

# North Georgia News

5 Sections 48 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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## BOE to hold tax increase hearings Aug. 24 & 31

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
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Residents will get the chance to attend three upcoming public hearings to offer feedback on the Union County Board of Education's intention to accept a partial rollback millage rate this year.

The partial rollback will result in a property tax increase to allow the school system to continue educating local children by helping to plug a \$2.9 million budget gap caused by multiple factors, like year over year inflation, rising health care costs, and \$2.4 million in state funding cuts.

Millage rates can go up, down or stay the same from year to year depending on the

level of change in the property tax digest and the budgetary needs of a taxing authority such as the school district.

Following this year's state-mandated property value reassessments, the countywide gross digest of all taxable real properties went up about 26% for 2023, with 83% of the 23,306 real property parcels in the county seeing an increase in property value.

Stemming from still-rising property sale prices, the 2023 digest increase has come on the heels of a 22% uptick in home values in 2022, which was preceded by a 30% increase in 2021, reflecting the pandemic-era trend of people with means relocating here from more congested urban

areas. The dramatically increased tax digest of the last few years has likewise increased the "local fair share" of education costs calculated by the state, meaning the state will be sending less money to cover local education expenditures in the coming years.

When it comes time to levy property taxes each year, Georgia law requires taxing authorities to calculate what's known as a rollback rate "that will produce the same total revenue on the current year's digest that last year's millage rate would have produced had no reassessments occurred."

Essentially, rollback rates offset inflationary increases in property values caused by



Union County Board of Education members are optimistic taxpayers will understand their decision to go up 9.89% on the school portion of property taxes in 2023. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

annual assessments to prevent taxes from being raised without due notice.

If a taxing authority decides not to accept the

rollback rate because it needs more money to continue providing services to the public, it must hold at least three public hearings to inform property

owners that tax collections will be increasing.

These public hearings will be held at the Union County Courthouse. See School Tax Increase, Page 3A

## Union County High construction students deliver on Habitat home



Union County High School Construction students posing with the first "Panther House" - a home built entirely from scratch at the UCHS Construction Lab for use by a Habitat for Humanity family once one is selected. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

By Daysha Pandolph  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

In a heartwarming union of education and compassion, Habitat for Humanity of Towns/

Union Counties took delivery of the first-ever home built in partnership with the Union County Schools Construction Program the morning of Monday, Aug. 14.

After a yearlong process of building the house at the Union County High School Construction Lab, the home has now been transported, via flatbed, to its permanent

location off Smyrna Road, where Habitat for Humanity volunteers will finish the final installation procedures.

Charlotte Randall, the See Panther House, Page 6A

## BRMEMC announces rate increase for all

By L. Allan Glidewell  
Blue Ridge Mountain EMC  
General Manager

I am writing to inform the membership that Blue Ridge Mountain Electric Membership Corporation will have to raise its portion of the electric rates by 2.25%. This increase is the first in 10 years and will go into effect on Oct. 1.

Over those 10 years we have been able to manage our way through and absorb normal inflation, largely on the strength of growth, but post-COVID inflation rates have been much higher and have proven a different matter.

BRMEMC continues to experience an enviable growth rate of nearly 1,200 meters per year. The growth accelerated during the COVID pandemic, as many spent much more time in their second homes in the area.

But the negatives include difficult material supply chain issues resulting in 50%-60% cost increases on some items needed to build and maintain the system. These issues are not unique to us or even the electric industry. Anyone buying eggs,



Allan Glidewell  
EMC General Manager

butter and milk has felt the results of these issues.

Our increase will represent only a 2.25% increase (well below what we are seeing in our household staples). This increase will be spread evenly across all rate classes but will be applied in different methods.

Residential rates will be increased by raising the customer charge \$2.90/month from \$22.91 to \$25.81. The margin on kWh sales will not be increased. This method was chosen for fairness to large and small users (a seldom- See EMC Rate Increase, Page 2A

## Roberts of Rabun crowned Miss Georgia Mountain Fair

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

HIAWASSEE - The coronation of a new queen took place in Anderson Music Hall the evening of Thursday, Aug. 17, as 2022 Miss Georgia Mountain Fair Sarah Shook handed over her crown to the new 2023 Miss Georgia Mountain Fair, Caroline Roberts of Rabun County.

