

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, June 30, 2021

Meeks Park, Suches to wish America 'Happy Birthday'

By Brandon Montgomery
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

It's that time again, when Americans everywhere set aside their differences and come together to observe the anniversary of the birth of an unparalleled nation – the United States of America.

That's right, the great American experiment is turning 245, which means that people will be able to celebrate with plenty of food, fellowship and fireworks here in Union County.

And festivity organizers are excited to announce the return of more traditional Fourth of July experiences at both Meeks Park and Suches after COVID-19 put a damper on last year's efforts.

Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce President Steve Rowe said the chamber was "thrilled to be able to do the Fourth of July fireworks this year."

"Last year we had to do a somewhat scaled down version of our typical fireworks display," he said. "This year, we're anticipating not only a return back to a more normal social experience, but also a bigger and better fireworks display than ever before."

"East Coast Pyrotechnics will be providing the fireworks display again this year, and we have contracted with East Coast to put more fireworks in the air."

Rowe said the show will last the usual duration of about 20-30 minutes, but everyone can expect to see a "noticeably more grand spectacle" overall.

Due to concerns over COVID-19 in 2020, "a well-known member of the community," Chad Larissey, provided a Facebook Live feed of the Meeks Park fireworks display.

And since that was such

a hit with the community and people from other areas such as Florida and as far away as Maine, Larissey will be returning this year to livestream the event once again so that everyone can enjoy the show from wherever they are.

Usually, Union General Hospital assists in making it possible for the residents of the Nursing Home to attend the event, but that wasn't possible last year due to COVID. Precautions are still being taken this year, so they will be unable to attend in 2021 either.

Fortunately, the live video feed will enable local nursing home residents to be able to safely enjoy the patriotic event.

"We're selling a limited number of raffle tickets to help pay for the fireworks," Rowe said. "The raffle is a \$2,200 value and includes a gas grill provided by Home Depot, cornhole boards, and

Alexander's Store has donated his-and-her sunglasses as well.

"Tickets go on sale the morning of July 3 at the Union County Farmers Market and are \$10. Since the tickets are limited, your overall chances of winning are increased."

In addition to the chamber and community sponsors, the Union County Government and the City of Blairsville also contribute to the fireworks show each year.

There are a limited number of reserved parking spots at Meeks Park where people can stay and swim and enjoy other activities during the day. Guests often take advantage of these spots as early as 2:30 p.m. to ensure they enjoy all the activities and amenities the park has to offer.

And according to Rowe, it is definitely best to show up See 'Happy Birthday', Page 2A



This 2018 photo by North Georgia News' own Todd Forrest perfectly captures the patriotic spirit of Fourth of July in Suches, with celebrations to return this weekend in the Valley Above the Clouds.

Blairsville PD now selling Rubber Duck Derby tickets



L-R: Blairsville Assistant Police Chief Shawn Dyer, Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter and Lt. Rusty Walker are excited for this year's Rubber Duck Derby. Photo by Brandon Montgomery

By Brandon Montgomery
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Blairsville Police Department is gearing up for its Third Annual Rubber Duck Derby Fundraiser to benefit the annual Shop With A Cop for Christmas Program.

Tickets are on sale now for the event that will take place in Butternut Creek at the Union County Farmers Market on Saturday, Sept. 4, at 11 a.m. after the annual Tractor Parade.

People may purchase tickets for \$10 each, either by

stopping by Blairsville PD next to City Hall or by asking any of the officers in the community, as they do carry the tickets on them.

The fundraiser has been a huge success in providing many less fortunate children in the

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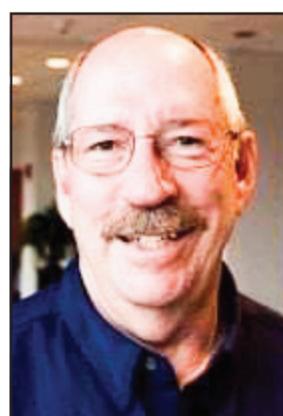
Paris proud to announce that Union County is debt free

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris has some exciting news for the county – his office has made the final payment on the SPLOST-backed general obligation bond from 2015, making the county officially debt free.

