

North Georgia News

4 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Sons of the Pioneers to benefit child literacy Oct. 22

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Plenty of folks remember listening to the legendary practitioners of country western music, the Sons of the Pioneers – one of the longest performing vocal groups of all time with a career spanning just shy of a century.

And on Oct. 22, the famous Sons will be visiting Blairsville for the second year in a row, returning for the First Readers Benefit Concert at the Union County Fine Arts Center.

It's all thanks to John Cochran, the Young Harris-based pharmacist, mega-fan and musician of his own band, John Cochran and the Cowhands.

"He actually produces the shows," said Sons of the Pioneers Trail Boss Tommy Nallie, who appreciates Cochran for his kind personality and passion for western music.

"John's the one that's in charge of selling the tickets and doing the advertising, putting up the posters – that kind of thing."

For his part, Cochran has loved the Sons of the Pioneers and the American tradition they represent "since I was a little boy."

"They mean a lot to me," Cochran said. "I lost my Mama when I was 7 years old in a car wreck, and my earliest remembrances of life are going to the (music) show with my Mama."

Dating back to high school, Cochran has dreamed of singing with the Pioneers, and he got to join them on stage during the 2022 benefit concert. He's thrilled to be a part of a great cause uniting his passion for music with raising funds to further childhood literacy for local kids, again in 2023.

"I want to promote the Sons of the Pioneers because



The Sons of the Pioneers performed locally last October to help raise money for the First Readers of Union County Childhood Literacy Program. The iconic western group will return for more this October. Photo/North Georgia News

Butternut Creek Fest enjoys another successful year

By Natalie Mintz
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

This past weekend, thousands of visitors flocked to Meeks Park for two days of shopping and entertainment during the Butternut Creek Festival, the popular annual event where all vendors are carefully screened, or "juried," to ensure the best possible quality and diversity of products.

As always, the festival was organized by the High Country Artisans, a local nonprofit focused on promoting arts and culture.

Going on its 24th year, this year's festival July 15-16 featured 80 carefully selected artists and craftsmen selling woodwork, leather wares, honey products, soaps, lotions, candles, jewelry, knitted and crocheted items, pottery, paintings, photography, glassworks and more.



The Butternut Creek Festival by the High Country Artisans not only promotes local artists but also supports education in the arts for local students. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Attendees could also have a caricature drawn, and face painting and balloon animals were made available to the delight of children.

If anyone got hungry or thirsty while shopping, the event also provided a cornucopia of food options, See *Butternut Creek Fest*, Page 6A

Libraries restructure branch management in Union, Towns

By Natalie Mintz
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Mountain Regional Library System is excited to announce several recent leadership changes in the three libraries between Union and Towns counties.

Union County Public Library in Blairsville, Mountain Regional Library in Young Harris, and the Towns County Public Library in Hiwassee have all undergone shifts in management after former Union Branch Manager Susie Brendle retired in May.

Marlene Cannon stepped in to lead the Union County library at the beginning of June, coming over from managing both the Towns County Public Library and the headquarters location at Mountain Regional.

When Cannon moved to Blairsville, the system decided to replace her dual management position in Towns with a branch

manager for each location, offering a primary advantage of increasing the number of days the Mountain Regional Library is open each week from three to four.

Kevin Kirby, who was assistant manager for both of Towns County's libraries, is now manager of the Hiwassee-based library.

Over in Young Harris, Ann Lewis, who was previously responsible for youth services at the Union County library, has been promoted to manager of the Mountain Regional Library.

Mountain Regional Library System Director Heath Lee explained that, when deciding who would helm the libraries, he and the MRLS Board took it on as a priority to "advance people within the system," hence the "staff restructuring and realignment."

According to Lee, Cannon has done an exceptional job at Mountain Regional and was an "obvious candidate" to



Marlene Cannon UCPL Branch Manager

fill the Blairsville vacancy.