Queen Roberts competed against 10 other girls in the regional Miss Georgia Mountain Fair Pageant, taking part in a night filled with various stages of friendly competition. From Fair questionnaires to daring displays of fashion, the young ladies won the hearts of the audience - and judges - between humorous quips of the hosts and dance breaks by skilled Hayesville, North Carolina, group Stardance Performing Arts.

This year's theme was "Queen of the Pioneer Village," and it brought to mind why having a Miss Georgia Mountain Fair is so important. Pageant hosts Corrina Luckenbach and Mark Ward had the girls pull random



2023 Miss Georgia Mountain Fair Caroline Roberts receiving her crown from Towns County's own Sarah Shook, who "passed the torch" Aug. 17 after earning the crown herself in 2022. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

questions out of a bowl. Each question had to do with the Georgia Mountain Fair and, by proxy, Appalachian culture, showcasing the young ladies' understanding of the importance of preserving heritage.

One contestant said that crowning a Miss Georgia

Mountain Fair ensured the support of a community event that "connects those who came before us." Another said that the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds were unique in covering such a wide range of events to unite everyone.

As the judges convened See Roberts Crowned, Page 6A

## Blairsville qualifying concludes on Wednesday, August 23

By Shawn Jarrard  
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editor@nganews.com

Qualifying began Monday for the City of Blairsville Municipal General Election and will conclude at 4:30 p.m. on Wednesday, Aug. 23.

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. Their terms expire in December.

To make the ballot, eligible city 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 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 through Wednesday, Aug. 23, between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.

Residents are eligible to qualify for and hold city See Qualifying Ends, Page 2A

## Drunk driver arrested after fleeing multiple area agencies

By Shawn Jarrard  
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Three law enforcement agencies collaborated last week to arrest a Hayesville, North Carolina, man who was driving recklessly in Union and Towns counties, resulting in more than a dozen charges, including driving under the influence and fleeing officers.

The incident began the afternoon of Tuesday, Aug. 15, when Union County Sheriff's Lt. Leon James, a dedicated traffic enforcement officer,

spotted a motorist traveling westbound "at a high rate of speed" on US 76 near Berry Road, according to UCSO Capt. Daren "Bear" Osborn.

Lt. James, who had been driving east at the time, used his radar unit to clock the truck going about 20 mph over the posted 55-mph speed limit, Osborn said.

The lieutenant turned around to make the stop, catching up with the truck near St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church. He activated his



Severo Escorza Tapia

See Tapia Arrested, Page 2A



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## Tapia Arrested...from Page 1A

lights and siren, and the driver eventually stopped next to a cornfield on 76, Osborn said.

James called the stop in to 911 Dispatch, and as he got out of his patrol car to approach the truck, the driver took off heading west again, Osborn said.

A chase ensued, with James notifying dispatch that the suspect was running from the law. The driver turned into the east entrance of Mountain Building Supply, again "at a high rate of speed," nearly striking a person walking across the parking lot, Osborn said.

"He then drove out of the second entrance of Mountain Building Supply heading back east," Osborn said. "He didn't yield, stop or anything, but pulled out into oncoming traffic, about causing another collision."

James proceeded with caution, Osborn said, yielding to traffic with his emergency equipment engaged. Unfortunately, the lieutenant was unable to catch up to the truck that was now heading eastbound at over 100 mph toward Towns County, passing cars on the wrong side of the road.

"It was basically a safety issue at that point, and Leon killed his equipment and stopped the chase," Osborn said.

In the meantime, Union County E-911 had informed Towns County Dispatch of the situation, and Georgia State Patrol picked up the chase across the county line, with the driver continuing to show "no regard for the motoring public as he traveled at excessive

speeds," per GSP.

As the driver was turning right from Townsend Mill Road onto Byers Creek Road, the pursuing trooper attempted a "Precision Immobilization Technique" but was unable to stop the truck, according to GSP.

The driver kept going toward Georgia 66 and wrecked his truck off the side of the road at the intersection of Byers Creek Road and Red Farm Road in Young Harris, and he ran from the scene on foot, the Towns County Sheriff's Office said.

Joining the search to apprehend the subject were deputies from the Towns County Sheriff's Office, the TCSO drone, and the Union County Sheriff's Office tracking K-9.

A Towns County resident saw the man running on his property and notified deputies on the scene as to the direction of travel, and TCSO Capt. Johnny McCoy observed him crossing a field, where he



According to authorities, Tapia bush-bonded after running his truck off the road in Young Harris last week.

