

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, September 1, 2021

Hospital continues to break COVID inpatient records

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The month of August brought with it an incredibly rapid rise in severe COVID-19 cases in the region, starting with a handful of coronavirus inpatients at Union General Health System that increased week over week to set multiple daily records for admissions at the local hospital.

And Friday, Aug. 27, saw yet another high of 51 people being treated in-hospital for COVID-19, plus 21 people admitted for other reasons, bringing the number of inpatients to 72 for a 45-bed hospital.

Patients being treated hail from North Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee, though the bulk of them are coming from Union County, according to Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett. Chatuge Regional Hospital in Towns County was also over capacity for inpatients as of Friday.

"We will do our very best until we can't anymore," Barnett said. "I don't know (how many more patients we can take), because it's not really even just about space - it's about staffing, too. We'll just keep going and do our very best to take care of everybody."

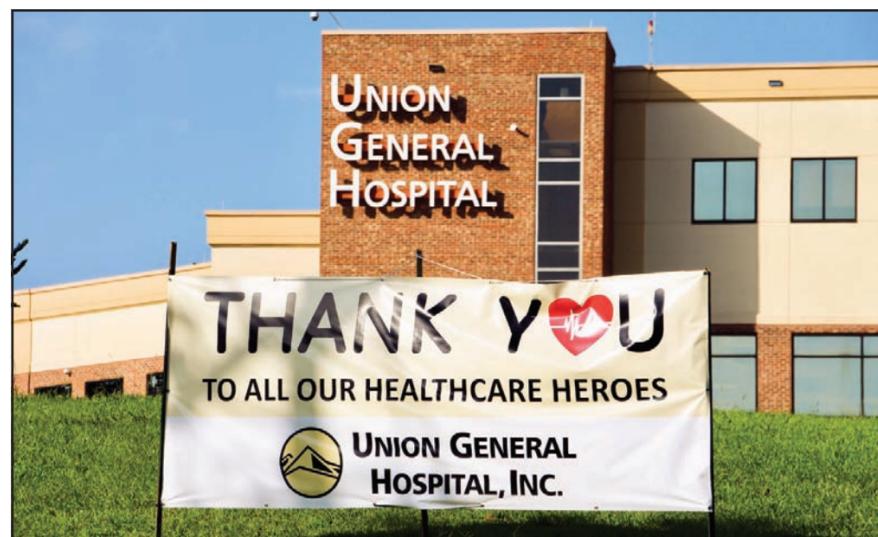
Added Barnett Aug. 27, "We are currently holding some patients in the ER waiting on beds at both hospitals, some for

COVID and some for regular beds."

The Health System has paused elective procedures while executing its surge plan, Barnett said, though "we do continue to do anything urgent/emergent, and we have (Operating Room) staff on standby for C-sections and other general surgeries that can't be put off."

"We hope it won't be a long pause, but we just have to take it day by day," Barnett said, adding the Health System appreciates the community understanding the pause that will remain in effect until staffing and space availability return to more normal levels following the current surge.

See UGH COVID, Page 2A



Combined millage to drop 3.159 mills after revaluation

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

There's good news for the combined millage rate for Union County Government and the School District will be dropping 3.159 mills compared to last year, with both taxing authorities committed to adopting their rollback rates in 2021.

The new combined millage rate levied against properties will be 15.759, down from the 2020 rate of 18.918. People can quickly calculate their upcoming tax bills by multiplying their total property values by 0.4, i.e. the taxable portion of their values, then again by 0.015759.

Such a substantial decrease in the millage rate is a byproduct of the two-year revaluation process that wrapped up this spring, which caused somewhat of



Lee Knight
Tax Commissioner

an uproar among property owners after they received their revised assessment notices this summer.

The first countywide

revaluation in 15 years led to a \$428 million increase in the real property digest, two-thirds of which came by way of

See Lower Millage, Page 6A

UC Schools temporarily offer families online-only choice

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Amid surging coronavirus cases in the community, state and nation, Union County Schools has announced that, barring necessary closures for lack of staff, the district will continue to provide in-person learning for students while also offering a temporary online-only option.

Made in person and livestreamed over YouTube, the announcement came in an Aug. 26 Board of Education meeting that was called to address the growing problem of COVID positivity in the school system.