"Why is this important?" Paris said. "Being debt free is not common with many county governments. It demonstrates the ability to manage our funds, and even though we may acquire debt in the future, it is evident that your tax funds are being carefully accounted for."

As background, Union County bonded \$8.185 million in July 2015 to pay off the 2010 Urban Redevelopment Agency bond of just over \$5 million for the construction of the Union



Lamar Paris
Sole Commissioner
County Community Center. Paris decided to build the Community Center with bond money because he perceived multiple benefits of getting

the project completed sooner rather than later. It was right around the time of the Great Recession, after all, and he was looking to foster development in tough times.

"The Community Center wasn't just going to be a golf shop, it wasn't just going to be the Chamber of Commerce, it wasn't just going to be economic development, and it wasn't just going to be a conference center," Paris said. "It was going to be all that."

"All that we felt like would contribute to the economic development of the county, and in addition, make a facility that we could all be proud of. And we have a restaurant in there besides that."

"So, we feel like it was a great move to make because it

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Jordan gets life sentence, eligible for parole in 30 years

By Shawn Jarrard
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Robert Curtis Jordan has been sentenced to life in prison for kidnapping his ex-fiancée, and due to the nature of the conviction, he will not be eligible for parole until 2050.

Jordan, 31, of Blairsville, will be 61 years old when he qualifies for release. Sentencing in the case occurred on Tuesday, June 22, by Enotah Judicial Circuit Superior Court Judge Joy Parks at the Union County Courthouse.

A jury of Jordan's peers found him guilty at the end of April on a variety of felony counts, with the most serious being kidnapping with bodily injury, which carries with it the mandatory life sentence he



Robert Jordan being led to the witness stand by Sheriff's Lt. Darren Jones at the Union County Courthouse last week. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Lake Nottely Boat Parade returns this Saturday, July 3

By Brandon Montgomery
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

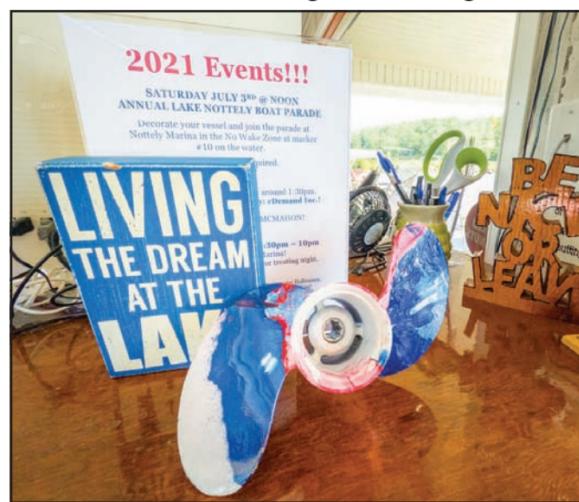
One of Union County's most traditional summertime events is coming up on Saturday, July 3, at the Nottely Marina.

The Lake Nottely Boat Parade has been a hometown favorite for more than two decades, and it is sure to be another unique and exciting festive entry for all to enjoy over Independence Day weekend.

Moriah Doucette is the granddaughter of Carleen Doucette, who founded Nottely Marina in the early '90s, and the family as well as the community are very proud of what she accomplished with her local business.

Sadly, Carleen has passed away since last year's parade, so this year will likely feel very different from the ones in the past.

According to Moriah, Carleen came up with the idea of starting a marina in the late 1980s, with construction beginning here in 1991 and the business up and running by 1992.



Nottely Marina looks forward to handing out these trophies to winners of the 2021 Lake Nottely Boat Parade. Photo by Brandon Montgomery

No one really knows just how long the parade has been going on now, but they do know that the first trophy was awarded back in 1994, so this has been an ever-growing event in the community for over 25 years. "Carleen always loved being the final judge of the

parade, but since she is no longer with us, we have made a decision to have a non-biased committee to do the judging of winners this year," Moriah said.

There are typically around two dozen decorated boats in the parade, which slowly

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Union Debt Free...from Page 1A

benefited so much of the county at the time we decided to do it. Now, we're in the process of adding onto (The View Grill), which will open (this week)."