Photo/Facebook

took the suspect into custody without incident, TCSO said.

Severo Escorza Tapia, 51, of Hayesville, was arrested by Georgia State Patrol and charged with driving under the influence of alcohol, aggressive driving, driving on the wrong side of the road, driving without a valid license, failure to drive within a single lane, failure to stop for a stop sign, two counts fleeing or attempting to elude a police officer, no insurance,

reckless driving, and speeding.

The Union County Sheriff's Office has charged Tapia with fleeing or attempting to elude a police officer and aggravated assault, with additional charges pending.

Tapia remained at the Towns County Detention Center at press time, where he is subject to a hold for his Union County charges. He is presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

## EMC Rate Increase...from Page 1A

used vacation property bears the increase equally with a heavily used residence). This method provides predictability both for the member and the cooperative.

GSA1 - Commercial and Industrial accounts (those with maximum demands below 50 kW) will be increased by raising the customer charge \$2.70/month from \$23.64 to \$26.34. The margin on kWh sales will not be increased. This method was chosen for the same reasons given in residential class.

GSA2 - Commercial and Industrial accounts (those with maximum demands over 50 kW but less than 1,000 kW) will be increased by raising the margin on kWh sales by 0.314¢ per kWh. The customer charge on these customers will not be increased.

GSA3 - Commercial and Industrial accounts (those with maximum demands over 1,000 kW) will be increased by raising the margin on kWh sales by 0.264¢ per kWh. The customer charge on these customers will not be increased.

Outdoor Lighting will be increased by raising the margin on kWh sales by 0.178¢ per kWh. The customer charge on these customers will not be increased.

Again, all these methods are calculated to provide a 2.25% increase in revenue from each class.

I realize this news may not fit exactly with all our announcements of grants won to expand broadband service to select areas. In truth, we have recently won three fiber grants that will cover projects costing \$16.3 million. The rest of the truth is those funds and efforts are separate from electric revenues.

Even on the fiber side, we will have to pay that entire sum as we build. Upon completion of work, we will be reimbursed 0.70¢ for each dollar spent. In essence, these grants mean we will spend nearly \$4.9 million in these areas. Nonetheless, these grants are a blessing as they will help to bring this service more quickly to our members.

I wish I could tell you this is all the news, but TVA, due to similar issues, has announced an end to its Pandemic Relief Credit which we have passed on to the members each of the past three years. In all fairness, the pandemic is generally acclaimed finished though its effects are still evident.

Regardless, this credit had the effect of reducing TVA's portion of your bill by

roughly 1.5%. In residential bill terms, the removal of this credit will result in an increase of \$1.50 per month for each \$100 spent. On the average bill, which is roughly \$127/month, this will increase that bill by approximately \$1.90.

Altogether, the total effect of these changes should be around \$4.90 per month for the average residential member, or an increase of around 3.8% on that average bill, and will commence on Oct. 1.

I'm not sure what the coming years hold, but it seems clear to me the new investment in the electric system, both TVA's and ours, will increase considerably as old non-electric loads are shifted to electricity and electric vehicles become standard. This past Christmas has surely proven that.

Yet as we are given grace, we will continue to manage these changes with such wisdom as is granted, and with the clear understanding that we as members own these opportunities and share these burdens.

Thank you all so much for the support you have shown and continue to show! And thank you for the opportunity to serve!

## Qualifying Ends...from Page 1A

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 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 Nov. 7 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.

## Iota Iota hosts August birthday party for residents at Branan Lodge and the Village



Ruth Brokenshre, Linday Moya, Marilyn Moore, Kathy Anderson

On Friday, August 11th, Iota Iota, a chapter of Beta Sigma Phi, hosted an August birthday party for residents at Branan Lodge and the Village. Four sweet ladies came for the celebration.

They donned their birthday crowns and enjoyed being

sung to and eating a cupcake and ice cream. Our youngest guest was celebrating her 66th birthday and our oldest guest was celebrating her 81st birthday.

We found out that they came from all over the U.S. before retiring to Blairsville.

At the conclusion of the celebration the women were given a special birthday glass that they can use each year.

Next birthday celebration for residents of Branan Lodge and the Village will be held on Friday, September 8th at 2 PM. N(Aug23,29)CA

## The County Sheriff: America's Last Hope program September 9th

This is a very unique event opportunity that everyone should attend...you as a citizen, sheriffs and all law enforcement, all public office holders who have taken the oath to uphold the Constitution! This is all about the true power of the constitution and how to apply it in today's world, ending tyranny and corruption across the country, protecting your rights and freedoms, why are sheriffs are

so important and much much more.

