

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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City OKs TSPLOST agreement; county expected to follow

By Shawn Jarrard
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TSPLOST served as one of the many business items in the July 6 Blairsville City Council meeting, with council members voting to approve an intergovernmental agreement with the county.

Getting the agreement in place is a procedural step toward Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris placing before voters in November a countywide referendum for a Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax, to be used to fund approved transportation projects.

The agreement will enable Blairsville to collect its

portion of TSPLOST revenues should voters choose to support the referendum, which the city would use on roads, sidewalks, crosswalks, equipment and more within the roughly 1-mile radius of town and at the municipal airport.

All told, the tax is estimated to collect a maximum of \$35 million over the course of its five-year run between April 1, 2022, and March 31, 2027, according to the intergovernmental agreement, meaning an average of \$7 million in countywide TSPLOST collections each year.

Collections are to be distributed 91.5% to the county and 8.5% to the city, translating to an estimated \$32,025,000 to

the county and \$2,975,000 to the city over five years, with a provision to allow for general obligation bonding to fund projects as deemed necessary.

This is the first time such a tax will have been proposed in Union County and would result in the total sales tax increasing from 7 cents to 8 cents on the dollar.

Should it pass in November, the TSPLOST will be the third 1-cent Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax being collected in Union County, including the county's current six-year SPLOST and the School Board's five-year Education SPLOST.

The longstanding 7% sales tax is made up of both

state and local components. Georgia imposes a 4% sales tax "on the retail sale of tangible personal property and certain services."

In addition, the rest of the sales tax comes from ESPLOST, county SPLOST, and Local Option Sales Tax collections at 1 cent each. LOST was implemented decades ago in the Georgia General Assembly to provide cities and counties with sales tax revenue.

This is an off year for countywide elections, so the referendum would be the only ballot item in a Special Election held Nov. 2, 2021. The city, however, is slated to hold municipal elections this year

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Blairsville City Councilwoman Betty Easter

Veteran grandfather credits grandson with saving his life

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Hunter Van Meter, 12, who lives with his grandfather Bob Van Meter, saved his grandpa from choking to death a couple of weeks ago.

Bob is a U.S. Army Airborne veteran who was deployed to Vietnam between 1970 and '71, where he was affected by Agent Orange among other Vietnam-era chemicals. Today, Bob, 70, is dealing with several ailments as a result of that experience.

One of these ailments impacts his ability to swallow correctly, so he is prone to choking. Everyone in their household is aware of this,

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Vietnam Veteran Bob Van Meter was saved by his grandson Hunter during a recent midnight choking episode.

Photo by Mark Smith

Canning season opens for food preservation enthusiasts

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Union County Canning Plant opened July 6 for the 2021 season, and everyone who attended expressed candid attitudes about getting down to the business at hand - canning.

From now through Oct. 5, people wanting to can fresh produce, soups, apple sauce and any number of other preservable food items may call 706-439-6043 to schedule either a Tuesday or Thursday canning session.

Canning appointments are required and must be made

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Gayle and Ron Miller came all the way up from Pinellas Park, Florida, to can these delicious looking green beans and other items.

Photo by Mark Smith

Butternut Creek Festival to feature 75-plus vendors at Meeks

By Allison Youngblood
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Back by popular demand, the Butternut Creek Festival by the High Country Artisans will be returning to Meeks Park this weekend after postponement in 2020 due to COVID-19.

The free-to-attend festival will open adjacent to Butternut Creek in Meeks on Saturday, July 17, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and on Sunday, July 18, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Vendors will be bringing unique arts and crafts from a wide range of specialties, including pottery, woodworking, jewelry, candle and soapmaking, painting, yard art, blacksmithing, folk art, photography, furniture, fabric art and much more. Food vendors will also be at the festival.

Founded in 1997, High Country Artisans, Inc. is an all-volunteer 501(c)(3) nonprofit with membership open to anyone who has a love and appreciation for the arts.

High Country Artisans



The Butternut Creek Festival returns this weekend, pictured here in a crowded 2016 outing.

