

# North Georgia News

4 Sections 24 Pages

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Wednesday, September 14, 2022

## Panthers to crown new Homecoming Queen Friday

By Todd Forrest  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

For the next 12 months, one young lady will wear the crown as the new Union County High School Homecoming Queen after the week's festivities conclude on Friday night at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

The 66th season of Union County football features the West Hall Spartans as the Panthers' 2022 Homecoming opponent, marking the first meeting between the two programs since 1991.

Last month, Union County High School nominated its 15-member Homecoming Court, which includes five seniors, four juniors, three sophomores and three freshmen.

Senior Class representatives

are Bailey Adams, Caroline Karnes, Saylor Noe, Chloe Potts and Sophie Truex.

Representing the juniors are Katie Byers, Georgia Patton, Addi Scott and Lara Turner. The sophomore representatives are Brook LeQuire, Mallory Rouse and Mikala Souther. Ninth-grade representatives Mady Adams, Lola Hunter and Kaylee Rader round out the court.

The 2022-23 winner will accept the title from 2021-22 reigning queen Mia McCombs, who edged out fellow seniors Tori Tracy (second runner-up) and Niya Cobb (first runner-up) last October. The junior class runner-up went to Potts. Byers was the sophomore runner-up.

Katie Baumeister won the 2020-21 crown, and Cydney

See Homecoming 2022, Page 2A



The 2022-23 Union County Homecoming Court

Photo by Todd Forrest

## Rep. Clyde hears forest husbandry concerns

By Mark Smith  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

U.S. Rep. Andrew Clyde visited the Union County Farmers Market on Wednesday, Sept. 7, at the invitation of some longtime residents to hear their concerns regarding the husbandry of local forest lands.

The group of 14 people

included Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris, Mickey Cummings of the Fickers Market, Union/Town County University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Agent Jacob Williams, and UGA Extension Wildlife Biologist Dr. Michel Kohl.

Together, they enjoyed a dinner of corn on the cob, tomato sandwiches, and homemade

strawberry and peach ice cream with the congressman before the meeting.

Cummings began the meeting with a brief summary of why the group had gathered and what concerns they wanted to convey to Congressman Clyde, which was to say that they support the U.S. Forest Service policy of timber cutting

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(L-R) Cody Allen, Jennings Ivester, Larry Farris, Paul Cummings, Sheldon Henderson, Tony Harkins, Andrew Clyde, Lamar Paris, Chase Hemphill, Michel Kohl, Jim Wentworth, Tom Starrett, Milton Bradley, Jacob Williams and Mickey Cummings. Photo by Mark Smith

## Highway 515 project delayed but in progress



By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

The start of construction on the multimillion-dollar project to widen and straighten Georgia 515 along an 8.5-mile stretch of highway between Blairsville and Young Harris has been delayed by six to nine months, according to the Georgia Department of Transportation.

Construction for the project was expected to begin later this fall, but when bids came back too high in May, the project was put on hold as engineers worked out how to proceed, GDOT said.

Last month, project leaders submitted a new plan to split construction into three separate budgeted phases to make it more manageable, with the bidding process to begin again in late Spring 2023 on the first phase of the project,

which will be the roughly 1-mile bypass of Downtown Young Harris.

The project has been in the works for more than two decades, with preliminary engineering dating back to 1999; engineering resumed in 2014, and right-of-way acquisitions began in 2017, according to the GDOT project page.

State officials said in 2019 the project would likely go to bid in June 2020 for probable construction beginning in Fall 2020 on a completion timeframe of no more than three years.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the derailing of not just GDOT's plans, but plans globally – for reasons of health, supply chain, inflation, etc. – contributing to bids not being let until May 2022.

The scope of the project spans Young Harris Street in Blairsville to Timberline Drive in Young Harris, with a purpose of straightening and widening the majority of that corridor of Georgia 515 from two and three

lanes to four lanes to increase safety and accessibility for commuters.

There will also be a two-lane bypass of Main Street in Young Harris to include a roundabout at each end and two new bridge crossings over Brasstown Creek.