Saturday, Sept. 9, 2023, 9:00-5:00, at First Baptist Church Fellowship Hall, 517 Hiwassee St., Murphy, NC. A Registration fee of \$70 will include continental breakfast, Famous Jim's Smokin' BBQ lunch, and break snacks. Sheriff Richard Mac of Constitutional Sheriffs & Peace Officers Association (CSPOA) in Arizona and

Sheriff Dar Leaf of Michigan will be presenters. Cherokee County Sheriff Dustin Smith will introduce. Registration is required. To register or donate <https://form.jotform.com/231725784551158>

Sponsored by Citizens For A Better America... [www.CitizensForABetterAmerica.com](http://www.CitizensForABetterAmerica.com). For more information contact CSPOA office at (602) 610-1566 or locally (678) 372-3212.

# School Tax Increase...from Page 1A

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 Aug. 31 at 7:30 a.m. The 2023 millage rate will be set at a called board meeting on Aug. 31 at 8 a.m. at the Board Office.

The school district's 2023 millage rate will actually be going down relative to the 2022 rate, to remain one of the lowest rates in the state; but because it is only a partial rollback, the new rate will still be 9.89% higher than the full rollback.

"This tentative increase will result in a millage rate of 7.523 mills, an increase of .677 mills (over the rollback rate)," the School Board said last week. "Without this tentative tax increase, the millage rate will be no more than 6.846 mills." For reference, the 2022 school millage rate was 8.2 mills.

All told, the board hopes to generate about \$19.5 million with the proposed partial rollback rate, which is \$2.4 million more in tax collections than in 2022, factoring in some tax revenues from growth versus inflation.

In promoting the partial rollback, the School Board has taken into consideration the fact that thousands of homeowners will be seeing a significant decrease in their tax bills this year from the one-time Homestead Property Tax Relief

Grant established by Gov. Brian Kemp.

The thought process has been to have the least impact on homeowners, which, thanks to the number of taxpayers with homestead exemptions who will benefit from the Property Tax Relief Grant, should be minimal in 2023.

Per the Tax Commissioner's Office, there are 6,750 homesteads and 15,295 total homes – stick-built and mobile – in Union County, meaning about 44% of all homes have homestead exemptions.

Only homeowners with existing homestead exemptions will be granted this relief, which will have approximately \$216 off 2023 property tax bills. People can see if they qualify for a homestead exemption for future tax purposes by inquiring at the Union County Tax Assessor's Office.

In the regular monthly School Board meeting on Tuesday, Aug. 15, Superintendent John Hill offered multiple reasons for the Fiscal Year 24 budgetary increases and, by extension, the need to raise taxes.

"Since 2020, you're looking at 18% inflation," Hill said. "Labor costs have gone up for us to be able to hire employees. The governor's teacher raise that's mandated by the state – there's a local cost to that. The non-certified cost has

increased.

"Utilities have increased ... food costs – just things that you don't think about – it's made operation very difficult.

"And really, what's hurt us the very most is the increase in our property values, because that has resulted in a decrease in state funding. As property values increase, the Quality Basic Education funding decreases.

"The last thing is a very substantial increase in health care costs for our employees. That number has gone from \$11,340 per employee to \$18,960 per employee through state health benefits. So, you add all those numbers up, and we're in a pretty big hole."

Hill said in early June that he did not plan on recommending a tax increase, but after digging into the numbers while calculating the budget this summer, the board worked hard at making cuts while coming up with the partial rollback compromise that will result in a tax increase for 2023.

"Why do we need to do this?" Hill said. "Well, we've talked about all the costs, but let's talk about the taxpayer. This year, there is a Homestead Tax Relief Grant, and that is an \$18,000 reduction of the assessed value of your property when it's a homestead.

"In many cases, it will be a tax reduction to their

actual property tax bill year over year to the citizens of our community. This Homestead Tax Relief Grant is a wonderful thing, and so that's why we think that this might be something worth discussing and the board considering."

Board Member Jason McCarter agreed before switching gears to level criticism at the state funding formula as being outdated relative to when it passed into law in 1985. The goal at the time was to ensure no school system pays more than 20% at the local level to educate children.