Cannon has over a decade of experience working with the Mountain Regional Library. And though she had never planned to work in the library system, Cannon "landed in the library world and fell in love with it."

See *At the Library*, Page 3A

Department of Transportation updates public on GA 515

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

HIWASSEE – Four representatives from the Georgia Department of Transportation joined members of the Towns County Civic Association at the Senior Center on June 29 to discuss the SR 515/SR 2/US 76 widening and relocation project between Blairsville and Young Harris.

"The state's divided into seven districts; District 1 is the Northeast 21 counties. We're housed in Gainesville," explained District Preconstruction Engineer SueAnne H. Decker. "These guys come from our Atlanta office, so I'm your local contact here for these 21 counties."

According to Project Manager Oluchukwu "Olu" Anyaebosi, "This project goes back a long time." Indeed, talk of modifying the road first began as far back as November 1998. Earlier this year, the project was divided into three stages to "spread out the costs."

Project Manager and Transportation Engineer Jeff Middlebrooks elaborated, adding, "It has been in design



Officials with the Georgia Department of Transportation enjoyed spending time with area residents and updating them on the massive Georgia 515 construction project set to begin later this year. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

for almost 25 years, and a lot of (the delay) is to do with environmental impacts up in this area."

In addition to ecological challenges and archaeological finds, the rise in prices following the COVID-19 pandemic added another layer of difficulty to

the project. In short, the high construction costs in returned bids were "unexpected."

Audience members were invited to approach the projector for a better look at the map detailing Phase 1, which will deal with the See *GA 515 Update*, Page 2A

EV chargers ready for use near new bathrooms downtown

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Blairsville Downtown Development Authority's regular board meeting July 11 revealed exciting news: the installation of two electric vehicle rapid charging stations was completed that afternoon, and they are now available for use across from the new public bathrooms near the square.

Before that, the DDA addressed the upcoming Mountain Music & Moonshine Festival, to run July 28-30 in Downtown Blairsville. Granddaddy Mimm's Distillery General Manager Megan Kimsey, who chairs the DDA Board, reported seeing a lot of confusion about the event.

"Last year, we had an issue with the branding because a lot of people think it's a Granddaddy Mimm's festival, but it's not," said Kimsey, adding that Granddaddy Mimm's is only the presenting sponsor for the festival, which is actually put on by Visit Downtown Blairsville.

"I don't know if we can figure out a way for, in the



These Level 3 EV chargers behind City Hall are the fastest on the market and will augment Blairsville's other charger, a Level 2 station at the Union County Community Center. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

future, to rebrand it somehow or figure out what the DDA's responsibilities are versus Granddaddy Mimm's," she continued.

Granddaddy Mimm's primarily handles advertising, but despite that, Kimsey said, moonshine is not the main focus of the event; due to the propensity of people to shorten the name to the "Moonshine

Festival," the belief that it is has been reinforced.

One suggestion was not to "de-emphasize" the moonshine aspect but highlight what else makes the festival special. Kimsey reported folks misunderstanding that the concert tickets also served as an entry fee, but the two are separate; it's free to come by See *Downtown Development*, Page 6A

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GA 515 Update...from Page 1A

bypass around the City of Young Harris. Middlebrooks described it as a “separate project for GDOT.”

Phase 1 is expected to begin this fall and will approximately last until the fall of 2025. It will cover a two-lane bypass running around the west side of Downtown Young Harris, serving to divert traffic away from the busy college crossing stations and businesses close to the highway.

In particular, the bypass will feature 12-foot-wide lanes with 8-foot shoulders, and 6-and-a-half-foot “paved shoulders” will sit on either side of the road for bike traffic.

“On this project, we are anticipating a few detours, but the detours are only for sideroads,” added Middlebrooks. “If you’re on 515, you’re always going to have two lanes of traffic open.”

“Businesses are always going to have access, driveways to homes that had access to 515 are always going to have access to their properties. That’s never going to be a problem in the construction phase.”