Photo/North Georgia News

was formed by artists who had attended many craft fairs and festivals for which they perceived much room for improvement in planning, organization and entertainment. As such, the group started its own event - the Butternut Creek Festival.

The festival offers

a beautiful natural setting alongside vendors, pleasing live music and good food, free admission and parking, reasonable prices for vendor booths, night security, media publicity, and community support, all achieved by volunteer work.

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School Board to put new ESPLOST on May 24 ballot

All students to return to classrooms in 2021-22

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The Union County School Board will be asking voters in May to approve a new Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax a year before the originally projected

expiration of the current ESPLOST.

Should it pass electoral muster in the May 24 General Primary Election, the 1-cent ESPLOST would simply remain in place and not contribute to an increase in the local sales tax. If the measure fails, the local

sales tax would decrease by 1% once ESPLOST V runs out next June.

ESPLOST VI would be used to fund, among other capital projects, a brand-new Elementary School to better serve the needs of local school

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L-R: Union County Schools Special Education Director Tiffany Setzer was proud to present Cindy Dobbins, Seth Merritt, Mandy Hunter, and Rob Dobbins with "Going the Extra Mile" Awards in the June School Board meeting.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Blairsville a 'Purple Heart City'; brew pubs closer to reality



L-R: Rhonda Mahan, Betty Easter, Lou Zayas, Buddy Moore, Jim Conley, Mary Ruth Cook and Ryan McPherson pose with the "Purple Heart City" proclamation in the July 6 city meeting.

Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

A proclamation declaring the City of Blairsville to be a "Purple Heart City" was made by Mayor Jim Conley with the blessing of City Council members in their July 6 monthly meeting.

The purpose of the proclamation is to encourage residents "to show their appreciation for the sacrifices the Purple Heart recipients have made in defending our freedoms, to acknowledge their courage, and to show them the honor and support they have earned."

Following the proclamation, Councilwoman Mary Ruth Cook offered her "appreciation to any and all veterans who are in here."

"I appreciate your

service," she said. "It just warms my heart."

According to purpleheart.org, the Purple Heart is specifically a combat decoration for U.S. military.

"The Purple Heart Medal is awarded to members of the armed forces ... who are wounded by an instrument of war in the hands of the enemy and posthumously to the next of kin in the name of those who are killed in action or die of wounds received in action," per the website.

Purple Heart recipients Ryan McPherson, a Union County resident, and Lou Zayas, who leads Military Order of the Purple Heart Chapter 465 in Atlanta, were on hand to accept the proclamation.

Zayas is also the Junior Vice-Commander at the state level for the Military Order

of the Purple Heart, which is the only veteran organization composed entirely of combat veterans.

The two men attended the June commission meeting as well, in which Commissioner Lamar Paris signed a proclamation declaring Union County to be a "Purple Heart County."

Taken together, the proclamation from Union County and now Blairsville put the county one step closer to becoming a member of the Purple Heart Trail, an initiative being championed by McPherson.

"The purpose of the Purple Heart Trail is to create a symbolic and honorary system of roads, highways, bridges, and other monuments that give tribute to the men and women

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TSPLOST ...from Page 1A

for the office of mayor and two city council seats.

If TSPLOST makes it to the ballot and passes with majority support, then Union will be joining 32 other Georgia counties that have adopted the tax, including neighboring Lumpkin.

According to the intergovernmental agreement, the tax may generate as much as \$6.4 million a year for the county to use on roads, bridgework, equipment, maintenance and

pedestrian upgrades, or greater than four times the current Road Department budget of about \$1.5 million.

As a result, TSPLOST would enable the county to provide about \$1.5 million in property tax relief each year, Paris said, as the entire Road Department would be moved from the general fund to the TSPLOST budget.

All additional TSPLOST revenues would be used to expand maintenance and keep

many more county roads resurfaced and paved each year, Paris said.

As previously reported, transitioning the Road Department budget to TSPLOST would require the tax to be passed in perpetuity to maintain property tax savings, with the sales tax aspect of TSPLOST ensuring all residents and visitors pay for roadwork, and not just property owners.