At the time of the
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John Hill
School Superintendent

Paris calls TSPLOST election, awards grants, talks planning



Summer Cress and Shawna Harkins of Positive Pathways, Troy Beaver of New Hope Counseling, and Rebecca Brendle of Change in Our World, Inc. accepted substance abuse grants in the August county meeting. Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

In his Aug. 19 regular meeting, Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris officially approved a resolution calling for an election to impose a countywide 1% Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales and Use Tax.

"Election day will

be Nov. 2, 2021," he said. "This is very important to our community and for the purpose of improving and the safety and infrastructure of our highway and our signs and our roads, but also necessary to help further reduce the property taxes of our Union County citizens."

"We already anticipate that our millage rate will be reduced because of the

countywide (revaluation).

"In addition, should our TSPLOST election be successful and be passed in November, we estimate that our property taxes can be further reduced by at least \$1 million due to the shift in the amount of money from the General Ledger and the General Fund that will be exchanged

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Dr. Kelley urges vaccination among hesitant residents

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Dr. John Kelley has been enjoying retirement since the start of the year, doing some farming, developing property, serving on the Young Harris City Council, spending time with family, working in his shop on various restoration projects, including classic cars and furniture.

Essentially, he has stayed busy with the things that have always occupied his time aside from practicing cardiology at Piedmont Heart of Blairsville. But that doesn't mean he has stopped monitoring the state of health care in the region, state and nation.



Dr. John Kelley is a retired cardiologist who is hoping to convince all eligible residents not yet vaccinated to get their COVID shots. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Federal attorney responds to Gowder's request to vacate

Appeal date set in Heaton case

By Linda Erbele
North Georgia News

The U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Georgia has filed a response to former Union General Hospital CEO Mike Gowder's April motion to vacate his conviction for prescription drug fraud.

As previously reported, Gowder began his year-and-a-day prison sentence on May 1, just weeks after filing his request to have his conviction and sentence thrown out.

Gowder made four claims in his request, including that U.S. District Judge Richard W.

Story had erred in not allowing him a separate trial from his co-defendant, former Blairsville physician James Heaton.

Additionally, he contended that the government selectively prosecuted him, and that the evidence against him was insufficient to convict on any basis other than his "guilt by association" with Heaton.

Concerning the claim of selective prosecution, Gowder wrote that he was "selectively scooped up and selectively prosecuted solely because of his (association) treatment from Dr. James Heaton," and that his



Mike Gowder

See Gowder, Page 2A

July Term 2021 Grand Jury Indictments, continued

The following individuals were indicted during the July Term 2021 of the Union County Grand Jury, which met for a second time last month:

Brittany Nicole Youngblood, sale of methamphetamine.

Sharon Denise Allen, aka Sharon Denise Allen Robinson, two counts sale of methamphetamine.

Joseph Lee Davenport,

making a false statement; obstruction of an officer.

Robert Edward Berger, sale of methamphetamine.

Amber Reese Long, violation of Georgia Controlled Substances Act.

David Randall Brunson, two counts aggravated battery; two counts aggravated battery, Family Violence; battery, Family Violence.

Isaac Hagen Crawford,

aggravated assault; battery.

Mario Benson, furnishing alcohol to a minor.

Joshua Roger Morrow, two counts aggravated stalking; simple battery, Family Violence; criminal damage to property in the second degree; influencing a witness.

The above individuals have been charged only and are presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

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Gowder ...from Page 1A

actions “standing alone” were not criminal.

Filing his motion pro se – that is, without an attorney – under U.S. Code 2255, Gowder further claimed he had been deprived of his constitutional right to “effective assistance of counsel,” and he appeared to be arguing that his other claims fell under the same deprivation.

Apparently, the appropriate venue for Gowder’s first three claims should have been on appeal of conviction instead of in a 2255 motion alleging ineffective assistance of counsel, but Gowder missed the deadline to file a notice of appeal.

Missing this deadline is at the heart of Gowder’s overarching claim that his legal counsel was ineffective, as he says he requested his counsel to file the notice after sentencing but was told by his attorney that “additional funding” would be required to pursue the case further.

In his motion, Gowder writes he had to let his attorney go due to lack of funds, leaving him “entirely without the assistance of counsel for his notice of appeal, and on appeal,” thereby resulting in him being unaware he could still appeal his case after separating from legal counsel.

