

North Georgia News

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Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, August 16, 2023

First day goes smoothly for Union County Schools

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Wednesday, Aug. 9, marked the return for Union County students headed back for another school year, and so far, 2023-24 has gotten off to a bright start.

In fact, according to Teaching and Learning Director C.T. Hussion, the infamous annual "first-day traffic" was actually the smoothest he and several others had ever seen.

"Usually, it's a little bit chaotic in the morning and we're still dealing with traffic even at 8:30 or 9. And it was 8:05 and we were clear - like, all clear," Hussion specified, crediting the new traffic patterns introduced last year

with the ease of transport.

On the topic of transportation, Hussion wanted to implore parents and guardians to consider using the bus system, adding, "I wish more people would ride the bus because it would cut down on traffic and also get the kids where they need to be on time."

Regardless of how they got there, students were greeted last week with signs of encouragement from members of the local Vertical Church.

Reading encouraging messages such as, "You've got this!" and "We are praying for you!" or "We rise by lifting others!" made many folks' days, and it especially helped that there was a stand with Abide Coffee cups waiting for parents who drove

back through the early morning fog from the bypass.

But teachers also received their own message of thanks and encouragement in the form of Pinnacle Bank serving a pizza lunch to the educators and staff of Union County Primary School on Aug. 8, the day before classes started.

Press-time enrollment figures saw Union County Primary School with 781 students, Union County Elementary School with 640 students, Union County Middle School with 692 students, Union County High School with 940 students, and Woody Gap School with 60 students.

One of those students is
See *First Day of School*, Page 6A



Children at Union County Primary returned to classes last week alongside older students as school started back Aug. 9. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Blairsville to qualify council candidates August 21-23

By Shawn Jarrard
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It's that time again for interested and eligible City of Blairsville residents to decide if they wish to run for local office, with qualifying set to take place next week for the Nov. 7 Municipal General Election.

Three council seats are up for grabs in this year's electoral contest, with those positions currently being held by Councilwomen Rhonda Mahan, Mary Ruth Cook and Kayla Hemphill.

When their current terms expire in December, Mahan will have served five full terms and two years of a special election term for a total of 22 years on the council; Cook, one full term plus two years and a month of a special election term for a total of six years and one month; and Hemphill, two years and two months of a special election term.

To make the ballot, residents will need to fill out the appropriate qualifying paperwork and pay a fee, which is \$162 for a council seat.

Qualifying packets



can be picked up now during regular business hours inside City Hall located at 62 Blue Ridge Street in Blairsville.

People may submit their qualifying paperwork and fee payments at City Hall starting Monday, Aug. 21, through Wednesday, Aug. 23, between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. each day.

Residents are eligible

to qualify for and hold city office if they are 21 years or older, a city resident for at least a year immediately prior to the election date, a registered and qualified voter in the municipal election, and they must continue to reside in the city during the term of office.

Terms of office will begin Jan. 1, 2024, and run
See *Blairsville Qualifying*, Page 2A

School Board proposes property tax increase in 2023

The Union County Board of Education has announced its intention to increase the 2023 property taxes it will levy this year by 9.89% over the rollback millage rate.

Each year, the Board of Tax Assessors is required to review the assessed value for property tax purposes of taxable property in the county.

When the trend of prices on properties that have recently sold in the county indicate there has been an increase in the fair market value of any specific property, the Board of Tax Assessors is required by law to re-determine the value of such property and adjust the assessment. This is called a reassessment.

When the total digest of taxable property is prepared, Georgia law requires a rollback millage rate must be computed that will produce the same total



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revenue on the current year's digest that last year's millage rate would have produced had no reassessments occurred.

The budget adopted by the Union County Board of Education requires a millage rate higher than the rollback millage rate; therefore, before the Union County Board of Education may set a final millage rate, Georgia law requires three public hearings to be held to allow the public an opportunity to express their opinions on the increase.

All concerned citizens

are invited to the public hearings on this tax increase to be held at the Union County Board of Education Central Office at 124 Hughes Street in Blairsville on Aug. 24 at 7:30 a.m. and 6 p.m., and on Aug. 31 at 7:30 a.m.

Subsequently, the millage rate for 2023 will be established at the Called Board Meeting to be held on Aug. 31 at 8 a.m. at the Board Office.

This tentative increase will result in a millage rate of 7.523 mills, an increase of .677 mills. Without this tentative tax increase, the millage rate will be no more than 6.846 mills.

The proposed tax increase for a home with a fair market value of \$100,000 is approximately \$25.72, and the proposed tax increase for non-homestead property with a fair market value of \$300,000 is approximately \$81.24.

