that when the House votes to advance a bill during the session, it goes over to the Senate for consideration, and vice versa.

"If a House Bill is in the Senate and they make a slight See Legislative Overview, Page 2A

Sex offender wanted after failing to register again

By Shawn Jarrard
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The Union County Sheriff's Office is seeking the public's help in locating an absconded sex offender who has violated his registration requirements for a second time in under a year.

Harold Lee Cooper Jr., 35, of Blairsville, was released from Union County Jail on May 15 after serving six months of a one-year sentence for failing to register and absconding last October.

On May 31, when UCSO Capt. Daren "Bear" Osborn went to the local hotel Cooper had registered as his most recent address, Osborn discovered that Cooper had moved out without notifying the Sheriff's Office as required by law.

Cooper became a sex offender in 2007 following conviction for statutory rape involving an underage girl,

according to court documents, requiring thereafter that he register under the Georgia Sex Offender Registry.

Sex offender registration imposes strict restrictions on contact with minors. For example, registrants are forbidden from living within a certain distance of places like schools, churches and playgrounds where children are known to gather.

As a result, sex offenders must register their places of residency with the Sheriff's Office, which then conducts residential visits for address verification to see that they are complying with the law — a requirement that Cooper has once again violated, Osborn said.

Pertaining to Cooper's criminal history, he served roughly four years in state prison for his original statutory rape offense, then went back to prison in 2015 for about two



Harold Lee Cooper Jr. years on battery and terroristic threats and acts charges, per the Georgia Department of Corrections.

He returned to prison again in 2019 for meth possession before his release in June 2022, and he was incarcerated locally in See Cooper Wanted, Page 3A

Vol. 114 No. 24
Arrests - 6A Legals - 4D
Church - 2B Obituaries - 4B
Classifieds - 3D Sports - 2C
Opinion - 4A

MUSIC | FOOD | FUN
SCOTTISH FESTIVAL
AND HIGHLAND GAMES

See Scottish Festival Insert in the C Section

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Assessments Up Again...from Page 1A

conduct the first countywide mass revaluation since 2006, as local values had fallen too far out of line to be in compliance with the state. The company has continued to work with the Assessor's Office to keep values updated.

Much goes into the valuation process: land, structures, additions, improvements, condition, classification, location, nearby sales and more must be accounted for when determining the value of a piece of property.

And different property types sell at different times for different reasons. For instance, in '22, average urban land values went up more than average rural land values simply because there was more of a market for property in subdivisions in 2021. This year's data reflects a reversed trend.

Unfortunately for property owners, overall, the market remains inflated. This year's digest values are based on 2022 sales plus sales from the first quarter of 2023, and

while the number of sales has decreased slightly, the average home sale price is continuing to move upward.

All real property classifications went up in the 2023 gross digest, by the following averages: Agricultural, 28%; Conservation Use, 32%; Commercial, 9%; Industrial, 17%; and Residential, 27%. Taken together, the average increase in the digest is 26%.

To account for the upward movement for residential properties, the Tax Assessor's Office has had to adjust base house pricing, increasing the assessed price per square foot from \$150 to \$190.

Last year, lakefront homes increased 15% above the valuation of non-lakefront homes, and in 2023, based on actual market sales last year, lakefront home valuations have gone up another 15% for a 30% total increase over the last two years.

Market conditions have been dramatically inflated over the last few years, with Federal Reserve interest rate increases to fight general inflation complicating the picture, and it remains to be seen when the housing market will begin to stabilize or perhaps even decline.

People may check their values by consulting their mailed reassessment notices



Chief Appraiser Susie Phillips of the Union County Tax Assessor's Office paying close attention to information delivered by GMASS last week. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

or by going online to www.qpublic.net/ga/union and clicking "Search Records" in the blue box labeled "Related Information."

Property owners with questions or concerns may contact the Assessor's Office at 706-439-6011. Should residents feel their property values are not correct, they are encouraged to file an appeal online at the qPublic site.

People may also file an appeal directly with the Tax Assessor's Office inside the Union County Courthouse. All

appeals must be filed within 45 days of the date on the reassessment notice.

In 2021, 1,388 people appealed their new values; in 2022, however, there were only 586 appeals.

If a taxpayer owns a homestead, his or her property tax bill will automatically be lowered by roughly \$200 in 2023 due to Gov. Brian Kemp's one-time tax credit. And people with agricultural land can access a lower tax rate by putting their land in a conservation covenant.

Legislative Overview...from Page 1A

change to it, it comes back to the House," Gunter said. "We either agree or disagree. If we disagree and the Senate insists on their position, then it goes to a Conference Committee — three senators and three members of the House — and they have to work out that bill."

When it comes to the last day of the session, this Conference Committee process "is a real pressure cooker," Gunter said.

"Late in the evening, (a bill that the Georgia Municipal Association was watching), they worked out a compromise at the last minute," Gunter said. "But the compromise didn't make it all into the bill that was presented to the House and Senate as the compromise."