Added Paris, "(Bonding to build the Community Center) was one of the best things we ever did, because we had a low bond rating, and when you look what we paid total on it, it was much less than it would be to build it today."

The county completed several SPLOST projects with the remaining \$3.185 million in bond money, including: buying a fire truck for Station 1 and a motor grader and long-arm mower for the Road Department; construction of the Splash Pad and new pavilion at Meeks Park; and building the Union County Sports Center that houses the Recreation Department offices.

"With each SPLOST, the county can bond up to \$10 million for funding SPLOST projects," Paris said. "When money is bonded, it is always our plan to pay off the debt by the end of the current SPLOST; therefore, we put money away each month to make those yearly payments."

"Bonding or financing projects allows the county to use a combination of financial strategies for projects,

including 'pay as you go.' Or when and if the project has a current need and if the interest rates are relatively low, it often makes sense to go ahead and build or purchase equipment now and pay with the SPLOST funds as they are collected."

"For example, the Union County Community Center and the courthouse addition were both built with bonded funds. Pre-funding a project often saves on inflation rates, and with the excellent credit rating of Union County, it allows us to bond with smaller interest rates."

The commissioner is aware that critics might call into question the county's financial situation in light of recent budgeting issues, which last year necessitated an 18% jump in the county millage rate, as expenses continued to outpace property tax revenues while reserves dwindled.

To such critics, it may seem paradoxical for Paris to celebrate getting out of debt while simultaneously acknowledging near-term plans for additional bonding, especially since he has had to raise property taxes to maintain the ever-increasing county budget.

But Paris said he focuses on the bigger picture when stewarding the county's finances, to include emergency services, public amenities and more that have boosted quality of life for residents. Further, as the six-time elected commissioner, he sees it as his duty to follow his vision for the county.

He does, however, recognize he has kept the millage rate too low in recent

years, though he notes that, even with the 2020 increase, Union still has one of the lowest tax rates in Georgia. And that includes the school portion of property taxes, which encompasses about two-thirds of tax bills.

Looking ahead, Paris is optimistic the state-mandated, countywide real property revaluation that was completed this year will allow him to lower the millage rate to offset gains in the tax digest. Assessment notices are being mailed this week so people can learn their new property values.

In terms of taking out SPLOST-backed bonds, Paris sees it as beneficial for certain projects, and the current debt-free status of the county will make for even more favorable borrowing terms to enable, for example, earlier access to public facilities for residents and visitors alike to enjoy.

"Most of the time, the government is able to borrow money at a very low rate, much lower than the public," Paris said. "You always have to evaluate, can we borrow the money and build it now, and get the use of the equipment or the truck or the building or the facility? Or do we want to wait until we can pay for it without borrowing any money?"

"So, it's just a matter of each time deciding, is this something you want to wait on, or is this something you think is worthwhile to do? Because the value of anything you build is going to go up with time, too."

"Sometimes, if you borrow money ahead of time, you may actually end up getting the project done for

less money, just because of the inflationary amount that goes along with waiting. We feel very fortunate that we've watched our funds and that we are out of debt."

"Once we decide when we're going to start on different projects going forward, we may want to borrow some more money at some point in time. Right now, we are very comfortable with where we are. Being out of debt is a good feeling."

SPLOST, or Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax, is a voter-approved 1-cent sales tax that helps to alleviate some of the burden of local tax collections on property owners. Each SPLOST raises many millions of dollars that go toward all kinds of local projects and improvements.

Popular attractions like Meeks Park, the Farmers Market and the Horse Arena were paid for with SPLOST, and first responder services are also supported with the sales tax, including the purchase of ambulances, patrol cars, fire trucks, 911 communications and road repair equipment.

Additionally, SPLOST pays for the paving, striping and maintenance of over 600 miles of county road, renovations to existing structures like the Senior Center and Civic Center, and much more besides.

Upcoming SPLOST projects will include the new \$1.5 million Fire Station No. 13 at the north end of the county, the \$3.5 million Youth Sports Complex with baseball fields near the Farmers Market, and the \$3.5 million Meeks Park Amphitheater, with all amounts being estimates.