One detour is anticipated at Townsend Mill Road, and another is planned around Brasstown Creek Road while a third will be on Timberline Drive, with the bypass bookended by roundabouts at 515.

Young Harris City Councilman John Kelley attended the meeting, saying, “As you know, the town of Young Harris is a small community, and the inhabitants of the whole town face every single day traffic that’s going anywhere from 55 to 75 (miles per hour).”

“It’s very unsafe. If you’ve ever tried to cross the street with the blinking light system... we’ve had at least five near-misses that I’m aware of.”

“Our goal within the community ... is to develop a village-like concept, promote walking, promote non-motorized vehicles, have areas together where people can socialize and get to know one another, where people can take their children and grandchildren out for walks safely and where it’ll be quiet.”

Phase 2 will pick up on Swanson Road in Young Harris and continue west to Earl Shelton Road in Union County.

“This particular project will have the bridge we’re replacing,” Middlebrooks said.

“We’re building a parallel bridge and replacing the existing bridge at the county line. This project has about four retaining walls ... to handle the slopes throughout the corridor.”

Middlebrooks revealed that construction for Phase 2 will begin next spring and should wrap up around spring of 2026.

“This section will be the four-lane divided highway with a 32-foot depressed median and a 10-foot shoulder with a 6-foot paved shoulder to accommodate bikes from both directions,” Middlebrooks said.

Bridge and Roadway Group Director M. Asif Iqbal added, “There’s going to be two bridges, and the reason for that is we want to continue maintaining traffic on the existing bridge.”

Following questions, he clarified, “We’ll keep the existing, we’ll build another one parallel to it, and then demolish the existing and build another one.”

That said, the 3-mile stretch defining Phase 2 will have about eight detours “just to allow the sideroads to get tied back into the mainline.”

Phase 3 will encompass Earl Shelton Road and “just past the Home Depot” inside Blairsville city limits, with construction expected to last from summer of 2024

through summer of 2026, so all three projects should be started within the next year and experience some construction overlap.

“This particular section has nine retaining walls that will be constructed to maintain slopes throughout the corridor of this project,” Middlebrooks said.

Just like Phase 2’s stretch of road, Phase 3 will consist of a divided four-lane highway with a 32-foot depressed median, a 10-foot shoulder and 6-and-a-half-foot paved bike lane. It will include nine detours.

“The project goal is to provide acceptable traffic levels of service for future traffic demands to reduce traffic, crash frequencies (and) severity along the corridor through Union and Towns County, and to provide better mobility through the additional bike lanes on the corridor and on the bypass,” summarized Middlebrooks regarding the overview, including all three phases.

The SR 515/SR 2/US 76 Project will include several roundabouts meant to slow down notoriously fast traffic on the road to about 25 miles per hour, cutting down on the likelihood of devastating speed-related accidents.

People with questions on the Young Harris Bypass or any other GDOT projects may call 404-631-1990 for the main office in Atlanta or 770-532-5500 for the Gainesville office.

Avoid the Back to School Rush, Get Your Children’s Immunizations and Health Screenings Early



As the summer break comes to an end, District 2 Public Health emphasizes the importance of back-to-school vaccinations for students to ensure a safe and healthy return to the classroom. In adherence to the Georgia Back to School requirements, District 2 Public Health is urging parents, guardians, and students to prioritize immunizations as an essential part of preparing for the upcoming academic year.

Immunizations play a critical role in safeguarding public health, preventing the spread of infectious diseases, and protecting vulnerable individuals within our communities. The Georgia Back to School requirements aim to ensure that students are adequately protected against vaccine-preventable illnesses, maintaining a secure educational environment for all.

According to Leyna Mashburn, District 2 Public

Health Immunization Coordinator, “Back to school vaccines are vital in ensuring that we minimize the risk of outbreaks and maintain a healthy learning environment for everyone.”

