

# North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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## Paris raises tax rate following contentious public hearing

By Shawn Jarrard  
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The third and final tax increase hearing held by Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris featured more intense verbal dissent than the first two hearings last week, as dozens of people filled Courtroom A for the meeting inside the Union County Courthouse Aug. 27.

Paris took a different tack Thursday to give more time for public input, offering a briefer overview of the increase and what it means for property owners – a 19.98% increase on

the county portion of property taxes, or about 7% on the overall tax bill due to the offsetting of school taxes.

Once again, it appeared most people were upset about the suddenness of the sharp increase, citing concerns over Paris purchasing property and pledging large amounts of money for items they considered unnecessary, especially during a pandemic and with such a sizeable budget shortfall.

Basically, the commissioner needs to raise about \$1.7 million in additional tax revenues to operate the county next year, and reserve funds – about \$1.8 million –

have gotten too low to make up that difference due primarily to big budget amendments made over the last couple of years.

Paris made clear at the beginning of the Aug. 27 meeting that he was holding the three public hearings because the state mandated them, though his answer that he'd already made up his mind about raising the millage rate despite public input did not go over well with attendees.

Several calls for the creation of a multimember commission board were heard that evening as an apparent protest of Paris' unilateral ability as sole commissioner

to raise property taxes and approve purchases like the Hill and Shoe Factory Road properties.

People pointed out that buying private property shrinks the tax digest and therefore

tax revenues to the county, and they expressed worry that taxes would be going up again next year after completion of the major countywide property re-evaluations that are currently underway.

Others questioned Paris' decision making generally, asking if he'd considered all his options, such as impact fees on new development or furloughing employees to

See Tax Rate Hearing, Page 2A

## Commissioner Paris reduces tax increase by 2.98% after public input

News Special  
North Georgia News

After hearing from constituents at the three public hearings, Union County has decided to reduce the proposed property tax increase from 19.98% to

17%. The school portion of your total tax bill, meaning that even with the increase from the county, your actual out-of-pocket property tax increase should only be about 5.8% of

your total property tax bill. Just a reminder of some of the reasons a tax increase was necessary in the first place:

- 1. We have mostly been in the top three lowest mill
- See Reduction, Page 2A



Commissioner Lamar Paris caught another earful in the Aug. 27 tax hearing, with more people attending that night than in the previous two hearings. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## Six dead in COVID-19 outbreak at Union County Nursing Home

By Shawn Jarrard  
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### UNION COUNTY NURSING HOME

At least six residents have died in the COVID-19 outbreak at the Union County Nursing Home, with two

residents hospitalized with the disease as of Friday, Aug. 28.

All the residents who have died with COVID-19 were elderly and had significant underlying health conditions, both of which are known to contribute to mortality risks with and without the viral disease.

The outbreak appeared to grow last week after the number of residents testing positive went from 20 cases on a single hall to over 30 cases on two halls. Thankfully, the virus seems to be contained to one of the two sides in the building.

"I think we finally have

everybody with a baseline and kind of know what we're dealing with, so I think that's the beginning of trying to heal the organization, get everybody segregated appropriately," Union General Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett said last week.

A majority of residents have remained well enough to stay in the nursing home under observation per Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, with most experiencing mild or asymptomatic infections, Barnett said.

The local outbreak began

about a month ago when a new resident at the nursing home suddenly developed symptoms before quickly requiring hospitalization, Barnett said, noting that this same individual had tested negative twice before being admitted as a resident.

A second resident started exhibiting COVID symptoms soon after, prompting the nursing home to test everyone on that hall for the virus on Friday, Aug. 7. When 20 tests came back positive Aug. 12, the hospital made the call to test all residents and staff in the building.

Thirty-nine total nursing

home employees have tested positive since the start of the pandemic, many of them after the outbreak began, though Barnett has emphasized the impossibility of knowing exactly how the virus entered the building.

Viral outbreaks are not unheard of in nursing homes, with influenza and stomach bugs regularly affecting large percentages of long-term care residents nationwide, including in the past at Union County Nursing Home.

However, this is the first COVID-19 outbreak in the local facility, and as such, the

nursing home has increased its surveillance of residents for COVID symptoms, with Barnett saying the facility remains on lockdown to outside visitors, as it has since mid-March.