Now that the city has approved the intergovernmental agreement, the document will

go to Paris to sign and accept in his regular county meeting this Thursday, July 15, at 6 p.m. in the courthouse (*Editor's Note: Last week's TSPLOST article contained an error in the meeting date.*)

Based on community feedback to the North Georgia News, among the topics expected to be raised by the public in the upcoming county meeting will be the recent countywide real property

reevaluation, its potential impact on property taxes this year, and the Transportation SPLOST.

Other business from the July 6 city meeting has been covered separately in this edition of the newspaper.

Van Meter ...from Page 1A

especially Hunter, who keeps a watchful eye on his grandpa.

Another of Bob's ailments has affected his bones, which are extremely brittle now, ruling out the possibility of the Heimlich and similar maneuvers for choking. Fortunately, his grandson knew exactly what to do when the time came.

Hunter said he was about to fall asleep in his room the night of the incident when he

heard his grandfather begin to choke after sipping on a drink. The elder Van Meter had collapsed on the floor and was trying to get the attention of his wife as he gasped for air.

"About the third sip, it went down, and he got choked," Hunter said. "And that's when I woke up and saved him."

Bob said this was not a new experience for Hunter, who has observed similar episodes in the past with other adults

around to help. Due to his brittle bones, Bob requires a lighter touch to return his breathing to normal, and Hunter was able to hit him in the right way to bring him back around.

"This has happened maybe two or three times, and he kind of knows what to do," Bob said. "Being his age, I thought it was pretty cool that he kept his cool. He said, 'I got you, Papaw.'"

The North Georgia News commends young Hunter for assisting his grandfather that evening.

Butternut Creek ...from Page 1A

This artisan-focused and artisan-founded event features 75-plus artisans and craftspeople from all over the Southeast, including the local area. Over the last 22 years, the festival has boasted an average of 15,000 attendees, promoting tourism across the county and the region.

And for 11 years in a row, the Butternut Creek Festival made the "Top 20 Events" list by the Southeast Tourist Society, which is "dedicated to improving the economic vitality of the Southeast."

The festival is a way for the community to see what local artists have to offer each year, with new vendors and new crafts appearing at the festival annually.

High Country Artisans, Inc. Secretary Helena Grossmann is optimistic that

people will feel safe enough to come this year, since COVID kept the event from occurring in 2020. Masks and social distancing are not required, though masks and sanitizer will be made available.

There will be three musical performances per day, at 10:30 a.m., 12:30 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. Zach Haines, the Rocky Creek Band, and the Country River Band will perform Saturday, with Southern Gospel Music, Hunter Flanagan, and the Country River Band slated for Sunday.

Organizers hope visitors enjoy the event, especially knowing that festival proceeds directly benefit the community through the art programs of Union County Schools, including Woody Gap, with money helping art teachers

buy supplies to be used in the classroom.

For more information, visit <http://www.butternutcreekfestival.com/>.

After visiting the Butternut Creek Festival, people can stop by the Sweet Summertime Downtown Market, set for July 17 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. in Downtown Blairsville.

The market will feature 25 vendors offering locally hand-crafted items, everything from jewelry, candles and home décor to more unique pieces like bicycle wheel wreaths and vintage colander lights.

In addition, the market will have face painting, fresh lemonade and sweet treats, as well as music by local DJ Chris Cote. For more information, visit the event page on Facebook.

Purple Heart City ...from Page 1A

who have been awarded the Purple Heart Medal," according to purpleheart.org.

Many of the surrounding municipalities are official members of the Purple Heart Trail, and McPherson will be visiting Towns County and her cities soon to expand its reach even further.

In other news, Fire Chief/EMA Director David Dyer informed the mayor and council that the county's updated Hazard Mitigation Plan was approved by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Georgia Emergency Management Agency in February.

An approved Hazard Mitigation Plan must be in place for the city and county to qualify for federal reimbursement of expenses incurred as a result of disasters, whether natural or manmade, and to acquire state and/or federal hazard mitigation grants.

Dyer also said the new Insurance Services Office rating for Union County would be going into effect Aug. 1. Though essentially staying the same, the 4/4Y rating reflects several Fire Department improvements, and the fire insurance rates for the city will be remaining the same.