The Georgia Back to School requirements outline specific vaccinations that students must receive based on their age and grade level. The recommended vaccines include, but are not limited to: Diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis (DTaP/Tdap): protects against serious respiratory infections. Measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR): prevents highly contagious viral diseases. Polio (IPV/OPV): guards against poliovirus infection. Hepatitis B (HepB): protects against liver disease. Varicella (chickenpox): protects against the varicella-zoster virus. Meningococcal conjugate (MCV4/MPSV4): guards against bacterial meningitis. Human papillomavirus

(HPV): prevents certain types of cancer and other diseases.

To facilitate access to vaccinations, District 2 Public Health recommends contacting healthcare providers, local clinics, and public health departments to schedule appointments or inquire about vaccination clinics. Additionally, there are immunization programs designed to provide affordable or free vaccines to eligible individuals who meet specific criteria.

As students prepare to return to classrooms, public health urges parents, guardians, and students to review the Georgia Back to School requirements, ensure their immunizations are up to date, and promptly schedule any necessary vaccinations.

For more information about Georgia Back to School requirements, contact your local health department or visit the Georgia DPH website.

Union County: Regular Health Department hours at Union County Health Department.

Towns County: Regular Health Department hours at Towns County Health Department.

UCS Union County School System New Student Registration For The 2023-2024 School Year

New and transferring students in Pre-K through twelfth grade (K-12) may be registered for the upcoming school year by completing New Student Online Registration at <https://www.ucschools.org/parents/student-registration>.

If you need access to a computer to do your online registration, you can come to Union County Primary School at 592 School Circle, Blairsville, GA to enroll your student. The summer registration office hours for in-person enrollment will vary from week to week and will be by appointment only. Please don’t wait until school starts to register. The first day of school is Wednesday, August 9th. Waiting until the end of July or beginning of August to begin the enrollment process may cause your child to delay their first day of school.

The online registration forms will need to be completed and the required documents indicated below will need to be presented. Your child will not be fully enrolled until the school has ALL of the required documents.

Documents you must submit when enrolling a student:

Age Verification: The school system requires evidence of the student’s date of birth and accepts as evidence a birth certificate or an alternate document from the prioritized list in the state enrollment rule.

Social Security Number: The school system complies with the provisions of O.C.G.A. §20-2-150, which requires a person enrolling a student to provide a copy of the student’s social security number or to sign a form stating that the person does not wish to provide the social security number.

Immunization Certificate: The school system re-

quires proof of immunization as required by O.C.G.A. §20-2-771, which includes an exemption for religious grounds and provisions for a temporary waiver.

A Georgia Department of Public Health Form 3231 marked “Complete” for the appropriate grade level shall be considered proof of immunization.

Out of State Immunization Records will need to be transferred to a GA DPH Form 3231 by the Union County Health Department PRIOR to registration. The Union County Health Department is located at 175 Chase Drive, Blairsville, GA, 706-745-6292.

Certificate of Vision, Hearing, Dental, and Nutrition Screening (Form 3300): This can be obtained from your child’s doctor or from the Union County Health Department, and is required for students who are enrolling in a Georgia school for the first time.

Proof of Union County Residency (2 different documents) Examples include: Current (within 2 months old) lease agreement, vehicle registration form, mortgage

documents, property tax notice, homeowner’s or renter’s insurance bill, utility bills, etc. A cell phone bill, driver’s license, or bank statement are not acceptable.

Withdrawal Form/Report Card from the student’s most recent former school for transferring students.

Documentation for Homeless Students: Homeless students, as defined by the McKinney-Vento Act, shall be enrolled immediately with full participation in school activities, regardless of whether all of the above can be provided at the time of enrollment. The designated employee responsible for care of homeless students shall assist the person enrolling the homeless student or the unaccompanied youth in acquiring the necessary documents for enrollment in accordance with the requirements of the state enrollment rule and the McKinney-Vento Act.

Please feel free to contact the Registration Office by phone at 706-835-4321 or by email at registrar@ucschools.org if you have any questions regarding student registration.

