

North Georgia News

2 Sections 20 Pages

Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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Voting Center ready for voters in '24 elections

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The new Union County Voting Center is open and ready for the 2024 Election Cycle, which kicks off in Georgia on Feb. 19 with the start of early voting for the March 12 Presidential Preference Primary.

Serving as the new home of both the Union County Board of Registrars and the Union County Board of Elections, the SPLOST-funded facility at 33 Roscoe Collins Drive next to the Sports Center is a one-stop shop for local election needs.

Completed in December, the structure relocates voter registration, early voting and Elections Day tabulation – all activities that were previously staged in separate locations – to a single facility, with

separate offices for the Board of Registrars and the Elections Board.

For past elections, voter registration occurred in the Registrar's Office of the Union County Courthouse, where many records were required to be kept in cramped quarters.

And since the Registrar's Office also has charge of early voting, voters reported to the courthouse to request absentee ballots or to the lower courthouse floor to vote early in-person, which presented logistical issues having to share the space with regular courthouse business.

The Elections Board offices have moved over from the old nursing home building on Hunt-Martin Street, which was an outdated facility where public viewing of Election Day activity had to be done through

open doorways.

Designed with transparency in mind, the new building contains a large glass wall in the foyer looking onto the counting area so voters can easily view votes being tabulated after polls close at the 11 county precincts on Election Day.

And as the Elections Board tabulates votes from the precincts as well as mail-in absentees and advanced in-person ballots from the Registrar's Office, housing the offices in one building dedicated to elections simplifies the counting process for a more seamless overall experience.

Ultimately, it just makes sense that the two offices dealing with elections in the county occupy the same structure, which also features

See Voting Center, Page 4A



The new Union County Voting Center can be found at 33 Roscoe Collins Drive, just off the Glenn Gooch Bypass across from Union County High. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

GDOT extends sinkhole repair timeline to April

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

Volatile winter weather has delayed the completion timeline to repair the sinkhole area at Murphy Highway and Georgia 515, with construction now expected to last through April, according to the Georgia Department of Transportation.

Work began late last summer after the 40-foot sinkhole opened during torrential rains on Aug. 29, and GDOT estimated then that the repair would take until Jan. 1. In November, GDOT revised the completion timeline to February 2024, and again this month to late April.

Initial work consisted of

filling in the sinkhole before driving dozens of steel piles into the ground to get a retaining wall in place, shoring up the dirt so that crews could safely excavate the area, determine what went wrong and replace the infrastructure there.

Soil saturation from the storm and a burst stormwater

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GDOT is planning to spend \$5.1 million to install a new stormwater pipe after the old one burst in a rainstorm last August, contributing to a massive sinkhole at Murphy Highway and GA 515. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Fortenberry honored by SAR patriots in meeting



L-R: Blue Ridge Mountain SAR Vice President Sid Turner, UCFD Fire Capt. Jeff Fortenberry and SAR Treasurer Jared Ogden for a Public Safety Award presentation on Jan. 18. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

By Shawn Jarrard
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On Thursday, Jan. 18, Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris once again welcomed members of the Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter Sons of the American

Revolution to his regular county meeting after they appeared last month to bestow Public Safety Awards.

As direct descendants of patriots of the American Revolution, SAR members have adopted a "patriotic, historic and educational" mission, and

part of their outreach consists of recognizing outstanding public servants as selected by the heads of local first responder agencies each year.

After presenting commendations to Union County Sheriff's Maj. Shawn

See SAR Award, Page 3A

Garrett, supporters celebrate Drug Court graduation

By Daysha Pandolph
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Family, friends and supporters of Ethan Garrett gathered at the Union County Courthouse this month to celebrate his graduation from the North Enotah Drug Court Program.

"The Drug Court is an alternative sentencing program," Drug Court Coordinator Danny Hawkins said on Jan. 11. "When somebody's charges in some way involve drug usage – (it could be) possession, a burglary, a theft charge – rather than just locking them up, what we want to do is to give them an opportunity to address the problem, which is the drugs."

Through the extensive work of the Drug Court team, the Public Defender's Office, the Sheriff's Office, the Commissioner's Office and Probation, offenders are able to overcome their addictions and become contributors to their community in 18 to 24 months.

Drug Court has been in this area for a little over 10 years, and with an 80%



The North Georgia News wishes all the best to Ethan Garrett, shown here speaking at his Drug Court graduation ceremony at the Union County Courthouse Jan. 11.

Photo by Daysha Pandolph

graduation rate, the North Enotah Drug Court has overseen six graduations in the past year and a half alone. On Thursday, Garrett, a Blairsville local, added his name to the list of graduates.

"Today is a special day, and it is a wonderful way to start off the new year," said Superior Court Judge Buck

Levins, who officiated the graduation. "Today, among other things, is the last day that Mr. Garrett has to come to court, unless he wants to, for this type of thing."

"But that's not really what today is about; today is the day when we come together and reintroduce Mr. Garrett to

See Drug Court Success, Page 5A

County, Rec Department deliver Food Bank donations

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Union County Recreation Department donated \$1,000 and delivered a truck bed full of food for the Union County Food Bank this month, with Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris attending to present the check to Food Bank Manager Ann Sullivan.

According to Parks and Recreation Director Scotty Thompson, the Rec Department's goal is to serve the community, and helping provide food for those in need is just another aspect of that mission.

"We're always excited to help out and pitch in whenever we can," Thompson said on Jan. 8. "In lieu of an entry fee to the Sports Center, we let visitors know about the Food Bank up front, and usually they'll give more in that case."

