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# North Georgia News

4 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Legal Organ of Union County Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1909 Wednesday, August 30, 2023

## School Board holds tax hearings; final one Aug. 31

**By Shawn Jarrard**  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

More than 70 people attended the morning and evening property tax increase hearings held by the Union County Board of Education on Thursday, Aug. 24, with six people addressing the board to provide input on the proposed 9.89% increase in the millage rate over the rollback.

Resident George Burch, who has been a vocal critic of the School Board in the past, said he understood that the board was facing issues "that we never thought would come up, but I'm back once more to say, when is enough enough?"

He criticized the board for wanting to raise property taxes after getting ESPLOST passed last year, pointing out that the usual promise around SPLOSTs – which cover voter-

approved capital projects and not general operations – is that they will prevent property tax increases.

Burch also advised the board to consider cutting school programs to save costs.

Marsha Lodes spoke in both hearings, opining that the board has refused to listen to public input in dealing with the "runaway expenses (that didn't have to happen)" that are now affecting residents living "paycheck to paycheck" due to high inflation and low incomes.

She denounced the district for a perceived lack of transparency, authorizing exorbitant salaries, and accepting out-of-county students whom she believes are a burden on local taxpayers, and she suggested the district cut all "extra expenses except the teachers," proffering the idea that students learn greater

responsibility by performing janitorial duties, like in Japan.

Vince Peterson, a regular public speaker in School Board meetings, prepared a handout for the hearing, adopting a critical stance of the board for approving an "out of balance budget" in July before asking the taxpayers to "rescue us" in August.

Peterson said that the board was transparent in its dealings, insisting that board members had adopted an "out of balance budget" without detailed discussions on what it had done to try to resolve the shortfall or consulting taxpayers for assistance.

He echoed a refrain heard among several people in attendance before and after the meetings, that the state-mandated tax increase hearings were just a formality, and that

*See School Tax Hearings, Page 2A*



It was standing-room only in the evening tax increase hearing at the Union County Board of Education Central Office on Thursday. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## Four candidates qualify for three City Council seats

**By Shawn Jarrard**  
North Georgia News  
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Qualifying for the Nov. 7 Municipal General Election ended after three days on Wednesday, Aug. 23, resulting in four candidates vying to fill the three Blairsville City Council seats up for grabs in 2023.

The four qualifiers were incumbent Councilwomen Rhonda Mahan, Mary Ruth Cook and Kayla Hemphill, along with Blairsville resident Frank Pack.

Mahan has been on the City Council since January of 2002. By the time her current term expires at the end of December, she will have served five full terms and two years of a special election term for a total of 22 years on the council.

Cook is coming up on the end of her first full term after serving two years and a month of a special election term that started in December 2017, for a total of six years and one month on the council by the end of the year.

*See Council Qualifying, Page 2A*



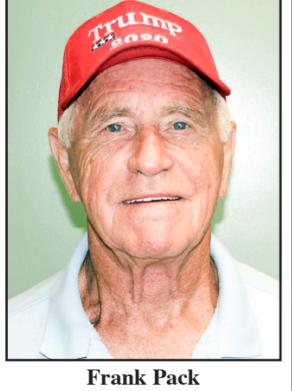
Rhonda Mahan



Mary Ruth Cook



Kayla Hemphill



Frank Pack

## Heritage Festival to celebrate tradition this weekend



The Mountain Heritage Festival opens this weekend, and the entire community is invited to take part in the two-day celebration of local traditions and heritage. Photo by Shawn Jarrard/2019

**By Brittany Holbrooks**  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

A beloved annual tradition celebrating local traditions, the ever-popular Mountain Heritage Festival will return this Labor Day weekend to the Mountain Life Museum and Downtown Blairsville Sept. 2-3.

Guests will get to peruse

dozens of vendors and tour the historic 1906 Grapelle Butt-Mock House and Payne Cabin, with 2023 seeing things spread out a bit more to accommodate a different layout plan.

The event comes to fruition after careful planning between the Union County Historical Society, the Blairsville Downtown Development Authority and

the Union County Chamber of Commerce, with sponsorship help from Nelson's Tractor Co.

2023's vendors will be split between two locations. Those selling items like jewelry or art and photography will be set up on and around the Blairsville Square. Meanwhile, demonstrators for live crafts or handmade food can be found

*See Heritage Festival, Page 3A*

## Rubber Duck Derby splashes into Butternut Creek Saturday

**By Brittany Holbrooks**  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The "quackening" will soon be on Blairsville, as Saturday, Sept. 2, marks the annual Duck Derby fundraiser set to take place at the Union County Farmers Market at 11 a.m.