"So, it then goes to the governor, and he signs it, so it becomes law. That's how fast and how much pressure there is on this kind of stuff."

He mentioned another bill that passed without what he considered to be due diligence, Senate Bill 115, which, according to Gov. Brian Kemp's office, "allows for the public to hunt, fish, and transit the navigable waters of this state."

The bill was sitting in the Rules Committee and "not going anywhere" when, suddenly, the entire text of the bill was replaced around 10 p.m. on Sine Die, after which it passed both chambers without Gunter's support due to his concerns over potential property rights issues.

"I'm a little concerned about that bill, but there is a Study Committee over the same subject matter that I think

is going to flesh out that bill," Gunter said. "The problem with the bill being stripped out like that in coming out of the Rules Committee is that it's not been vetted."

"You don't really know the effect of it, and in my reading of it, it seems vague and ambiguous and could cause a lot of confusion out here for people trying to implement this."

Added Gunter, "The ones that are for (the bill) argue that it doesn't allow anybody to just walk on your property to hunt, that you still have a right to prevent them from doing that. But there's others that look at it, because of the language, it's not spelled out like it should be."

Still, he reiterated his belief that the aforementioned Study Committee will likely "flesh it out" to allow for legal fixes if needed in the future.

"That's the good thing about all this," Gunter said. "If you get these messes in there, we can fix it next year. I'm just concerned about what will happen between now and then."

Now in the first half of his second term, Gunter reminded people that he had been selected to chair the House Judiciary Committee in 2023, an assignment that was based primarily on his extensive legal knowledge as a former Superior Court Judge and District Attorney.

On the Judiciary Committee, Gunter is responsible for overseeing "a wide variety of measures relating to law, courts and judges, and constitutional amendments." Further, any legislation "that carries a possibility for civil penalties

can be referred to the Judiciary Committee."

Gunter answered multiple questions in the process, discussing his trepidation with things that are coming down the pipeline. For instance, the Biden administration has proposed highly restrictive emissions standards via the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

In April, the EPA announced rules designed to "accelerate the ongoing transition to a clean vehicles future and tackle the climate crisis," ramping up regulatory tactics aimed at getting the automobile industry to eventually stop producing gas-powered cars.

Based on the newly proposed emissions standards for light-, medium- and heavy-duty vehicles, the EPA projects that electric vehicles "could account for 67% of new light-duty vehicle sales and 46% of new medium-duty vehicle sales in (model year) 2032."

Gunter noted that Gov. Kemp has been working hard to court EV and battery manufacturers to get ahead of the electric push, but several meeting guests expressed concern over the plausibility of such far-reaching goals as those being enacted by the Biden administration.

The Mountain Movers & Shakers meet every Friday at 8 a.m. in Hiawassee's Sundance Grill. Speaking this Friday will be local Emergency Management Agency & 911 Director Marty Roberts, as well as Emergency Medical Services Director Ken Nicholson.

Mountain Beautification and Revitalization Association works in Towns and Union Counties



Gordy Jones, President of MBRA shakes hands with Andrew Johnson, one of the volunteers who helped build the raised bed for a Holocaust Daffodil Garden in Blairsville

Volunteers from MBRA (Mountain Beautification and Revitalization Association) a local 501c3 organization, completed another project. The Rotary Club of Union County and the Blairsville DDA asked MBRA to build a 10' x 24' raised bed in the park between Blairsville City Hall and Arby's.

Jesse Cook, Andrew Johnson, Michael Courey and Gordy Jones built and finished the raised bed over the past two Saturdays, May 20-27, 2023. It will be filled with dirt and planted with daffodils this fall and become one of the hundreds of Holocaust Memorial Daffodil Gardens in the

U.S. and overseas.

This international project hopes to plant 1.5 million daffodils, to honor the 1.5 million Jewish children who were murdered by the Nazis in WWII. The shape and color of daffodils represents the yellow stars that Jews were forced to wear during the holocaust. So far 861,000 daffodils have been planted in 469 locations. MBRA had recently been part of establishing another Daffodil Garden at Lloyd's Landing in Hiawassee.

In another ongoing project, Jesse Cook, a Volunteer for MBRA, spent the day cleaning up the Old Smyrna Cemetery with Steve Eller,

who has kin buried there. This old cemetery is located off Charlie's Creek, near Tate City in Towns County and was lost and in horrible shape until recently when Jesse and others found it and started cleaning it up. It's notorious for having J.B. Goddard buried there, whose murder led to the only legal hanging in Towns County.

MBRA is a 501c3 entity and depends on contributions to cover its expenses. Any help would be appreciated, at PO Box 382, Young Harris, GA 30582. If you'd like to work with the MBRA volunteers email Gordy Jones at MBRA8054.com.

Scottish Festival & Highland Games...from Page 1A

The Passport of the Clans will again be available, allowing each child to take a "passport" and go from clan to clan, learning the history of each and receiving a special stamp or marker. Once a child fills out the passport, he or she can return to the Children's Area for a prize.