Lieutenant governor rep visits for 'Constituent Mobile Office Hours'

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

North Georgia Field Director Luke Hetland of Georgia Lt. Gov. Burt Jones' office made his way to the Union County Public Library last week for what the lieutenant governor calls "Constituent Mobile Office Hours."

The Mobile Office Hours were announced in February as part of the new "Statewide Field Representative

Constituent Program," which divides Georgia's 159 counties into three regions with a dedicated constituent services representative for each.

As the representative for this region, Hetland stopped at the library on Wednesday, Aug. 9, to speak with anyone who had something to say, from local organization members to ordinary citizens looking to offer their input.

"We're here to listen to questions, concerns that people have," Hetland said. "Each

issue should be taken seriously and quickly, but it's not always the case. So, if we're able to bring attention to it, it gets done."

For Union County in particular, several representatives for personal wellness showed up to talk about the need for mental health care services and reform.

Individuals from Positive Pathways, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, addiction recovery groups and
See *Hetland Visits Union*, Page 2A

Georgia Mountain Fair arrives; opening early for carnival



Families from all over will be flocking to the 2023 Georgia Mountain Fair for many reasons, including the massive carnival that opens Thursday. Photo by Lowell Nicholson/2022

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

HIAWASSEE - Get ready for nine full days of family friendly festivities at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds Aug. 18-26, though the fun will actually start early with a couple of awesome community events this Thursday.

Now in its 72nd year of operation and still going strong, the 2023 Georgia Mountain Fair is expected to

draw thousands of folks from all over the country for the many attractions this season has to offer.

The carnival by Amusements of America Midway opens a day early on Aug. 17 at 4 p.m., and \$10 will buy an unlimited ride wristband on that first day. For presale and online pricing specials throughout the fair, visit <https://georgiamountainfairgrounds.com/pageserver/carnival-rides>. Touted by the Guinness

Book of World Records as "the largest traveling amusement park in the world," Amusements of America will be "open daily with clean, safe family rides and games, as well as additional guest amenities throughout the carnival area."

Then there's the annual local youth talent exhibition known as the Miss Georgia Mountain Fair Beauty Pageant. For \$5, guests can gain admission to the Aug. 24 pageant. See *GA Mtn. Fair Fun*, Page 2A



Luke Hetland from the Office of Lt. Gov. Burt Jones spoke with local constituents last week to take their concerns back to the Gold Dome. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

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Blairsville Qualifying...from Page 1A

through Dec. 31, 2027.

Voting in the municipal election will be open to eligible residents of the city. The registration deadline to cast a ballot in the election is Oct. 10, so people who have yet to register should

do so at the Union County Registrar's Office inside the county courthouse.

Early voting will run weekdays for three weeks prior to Election Day, starting Monday, Oct. 16, and ending on Friday, Nov. 3, with two days

of weekend early voting on Saturday, Oct. 21, and Saturday, Oct. 27. All in-person voting will take place at City Hall.

The deadline to request an absentee ballot is Oct. 27. If requested, absentee ballots will be mailed at the earliest

beginning Oct. 16.

There is no countywide election in 2023, just the municipal election, so only residents qualified to vote in the City of Blairsville will be able to participate in November.

Hetland Visits Union...from Page 1A

other local organizations made their voices – and those of the people that they help – heard.

Linda Maddox served as a representative for AmeriCorps. As a member of Volunteers in Service to America, or VISTA, she was assigned to NAMI Georgia's Union County branch.

"Just like Peace Corps sends people out – they just send them to help – AmeriCorps does the same thing," said Maddox, explaining that AmeriCorps tries to fight poverty, and part of that effort includes tackling deficits when it comes to mental health care.

In Maddox's own words, "Mental illness can cause the poverty. Chicken or the egg,

which came first?"

Another attendee, Maryjane Wysocki, previously served as a job coach and worked with people with disabilities to help them find fulfilling occupations.

"I tried to match people with jobs," Wysocki said, but today, she works as the Union County representative to the Advisory Council for the Department of Behavioral Health, Developmental Disabilities and Addictive Diseases.

"My role is, if you have a concern or something's not working right, to let me know so I can bring it to the Commissioner or I can bring it to the Council and say what's going on," Wysocki said. "I'm new at this; I have no power, but you know, it always helps to have a voice added."

But mental health advocates weren't the only ones present. Vince Peterson brought along the Concerned Citizens of Union County to talk to Hetland about voter integrity and general political concerns.

In time, Peterson, Maddox, Wysocki and others had their chance to speak individually, but making connections outside while waiting their turn was just as important.