“Defendant’s attorney rendered deficient performance by failing to inform Defendant that he was entitled to an appeal,

and that Defendant could file a pro se Notice of appeal by a simple letter to the court,” Gowder wrote in April.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Laurel Boatright responded in an 18-page brief filed last month that Gowder was “barred from raising prosecutorial misconduct in (a) 2255 motion unless he can show cause excusing his failure to raise the issue previously, i.e., ineffective assistance of counsel, and actual prejudice resulting from the alleged error.”

“With respect to the first three claims, it is not clear whether Gowder is asserting claims of court error or ineffective assistance of counsel,” Boatright wrote.

“Regardless,” she continued, “those claims are either procedurally defaulted, affirmatively contradicted by the record, or counsel’s conduct was reasonable. Moreover, Gowder has not demonstrated prejudice as to the three claims.”

“Gowder’s fourth claim, that his counsel failed to file an appeal when Gowder asked him to do so, requires a limited evidentiary hearing. But the record is sufficient for the court to dispose of Gowder’s first three claims without a hearing.”

Ultimately, the U.S. Attorney’s Office has recommended denial of Gowder’s first three claims along with the scheduling of an

evidentiary hearing to ascertain whether his attorney failed to file an appeal after being asked to do so.

If granted, an evidentiary hearing would require Gowder’s legal counsel from the trial to come before the judge and either deny his former client’s claim that he was asked and failed to file an appeal or admit he was ineffective.

Although the deadline for Gowder to file an appeal has passed, should the court decide that his attorney was indeed ineffective, it could allow him an “out-of-time” appeal.

According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons website, Gowder is scheduled for release on March 4, 2022, which is about two months shy of his full year-and-a-day sentence.

This release date reflects Federal Sentencing Guidelines that allow prisoners who have served 85% of their sentence to be eligible for release if they have had good behavior.

No date for an evidentiary hearing had been determined by press time.

Concerning Gowder’s co-defendant, James Heaton, who filed an appeal to his conviction in July 2020, the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals has set a tentative date of Dec. 13, 2021, for oral arguments on that appeal.

As last reported, one of Heaton’s attorneys had failed to renew her membership in the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals Bar, but it was renewed in June, so the appeal is pending.

UGH COVID ...from Page 1A

Union General did see its first pediatric COVID patient of the entire pandemic for a short stay last week; that patient has been discharged “and as far as I know is doing well,” Barnett said.

She continues to stress the fact that patients admitted for COVID remain overwhelmingly unvaccinated, consistently running between 90%-95% of all people hospitalized locally for the novel coronavirus, though re-infections still appear to be the rarest admissions for COVID.

Barnett said the percent positivity among inpatients tested for COVID-19 was in line with Georgia Department of Public Health data, which through Friday had the county sitting at 33.6% for the last two weeks, putting Union in the Top 10 counties for positivity of all 159 counties in the state, with both Towns and Union experiencing at least three COVID deaths in August.

Of course, the stress levels are high everywhere, including in the community and inside the hospital, where medical professionals are working around the clock to serve the needs of patients who come seemingly as fast as they go.

“We certainly appreciate the encouragement of our staff,” Barnett said. “They need encouragement; they are tired and weary, and they’re doing their very best to take care of everybody that presents here.”

“Working extra, working long hours, working hard when they’re here – what they’re taking is stressful. So, we appreciate every gesture that’s been made by the community. There have been cards and food and snacks and other things. We just appreciate that so much.

“We appreciate the patients and their understanding that when the organization is this stressed, we certainly want them to continue to come when they need us, but at the same time, we need and desire their patience as we have to triage and take care of the sickest.

“They may have to wait a little while, so we appreciate their patience and understanding and kindness toward our staff if they do have to wait. We’ll do our very best to see everybody as quickly as we can, but (again), the organization is stressed.

“And we don’t discourage anybody from coming to the ER if they have an emergency. We do have walk-in clinics in our community for things that are not emergent, but we don’t want to discourage anybody from coming in and seeking medical care when they need it.”

Fortunately, Union General is not having to divert patients to other health systems, though even if the hospital wanted to, Barnett said they would be unlikely to do so because “there’s nowhere for them to go – all the hospitals around us (are) going on diversion.”