The Royal Scottish Country Dance Society, Atlanta Chapter, along with the Smoky Mountain Highland Dancers, will be present with musicians Celtic Conundrum, Colin Grant Adams, Tracie Brown and Wild Blue Yonder.

"For the first time, there is going to be a sanctioned pipe and drum competition," Festival Public Relations Chair Pam Fink said, adding that since 2023 is the contest's first year, only about five or six groups are taking part.

That said, the event will hopefully grow as the years go on and more folks "prove themselves" as capable performers.

Clan MacLaren - known in Scottish Gaelic as Cinneadh MacLabhrainn - won the place of 2023's Honored Clan. Their tartan colors are green, navy, red and black, and their clan badge is a laurel branch. The slogan on their crest is "Creag

An Tuirc," translating from Gaelic to "The Boar's Rock."

MacLaren history is intriguing, considering Donald MacLaren of Invernentie served as a Captain in the Appin Regiment during the Jacobite uprising of 1745. The ill-fated movement saw most of the Highland army slaughtered at the Battle of Culloden, but MacLaren survived and was taken prisoner on charges of treason against England.

Legend says that while MacLaren was being transported to trial, he was either freed or escaped on his own terms, throwing himself off a cliff known as the Devil's Beef Tub. Dodging fire from the King's dragoon, MacLaren used the misty surroundings to his advantage and went into hiding until 1757's amnesty.

It's possible for people to learn about their own family heroes by visiting the festival genealogy tent to peruse collections of surnames and their variations. Some are listed on posters outside of certain clan tents; for example, the Mason family is historically a part of Clan Sinclair.

Family names found with the genealogists include lineages not just from Scotland, but from England, Ireland,

Wales and other countries, so it's worth checking out even if one's ancestors never roamed the Highlands.

That said, family and tradition is what makes the Scottish Festival so important to Blairsville. Fink said that when Scottish immigrants sailed to America, they found Appalachia to be most like the homes they left behind.

"They moved here deliberately 200 years ago because it reminded them of the mountains that they came from, much like the Highlands," explained Fink, adding that much of the area north of Stone Mountain into North Georgia and the Carolinas was an especially popular location for Scottish families to settle.

"It's designed more than anything else to be an educational festival where you can learn about your heritage, you can learn about your tartan, you can learn about other people's (heritage)," Fink said. "There's all kinds of things. It's entertaining, but it's educational."

Be sure to head on over to the Scottish Festival this weekend for all manner of delicious food options, handmade wares, demonstrations, Scot-themed

products and more.

People won't want to miss the Opening Day Ceremony set for noon on June 10 at the Main Field in Meeks Park, to feature the popular Parade of Tartans, Clan Roll Call, Massed Bands, and a performance of "Amazing Grace" in memory of Scottish Festival Past Chair Joe Satterfield.

Of course, the Heavy Athletics portion of the Highland Games kick off at 9 a.m. on both days of the festival, with three athletic divisions giving people all the stone throwing and hammer/caber/sheaf tossing they can handle.

Festival organizers are still looking for volunteers, so to play an active part in helping to promote an event that is great for the local economy, visit <https://blairsvillescottishfestival.com/volunteers-needed/> to sign up.

For additional information, including a full list of vendors, sponsors - RRG Roofing is this year's Chieftain Sponsor - site map, and a complete scheduling breakdown, visit <https://blairsvillescottishfestival.com/>.

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

in Georgia, and five of our students entered in a shoot-off to reach either First, Second or Third Place.

The seniors who came in Second in State were Alex Henson, Kade Dills, Ella Martin and Josh Davis. Each student received a medallion and a plaque for their remarkable achievement in the competition.

Highlights from the Senior Team include:

Phillip Jones earned First Place High Overall with a score of 283 broken targets out of 300; Ella Martin came in Third Place High Overall;

Alex Henson came in Third Place in sporting clays with a 92; Kade Dills placed third in trap with an 89; Phillip Jones came in First Place in skeet with a perfect 100; and Andrea Jeong came in Second Place in skeet with a 97.

Junior highlights saw Will Henson earn a First Place finish in skeet with a 90, and Ricky Maier came in Second Place in trap with a 92.

A special thank you to Shannon Rankin and Stan Lunsford who have been coaching with me for the past eight years. Also Arron Dills, who has been with us at every

practice helping throughout the year.

Thank you to many of the parents who are referees and helped with releasing targets and keeping score.

We welcome students who have at least one year of Modified Trap experience with Head Coach Keith Herbert to also participate in our Savannah Challenge team. We start practice in September, and details will be available in August.

I want our team to know how proud I am of their accomplishment. You are the best!

Cooper Wanted...from Page 1A

November 2022 after being arrested for absconding last October, according to court documents.

Cooper is 5 feet, 9

inches tall and weighs about 140 pounds, with brown hair, brown eyes and multiple face tattoos.

Osborn is asking that

anyone with information regarding Cooper's whereabouts call 911 or the Sheriff's Office at 706-439-6066.

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