Moving along, the council held a first reading to add a brew pub provision to the city's existing Alcohol Ordinance, with a second reading and enactment expected to occur in next month's regular meeting.

The provision comes at the request of Union County

Development Authority Executive Director Mitch Griggs, who asked council members in May to consider amending the Alcohol Ordinance to allow for specialized brew pub licenses as designated by state law.

Currently, the ordinance allows beer brewing, taprooms for on-premises consumption, and restaurant sales with outside brewers, but it does not allow brewers to serve food alongside in-house craft beers, as that would make an establishment a "brew pub."

"The reason I'm asking for this is that those have been a couple of the targets of the types of businesses that we're trying to recruit to the community," Griggs said, "the reason being that they are extremely popular in Georgia and the United States."

"And they're especially popular with tourists and visitors – so much so that it's one of those types of businesses that visitors expect to find in any given community that they might come to."

Councilman Tony Dyer said at the time he didn't want the city to turn into a "beer joint," but he was ultimately supportive of the idea, and the council voted unanimously to proceed with preparing the provision, which, again, is expected to be officially enacted next month.

The city is also adding a provision to enable alcohol licensees to hold outdoor events in which alcoholic beverages are served. Likewise, this provision will be codified in

the August meeting.

Tommy Townsend of Granddaddy Mimm's Distilling Co. asked the council to grant him an early exception for an outdoor concert that will take place at his business during the Georgia Mountain Moonshine Cruiz-In at the end of this month. The council gave him the go-ahead that evening.

In other business, the council approved a contract with the Georgia Department of Transportation for a \$13,000 federal grant to be used at the Blairsville Municipal Airport.

The grant comes by way of the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act that includes nearly \$2 billion in funds to aid eligible U.S. airports and airport concessions.

Continuing, the council approved a GDOT Fiscal Year 2022 Tentative Allocation of \$158,333 for work at the airport. This, too, is federal grant money passed through the state, and it will require no local match.

As they do yearly, council members approved a request by the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce to support the annual Meeks Park fireworks display in the amount of \$7,000.

Finally, the council approved an Intergovernmental Agreement with Union County for the "Use and Distribution of Proceeds generated by the 2022 Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax 'TSPLOST' Referendum," covered separately in this edition of the newspaper.

Beta Epsilon supports early literacy with Ferst Readers

Beta Epsilon Chapter of the Georgia State Organization of Delta Kappa Gamma Society International (GSO DKG) is supporting early literacy by donating \$1,000 check to FERST Readers. Cathy Kirby, Beta Epsilon President applied for and received the Boylston Foundation Grant from GSO DKG to fund books for 27 children for one year. Beta Epsilon has supported early literacy efforts in Fannin, Towns and Union Counties through grants, volunteering, mentoring, literacy materials, and other items since their founding.

Children in the Ferst Readers literacy program receive a bookstore-quality, age-specific book and resources mailed to them at home every month until their fourth birthday. It is this access to print that helps create a language-rich environment in the home. Ferst Readers in your community is facilitated by local Community Action Teams who seek funding to ensure that all eligible children are enrolled. The program is open to all children regardless of income level. Enrollment brochures are available at your local library, or online at ferstreaders.org. It costs \$36 per year to provide books and materials to one child. If you would



Beta Epsilon President Cathy Kirby presenting FERST Readers Treasurer Pam Jordan a \$1,000 donation check.

like to support Ferst Readers, you may donate online at ferstreaders.org, or complete a donation brochure available at your local library.

Beta Epsilon GSO DKG is an organization of key women educators from Fannin, Towns, and Union Counties that promotes professional and personal growth of women educators and excellence in education. Members have been involved in many aspects of education, community and society work, including supporting a schol-

arship for a local student pursuing a career in education. Women educators, active or retired, in any area of education, are invited to join Beta Epsilon and new members are always welcomed. For more information on DKG, please visit www.dkg.org, and for information on attending a meeting or joining Beta Epsilon, please e-mail be.psi.dkg@gmail.com and visit the Beta Epsilon website at betaepsilonsodkg.wixsite.com/begso.