“We don’t want to take ambulances out of the county for hours trying to find a hospital to take our own community members to,” Barnett said. “So, we appreciate the community using the emergency room for what it’s intended for, especially during this time, so that it cuts down on unnecessary ER visits.

“At this time, even though we are above capacity and we are stressed, we do not intend on going on any sort of formal diversion. We are just pushing through and taking it one day at a time. I’ll be so excited when we actually see a peak and see that we’re coming down the other side of it, but I don’t believe we’ve seen that yet.”

In terms of staffing, Union General is facing shortages similar to much of the country, which is seeing overworked, exhausted health care employees leave the industry.

“We are pretty fortunate here,” Barnett said. “Generally speaking, people like working in our hospital, so we may be

better off than a lot of other hospitals.

“But more importantly, we have truly good people working with us who care about our patients and community and about each other. I don’t know what we would have done otherwise.

“They have been willing to work extra hours, often outside of their comfort zones, and harder than ever even though they are weary. But yes, we have lost some staff.”

Union County’s population remains on par with the state average at 43% fully vaccinated – up a percentage point in the last week – and Towns County continues to exceed the state average at 46%, though Public Health and others are actively trying to improve those numbers.

In solidarity with the overworked hospital system, officials associated with the Union County Government implored residents via Facebook last week to get vaccinated and to take the ongoing surge seriously:

“Each one of us loves Union County and wants to continue ‘business as usual,’ so this is our reminder to everyone that we do not want to shut down our recreation activities, county facilities and programs, festivals, etc. So, we would like to encourage and remind you to wear a mask, social distance, wash hands, and even more important, get vaccinated if you can.”

COVID vaccines are available for free and without an appointment at the local Health Department, and area pharmacies are also offering walk-in vaccinations to all residents.

Department of Public Health free COVID-19 testing is available Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Allen Creek Soccer Complex located at 2500 Allen Creek Road in Gainesville.

Running through Thursday of this week from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., people may get free local testing at a Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta and Emory University COVID Research Event at the Union County Farmers Market. Residents will receive a gift card for participating, and all ages are welcome.

Postponed: Membership Meeting of Byron Herbert Reece Society



The Byron Herbert Reece Society’s Annual Membership Meeting was tentatively scheduled to be on the second weekend of September in order to coincide with his 104th birthday. Reece was born on September 14, 1917.

Because of the recent spike in COVID-19 cases in Union County and the surrounding area, as well as throughout the country, the

Board of Directors made the prudent decision to postpone the meeting and celebration of Reece’s birthday remembrance until it is evident that there is a lessening of risk of the spread of COVID.

This is a disappointment to not be able to gather together in the past couple of years; however, it is wiser to protect the health of our members and their families and to do our part to stop the spread of this dread disease in the community. A tentative rescheduled date is October 23, 2021, at the Reece Farm and Heritage Center if conditions have improved.

Jerri Gill, Chair, The Byron Herbert Reece Society

Get Vaccinated...from Page 1A

To the contrary, Dr. Kelley has been watching with growing concern as more and more people become sick with the incredibly infectious delta variant of COVID-19, especially those making up the overwhelming majority of hospitalizations and deaths: the unvaccinated.

And now, he's appealing to the good people of the mountains – the very people whom he credits as a fifth-generation native with helping him to become the man he is today – to get vaccinated if they are eligible and haven't done so already, as severe illness is fully preventable in most cases.

"This is a health care crisis," Dr. Kelley said. "If it was just health care and it did not translate into economic burden, the ability of people to maintain a livelihood – if none of the ripple effect was there, then people would say, 'It's my life, I can do with it what I want to.'"

"But the bottom line is that, when it comes to a pandemic, your life affects my life. And that's the bottom line that I think people need to understand. Why would you jeopardize your children, your grandchildren, or your best friends? Why would you impair their health?"

"That's what an unvaccinated person is doing; it's not just affecting them."

All one need do is look at the data coming straight out of Union General Health System, which serves people from around the region, to see that greater than 90% of all severe COVID cases requiring hospitalization locally are among those who have chosen not to be vaccinated.

"Is the vaccine perfect? No, it's not, but it is as close to perfect as any vaccine we've ever had," Dr. Kelley said. "Is the current surge affecting people who have been vaccinated? Yes, because there's a different variant out there, and there's another one after that one."