"This is a very important project for Georgia Department of Transportation," said GDOT District One Communications Officer Elizabeth Johnson. "We have spent a considerable amount of time and resources just to get here and will get this widening of 515 accomplished."

"To better understand the process, the original project was put out to bid on May 20, 2022. Upon review of the bids that came in, all were significantly in excess of the estimates determined by GDOT engineers, and the bids were rejected."

"The committee then discussed next steps and determined that the massive project should be divided into

See Highway 515, Page 2A

## 9/11 tragedy, heroism remembered in ceremony



UCHS Chorus Director Alicia Covington leading her high school choir in a performance of "Amazing Grace" during Sunday's 9/11 ceremony at Meeks Park. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

Blairsville residents came together early Sunday morning to recognize Patriot Day and honor the thousands of lives lost on American soil 21 years ago in the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Bright with the waning sunrise of 8 a.m. and drizzling with droplets of rain, even the weather seemed to reflect the somber nature of the occasion.

The Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce, the Union County Fire Department, the Union County Sheriff's Office and the Blairsville Boy Scouts joined the other cornerstones of the community to provide a moving memorial.

This year, they and many others met up at the Conley Pavilion in Meeks Park, near the site of the future Appalachian Veterans Memorial Park. Normally, the gathering would

take place in front of the upper ballfields, but the rain had a different idea.

Chamber President Steve Rowe said a few words before the ceremony began, explaining how the Chamber and Fire Department especially have teamed up annually in recent years to put on a memorial ceremony for the innocents and heroes alike who perished that tragic day.

The Union County High School

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## County, Schools adopt lowest mill rate since 1989

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

Property tax bills should be hitting mailboxes later this month after the Union County Board of Education and Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris set their respective millage rates in called meetings last week.

The new combined county/school millage rate used to calculate taxes owed by property owners will be 13.313, which is 2.446 mills less than the 2021 rate of 15.759, making the 2022 rate 15.5% lower than last year.

Similarly, the 2021 rate was significantly lowered from the 2020 rate, reflecting both pure growth and the inflationary increase in property values – especially for homeowners – since the onset of COVID-19.

Because of the big millage rate decreases of the last two years, the 2022 combined millage rate is the lowest the county has seen since 1989, according to Tax Commissioner



Tax Commissioner Lee Knight and Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris after the Sept. 8 called meeting in which Paris accepted the rollback millage rate for 2022 inside the Union County Courthouse. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Lee Knight, who attended the meetings last week in which the School Board and Paris set their millage rates.

On Sept. 7, the School Board unanimously adopted a millage rate of 8.2 mills, down from the 2021 school millage rate of 9.735.

The new rate is actually below the 8.213 rollback rate calculated to avoid a tax increase. Superintendent John

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**FOOTBALL**  
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**Homecoming**  
**SOFTBALL**  
9/15 vs. Providence 5:30 PM  
Senior Night

**New COVID-19 Boosters**

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**UC Fire Dept. 2 Open House**

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**FERST Concert - Sons of the Pioneers**

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## Homecoming 2022...from Page 1A

Rich took home the honors in 2019-20. The 2018-19 title belonged to Aladriel Arnold following Jessica Palomo's crowning in 2017-18.

Meanwhile, the Panthers

are off to their best start in three years with a 3-1 record that includes victories over rivals Fannin County and Towns County. Class AAA West Hall is currently 1-2 on the year,

with a win over Johnson and losses to East Hall and East Jackson.

Friday night's Homecoming Game kicks off at 7:30 p.m., with the crowning

scheduled before the game at 7 p.m. The Homecoming Parade will be held Friday on campus at a time to be determined this week.

## Rep. Clyde Visit...from Page 1A

to rejuvenate local forests.

According to Cummings, the Chattahoochee National Forest is presently in a climax stage, where the forest canopy shuts out the sun, which causes a relatively bare forest floor that in turn directly affects the number and types of animal species that can survive in that environment.