"From the beginning of the pandemic (to now)," Barnett said, "we are just constantly learning and making sure that we are staying prepared, because we don't know what the future holds as far as the so-called second wave or any of that.

"It's definitely a benefit to our nursing homes to have

See Outbreak, Page 2A

## School board accepts 2020 millage rate for 0.17% tax cut

By Shawn Jarrard  
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On Aug. 26, the Union County Board of Education unanimously accepted the district's 2020 millage rate, which actually ended up providing a minor tax cut of 0.17% due to a quirk in 2020 property valuations.

The school rate for 2020 tax bills is 11.74 mills, the same rate as the previous two years, which happens to be 0.02 mills below the 2020 rollback rate due to downward re-evaluation of some property in the county. Overall, growth is still positive in the tax digest.

This millage rate will help the system generate the roughly \$14.2 million in property taxes needed to operate the schools this year.

Also on Aug. 26, the board held a second budget public meeting that was simultaneously streamed online and available in person at the board office, and like the



School Board Chair Tony Hunter voted along with his fellow board members to set the 2020 millage rate at 11.74 last week. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

first meeting held the week before, nobody attended from the community in person.

All told, the district's

Fiscal Year 2021 Budget features revenues of \$29,902,680 and expenditures of \$31,253,954. See School Millage Rate, Page 3A

## James 'BBQ' Grubbs to appear in Netflix cooking show Sept. 18

By Jarrett Whitener  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Come Sept. 18, Union Countians will want to tune into Netflix to watch one of their own, James "BBQ" Grubbs, compete in the debut season of an original cooking contest called "The American Barbecue Showdown."

"Eight of the country's best backyard smokers and pitmasters vie for the title of American Barbecue Champion in a fierce but friendly faceoff," according to Netflix.com.

Barbecue masters Melissa Cookston and Kevin Bludso will be judging the contest alongside hosts Lyric Lewis and Rutledge Wood.

For decades now, barbecue has been a life passion for Grubbs, one that he decided to master as a teenager. And he's been happy barbecuing in Union County for many years now, running Grubba-que Catering and Competition



James "BBQ" Grubbs runs Grubba-que Catering and Competition Team in Union County. Photo/Submitted

## Community questions COVID-19, state of American polarization

By Jarrett Whitener  
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Now that the country is entering its seventh month of COVID-19 mitigation efforts and concerns over the virus, more and more people in the community seem to be questioning the state of the country and what priorities should be taken to get back to a sense of normalcy.

Wanda Jones of Fannin County believes the pandemic has been made out to be a larger problem than it is, though she continues to find it incredibly important to follow guidelines to lessen the impact of the virus

as much as possible.

"I think the COVID numbers were inflated," Jones said while shopping at Castoff Pet Rescue Thrift Store Aug. 29. "Some places made bigger numbers and diagnosed people that did not actually have the virus. That doesn't mean though that I don't take the virus seriously.

"Even if the numbers are inflated, it is still important to protect each other. If we have a few people around here that have it, then we still need to wear masks and social distance. If two people were to have it, then it would still be a

threat because of how easily it spreads.

"So, while I think the numbers may be false, I do still think we need to be safe."

Others like Teresa Sharp of Union County feel that the country is unhelpfully divided, and that people are acting against each other when they should be working together.

"With the election coming up, I think everyone is at each other's throats," Sharp said at Walgreens on Friday. "I like to advocate for peace and good attitudes. With the protests and the election,

See COVID, Page 6A



Meeks Parks remains as popular as ever, with residents pictured here enjoying the trails Sunday. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

Vol. 111 No. 36  
4 Sections 24 Pages  
Weather  
Thurs: Sunny Hi 87 Lo 66  
Fri: Cloudy Hi 86 Lo 64  
Sat: T-Storms Hi 82 Lo 64

Inside  
Arrests 3C  
Church 5C  
Classifieds 2D  
Opinion 4A  
Legals 4D  
Obits 7C  
Sports 2B

UCS  
UCBOE  
Tentative Budget  
See page 3C

Derrick Whittle  
Memorial Blood  
Drive  
Sept. 18  
See page 6C

Suicide  
Prevention  
and  
Awareness  
Month  
See page 8C

Blairsville PD  
Rubber Duck  
Derby Sept. 5  
See page 4D