"All the variants are not equally susceptible to the vaccine, and that's why, over time, new generations of vaccine will evolve to try to keep up with new generations

of the virus. So, it's a battle. We truly, in my opinion, are in a war with this virus."

"There's some areas of the country where the success has been great, and there's some where it's just been dismal. And all the hospitals are currently filled with cases that are predominately unvaccinated people."

Of course, once people do become fully vaccinated, Dr. Kelley said the odds of a better outcome in the event of a breakthrough infection are much higher than contracting COVID-19 without vaccination.

"More than likely you're going to be able to be treated as an outpatient, and if you're admitted, you're very unlikely to be in the ICU or on a ventilator if you've been vaccinated," Dr. Kelley said. "Now, is it zero? No."

"It's not, because the variables that we're dealing with have to do with people's health that they carry with them every day. The more comorbidities that you have, the more likely you are to suffer complications of COVID."

Barring general health improvements – losing weight via diet and exercise, cessation of tobacco products, etc., which Dr. Kelley continues to recommend as a retired cardiologist – he believes the best and easiest thing a person can do to dramatically lower their odds of severe illness with COVID is to be vaccinated, especially if they have pre-existing conditions.

But even for younger, healthier-seeming people who have no known pre-existing conditions, Dr. Kelley said there is no guarantee against bad outcomes, or that unvaccinated healthy people won't spread the disease to others who are more likely to suffer severe illness.

"We've got to face today, and today, we need to be unified in our response, because it truly is a health care crisis," Dr. Kelley said. "It's not somebody else's problem. It is every individual's problem, because it affects not just yourself, but it affects everybody you know, everybody you love, everybody you care about, in addition to all the people that

you don't even know."

"It's a time to see really what we're made of. Are we able as a nation to come together and fight for a common purpose, the health of our nation? Because if we become continually infected, ultimately, we're going to become vulnerable as a nation."

Dr. Kelley regrets the politicization of COVID, the vaccines, and so much else during this pandemic, and he wants people to know that, while others may have an agenda outside positively influencing health, he has spent his career and now his retirement simply trying to help people make better health decisions.

Having embarked on his medical journey more than five decades ago, the doctor committed 34 years to improving the health of patients in the Augusta area. In 2006, he returned to his beloved mountains to begin a successful cardiology practice with Piedmont Hospital before retiring at the end of 2020, nearly a year after the global onset of the novel coronavirus.

For the sake of the community he loves, he wants people on all sides to put politics aside and focus on solving the problem at hand, and that includes the vaccinated and unvaccinated alike.

He understands it might be tempting amid heightened tensions spurred by yet another surge of increasingly infectious SARS-CoV-2 to shame or blame unvaccinated individuals for circulating the disease, but this is unlikely to be helpful in the current politicized climate.

Instead, Dr. Kelley believes people simply need to be talked to with respect about the choices they may yet make to impact their health and the health of those around them.

"I want people to know how much I love my mountain community," Dr. Kelley said. "This is my heritage, and this is my people who made me who I am and helped me get to where I got to in life."

"And I want to say thank you for the privilege and the

opportunity to help care for your health care needs over the last 14 years. I would appeal to people to just please trust what I say. Please."

In the end, Dr. Kelley hopes to convince hesitant residents to make the decision to protect themselves and others with vaccination, because he doesn't want to see any more people succumb to or spread a disease for which the worst outcomes are largely avoidable.

"The bottom line is, if you care about others and you care about people in your community, then I think you're going to be vaccinated," Dr. Kelley said. "And I think most people care."

People should consult their doctors if they have further questions about the vaccines, their side effects, and even concerns about potential unknown long-term risks associated with both COVID-19 and vaccination against it.

COVID vaccines are available for free and without appointment at the local Health Department, and people may also find them at any number of local pharmacies.

For more information on vaccination and the state of COVID in Georgia, visit <https://dph.georgia.gov/covid-19-daily-status-report>.

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UC Schools...from Page 1A

meeting, not even two full weeks into the school year, nearly 1,000 total staff and students were quarantined at home systemwide, including for potential exposure and 200 known positive cases.