Duck Derby...from Page 1A

community with the opportunity to have a memorable Christmas they would not get to experience otherwise.

Through Shop With A Cop, children get the chance to go with a law enforcement chaperone to purchase items that they may need or desire for placement under their family Christmas tree.

Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter and Assistant Chief Shawn Dyer care a lot about the Duck Derby, saying that fighting crime is important in the community, but that helping local children is one of the best and most rewarding things they do at the agency.

And the fundraiser has continued to get bigger each year, growing from 1,200 ducks the first year to 1,700 the next, selling out each time and allowing 125 children to go shopping in 2020.

By comparison, just nine children went shopping when the program began 21 years ago, and it goes to reason that, had they had the derby as a fundraiser back then, they'd have been able to take a lot more children right away.

"So this year, we are anticipating selling 2,000 ducks," Chief Baxter said, adding that there were over 30

local businesses supporting the fundraiser.

Year after year, the Police Department marvels at the generosity of businesses in sponsoring the event and providing prizes for the top finishers in the derby race, with plenty of individuals also chipping in by buying the tickets.

Supporters who purchase a ticket are given a number to a corresponding derby duck. Once it is time for the Duck Derby to begin, all the ducks are put into a tractor bucket and dumped into Butternut Creek.

The first three ducks to cross the finish line are cash prizes, with First Place winning \$500, Second Place \$250, and Third Place \$100. After the first three ducks, there are various other prizes including gift cards, gift certificates, merchandise, baskets, edibles and more.

It is important to note that 100% of the proceeds go to the Shop With a Cop Program, so people can rest assured that all their donations will be helping children have a fun Christmas for which they'll be very thankful.

All told, the entire experience is truly touching, both Baxter and Dyer said.

"We've experienced

many situations where a child will actually choose to buy food or drinks instead of toys or other products," Baxter said. "Some of the older children all the way up to high school aged like to get clothes."

"In many cases, it's clothes that they otherwise could never afford, and it helps them fit in and feel more accepted by other classmates."

Many of the children even buy gifts for members of their family, and Baxter said that this is what gives the fundraising and Christmas program even more meaning.

"We can tell that these kids have never experienced anything like this and that they really are more than appreciative and in need of what the Duck Derby Fundraiser provides them," Baxter said. "They are so thankful to have this opportunity."

"It will make anyone tear up. When we go shopping with these children, it's an experience we never will forget."

Blairsville PD would like to thank all contributors, from anonymous donors to business sponsors and all partners in the community who make the event possible for less fortunate children.

'Happy Birthday' ...from Page 1A

to the event early to claim a spot and enjoy the festive Meeks Park fireworks, which will go off after dark.

Just like in years past, there will also be additional parking available at the North Georgia Technical College Campus and the First United Methodist Church of Union County. The church will be providing a unique experience for spectators at their location.

Beginning at 7 p.m., the Boy Scouts of Blairsville will be at the church selling

barbecue, and the local Girl Scouts will be there, too, selling ice cream and helping to conduct a flag retirement ceremony. My Pop Pop's Nuts will also be available, as well as a snow cone machine.

There will be live music from church band "Overflow" on site as well, and more information about these events can be obtained by visiting the Chamber of Commerce website at www.visitblairsvillega.com.

The community of Suches will be holding its

own annual fireworks display on Sunday, complete with a concession stand offering beverages, chips and other snacks. Doug Pruitt of Fire Station No. 5 in Suches said the Gaddistown Homemakers will be selling hotdogs.

Parking is free and first-come, first-served at Woody Gap School, the Fire Station, and the Suches Community Center, with the fan-favorite fireworks to be set off at dark.

As always, the display is fully supported by donations, so any donations are encouraged by those attending the event.

There were no rain contingencies for the Meeks or Suches fireworks at press time.



Gov. Kemp Issues Final Public Health State of Emergency Executive Order

Atlanta, GA – Governor Brian P. Kemp issued the final executive order extending the public health state of emergency, which will now expire on Thursday, July 1 at 12 AM.