Simply put, there is less food for deer, turkey, grouse and songbirds, and less foliage for their young to hide in from predators – coyotes, bear and wild hogs. So, over time, the animal populations in the Chattahoochee Forest have dwindled significantly.

Much of the reason for the unchecked maturing of the Chattahoochee Forest appears to be the lack of natural tree culling by fire. Given the urban sprawl of the last century, and the technology available today, forest fires have been almost completely eradicated, Cummings said.

Sure, there are still

wildfires, but nothing like the natural fire occurrences of earlier times. The upshot is that forest diversity has been taken out of the equation and the animal population has suffered for it.

"The more diverse the forest ecosystem is, the healthier the wildlife habitat will be," Cummings said.

To compensate for such developments, the Forest Service has begun cutting timber in small acreages over large areas of forest.

This small gathering of concerned residents contends that this program of cutting timber will not only be good for local forests and the animal populations they support, but it will also be a boon for the lumber industry, which has been all but wiped out in North Georgia since the lawsuits against timber cutting of the 1990s.

Several members of the group gave supporting testimony of the negative consequences of the policy of no timber cutting, thereby

justifying their position.

"There's this dense midstory, so we don't just have our tall canopy cover, we've got stuff at 15 to 20 feet (as well)," Kohl said. "And what that means is there's no way for sunlight to (filter through) to the ground (to sustain an herbaceous ground cover – grasses, forbs and shrubs).

"So, there's basically no food left for most species (of animals) that live on the ground."

Additionally, without those grasses and shrubs, young animals have nowhere to hide from predators – another cause of game animals thinning out over the last several decades, Kohl said.

Jim Wentworth, a retired Forest Service wildlife biologist, talked about the reduction of songbirds over the last few decades as result of the policy of no timber cutting and fire suppression, which has led to an unhealthy habitat significantly reducing their numbers.

Sheldon Henderson, a

retired Forest Service wildlife biologist who conducted songbird population surveys, said people just don't understand how beneficial timber cutting is to forests.

Henderson said the Forest Service has harvested areas of timber in the Cherokee National Forest. Two or three years after the harvest, they do a controlled burn, and just a few short years after that, the documented increase in the songbird population is incredible, he said.

Educating the public is key, said Henderson.

"This was phenomenally educational for me," Clyde said. "I had no idea of the different growth patterns of the forest and how that affects wildlife. And now I understand. You've got an advocate here for (controlled timber cutting).

"So now, we have to figure out how we can best apply that (knowledge) to make sure that it happens," Clyde said, "not just for the folks that want to birdwatch, but for the folks that want to hunt, too."

## Highway 515...from Page 1A

three phases. According to the project manager, a request was submitted to the Planning Office on Aug. 8, 2022, to split the project into three phases.

"We are anticipating the first phase, which is the truck route bypass, to be put out for bid by late Spring 2023, and the other two phases put out to bid by end of 2023."

The total cost of the project is estimated at about \$162 million, which breaks down into \$40 million for right-of-way acquisition, \$17 million for preliminary engineering, and construction costs of around \$105 million, Johnson said.

After the project was put out for bid this past May, Johnson said the lowest option came in at \$192.5 million, or nearly double the estimated construction costs for the project, and "that is why the bid was rejected."

To undertake the massive project, GDOT has acquired more than 200 parcels of land along the 8.5-mile stretch to be completed, previously estimating the potential

displacement of about 30 businesses and 15 residences, and it's likely more than a dozen detours will be needed over the three phases of construction.

Considerable developmental planning by local government and private stakeholders has taken place around the widening and relocation, and while the delay is inconvenient, it should come as a relief to many that GDOT is still treating the project as a priority despite recent budgetary issues.

Importantly, the project will be funded using federal and state monies with no local match required, and residents and visitors to the area will benefit from the increased safety of the roadway.

"Crash data reveals that the corridor has experienced higher incidents, rates of crashes, injuries and fatalities in comparing statewide averages for roadways of the same classification," GDOT said in 2019. "This is considered a rural, principal arterial.