But the state formula is the culprit behind the current local funding deficit of \$2.4 million, as the rapid rise in property values over the last few years has caused a "mismatch" in what the state originally intended to fund, about 80%, versus what it is funding today, about 70%.

Furthermore, Hill said that the state funding reduction has a two-year lag, so the decrease in state funding this year is actually reflective of the increase in values from 2021.

"And two years from now, we will be seeing another (funding) reduction from this property assessment that we currently just went through," Hill said. "This is killing the

school district."

The district projects it will have about \$32.6 million in operating reserves at the end of this fiscal year, and these funds are helping to fill the current budget gap. But the Board Office contends that operating at such a large revenue deficit – several million dollars a year – is not sustainable.

So, costs going up yearly and anticipated future state funding cuts are why the School Board has decided to do a smaller tax increase in a year that nearly half of taxpayers will receive a property tax credit, in hopes of preventing the need for a big single-year tax increase down the line.

Also in the Aug. 15 meeting, the School Board approved moving all the system's bank accounts to United Community Bank to take advantage of a higher interest rate to generate roughly half a mill's worth of additional revenues to further offset expenditures moving forward.

As for the county portion of property tax bills, the Commissioner's Office will soon be setting its own millage rate. Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris committed earlier this year to rolling back the 2023 county millage rate "to minimize any tax increase" from the reassessments.

# Butternut Creek Festival wins a 200 Best Award



High Country Artisans, Inc., coordinators of the Butternut Creek Festival, is delighted to announce Sunshine Artist magazine has released its 2023 200 Best, ranking the most profitable art and craft festivals in the country based on artists' reported sales in 2022.

The Butternut Creek Festival was ranked No. 60 in the Classic & Contemporary Craft Show category.

Launched in 1993, Sunshine Artist's 200 Best is split into two categories: Fine Art

& Design for events that focus on unique, fine-art pieces and Classic & Contemporary Craft for events that focus on traditional or modern craft and production work.

Information about all the shows that made this year's 200 Best list is available in Sunshine Artist's August/September 2023 issue, as well as online at <https://sunshineartist.com/200-best>.

Artists were able to cast their votes from February through April to nominate their highest money-making shows from 2022. The ballot asked artists to list the 10 most profitable art and/or craft shows they exhibited at during the previous year, indicate

their level of gross sales at each event, and note whether they considered themselves fine artists or craftspeople for each event.

The results were tabulated using a weighted scale based on four sales levels to ensure all events competed against each other fairly. Sunshine Artist's 200 Best focuses solely on artists' show revenue, because that is the most objective indicator of a show's future success. Subjective attributes, such as artist treatment, amenities, attendance levels, management, and overall quality, can impact sales but are harder to gauge and therefore have no direct bearing on the rankings.

# Community Wildfire Protection Plan reduces risks

A Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP) is a written document that is used by a community to prepare for wildfires that will require local resources to protect the community. A CWPP is designed through collaboration between state and local fire agencies, RC&Ds, homeowners, and interested stakeholders. The plan implements the community's values and serves to protect natural and community resources and public safety. Planning also enables communities to address their development patterns in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and determine how they can reduce their risk through alternative development patterns.

The plan includes prioritized recommendations for the appropriate types and methods of fuel reduction and structure ignitability reduction that will protect the community's essential infrastructure. Specifically, the plan includes community-centered actions that will: Educate citizens on wildfire, and ways to protect lives and property; Support fire rescue and suppression entities; Focus on collaborative decision-making and citizen participation; and develop and implement effective mitigation strategies.

The Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) provided communities with a tremendous opportunity to influence where and how federal agencies implement fuel reduction projects on federal lands. For more than a decade, Congress has made the protection of communities from wildfire a national priority. Yet, since the establishment of the National Fire Plan (2000) and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA (2003) the issues regarding deteriorating health of our forests and the need for greater community protection from wildfire are still prominent.

Fire suppression costs have exceeded \$1 billion in recent fire seasons so communities, interest groups, and land management agencies must continue to express their

concerns to Congress regarding mounting risks to life, property, and the environment.

A CWPP is the most effective way to take advantage of this opportunity. Additionally, communities with CWPPs in place will be given priority for funding of hazardous fuels reduction projects carried out under the auspices of the HFRA. Fires are usually costlier to suppress in the WUI, the areas where homes are intermixed with forests and wildlands. Debris burning in the WUI is the most frequent human cause of wildfires, but these human-caused fires can be prevented and the excessive cost of fire suppression reduced.