For example, Kelly Sykes of Gilmer County wanted to speak with Maddox and Wysocki to find out ways she could help her own community, which she said suffers from a lack of support for emotional and mental wellbeing.

Shawna Harkins and Miriam Roper were there to encourage recovery from addiction in particular while spreading the word about the Third Annual Hope in the

Mountains event on Sept. 9, sponsored by the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disorders, Georgia Recovers, Positive Pathways and the Georgia Council on Substance Abuse.

Hetland said that Union County had not been visited for any specific report, but he was glad to have come out. After compiling his work from last Wednesday's session, he will submit local concerns to the program chief and Lt. Gov. Jones himself for review.

"It sounds like there is an overall lack of mental health infrastructure. You've got Lumpkin, Union, Towns, Fannin, all these counties that don't really have any accessible care maybe," said Hetland, adding that low-income families in rural communities often face "double" the

problems due to bills and the gas money required to travel.

The closest specialized mental health facility is in Gainesville, and for some, treatment can't wait for a ride over the mountain. Other times, people in crisis get caught somewhere else; Hetland said that many police officers talked about a need for help in jails and prisons.

"I heard the word 'stigma' earlier, like (needing to break) that stigma," Hetland said about mental health and some of the feedback he plans to take back to Atlanta. "I think it'll be really good and hopefully bring some change whenever (our) next session kicks off next February."

To contact the Lt. Gov.'s office, call 404-656-5030. To contact North Georgia Field Director Luke Hetland, call 404-807-7436.



Positive Pathways Executive Director Shawna Harkins and volunteer Miriam Roper attended the Constituent Mobile Office Hours to talk about addiction recovery resources.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

GA Mtn. Fair Fun...from Page 1A

17 pageant at 7 p.m. inside Anderson Music Hall, and contestants will earn points for different outfits along with their personalities.

Specifically, 30% of the total score will rely on personal interviews with the judges, 20% on the ladies' overall presentation, 20% on stage questions, 20% on their display of evening gowns, and 10% on their active wear.

An optional talent show will follow the official judging portion and "will be based on pure talent and showmanship," as the judges will have no idea which of the girls plans to perform.

The overall winner will take home \$2,000 and "merchandise prizes," not to mention yearlong bragging rights as Miss Georgia Mountain Fair. First and second runners-up will receive \$300 and \$200 respectively, with more prizes available for Miss Congeniality and winning the talent show.

Hiwassee Garden Club will host a Flower Show Aug. 18 beginning at 10 a.m. with the patriotic theme "Plants America the Beautiful." If anyone misses the initial showing, they can catch the fantastic flowers on Aug. 19 from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., or on Aug. 20 from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Of course, folks will want to line either side of Main Street in Hiwassee on Saturday, Aug. 19, for the 72nd Annual Georgia Mountain Fair Parade, which will roll through town beginning at 11 a.m.

The 2023 parade theme is "Stars, Stripes, and Summer Nights," to feature big cash prizes for winning float

entries. The parade will start at SouthState Bank and works its way to and through the Fairgrounds and around Anderson Music Hall.

This year's Photography Exhibit and Contest will welcome participation from amateur and professional photographers, with categories of people, scenery, flora, fauna and abstracts. There is no fee to view the gallery, and monetary prizes will be awarded to 31 winning photos.

Sunday, Aug. 20, will feature an interfaith worship service beginning at 11 a.m., and guests are encouraged to attend the Gospel Music Show in the Music Hall starting at 2 p.m.

There's a full schedule at the Music Hall this year, with returning artists and big-name performers. The Vintage Vixens and none other than Peter Noone and Herman's Hermits will be there on Aug. 18, with the first performance beginning at 6 p.m.

Montgomery Gentry will perform on Aug. 19 at 7 p.m. as part of the Brotherly Love Tour, but keep in mind that a hard ticket is required for entry. Afterwards, on Aug. 20 at 2 p.m., Gospel Day will feature Inspirations, Down East Boys and Chris Rumpf and Family.

Kicking off the next week on Aug. 21 at 6 p.m. will be Chris Stalcup & The Grange along with T. Graham Brown, and 6 p.m. on Aug. 22 will see Destin Bennett and Larry, Steve and Rudy; The Gatlin Brothers perform. Veterans and first responders have free admission on Aug. 22.

On Aug. 23 at 6 p.m., the Kurt Wheeler Band and Lee

Greenwood will take to the stage. Bluegrass Day is Aug. 24, and the lineup starting at 6 p.m. will include the Kody Norris Show, Little Roy & Lizzy and Dan Tyminski.