There, several thousand rubber ducks will be dumped in the Butternut Creek to be swept away in the current in a race that brings the community together each year for all the best reasons.

Blairsville Police Chief Michael "Bear" Baxter is making sure things go

swimmingly before the big day, and he urges folks to come out and support the aquatic fun. It's a good way, he believes, to bid a final farewell to summer as well as make a difference in the lives of local families.

"This'll be our fifth annual (Duck Derby)," Baxter revealed, sharing that so far, about 3,000 of the \$10 tickets have been sold. Individuals and businesses alike participate in the purchases, with all proceeds going toward helping fund December's Shop With a Cop Christmas Program.

"Whether it's a business, a social organization, a civic

organization, a church – everybody comes together, and they make this thing happen. We just kind of manage it," said Baxter of BPD's role in the event.

That said, anyone who buys a duck to enter the race has a chance at receiving their very own prize. It's possible to win \$500, \$200 or \$100 if your duck crosses the finish line first, second or third place respectively.

From gift certificates to baskets donated by local businesses, there are about 80 "smaller prizes" for the lucky ducks that follow behind the

*See BPD Duck Derby, Page 3A*



The Blairsville Police Department looks forward to a "quacking" good time at the Rubber Duck Derby Shop With a Cop fundraiser on Saturday. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

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# School Tax Hearings...from Page 1A

the board was prepared to raise taxes regardless of public input.

Steve Rowe, who leads the Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce and chairs the Union County College & Career Academy Governing Board, thanked the school system for “what they’re doing to prepare our students for the workforce.”

Sylvia Munson, a resident and grandmother of Union County students, said she understood that the overall proposed budget had only increased less than \$100,000 from 2022, that decreased outside funding was the cause of the major budget deficit, and that the proposed millage rate represented a rate reduction.

She said she wasn’t happy about the tax increase but accepted it after hearing feedback from the School Board, noting that she would like to hear “more open discussions” with interactions that make people feel like their concerns are being heard.

Munson did, however, take issue with the fact that the school system does not

offer some kind of property tax exemption to senior citizens to protect the elderly, suggesting a “simple freeze of the tax liability for any homestead occupied by someone over the age of 65” or some other option.

Union County High School Senior Colt Chastain, 17, was the final speaker of the evening. Chastain expressed gratitude for the school system in providing him with CTAE training that has enabled him to choose a career path and start working professionally as a welder.

“During my junior year, I focused on welding and fabrication and completed my AWS welding certification,” Chastain said. “This is a nationally recognized welding certification.

“With this certification I was able to start my career as a full-time welder this past summer and will continue through the Work-Based Learning Program throughout my senior year as part-time.

“I will have also had the opportunity to share my knowledge with other students, which I find very rewarding.

“After high school, I plan to attend Chattahoochee Technical College to obtain a degree in welding, and then continue my education to include my teaching certification. I hope to one day return to Union County School System and have the opportunity to come be an instructor at the CTAE program.”

School Board members will hold one more public hearing at 7:30 a.m. on Thursday, Aug. 31, before immediately convening a special called meeting to accept the millage rate at 8 a.m.

The proposed rate is a partial rollback of 7.523 mills, which is a decrease from the 2022 millage rate of 8.2 mills. But because the board is seeking to adopt a rate that is 0.677 mills over the full rollback rate of 6.846 mills, it is required to hold three hearings to properly notify the public.

Both the school district and the county government levy property taxes in Union County, with school taxes making up approximately two-thirds of property tax bills.

Separately, Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris announced this week that he plans to accept the full rollback rate of 4.286 mills, down from a 2022 rate of 5.113 mills. Paris will accept the county millage rate in a called meeting on Sept. 7 at 5 p.m. in the county courthouse.

Should both proposed millage rates be accepted, the combined millage rate for property taxes in the county will be 11.809 mills in 2023, down from the 2022 combined rate of 13.313 – a decrease of 1.504 mills year over year.

The decreasing millage rates are the result of state-mandated property value reassessments that have increased the gross digest to the tune of 78% over the last three years due to pandemic-era relocations to the area driving up local fair market values.