The first step in wildfire prevention education is to raise awareness of the responsibilities of living in a fire-prone environment. The CWPP collaborative process is effective in improving coordination and communication between emergency response agencies and the community. The goal of protecting communities and natural resources from wildfire cannot be accomplished by any one person or entity so we must work together to identify and pursue a pathway to success thru collaboration.

Collaboration is simply people working together to address a shared problem that no one of them could effectively resolve alone. Each participant brings to the effort knowledge, skills, ideas, and resources, and these decision-makers need to stay actively engaged throughout the collaborative process, and the other participants need to know what the collaborative group's "decision space" is and how much weight its recommendations will carry with the decision-makers.

The use of a collaborative process is one of the requirements that Congress established for a CWPP. Developing and adopting a CWPP opens the door to significant local community benefits, including being able to: 1) define and set the boundaries of the community's WUI;



2) identify and prioritize areas for hazardous fuel-reduction treatments on USFS lands in the WUI; 3) recommend the types and methods of treatment to be used; and 4) influence how federal funds for projects on non-federal WUI lands may be obtained. Additionally, the collaboration should stimulate or strengthen local efforts to reduce structural ignitability, enhance emergency management and communication, and foster public education and action to reduce wildfire risk to life and property. Perhaps most importantly, collaborative processes help build trust and good working relationships among the participants.

Effective collaboration ensures that all bases are covered in the planning process, that potential problems or roadblocks are identified and dealt with, and that good use is made of available time and money. Getting and keeping people engaged with the process is important to keep the process moving toward developing the emergency plan.

The local Firewise Citizen's Coalitions that have been developed in our area in recent years are the collaborative group that makes this happen and creates among the members a sense of ownership that takes the process to the people to protect them from wildfire. We are in the process of applying for a Community Wildfire Defense Grant that will pay for writing CWPPs for Towns, Union, Hog Hammock on Sapelo Island and five other at risk communities that need to update a CWPP or create a new one. Once we write a CWPP, then we apply for a grant to pay for the items and practices proposed in the CWPP.

For more information on CWPP contact Frank Riley at [info.ccrd@gmail.com](mailto:info.ccrd@gmail.com).

## Roberts Crowned...from Page 1A



L-R: Taking home prizes for the 2023 Miss Georgia Mountain Fair Pageant were Emily Leonard of Union County, Cara Cole Heerde of Habersham County, Caroline Roberts of Rabun County, Jewell Massey of Union County, and Kylee Parker of Rabun County.

Photo by Lowell Nicholson

to decide a winner, the hosts shared fun Fair facts to offer the audience insight into just how far back the event's history goes. The Fair began in 1950, and seeing as only 2,000 guests attended the first year, the annual event has grown exponentially.

Part of this growth can be attributed to the pageant itself, considering the support that some crowned queens show their area. While thanking their sponsors, the hosts showed a video highlighting the Sponsor of the Year, Retreat on the Lake, formerly Mull's Motel.

It was there that 2022 Miss Georgia Mountain Fair Sarah Shook had toured and even helped a bit with renovations. Projected onto the big screen, Shook carefully hammered a nail into place as her voiceover narrated how excited she was to see the repurposed hotel once more becoming an asset to her beloved hometown.

And before passing the crown, Shook made an appearance on-stage, marking her final walk before thanking those who had made her reign possible.

Brimming with emotion, Shook admitted to understanding all the hard work that each contestant put into the pageant, and she said that no matter who took up the mantle as queen, each and every one of the young ladies were winners.

"No matter whether you place tonight or not, you all have taken a piece of the Georgia Mountain Fair home with you, and you have given a piece of yourselves to us, and that is just beautiful. And we thank you so, so much for that," said Luckenbach, herself a

former Miss Georgia Mountain Fair Queen.

That said, when it came time to reveal the luckiest ladies of the lot, Emily Leonard of Union County took home the title of the Talent Show Winner, earning herself \$75 for her moving solo dance routine.

Kylee Parker of Rabun County was voted by her peers as Miss Congeniality for possessing "the most positive energy" and an especially kind, outgoing personality that got her \$25 in prize money.

The Second Runner-Up, Jewell Massey of Union County, won \$200 to a roar of cheers and applause. The First Runner-Up, Cara Cole Heerde of Habersham County, received a similar congratulatory cacophony before taking home \$300.