For reference, there are almost 500 employees and — for the first time in school history — more than 3,000 students in the schools, meaning roughly a third of the district was quarantined that evening for COVID-19.

In recognition of the fact that there is no perfect solution to suit everyone, from now through Sept. 24, the district will allow students of families concerned about the regional rise of COVID to transition to virtual learning if they wish, with all others continuing in-person instruction.

This compromise will enable working parents to keep their kids in school while alleviating some of the pressure, for example, on families living with immunocompromised members in their households.

Superintendent John Hill said Thursday that the School District is working on more permanent solutions and will present those to the public by or before Sept. 24.

As noted in the called meeting, a key challenge with offering hybrid learning options is that many students last year failed to thrive outside of the structured school environment, and the district hopes to come up with a solution that both better engages students and doesn't put too much strain on teachers having to pull double duty in physical classrooms and online.

School officials are hopeful that the numbers will begin to come down by the

end of this temporary period, but the situation remains fluid, so schools may have to close if staffing drops below certain levels this year, as occurred at the Primary School that resulted in all students there doing virtual learning last week. The Primary School did re-open this week.

Strict seating charts are being enforced and masks continue to be encouraged but not mandated on campus, with implications for quarantine procedures, as students who choose to wear masks during class will not have to quarantine following close-contact exposures with positive testers.

Importantly, families of students going online for the next month should be aware that online-only learning will be subject to the following standards: "Assignments that are incomplete will be graded accordingly, and assignments that are not turned in will result in zeros."

Moving forward, the Board Office has committed once again to posting updated COVID-19 figures to <http://ucschools.org> each Friday, located under the "News" tab on the homepage.

A letter from the school detailing the present circumstances can be found at the website, as can the district's COVID-19 protocols, which are subject to change alongside the ever-evolving dynamics of the pandemic.

Blairsville Church of Christ Pastor Terry Stuart also spoke in the meeting, leading everyone in prayer and imparting his personal experiences with COVID-19 hospitalization, to include himself and immediate family

members. Assistant Superintendent David Murphy walked people through a PowerPoint presentation showing the timeline of school decision-making, from the implementation of many Day 1 mitigations to that Thursday's call for one month of online-only learning for those wanting it.

Hill reiterated the rapidly shifting nature of the situation amid community spread of the delta variant, detailing how the district had nowhere near current levels of transmission last school year nor during record levels of summer school attendance to get online-only kids caught up.

Neither did athletic practices see wide transmission right before the start of school, such that everything lined up to give district officials cause to believe they could start things as normally as possible in 2021-22. By the second week of school, however, the state of affairs had changed.

"We really thought we were on the backside of the COVID challenge, truthfully ... but I've got to take ownership of the fact that it's not going well right now," Hill said. "It's not pretty, and it's not good."

"And ultimately, that's my responsibility as school superintendent, to provide these kids with safe and effective education. We've got to pump the brakes and evaluate there's a problem, and we need to own that problem, and recognize there's a problem, and fix it the best that we can."

Hence the present compromise and ongoing work to provide parents with additional options, ones that keep, for instance, hungry kids in school and working parents in their jobs, including at the largest local employer that



School Board Members Janna Akins and Julia Barnett in last week's called meeting about COVID-19 in the district.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

needs all the staffing it can get — Union General Hospital.

Multiple stakeholders spoke in the meeting, including teachers, administrators, and Jason McCarter, who is married to a teacher and has kids in the system. He told the board he believed the schools should do all that is in their power to make sure children stay in classrooms.

"We're dealing with a different variant, delta," McCarter said. "Once this passes, and it will pass, another one's coming at some point; there's a lot of letters left in the alphabet."

"My youngest daughter said to me last night, 'Daddy, I wish this would just go away.' And I said, 'Well, you and every other person that's dealing with it wishes the same thing.'"

"But the fact of the matter is, we've got to take, I think, calculated risk and push through it and manage through it."

School Board Member

Julia Barnett, who oversees Union General as Chief Nursing Officer, largely agreed with McCarter's sentiments, and she added some context from the health care side.

"I've been taking care of COVID patients all day at the hospital; that's all I've done, all day," she said. "So, it's real, it's a real problem right now."

"But at the same time, (we're) trying to balance that with exactly what you're saying — we want the kids to be in school and we want them to be in that controlled setting. We have found, historically, that perhaps it even helps our community for school to be in session."