"With the executive order I signed today, the public health state of emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will end on Thursday, July 1 at 12:00 AM," said Governor Kemp. "I appreciate the General Assembly granting my office this authority in order to swiftly and appropriately respond to the coronavirus pandemic. We worked together - along with the Department of Public Health, dozens of state agencies, local leaders, private sector partners, and countless others - to protect both lives

and livelihoods.

"Thanks to those efforts, more Georgians are getting vaccinated, our economic momentum is strong, and people are getting back to normal. We have emerged resilient, and I thank all Georgians for doing their part. Georgia's best days are ahead as we continue our work to keep the Peach State the No. 1 place to live, work, and raise a family."

Next week, the Governor will issue a state of emergency executive order that will continue aiding the state and Georgia job creators as they fully recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, which will include the suspension of various state rules and regulations.

Correction:

An agenda item from the June 17 regular meeting of Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris read that the upcoming Union County Target Range would feature a "100-yard rifle range and a 25-yard pistol range."

A member of the Union County Gun Club alerted the North Georgia News, which reported this information, that the rifle range will actually be 150 yards in length. This is down from the originally planned 200-yard range.



Boat Parade...from Page 1A



The Ghostbusters put a lot of effort into decorating their Nottely Boat Parade entry five years ago. Photo by Lily Avery/2016

UCGOP hears from GMASS on Union County Revaluation of Property Values

Chair Dena Gooch, Union County Republican Party, welcomed a large crowd Saturday, June 19, interested in learning more about the revaluation process recently completed for Union County. Stan King, CEO of Appraiser Services, a division of GMASS, addressed the group. Union County has just completed the revaluation process that is followed for all counties in Georgia. Assessment notices reflecting changes for all property owners in Union County are due out soon.



Chair Dena Gooch

to review your notice timely, as there is a deadline for filing an appeal. UC Tax Accessors Office can provide you with the appropriate forms and answer questions about the process you must follow.

Attendees raised concerns about taxes in Union County. Expecting that our county will see an increase in revenues greater than budgeted because of the revaluation, discussion focused on the roll-back of the millage rate. Is there a requirement for the rate to be rolled back when revenues are expected to ex-

ceed that planned in the budget? There is no requirement; however, should the decision be to NOT roll back, there is a requirement the Sole Commissioner hold 3 meetings for public feedback. It is important that all concerned citizens of Union County share their thoughts with the Commissioner's Office.

At the time of our meeting, Mr. King was unable to provide an idea of what the average percent of increase a taxpayer in Union County could expect to see. We walked away with an understanding of how important it will be to review the notice we receive in a few weeks - as expectations are that there will be an increase!

Upcoming events: Saturday, July 3rd - Hot Dog day at UCGOP Headquarters; Friday, July 9th - Trash to Treasure at UC Farmer's Market, stop by the UCGOP Booth; Saturday, July 17th - Gubernatorial Candidate Vernon Jones, Civic Center. (Monthly Meeting); Visit the UC Republican Headquarters at 294 US Hwy 76 in Blairsville, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays from 10 AM to 2 PM to learn more.

Submitted by Linda Hill, UCGOP Media Specialist

makes its way around the bay at the marina, allowing parade entrants to show off their hard work in hopes of becoming the next Nottely Boat Parade Champion.

"Their designs are always a big surprise, even for all of us that work at the marina," Moriah said. "We don't know what we're going to see."

Live music will be provided by David McMann during the boat parade, which starts on Saturday around noon and lasts for about an hour and a half typically. Trophies will

be awarded to the top finishers around 1:30 p.m.

The trophies are hydro-dipped boat propellers, and each one is unique. There will also be \$25 gift certificates provided by eDemand Inc. awarded to each of the winners.

Moriah said spectators need to stay out of the water during the parade for their own safety, and if people are watching from a boat, she asks that they please remain outside of the no-wake zone during the event.

Visitors are encouraged to park as closely and neatly

as possible to provide ample room for the greatest number of guests. Some people pull over on Murphy Highway once other parking spots are occupied, which is OK, but they should be careful and aware of the traffic along the highway.

Also, Moriah said to be sure and stay for the whole event, as "sometimes even some of the winners leave without receiving their gift certificate."