Finally, to a lauding cascade of whistles, whoops, shouts and overall wild acclaim, Caroline Roberts of Rabun County was crowned Miss Georgia Mountain Fair 2023. She will earn her prize of \$2,000 in increments over the next year as she serves as an ambassador for the Fair.

"I think I'm going to pass out," her mother Rebecca uttered through happy tears, rushing to the stage to photograph the happy moment that Shook graced Roberts with her new sash and a sparkling crown of her very own.

At 18 years old, Roberts just graduated high school and plans on going into criminal justice, particularly crime scene investigation.

She cultivates a variety of interests such as sports like archery, hunting, golf and horse riding. In fact, she maintains a job as a trail lead at the

Brasstown Valley Stables, and in her own words, she likes to "keep (her) options open" when it comes to her time.

"I am a little bit shocked, but I'm very honored to have been chosen," said Roberts, who before now had zero pageant experience. "The other girls did such a good job this year; it was a fair competition."

According to Roberts and her parents, the Rabun residents spend an incredible amount of time in Towns County.

"She took her first steps in Towns County," recalled proud mother Rebecca, whom Caroline credits, along with her father Reid Roberts, pageant coach Tabitha Egan and even other contenders, with supporting her first steps as Fairgrounds royalty.

Come January, Roberts will be in Atlanta for a state-level pageant but will keep her title as Miss Georgia Mountain Fair for a year. During her reign, she will promote the Fair, including having taken part in the parade Saturday, while making sure to help her community.

"I just was true to myself. I tried to have fun with it," said Roberts of her victory, encouraging any girl who dreams of following in her footsteps to take the plunge and believe in herself to become a queen in her own right.

The Georgia Mountain Fair continues this week through Saturday, Aug. 26, with plenty of vendors, carnival action, music and other entertainment inside the Fairgrounds and Anderson Music Hall. Visit <https://georgiamountainfairgrounds.com/> for full scheduling information.

## Panther House...from Page 1A

Executive Director of the local Habitat for Humanity, said that the home – referred to as The Panther House – is scheduled to be move-in ready by this fall for a qualifying family.

The collaboration between Habitat and UCHS initially came about 4 1/2 years ago when Construction Teacher Charley Cattanaach approached the nonprofit about a project to give students experience in both construction and civil responsibility while helping local families in need.

Construction of the home, however, did not begin until August 2022, following the completion of the new College and Career Academy building at UCHS. The program quickly took off, with Cattanaach's fall semester class erecting the framing and roofing for the home.

By the end of spring semester, the walls, siding, interior fixtures, wiring and plumbing were finished by Construction Pathway students, with summer work to complete the home done by dedicated students Shawn Pokrywa, Logan Thornton and Isaac Hyde under Cattanaach's watch.

"This is a great program that gives students the construction training that we need in the community, as well as benefits a family who will be able to own the house at an affordable cost," said Randall, who is thrilled with the partnership.

On Aug. 14, High School student Colten Chastain, who lent his hand in the construction of this first UCHS/Habitat home, expressed his appreciation for the program and what it does both for the community and in providing



Leaders with Habitat for Humanity Towns/Union Counties were happy to take delivery of the Panther House at its permanent location last week off Smyrna Road.

Photo by Daysha Pandolph

invaluable real-world work experience to students like himself.

"All in all we had a great experience out here," Chastain said. "We learned a lot because everything in that house was literally done by students."

Moving forward, the UCHS/Habitat collaboration will continue to build homes for local families at a similar rate of production, with UCHS CTAE Director Josh Davis noting that construction on the next home will be starting in the next couple weeks.

The team responsible for the inaugural Panther House put great attention into ensuring the home would be welcoming and functional for the family moving in. This, of course, could not have been possible without the help and mentorship of many local businesses and community members.

Contributing to the project were: John Chitwood with Service Plumbing, Charles Floyd, Cooper Patton and John Allen with Brown Haven Homes, Kevin Green, Gavin King, Looper's House Moving, Ramsey & Son Grading, Chastain Construction, Brock Kelly Trucking, Shaun Cole with Mountain Home Crafters, Blue Ridge Mountain Surveying, Joel Warner, Union County Sheriff's Office, Union County Building Department, and several others.

The Habitat Board of Directors has yet to choose a family for the Panther House and will have upcoming orientations for Family Selection when the home is closer to completion. For information on Habitat for Humanity's Family Selection Program, visit [townsunionhabitat.org](https://townsunionhabitat.org).