Sons of the Pioneers...from Page 1A

Nashville does not, and the young people growing up today don't know what western music is," Cochran said. "They don't know who the Sons of the Pioneers are, a lot of them, and I want to help change that if I can."

Some of the oldest songs preserved from America's history are country ballads from the late 1800s. Before the days of completed railroads, cattle were herded by cowboys and driven up to stations where they would be sold to market.

"You know the old trail drives, the old cowboys that moved the cattle from Texas up to the railroad in Kansas?" Cochran said. "They would

sing to the cows at night to keep them from stampeding, to just keep them calm.

"So, cowboy music is not something that's just made up. They had a reason. Many cowboys and many cow horses were killed in stampedes because you couldn't stop them. But by singing to the cattle and keeping them calm, they always had a night guard — like Roy Rogers' song."

And that's where the Sons of the Pioneers come in. What started as sharing the lonely songs of the night guard grew into a preservation of history and a way to connect to bygone days. Bob Nolan, one of the original founders of

the Sons of the Pioneers, was a poet.

Seeing the use in "painting with words," many of Nolan's poems were set to music courtesy of bandmates Roy Rogers and Tim Spencer — the latter of whom helped write new ditties in the same style of yodeling cowhands.

Nowadays, a lot of the group's writing and communication is handled by bassist and harmony vocalist Chuck Ervin, who has a degree in journalism and is currently working on continuing a biography detailing the history of the Sons of the Pioneers called "Hear My Song."

One could call it a

language of its own, and to fully appreciate the artform, learning literary skills is critical. Ferst Readers of Union County ensures that children who may not otherwise get a chance to foster healthy reading skills can do so in a positive, stable environment.

"Ferst Readers wants every child to have the best start in life — and nothing helps a baby's brain develop more than exposure to rich language and loving interactions," according to www.ferstreaders.org.

This means providing books to low-income families to "ensure children have developmentally appropriate books in their homes and provide parents with resources supporting them as their child's first teacher."

Children who are signed up for the program receive a free age-appropriate book in the mail every month until their fifth birthday, and while Ferst Readers may specifically target community members with limited income, the program is open for any child to join.

Funding is provided by Community Action Teams made up of volunteers that raise money on an individual basis, paying for each child's "subscription." Partnerships with donor groups such as the Rotary Club or Kiwanis also help cover costs.

On a more personal level,

then, it's important to realize that the proceeds generated from the concert will be going to a good cause, so people who attend the concert in October will be taking part in a historical event as well as a charitable one for local families.

Those who grew up listening to the Sons of the Pioneers can experience the sweet nostalgia that comes with reliving bygone days, and children and grandchildren can make new memories reading with loved ones.

As a matter of fact, baritone John Fullerton was dragged kicking and screaming to a Sons concert in his youth by his grandparents. He grew up to collect every album and plenty of memorabilia, then joined the band to carry on an 89-year-old legacy.

"We're just trying to keep this legacy going," Nallie said. "People wonder, 'Why don't they just stop?' Well, we don't want to stop. And we're hoping that younger guys would want to come in when we get too old to play; just keep it going. That's what we want."

For more information and to purchase tickets in advance of the big show, visit <https://www.eventbrite.com> and search for "FERST Readers Concert with Sons of the Pioneers." And keep a look out for one of the flyers promoting the event around town.

At the Library...from Page 1A

Even before working in Young Harris, Cannon was often there to pick up books for her children. Eventually, she was encouraged by a former employee to apply as assistant librarian, and she moved her way up to manager, at one point working in youth services.

It turned out to be a perfect fit, as she has "always wanted to help people," which is something she has been able to do through her position at the library.

The Blairsville library is currently looking for a new youth services specialist, and Cannon, who loves books and children's programs, eagerly anticipates working with whoever is hired.

Both Kevin Kirby and Ann Lewis have backgrounds in education.

Kirby had been working as a middle school teacher until he moved back home to Young Harris and accepted the role of assistant manager, where he used his teaching skills to

organize events for youth and promote Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math, or STEAM, programs.