"Even though I'm in a precarious situation at the hospital right now with more patients than I have beds, I'm not sure that putting school out is going to necessarily help that."

Added Barnett, "I talked to several of our physicians today at the hospital (who

take care of a lot of kids in their offices. They see what's going on, and I had several of them call me or approach me today, so I was happy to get some feedback from them."

"By and large, they are in support of us figuring out in the best way that we can, as long as we can operate safely and have enough staff to do so, to stay in school. So, I'm happy to hear that."

"They all recognize that we have a real problem in our community, but ... so does the whole United States, so does all of Georgia. Finding that balance is kind of tough, but we want to be reasonable. We want to do things that are common sense and that make sense."

Barnett also recognized the unpopular nature of school quarantines that require students to be sent home, but she said the practice was justifiable given the significant high level of positivity being returned among children quarantined pending COVID test results.

County Meeting...from Page 1A

through the TSPLOST sales tax program."

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

Collections are to be distributed 91.5% to the county and 8.5% to the city, translating to an estimated \$32,025,000 to the county and \$2,975,000 to the city over five years, with a provision to allow for general obligation bonding to fund projects as deemed necessary.

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

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

The longstanding 7% sales tax is made up of both state and local components. Georgia imposes a 4% sales tax "on the retail sales price of tangible personal property and certain services."

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

A common criticism against imposing the TSPLOST is that the new tax may unduly burden Union County residents

— especially those on fixed incomes — who will be paying the additional 1% on all local purchases year-round, unlike visitors who will only pay the tax while in town.

Also in the meeting, Paris presented substance abuse grants of \$5,000 each to Change in Our World, Inc., Freedom Ministries of North Georgia, Inc., New Hope Counseling of Blairsville, Positive Pathways, Inc., and Union County Family Connection, Inc.

"In 2010 when the referendum was passed on alcohol," Paris said, "I made a commitment to set aside up to \$50,000 each year, alcohol license fees and tax receipts put back into the community for the purpose of helping to combat the alcohol and drug problems that were already existing in Union County."

"Roughly half of these funds are distributed each year in the form of grants that interested organizations can apply for. We have a completely independent committee that does a review of the applications and awards the grants."

Paris reiterated that he has absolutely no influence with the selection committee, that he's not even aware of who is on the selection committee because they wish to remain anonymous.

Rebecca Brendle accepted the check for Change in Our World, Troy Beaver accepted the check for New Hope Counseling, and Summer Cress and Shawna Harkins accepted the check for Positive Pathways.

Katy Jones of Union County Family Connection and Boo Spivey of Freedom Ministries were unable to attend the meeting.

In other business, the

commissioner approved an agreement between Union County and Legacy Link for the required FY22 local share of \$95,000.

This is the amount the county has committed in local funds to operate the Union County Senior Center from July 1, 2021, to June 30, 2022, including congregate meals, the Meals on Wheels program, and transportation services also offered through the Senior Center.

Paris also approved an agreement with the Georgia Department of Transportation for funding in the amount of \$92,204 for the period July 1, 2021, to June 30, 2022.

"Funding in the amount of \$46,102 will be provided by GDOT, and Union County will contribute a match of \$46,102," he said. "This funding is for Union County's 5311 Transit System. So, that's the buses that help carry these seniors and different folks to different events."

A lease agreement was accepted by Paris between Medlink, Georgia, Inc., and Union County for the use of office space located at 56 Firewater Lane in Suches in the amount of \$100 per month. The lease duration will be Aug. 3, 2021, to Dec. 31, 2024.

"This is for the medical clinic in Suches," Paris said. "The initial plan is that they will be open at least one day per week."

"Hopefully that's going to expand to two to three days a week at some point in time. It's all an effort to service the community of Suches and also work with the school system."

No less than 11 new business licenses were approved by Paris. The only business

licenses required by Union County Government are for those businesses that collect revenue on cabin rentals, Paris said, adding that these were the most they've ever had in one month.

In his Commissioner's Comments, Paris said everyone was "very concerned about the spread of COVID-19 delta variant and the number of residents that are now suffering from COVID-19 in Union County."