The Jim Wood Band and Crystal Gale will perform on Aug. 25 starting at 6 p.m., and to close out the 2023 season, Casting Crowns will perform at 7 p.m. on Aug. 26, with a hard ticket required to enter the latter's showing.

Remember that admission for children 12 and under is free along with parking. Pets are not allowed.

A 1-Day Pass for \$16 will grant people access to the dozens of arts & crafts and food vendors, live music and entertainment performed throughout the Fairgrounds, entry to the carnival and an Anderson Music Hall performance – except the two Saturday hard-ticket shows.

A \$6 Carnival Pass will cover arts and crafts along with other Fairgrounds features, like the rejuvenated Exhibit Hall and Pioneer Village showcasing old mountain ways and local heritage, plus access to the carnival, but it will not cover music performances at Anderson Music Hall.

For music lovers, \$10 will buy a ticket to any of the Anderson Music Hall performances except for the premium Saturday shows. These will be available in-person after 5 p.m., located at the Music Hall and Handicap Gates.

Check out the official website at www.georgiamountainfairgrounds.com for more details or give a ring to 706-896-4191 for answers to any questions.



People can look forward to a revamped Pioneer Village at the 2023 Georgia Mountain Fair, where they can learn all about local heritage and the people who helped make the community what it is today.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson/2019

First Day of School...from Page 1A

UCHS junior Andrew Engle, son of Ingrid and Kenny Engle. At 16 years old, Andrew has started the school year being able to drive himself to and from classes.

"He drives now, so no more buses, no more bus lines," said Kenny Engle with some amount of relief tempered with pride. "It's a little scary having a 16-year-old out driving, but it does make it easier for us."

"He's a good boy," Ingrid Engle agreed. "He's got his teammates - he plays football. And on the weekends, he works at Jim's (Smokin' Que)."

Meanwhile, brothers Clay and Conner Stephens were excited to experience a new chapter. When Clay began his first day of fourth grade, he was especially looking forward to being able to officially start playing football.

Conner, entering the seventh grade, expressed confidence that he's "gotten the hang of middle school." This year, he anticipates staying busy with the band, the Future Farmers of America Program, and the 4-H BB Team that his parents help coach.

Mr. James Avery, an economics and personal finance teacher at Union County High, has already noticed similar



The teachers and staff of Union County High School are geared up and ready for a brand-new year of learning with students.

Photo by Todd Forrest

levels of confidence in his own students this year, who are mostly seniors.

"Obviously, they look forward to their senior year, and they look forward to

having a class that helps them to navigate that young adult life, and that's a difficult time for them," noted Avery, who saw students getting excited about taking class that first day as a step toward their own full independence. "So yeah, I have quite a few students who are really excited to be in here."

Essentially, no matter what role someone plays in the School System, there's something to look forward to. Whether it's learning, advancing at extracurriculars, parents seeing their children blossom, or making a difference in somebody's life, it all embodies the slogan of Union United.

"In a nutshell, people seem happy to be back: the kids, the parents, the teachers," added Hussion, who transitioned from the High School to the Board Office to start 2023-24. "There's been a lot of fist bumps and high-fives and stuff like that ... We're ready for a good year."

Go Panthers!



Be sure to watch out for buses as they roll through the community this school year! Let's keep the kiddos safe.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Blood Assurance awarding more than \$52,000 to area High Schools

As the 2023-2024 school year gets underway, many area high schools will have extra funds on hand thanks to Blood Assurance.

The community blood center announced that through its Heroes Grant Program, 53 high schools in Tennessee, Georgia and Alabama will share a portion of \$52,500, ranging from \$500-\$2,000 each. In Blairsville, Union County High School received \$750.

The recipients are schools that held blood drives with the nonprofit during the 2022-2023 academic year. The amount of money a school receives is based on several factors, including how many blood drives it hosted during

the year, and the number of blood units collected. After receiving the grants, administrators from each school will determine where the money should be allocated.

"Blood Assurance receive approximately 15% of our blood from high school student donations. We know that these students are the future of blood donation, and we hope to educate and inform them of the vital need for blood," said Linda Hisey, Blood Assurance's community engagement and development administrator.

The Heroes Grant Program is funded through proceeds from various events that take place throughout the year,

such as golf tournaments and benefit concerts.

"Blood Assurance is incredibly thankful for all of the philanthropic support we've received from the community," said Hisey. "Anyone attending one of these events understands the importance of seeing the leaders of tomorrow excel in school."

Since its inception in late 2021, the Heroes Grant Program has raised nearly \$102,000 for dozens of high schools.

Students or staff interested in hosting a blood drive at their school this year should contact Kim Murphy at (423)-356-4368 or KimMurphy@bloodassurance.org. N(Aug16/23)CA