"Finally, this is a family-friendly event, and we ask that folks keep that in mind," she said.

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Jordan Sentencing...from Page 1A

is facing.

The kidnapping occurred the evening of Oct. 4, 2020, when Jordan rammed his ex-fiancée's car off the road and forced her into his vehicle. He took her to a secluded spot and held a loaded .30-06 rifle to her throat hard enough to leave a mark, per the investigation.

He was supposedly upset because he suspected her involvement with another man. He threatened to take her to the man's residence and make her watch as he killed him, and he discharged his firearm in her presence before she managed to escape into the woods, per the investigation.

Jordan was located at his father's residence the next day and taken into custody. He did not receive a bond at that time and will remain in custody of the Union County Jail until he is transferred back into the state prison system.

This was not Jordan's first felony conviction and prison sentence. In 2015, he was sentenced to three years in prison and nine years on probation for felony family violence battery when he committed a similar crime against another former significant other.

He was released on parole in July 2017 but was arrested again for family violence in 2018 after physically assaulting his father, at which time he was revoked back into prison and given in-prison drug treatment.

Jordan was paroled again in 2019 and continued treatment that he said was ultimately interrupted due to COVID and personal stressors impacting his life at the time.

Last week, he took the stand in his sentencing, stating he had stayed sober for a while after his 2018 offense and subsequent release, though he eventually relapsed into substance abuse, which he said contributed to his downward spiral and recent behavior toward his ex-fiancée.

His attorney from the Public Defender's Office introduced medical records to Judge Parks that she hoped would explain Jordan's tendency to use substances as a coping mechanism for documented adjustment disorder, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder for childhood trauma.

Testifying on his behalf was Jordan's grandmother, who gave examples of the childhood trauma he experienced due to



Superior Court Judge Joy Parks sentenced Jordan to life imprisonment on June 22 in Courtroom A of the Union County Courthouse.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

living in a chaotic household with parents who abused drugs and alcohol and fought with each other.

The victim in the case made a tearful statement in court, saying that while she wished the best for Jordan, she realized that she had been on a "ride through hell with someone I loved."

"It seemed like it was really honestly Satan himself," she said, before giving credit to God for allowing her to escape the situation and recognize her need to move on from the toxic relationship.

For his part, Jordan described himself as "damaged" and apologized for the events that led up to the assault, but it wasn't clear if he was taking full credit for his actions, as he seemingly rejected the idea that he had kidnapped his ex-fiancée, saying, "I know what I did and what I didn't do."

Judge Parks noted during sentencing that she had been moved by the testimony of the victim, with whom Jordan is to have "no contact whatsoever" while incarcerated or on probation.

He will be subject to mental health, anger management and substance abuse evaluations and any recommended treatments after his release, and he will also be prohibited from drinking alcohol or using any non-prescription substances while on probation.

"I just pray that you find healing through this, Mr. Jordan, and that somehow you're able to work from this," Parks said.

In addition to his sentencing for kidnapping,

aggravated assault, and eight other charges, Jordan has been ordered to pay \$3,000 for damage to the victim's vehicle. He may still file an appeal in his case or request a new trial, though it was unknown at press time if he planned to do so.

Arguing the state's case, Circuit Assistant District Attorney Anna Guardino was pleased with the outcome, espousing her belief that justice had been served in a "particularly violent and brutal incident."

District Attorney Jeff Langley said the life sentence is a win for the victim in the case and a win for Union County, as Jordan, a repeat offender, will not be able to commit additional crimes in the community for at least 30 years.

"We're not going to tolerate an armed kidnapping on the public roads in Blairsville," Langley said. "We're going to send that person to prison for a long time, and that's what took place."

Added Guardino, "Even if it weren't a mandatory sentence, the actions that he took and his criminal history justify life in prison. I think he would have gotten it whether it was mandatory or not – he certainly deserved it."

Union County Sheriff's Sgt. Marc Pilote was the lead investigator in the case, and he, too, felt justice was served in the courtroom that day.

"This is the outcome that was justified for the crime that he committed," Pilote said. "I think all involved played a very exceptional hand (toward that outcome), and everybody did a great job."