He would like to bring the STEAM programs to the Hiawassee library and add some culture-based educational programs as well. He and Lewis have gotten used to coordinating community events, something they plan to do more of in the future.

"My goal is to have at least one program a month," Kirby said, with more planned down the road. Already, the Towns County Public Library hosts a story-time for children every Tuesday at 10:30 a.m. that "the kids seem to really enjoy."

As for Lewis, she retired from a position as a school media specialist before taking the role of Youth Services Specialist at the Union County library, since working in a public library was something she "always wanted to do."

Lewis emphasized how

placing dedicated branch managers at each library will provide "more opportunity for growing programs for the community." She plans to get both local children and adults involved in library programs and events.

And the shifts in management positions have enjoyed a warm reception: "Every comment has been really positive," Lewis said, adding that people are happy to have the library open an extra day in Young Harris.

Overall, Lewis is "thrilled" about her new position, has felt "very welcomed" by the community, and is excited about "what's coming moving forward."

The Union County Public Library is located at 303 Hunt Martin Street in Blairsville. Hours are Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Tuesday and Thursday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.; and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Towns County Public Library can be found at 99 South Berrong Street in Hiawassee, open Tuesdays through Fridays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

People may visit the Mountain Regional Library at 698 Miller Street in Young Harris, with hours being Monday through Thursday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

All three libraries are planning to launch fall reading programs, which will start in September. For more information, visit <https://www.mountainlibrary.com/>.

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Butternut Creek Fest...from Page 1A



Gregg Erwin was one of several area artists to headline the 2023 Butternut Creek Festival to provide live entertainment to guests in Meeks Park over the weekend.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

with vendors selling tasty treats like barbeque, kettle corn and lemonade, to name a few.

Each year, two booths are reserved for local nonprofits, with organizations highlighted in 2023 being the Blairsville Cruisers and the Misty Mountain Quilters Guild.

Popular attractions included blacksmithing demonstrations at the Art of Critter Ridge booth, live chainsaw art by Jason Hamilton, and alpaca fiber art demos by Donna McCarthy.

Live music on Saturday included musicians Gregg

Erwin, Steve Sanders, and the Country River Band, while Sunday featured local gospel singers in the morning, with Mary Kate Farmer and the Country River Band playing later in the day.

As noted above, the Butternut Creek Festival is considered a juried art show. This means that all vendors have to submit applications and be chosen to participate in the festival. Helena Grossman, an organizer and owner of Willie's Wooden Wonders, explained the process.

"The jury panel is made

up of artists of various crafts," Grossman said. A blind vote is conducted using pictures submitted in the applications, and vendors who make it in the show must be unanimously chosen by the jury. Only "high quality goods" are offered to the public.

Festival proceeds come from vendor application fees, which are given to local schools with a goal of making sure teachers "are not paying for supplies throughout the year," Grossman said. Last year, the festival raised \$6,000 toward the cause.

Grossman pointed to support from the community as an important part of putting the festival together year after year.

"We get great support from the Recreation Department, and we couldn't put it on without the Fire Department (helping with traffic)," Grossman said. "It's a team effort between our office and the community."

The festival draws in anywhere between 12,000 and 15,000 people each year, and two of those many thousands of visitors in 2023 were father-son duo Don and Dan Morris.

Dan lives in Seattle but came back recently to visit his dad, whose wife was running a booth at the event. They were looking for things to do in the area and decided to spend the day at the festival, having a great time in the process.

Plenty of locals attend,

too, like Rita Kline, who lives in Blairsville and comes to the festival for the crafts and the music.

Glenn and Penny Trotti had a booth selling custom laser-engraved wood products. The pair are "very sentimental" about the festival after moving to Blairsville last year upon losing both their jobs and home. The Butternut Creek festival was the first event they attended in the area.

"It's super special to be in it," Penny said.

Sue and Paul Bergstrom of Mountain Melodies sold thumb pianos inside Meeks. Originally from Minnesota, the couple came to Blairsville in 1999 and are thrilled to participate in the festival.