"So, that says, what can we do to fix it? Is there geometry

of the roadway that we need to fix? Is there widening? Is there striping? Is there signage? With this project, we'll be able to go and do a lot of those things when we do new location and widening."

Georgia 515 is part of what's known as "Corridor A" of the Appalachian Development Highway System, or ADHS.

The ADHS was authorized by Congress in 1965 and was designed to generate economic development in the previously isolated Appalachian region," GDOT said previously. "SR 515/US 76 is designated as part of the Governor's Road Improvement Program (GRIP).

"The purpose of the GRIP system is to provide transportation infrastructure necessary for economic growth by providing connectivity in rural areas of Georgia. The section of SR 515/US 76 from Young Harris Street in Blairsville to Timberline Drive north of Young Harris is one of two remaining segments of the ADHS Corridor A and the GRIP that is two lanes."

## Union County celebrates the Great American Experiment with Daughters of the American Revolution



Commissioner Lamar

Paris proclaimed U.S. Constitution Week, September 17-23. Daughters attended the signing representing Old Unicoi Trail (OUT) Chapter, National Society Daughters of the American Revolution. Commissioner Paris's proclamation calls upon citizens of Union County to read the Constitution and reaffirm their support for the ideals the Framers held in 1787. The proclamation additionally calls for citizens to vigilantly protect the freedoms guaranteed through this document - the guardian of our liberties that upholds and protects the freedoms central to our American way of life.

In 1776 the unique and

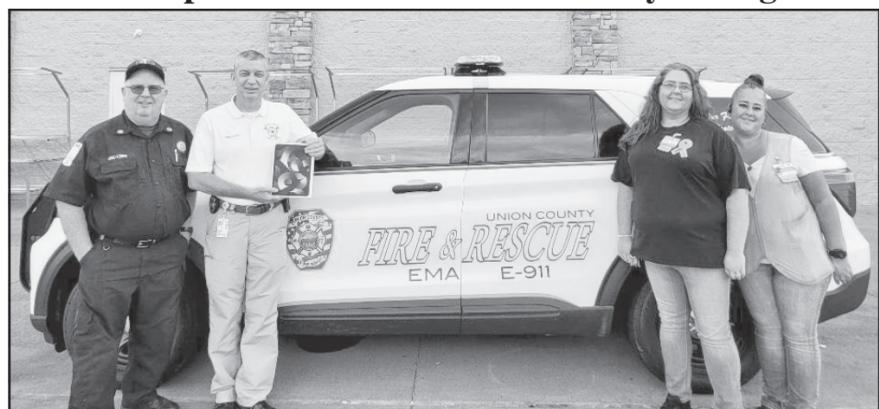
improbably American experiment - a political miracle - declared independence from the most powerful nation on earth through the Declaration of Independence which forged our national identity. Then in 1787, the Founding Fathers met in Philadelphia's Independence Hall and hammered out the U.S. Constitution which set forth the framework for the nation's government that still reigns today.

The Daughters of the American Revolution work to promote and protect the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, their importance to American history, and their application to life today. "The framers created a Constitution that translates into law the ideals upon which our nation was built," said Chapter Regent Pam Greene of Hiwassee. "Their vision was so forward thinking that their words still guide us today. No education

in American History is complete without a thorough understanding of the impact the Constitution has on the lives of American citizens. Each year, our DAR Chapter works with schools in Union, Fannin, and Towns Counties to provide pocket constitutions to all 10th grade students. A limited number of pocket copies will also be available through the public libraries."

One of the largest patriotic women's organizations in the world, DAR promotes historic preservation, education and patriotism via commemorative events, scholarships and educational initiatives, service to veterans, meaningful community service and more. For additional information about DAR and its relevant mission, visit [www.dar.org](http://www.dar.org). To attend an Old Unicoi Trail Chapter meeting, email [oldunicoi-trail@gmail.com](mailto:oldunicoi-trail@gmail.com).