Submitted by Donna Howell

ESPLOST ...from Page 1A



Last month, Assistant Superintendent Dr. Paula Davenport thanked School Nutrition Director Cindy Jones and the "Hunger Heroes" on the School Nutrition Team for their commitment to the "No Kid Hungry" initiative. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

children in a growing Union County.

As previously reported, sales tax collections have been incredibly robust throughout the pandemic, resulting in projections that the district will reach its hard cap of \$21 million for ESPLOST V collections by June 2022, about a year early in its five-year collection cycle.

There has been some discussion about whether to hurry and put the referendum on the ballot by November to avoid a disruption in ESPLOST collections, as a May referendum would require new collections to start after the projected June 2022 cap for the current ESPLOST.

Superintendent John Hill reported in the June 15 Board of Education meeting, however, that the schools had received a waiver from the Department of Revenue to avoid such a disruption, so the ballot initiative will appear in May.

"The issue, if anyone is not aware," Hill said, "is that cap that we've left on ESPLOST was the same one, to my knowledge, that we've always used of \$21 million."

"With all the folks moving into the community and all the construction going on, it's trending that we'll tap that SPLOST out about 12

months early.

"You would think that means we've got a lot of money, but not really, because the construction costs have gone up with it, everybody is very well aware of that."

"But we will have that on the May referendum now, and we won't have a disruption in collections, so that won't hurt our local vendors, and that was a huge positive."

After a series of recent conversations, board members have opted to follow a strictly "pay-as-you-go" model for ESPLOST VI rather than building in the potential for ESPLOST-backed bonds for emergencies, like with ESPLOST V, during which no bonds have been issued.

"My feeling is there's no need to even entertain these bonds," Hill said last month. "Let's just stick with pay-as-you-go ... we've gone through this ESPLOST and not had one conversation about bonding anything, and it's just a waste of tax money is the way I feel about it."

Added Hill, "We'll continue to be a debt-free school district that way and won't have to worry about that ... and if we can't afford it, we just won't buy it."

The School Board has yet to decide on an ESPLOST VI collections cap.

Also in the June 15 meeting, Hill said it had become clear this past school year that in-person instruction was the superior mode of learning after going through a year of hybrid instruction, where students were allowed to opt into online-only classes.

He said the upcoming year would feature exclusively on-campus learning for nearly all students, with online classes available only in a very limited capacity for homebound students with significant medical issues.

"We had some folks that did a tremendous job with online learning," Hill said. "Our staff worked diligently, and some kids were successful. But it's very evident that, if a child was isolated for the entirety of the school year, not all, but the majority of children – that had a negative impact on them."

Added Hill, "We're planning for a very classical school year, standard operating ... and we're building in contingency plans if the situation was to take a turn for the worse, which right now, it appears to be really good."

Board members also accepted the 2021-22 school calendar, which features just six Online Learning days spread throughout the year instead of every Friday like last year's calendar, which gave the schools time to sanitize classrooms during the pandemic.

In other business that evening, the board adopted the FY22 Final Budget for the upcoming school year.

As previously reported, for FY22, the schools are looking to spend \$47,158,509.28, up about \$7 million from FY21. Revenues have increased as well, projected to be \$46,919,395.30 in FY22 versus \$38,482,861.34 for the FY21 budget.

The projected ending fund balance for FY22 is \$23,858,352.02, which is roughly \$6.8 million more than the projected ending fund balance for FY21.

Both FY21 and FY22 budgets reflect considerable boosts from federal, state and local revenue sources,

everything from three rounds of CARES Act funding to reduced austerity cuts and big upticks in local sales and property tax collections.

Specifically, the district is gaining \$6,354,259 in CARES Act monies for FY21 and FY22; a "Literacy for Learning, Living, and Leading in Georgia" state grant for \$630,949; \$1,286,000 in additional QBE funding; and \$2.75 million more in property tax collections over 2021.

Furthermore, the schools absorbed more than 25 positions through retirement or resignation to save the district \$2.2 million during an uncertain FY21 amid COVID-19, and the Board Office will be spending about \$2.4 million to refill some "critical vacant positions" in FY22.