"We want to support our own community," Sue said, adding that it is also "a fun show."

Jean Stephens of Song

Dog Studios, a jewelry-making business, called the event a "do-not-miss show," agreeing with the general sentiment that the High Country Artisans is "a great organization with great people."

The festival is held every third weekend in July, and vendor applications can be found at butternutcreekfestival.com/vendor-application for people wanting to get in on the family-friendly action in 2024.

Downtown Development...from Page 1A



People needing to answer nature's call while visiting Downtown Blairsville will be able to do so soon at the public bathrooms located in the downtown parking area. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

the festival and look around.

Another idea was to combine it with the Mountain Heritage Festival to make a week-long event to include historical re-enactments at the Butt Mock House and Payne Cabin along with trade classes and even a church service.

"I like the idea of having a week of events ... and it's all tied into a theme," said DDA Executive Director Darren Harper, before describing the other issues that the Mountain Music & Moonshine Festival faces.

These issues include the heavy summer heat, which keeps plenty of people inside for their comfort and safety, as well as the inherent property of the word "moonshine" to both attract and repel certain groups.

"(But) I worry about if we were to combine them, then you're also subjecting yourself to - because the weather is good or it's not, and you've got a 50/50 shot, whereas if you have three festivals, maybe two of them will be good and one of them is rained out," Harper added.

Ultimately, the topic will be revisited in future meetings to continue considering possibilities, but the idea of a week-long celebration of mountain heritage is so far the most popular.

This year's Music & Moonshine Festival is shaping up to have 113 vendors and will broaden its horizons from the square to spreading out into the next-door parking lot and possibly other parts of town.

New in 2023 will be a 5K race on Friday evening, allowing entrants a chance to run in the cooler evening hours. For more information, to purchase tickets or to sign up for the race, visit www.mmmfest2023.com.

Construction for the new public bathrooms downtown has nearly wrapped up, lacking only a few finishing touches, and the facilities will be ready for use in time for the Music & Moonshine Festival to start serving people as a staple for festivals and other events moving forward.

The bathrooms will hopefully function more like a rest stop for downtown guests in the future, and Harper hinted at the impending installation of a digital signboard.

"Eventually, the goal is to get something that is electronic, digital, whether it's something like a touchscreen where they can (look) for restaurants, for cars, for shops - whatever," he said.

Even if the addition of a touchscreen won't be an immediate investment, Harper hopes to display multiple slides on such a device. He described it less as a billboard and more "like a television that you program with things that scroll through."

"What type of things will go in there? Like a map of the downtown, upcoming events," noted Harper, suggesting that ads from local businesses could help fund the organization or supplies for the restrooms.

Other minor touches anticipated down the road are cosmetic changes. The doors were painted white after some debate about the final color, but several DDA members thought the bathrooms needed a bit more decoration.

"We thought it might be funny to put a decal on the front door that kind of softens the look, and it also serves to protect the door," Harper said. So far, the most accepted design was a faux wooden look, but nothing was confirmed to allow for more development.

Visible from Blairsville City Hall's back deck is the new electric vehicle charging station. It sits at the edge of the parking lot and was completed the same day as the July 11 meeting.

Several DDA members came out to see the finished product after the meeting, along with getting a chance to check out the new bathrooms for themselves.

In addition to the recent accomplishments in the parking lot, Harper was quick to point out some changes to the greenspace behind City Hall.

"(The Rotary Club) did this walkway; this is handicap accessible," he said, motioning to a new brick path running to and around the picnic tables. "I extended the top of that table so you can get wheelchairs on both ends, so it's now (an Americans with Disabilities Act)-compliant greenspace."

"Ideally, we'd like to use it for more things, but it's limited in space ... We can't

have a festival down here, but we can have small events. The city's going to expand this deck, put stairs down, so we've got some other improvements over there on that bank. Right now, it's just early stages."