## UC Fire Department awarded Community Giving Grant



(L-R): UCFD FF- David Ueltzen, Chief David Dyer, Walmart Representatives Rebecca Peace, Michelle Alexander

Union County Fire Department was recently awarded a Community Giving Grant from the Blairsville Walmart. Walmart Store manager Tim Wood approved this grant for \$2000. Union County Fire Department used these funds to purchase new I-PADs for the department. These I-PADs are critical tools that provide the fire fighters with live data with up to date information to include pre fire plans, emer-

gency contact information, maps, and hazard information on emergency scenes. They can also access live information on hazardous materials if these materials are involved in any fire or accident situation. These I-PADs also allow for the firefighters to do many of the paperwork tasks and report writing to reduce the paperwork. Updated inventory, repair request and maintenance information is also entered on

these tablets to ensure that this information is available to all the personnel to ensure that these issues are addressed and documented. Union County Fire Department appreciates our local Walmart, Manager, Tim Wood, and his team for their support of our department. This donation allows Union County Fire Department to continue meeting our mission "our family protecting your family".

# 9/11 Remembrance...from Page 1A

School Choir, directed by Alicia Covington, officially opened the event with “Amazing Grace.” Boy Scouts Troop 101 followed, presenting the Flag Ceremony. At the unfurling of the Red, White and Blue, everyone stood for the Pledge of Allegiance.

All veterans and first responders were specially recognized and asked to stand for applause just before the Union County Middle School Choir, directed by Melissa Pilote, performed “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Quietly, several other voices from the audience joined in, moved to honor the country in their own way.

It was then that First Baptist Church’s new Senior Pastor Rickey Powell took the floor to deliver a sermon and prayer preceded by his own recounting of how the televised attacks stopped him in his tracks.

“I looked at the screen. I saw the smoldering North Tower of the World Trade Center. And then, almost as soon as I had turned my attention to the television, we witnessed another plane come into view and slam into the second tower,” he said. “What we thought at first was an accident we knew then was intentional. Our nation was under attack.”

The Sept. 11 attacks, perpetrated by 19 Islamic terrorists, resulted in the deaths of 2,977 people, including at least 372 from 102 countries. Powell described the empathetic pain he and the rest of the nation felt watching debris-dusted survivors flee for their lives, and the “sickening feeling” that came when “the towers crumbled in on themselves.”

But the World Trade Center was not the only location of tragedy. A third plane crashed into the Pentagon, killing members of the United States military along with even more innocent civilians.

The fourth plane was en route to cause more damage, but passengers stormed the cockpit and intercepted the hijackers. Everyone on board was killed when the airliner crashed into a field in Somerset County, Pennsylvania.

Powell recognized these victims also, along with the brave rescuers who sacrificed their lives to save others in the wake of disaster, saying, “It was Jesus who said, ‘Greater love has no man than this: than he (who will) lay down his life for his friends.’”

Still, Powell reminded the audience that “there’s



**On Sunday, Sept. 11, Union County Fire Chief David Dyer reminded everyone of the promise the nation made to “Never Forget” what happened in the 2001 terror attacks.**

something more that we need to remember today than just the evil and the hatred, the death and the pain.”

“We need to remember that we saw more than hatred – we saw love that day,” Powell said. “We saw as police officers, and Port Authority officers, and fire and rescue personnel rushed toward the danger, rushed into the buildings that thousands of people were trying to evacuate, and how so many lost their lives in the line of duty.”

Not even the preacher had “all the answers” to the horrific event, but Powell saw it was his duty to show others the importance of love, and how they can fight fear and honor the fallen by perpetuating kindness “in practical ways” every day.

To end his sermon, Powell offered up a prayer for the families who continue to suffer from the loss of loved ones on Sept. 11, asking that the Lord grant them comfort as well as guide everyone in the nation to come together and practice love instead of hate.

Fire Chief David Dyer said that, having delivered many speeches over the years on behalf of the events of Sept. 11, 2001, he had to “think about what to say” that Sunday morning. He settled on sharing the unique point of view that firefighters have on the disaster.

“The sacrifices of those firefighters going into that building, knowing something could happen – that is something that we all need to remember,” Dyer said.