And because of the way the schools are funded by the state, greater values in the gross digest – which has roughly



**UCHS Senior Colt Chastain spoke in the evening tax increase hearing last week, sharing the many benefits he has received as a Union County student.**  
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

doubled since 2020 from \$1.4 billion to \$2.8 billion – mean the school district is facing a state funding deficit of \$2.4 million due to higher “local fair share” expectations.

Essentially, Union County appears to be a victim of its own success, with property taxpayers having to put up additional money at the local level to educate students because more people have decided to call the county home.

And despite two years of budget cuts in anticipation of the local fair share going up, the School Board is facing other pandemic-era funding challenges.

Among the challenges are dramatically increased state health care benefits for more than 400 employees – up 67% from \$11,340 to \$18,960 per employee – greater than 18% inflation since 2020, record enrollment at 3,100 students, and increased labor, food and other costs.

In promoting the partial rollback, the School Board has taken into consideration 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.

As previously reported, 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, though the full impact of the partial rollback will likely be felt in 2024 unless Kemp puts in place another relief grant next year.

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

Only existing homestead exemptions will be granted this relief, which will shave approximately \$216 off 2023 property tax bills, so homestead-exempted properties at or below the median value of \$390,000 should see a decrease in taxes this year, despite the school district’s increased levy.

“And anyone with a home value of \$505,000 or less would not see an increase

at all,” School Superintendent John Hill said.

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 Aug. 24 tax hearings, Hill opened things up with a brief presentation explaining the circumstances around the tax increase, noting that, even with the partial rollback, the district looked to maintain the third lowest school millage rate in the state.

He also highlighted that the millage rate has decreased or stayed the same consistently for over a decade, going from 11.798 mills in 2012 down to the proposed rate of 7.523 in 2023, and he went into the ongoing challenges involved in funding the district.

State funding reductions have a two-year lag, Hill said, so the decrease in funding this year reflects the increase in property values from 2021. Likewise, the 2022 increase in property values will hit next year, and the 2023 increase will decrease state funding yet again the year after.

The district has projected 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 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 bigger single-year tax increase down the line.

Additional feedback may be submitted prior to the Aug. 31 hearing and rate adoption at [millage2023@ucschools.org](mailto:millage2023@ucschools.org).

People can sign up to speak at the upcoming hearing by visiting <https://www.ucschools.org/> and clicking under the Board of Education portion of the website. Sign-ups must occur within 24 hours of the meeting.

The City of Blairsville has announced its intent to accept the rollback millage rate this year, which, in addition to county and school taxes, will have to be paid by property owners located inside city limits.

# Council Qualifying...from Page 1A

Hemphill won a special election in November 2021 to fill an unexpired term and will have served two years and two months when that term expires Dec. 31.

Pack has run for municipal office multiple times in the past.

As city election outcomes are determined by plurality vote, the Top 3 vote-getters in the upcoming election will each win one of the open seats in November. Terms of office will begin Jan. 1, 2024, and run through Dec. 31, 2027.

The municipal election is set to take place on Tuesday, Nov. 7, between the hours of 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. at Blairsville City Hall.

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.

# 2023 Mountain Heritage Festival...from Page 1A

just outside the Mock House. For example, there will be butter churning in the Payne Cabin, and guests can get an even sweeter taste of history after watching how homemade ice cream is made with a "hit-and-miss" machine courtesy of Ronnie and Janie Dyer's "Nana and Papa's Homemade Ice Cream."

"There at the Mock House, it's going to be focused on local history," said Historical Society President Mickey Cummings, who added that there would even be a speaker on Native American artifacts from the area.

Keep in mind that it will be possible to celebrate every

part of the festival with ease, too, as there will be a tram running from the Mock House, parking lot and the Union County Historic Courthouse on the square, "so people are not going to have to walk unless they want to walk."

This all goes along well with a returning theme from last year, where there will be historical demonstrations of other olden crafts like pottery spinning and candle making to add additional layers of learning about local heritage. And therein lies the value of the event.

"The Mountain Heritage Festival is important because it helps us to show our history

to the younger generations," Cummings said. "Specifically here in the mountains, the way we lived, the way we ate, the way we did things, the games we played - you know, we were an isolated community until our roads began to be built."

It's one thing to read about the past in a history book or hear it told from those who lived it, but it's another thing entirely to watch the methods recreated and given new life. Another layer gets added when folks are invited to take part in these traditions.

New this year will be a demonstration on traditional "buck dancing." Considered the precursor to the more "refined"

clogging, buck dancing was an echo of the European roots of Appalachia's white settlers.