Other expenditures include an additional \$1.6 million in faculty salaries for FY22 due to automatic step increases and scale adjustments, as well as a teacher retirement increase of 0.75%. The Board Office noted that 84% of total budget expenditures is for salaries and benefits.

Budgeted E-SPLOST collections are also increasing from \$4 million to \$5 million in FY22, and altogether, year-to-date revenue increases have helped to offset the number of

property and other tax dollars the schools will have to spend to maintain and even expand services for students.

The School Board meets the third Tuesday of each month starting with a work session at 6 p.m. at the Board Office.

Canning Plant...from Page 1A



L-R: Milton Bradley, Mickey Cummings, Cole Kates and Patrick Fix stood for a photo with one of the new industrial-sized pressure cookers inside the cannery July 6. Photo by Mark Smith

at least 24 hours in advance, per <http://www.unioncountyga.gov/farmers-market/canning-plant/>. Appointments are available in two different time slots, from 6 a.m. to 8:45 a.m., and from 9 a.m. to 11:45 a.m.

Time limits are strictly adhered to, so guests are asked to prepare as much as they can in advance and to bring only as much as they can accomplish in their allotted time. Additional information can be found on the website.

Located on the grounds of the Union County Farmers Market, the Canning Plant is operated with assistance from volunteers and market employees.

"It's been a good opening day," Market Manager Mickey Cummings said. "I think we had about six people, maybe seven. We cooked potatoes, blackberry jam, someone processed some chicken. We had some green beans (and salsa). So, it's been a good day."

Cummings said the number of people who showed up on Day 1 was in line with the start of past seasons, noting that "it'll be so crowded in here the first week in August, we'll be slammed full of people."

Angela White of Pearson and Dody Arrendale of Atlanta put up tomatoes and green beans and made salsa that Tuesday. White brought the

tomatoes from home but bought the beans at the Farmers Market Saturday. She said their trips here have been a tradition for the last six years.

Ron and Gayle Miller of Pinellas Park, Florida, said they come up to Blairsville every year to can their vegetables because, by this time of year in Florida, the hot weather tends to burn everything up.

Both were very appreciative of the cannery for allowing them to use the facility.

"We love this area, especially in the summer," Ron said. "The weather is wonderful right now, and the people are all so friendly."

As a community cannery, the Canning Plant is for personal canning only, so canned products may not be sold. Canners are asked to bring jars, lids, bands, and all ingredients and products to be canned, with a cost of 25 cents per pint and 35 cents per quart.

New this season, the cannery has purchased four new industrial-sized pressure cookers, as the old ones had worn out, and Cummings said they have been very pleased with them.

Canning requires pressure cookers to maintain temperatures between 240 and 243 degrees Fahrenheit, "and the pressure, I try to maintain it somewhere pretty close to 11 and a half and 12 pounds."

"At our elevation," Cummings said, "we need to increase it somewhat over the normal sea level (pressure). At close to 2,000 feet (elevation here), we up that a little bit."

The Canning Plant is located at 290 Farmers Market Way in Blairsville.



Question: I picked up one of your business cards at my doctor's office. It says you offer "caring and compassionate support for women, men and families through free confidential services". Can you tell me what services you provide?

Answer: WEC Family Resources was originally formed under the name Appalachian Area Crisis Pregnancy Center. Under that name we offered material, emotional and spiritual support to pregnant women and young mothers. That has continued over the past 30 years.

Over the years however we recognized the importance of supporting the entire family. Thus, the name change.

Today we offer coaching by trained Advocates in areas other than pregnancy. Through

our BrightCourse Curriculum we can provide education addressing such topics as co-parenting, discipline, fatherhood, and financial skills, as well as taking the new moms through all phases of their pregnancy. There are also male Advocates who specifically work with dads in our Fishers of Men ministry.

We still provide material support such as diapers, clothing, car seats etc. Other resources available are Childbirth Education Classes, Bible Studies and Marriage & Life Coaching. The Center has also developed a network of resources that allows us to make referrals to other groups in the area who might be of help.

If you would like to learn more about our services please call 706-745-7518.