Three-hundred and forty-three firefighters lost their lives

on Sept. 11, 2001, and Dyer revealed that all firefighters have “in the back of their mind” the understanding that any call could be their last.

Having spoken to members of the force who had witnessed the attack, Dyer said he could “guarantee” that the same thoughts ran through the heads of the fallen that day, yet they still faced down death to save as many lives as they could.

“It’s been 21 years since that day, and we promised – we promised – that we would ‘Never Forget.’ So, it’s time to remember, but it’s also time to celebrate the heroism of these people,” Dyer said, before closing with, “We’ve always got to keep our promise to never forget.”

Finally, Commissioner Lamar Paris thanked everyone for their attendance, including those who performed and spoke at the ceremony. He also thanked Union County’s first responders for doing such an excellent job keeping the county safe.

“I think it’s (about) what the pastor said,” Paris said. “God loves the world, and we have to love the world as well. And we have to love our fellow man, and it’s hard sometimes, but that’s what we have to do.”

Paris then voiced his appreciation for the many young people attending the memorial. With future generations realizing that Sept. 11 was more than just an event in a history book, the nation can ensure that the mantra of “Never Forget” holds true.

# Mill Rate...from Page 1A



**Union County School Board Members Tony Hunter, Patrick White and Keith Potts voting to accept the school system’s 2022 millage rate on Wednesday, Sept. 7.** Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Hill said that an 8.2 mill rate was all the schools needed to meet their budget, so they opted to go with the lower rate.

Unless levying authorities plan on implementing a tax increase, state law requires millage rates to be “rolled back” to produce “the same total revenue on the current year’s new digest that last year’s millage rate would have produced had no reassessments occurred.”

Essentially, rollback rates offset inflationary increases in property values from annual assessments, which have shot up over the last two years due largely to COVID-driven housing market volatility as people moved from more populated areas, increasing fair market values in rural settings.

That’s why Commissioner Paris decided to accept the rollback rate of 5.113 mills in his Sept. 8 called meeting – down from 6.024 mills in 2021 – as the county does not need to raise taxes to meet its budgetary needs over the next fiscal year.

With the respective millage rates, the county expects to generate about \$10.7 million in property taxes, and the schools about \$17 million, with both figures being the highest amount of projected property tax collections in either entity’s history due primarily to

recent county growth.

To that point, not all recent growth has been inflationary. Since 2020, the county has experienced more than 10% of pure growth via additions and improvements to existing properties and also plenty of new construction and development, which contributes to the tax base and helps keep millage rates lower.

Such trends have been driven by housing and development markets as well as federal COVID stimulus funds flooding the economy with dollars, many of which were used on home improvement projects.

Because of this pure growth, even with reduced millage rates, the county expects to receive additional FY23 property tax revenues in the amount of \$312,997, and the schools are projecting to receive an additional \$391,885 in property taxes over last year.

At the end of June, the county announced that, following the annual reassessment process to figure the countywide property tax digest, “the average increase for home values in Union County based on actual sales will average about 22% for 2022.”

The county said at the time it planned to roll the millage rate back, setting a goal

“for the majority of property owners to have little or no property tax increase.”

Some homeowners saw revaluations in line with the average increase and beyond, meaning the decrease in the millage rate compared with last year may still result in a tax increase for some homeowners.

The 22% increase was for home values specifically, so other elements of the tax digest increased less substantially, contributing to the 15.5% year-over-year decrease in the millage rate.

No public comments were offered in either millage rate meeting last week. Once the millage rates were adopted, Tax Commissioner Knight began the formal submission process of the 2022 Property Tax Digest for approval by the Georgia Department of Revenue.

Knight expects property tax bills to mail between Sept. 20 and Sept. 25, to be due back to his office no later than Dec. 20, with interest to accrue on late payments.

The City of Blairsville also levies property taxes, but only on properties inside city limits. The city was expected to adopt its own lowered millage rate after press time on Tuesday, Sept. 13, at 6 p.m. in City Hall.