"As most of us know, our hospital is full," Paris continued. "I've never known as many people as we have locally right now that are in the hospital. I don't know if everybody is made aware of that, but there are a lot of people in the hospital right now that are suffering, and some seriously."

"We're really concerned about all of them. The hospital is at capacity with ICU patients. Continued prayers are needed, and we will continue to have to ask people who have not had their vaccine to consider it for the protection of (their) children, family and friends."

Paris announced that he had had the first of several meetings that week involving planning for the future of Union County.

The four-hour meeting on Aug. 18 addressed the topics of "housing, commercial, industrial, government, services, public infrastructure, public facilities, government policies, planning, land use, taxes, public relations, and political considerations."

"This is the outline that we're going to be using in looking forward to getting some community people involved and going over these issues and trying to decide how we want to look and how we want to feel and how we want to work Union County moving forward," concluded Paris.

Paris fielded several



**Lamar Paris
Sole Commissioner**

questions during the public comment period following the meeting, most of which related to the planning process and the consulting groups involved.

Potential planning partners include the Georgia Mountains Regional Commission, The Beatty Team, and The Carl Vincent Institute of Government.

July County Meeting

In the July meeting, Paris amended the FY2020 budget by \$465,904, and he welcomed Certified Public Accountant Clay Pilgrim of Rushton and Company to present the 2020 Audit Report, as he does every year.

Pilgrim reported that the county's "rainy day fund" reserve balance was up to about \$3.9 million, or roughly 2.7 months' worth of reserves, and that both revenues and expenditures were up from the previous year.

The budget amendment reflects upward and downward changes in revenues and expenditures "that we do

annually after the audit to adjust our budget to better reflect actual numbers," County Finance Director Laura Driskell said.

"The increase in revenues came mostly from our Local Option Sales Tax, with a smaller portion from property taxes," she continued. "General Administration increased by \$825,000 ... (which) includes items that cover the entire county, for example, the property reappraisal and the medical emergency helicopter agreement."

Paris also accepted in July a master service agreement for professional services between the county and CHA Consulting, Inc. "to provide professional design services on an as-needed basis for projects."

Subsequently, Paris accepted an agreement with CHA for a conceptual layout for "potential intersection improvements at the intersection of Pat Haralson Drive and Deep South Farm Road ... to include a draft layout and a final concept layout." The cost will not exceed \$10,000.

Lower Millage...from Page 1A

inflationary growth in property values going up over time, with the other third accounted for by growth in new homes and additions to properties.

Accepting the rollback rates means that neither the schools nor county will be increasing taxes above last year's collections to meet their budgetary needs, though both entities will benefit from about 10% in additional tax revenues due to the new growth captured during the revaluation.

As such, Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris and the Board of Education will be accepting their respective millage rates without having to hold tax increase hearings, and they will do so in separate called meetings on Sept. 8.

"They're going to roll back the inflationary increase," Tax Commissioner Lee Knight said. "Are we going to collect more revenue? Yes. And that is due to the growth in the county."

"We had growth in folks

that have added to their property — a garage, a swimming pool, a barn, other improvements. That is considered growth."

Non-inflationary growth has seen a remarkable uptick since the start of the pandemic, so the worth of a single mill in Union County will be going from about \$1.3 million from last year to more than \$1.7 million in 2021.

Despite the considerably lower millage rate, some people will still be seeing higher tax bills, as the values of many properties went up more than the amount that will be offset by the new combined rate.

Of the more than 22,500 real property parcels in the county, only about 1,300 property owners decided to appeal their new values, according to the Tax Assessor's Office.

"The revaluation is done, we're still going through those appeals," Knight said. "(The Tax Assessor's Office) has accepted all the appeals

but they have not finalized them."

"Property bills will go out after the school and county set their mill rates and we get the digest approved, so I expect the tax bills to probably go out around the end of September."

Added Knight, "The takeaway is, if your property went up 20% or 30%, your taxes probably shouldn't change. And I think you should feel good that your property is worth more and we're holding the line on taxes."

"In 2006, we had a revaluation. They rolled the mill rate back about 2 mills, but they still increased revenue over \$5 million. This year, we're only going to increase revenue about \$2.5 million, and this is 15 years later."

The City of Blairsville is currently working on finalizing its millage rate, which will be in addition to the county/school combined rate for property located inside city limits.