German and Scotch-Irish reels paved the way for modern bluegrass, and buck dancing was how folks in the mountains moved to that early music. The tradition has survived to this day and is still fresh in living memory, but there aren't many practitioners.

"What we used to call it was buck dancing years and years ago," recalled Cummings. "Somebody that really knows how to buck dance - you better be in good shape, because your feet are constantly moving."

A platform set up out front of the Mock House will serve as the staging area, and folks will be able to watch demonstrators to not only learn how to buck dance themselves, but also take part in a contest.

Those interested in buck dancing, whether casually or competitively, ought to plan to be at the festival from 1-3 p.m. on Saturday.

The Tunnel Rats will go from Friday's Courthouse concert to playing Saturday for buck dancers, but the Mars Hill Porch Pickers may also join in on the fun. That said, music lovers can expect quite the lineup this year.

Schedules are applicable to Saturday and Sunday, and

include Jim Wood playing from 9-10 a.m.; Nelson Thomas from 10-11 a.m.; Mike Lane from 11 a.m. to noon; John Cochran from noon to 1 p.m.; Tunnel Rats from 1-2 p.m.; Mars Hill Porch Pickers from 2-3 p.m.; and last but not least, Kathy Payne Maddox from 3-3:30 p.m.

According to Patsy McCollum of the Union County Historical Society, "Whatever music is missing (for any reason), Jim Wood will fill in."

"While we were isolated, we held on to the traditions like buck dancing and mountain music that our forefathers brought when they settled here in Appalachia," Cummings said. "And so what we want to do is show people (that heritage).

"Whether it's a tourist or a student in school or a young child, it's important to show and maintain your culture and your history, because we're changing so fast we're in danger of losing all that," Cummings concluded, hoping the festival will once again be as educational as it is fun.

The festival will be open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on both Saturday and Sunday, so get on down to the porch for some good old-fashioned pickin' and grinnin'. And be sure to visit the many specialized vendors while you're there.

## BPD Duck Derby...from Page 1A

cash prize winners, "but we're going to have a few more than that," said Baxter.

In addition, the dead-last duck - dubbed the "Lame Duck" - will earn a gas grill donated by Home Depot.

"Most contests or races, you don't get anything for being last, but we do give something for being last, and that's OK, too," Baxter said.

The Safe Pet Project, a local organization dedicated to providing financial aid for struggling animal caretakers,

will return this year as "duck wranglers" to ensure the critters that call the creek home year-round aren't endangered by littering.

Of course, this also means giving some of the "racers" a fighting chance by freeing them from weeds or pushing them out from under overhanging banks.

"They keep our ducks in a row," Baxter laughed, quick to quack up at the opportune phrase. But in all seriousness, he's thankful to live in a

community that makes such an effort to support local causes.

"We just live in a good community where everybody wants to help each other; we couldn't do it without them," noted Baxter, saying that to date, over 2,000 children have been able to celebrate Christmas because of the Shop With a Cop Program that began in 2000.

The Duck Derby serves as a supplement of sorts for local families, raising awareness and funds so many more well-deserving kids can celebrate the holidays by getting themselves - and often their families - something special for Christmas.

Purchasing tickets is easy; talk to any officer, call the non-emergency line at 706-439-6038 or head up to the Blairsville Police Department at 96 Blue Ridge Street.

So, once again, make sure to waddle on over to the Farmers Market this Saturday and put a ticket on your bill - they'll be available until the race begins at 11 that morning. Nothing has changed from past years, but everyone is welcome to participate or just come watch another Duck Derby.

For those who want to know more about the Duck Derby, Shop With a Cop or donate directly, call the Police Department during business hours at 706-835-1692.

## Save the Date: Reece Society Birthday Celebration Sept. 9

The Byron Herbert Reece Society will host its annual Celebration of Life for the beloved farmer-poet from Choestoe.

Byron Herbert Reece would be 106 on Sept. 14, 1917, and the Reece Society is gathering to honor the occasion on Saturday, Sept. 9, from 11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. at the Reece Farm and Heritage Center 1 mile north of Vogel State Park on Gainesville Highway.

Everyone is encouraged to attend to hear guest entertainer Dr. Jim Clark, noted Reece Scholar and talented musician who serves as Emeritus Professor of English at Barton College in Wilson, North Carolina.

Refreshments will be served, including birthday cake in remembrance of Byron Herbert Reece around noon.



Byron Herbert Reece

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