Meanwhile, food donations come from all over the county, having been dropped off at places like the library, the



The county made monetary and food donations to the Union County Food Bank this month, seen here dropping off supplies at the Haralson Civic Center. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Community Center and county offices for collections between Nov. 1 to just after the holidays.

"We're just excited that our Rec Department, all these guys and ladies, get out

here with the county, with the Food Bank, providing this to the community," Paris said. "This makes me proud, as the commissioner, that all these

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SAR Award...from Page 1A

Dyer and Union General Advanced EMT Adrian Stroud in December, local SAR Vice President Sid Turner and Treasurer Jared Ogden attended last week to give a third award, for the Fire Department.

“One thing I like about being in the Sons of the American Revolution is, we’re in a really good position to recognize people in the community and reward them for the good services that they do for our community,” Turner said. “Tonight, we’re going to do that for a firefighter.”

Union County Fire Capt. Jeff Fortenberry was selected by Fire Chief David Dyer as the recipient for the Fire Department, and Fortenberry graciously accepted his Fire Safety Commendation Medal and Certificate in the meeting.

“Capt. Fortenberry has been with the Fire Department for 36 years and has advanced through the ranks to the level of captain,” Turner said. “Capt. Fortenberry started his career in volunteer fire service, where he received his initial fire training. “He was then hired as a full-time firefighter for the Union County Fire Department in 1990. He completed his medical training in 1992 and is licensed in the State of Georgia as an emergency medical technician.

“Capt. Fortenberry is currently the shift commander of Shift C. His knowledge and experience are vital to the daily operations of the department, and he has gone above and beyond with his service to ensure the safety of his firefighters as well as the people of the community.

“For this reason, it’s a pleasure to present him with the Sons of the American Revolution Firefighter Commendation.”

After the meeting, Fortenberry said he was honored to have received the SAR award alongside fellow public servants Maj. Dyer and A-EMT Stroud.

In other business, Paris approved the re-appointment of James Fitzgerald to the Union County Board of Elections for a new term of Jan. 1, 2024, through Dec. 31, 2027. Fitzgerald is one of two Democratic Party appointees to the board.

The commissioner also approved the re-appointment of Linda Hill to the Board of Elections for a new term of Jan. 1, 2024, through Dec. 31, 2027. Hill is one of two Republican Party appointees to the board.

Agreements accepted by Paris in the Jan. 18 meeting included:

A \$2,100.15 contract for preventive maintenance of 911 dispatch base stations and repeaters;

A \$12,800 contract for annual maintenance on

the X-ray machines used for courthouse security;

A contract for \$175.34 per month for mailing services at the Registrar’s Office;

And a \$671 lease for year 2024 between Blue Ridge Mountain EMC and the county “for the use of tower space, building space and electricity on top of Rocky Top Mountain for the 911 Repeater.” This fee, to increase annually, is newly required by the U.S. Forest Service.

He also approved a year-long agreement with Lexipol for professional grant-writing services in the amount of \$4,500.

Lexipol will assist the Fire Department in filing increasingly complicated, competitive grant applications, with major potential for significant grant awards upwards of \$1 million to secure equipment such as new fire trucks, firefighting gear, etc.

Paris approved the appointment of local paralegal Mary Ann Stephens to the Union County Board of Tax Assessors effective Jan. 1, 2024, through Dec. 31, 2028.

Additionally, Paris approved a resolution setting the fees candidates must pay to qualify for election to county office in 2024. Those fees have been published separately in this edition of the newspaper, as authorized by Paris that evening. Qualifying occurs the first full week in March.

During his Commissioner’s Comments following regular business, Paris gave a brief update on the Union County Gun Range currently under construction off Georgia 180.

“We think it will be completed predominantly by the end of March, but probably not open until the first of April,” Paris said, “because we’ve got to get grass planted and get it coming up a little bit, because there’s been a lot of grading that’s had to be done out there.

“So, we’re excited about that being completed. (At) the current gyms that we have at the Sports Center and next door where our new voting facility is, in between there, they’re building a third gym.

“That will be utilized for not only sporting events but also for exercise, dancing, and one of the major things, it’ll be set up for voting. So, we hope to be able to, at some point down the road, move voting there.

“But for the time being, until and if the state approves that and the elections boards approve that, then it will just be used on the day of election if needed. Early voting (for the whole county) will take place in the new Voting Center.”

Commission meetings take place the third Thursday of each month at 6 p.m. inside the Union County Courthouse.



Friends of Union County Library: Advocating for Libraries, Literacy, and Lifelong Learning



Are YOU a Friend of the Library? Many people think since they have a Union County Library Card, they are a Friend of the Library, but joining the Friends requires filling out a membership card and paying a small membership fee (\$10 per person, \$15 per family).

Another common thought is that our Library is supported entirely by Union County funds, but the funds provided by Union County, while generous, are not enough to meet all the

needs and wishes of our library and its patrons.

Interestingly, the Union County Public Library is the busiest branch in the Mountain Regional Library System, yet over 50% of people who use this library access it only online, through e-books and Audiobooks. If you are one of these people, we encourage you to consider joining Friends of Union County Library. We are a group of volunteers who raise money to supplement the budget of our Library. We provide

funds to our Library can purchase equipment and, perhaps most importantly for those of you who use only online library resources, our contributions supplement what is needed for the purchase of Audiobooks and e-books. We also provide money for staff development, special programs, the Summer Children’s program, and books that people request outside of what the library’s budget allows them to purchase. The cost of online e-books, e-magazines, and Audiobooks has

dramatically risen. So, if you are one of the many people who use and love these services, but never come to the Union County Public Library, please become a Friend of the Union County Library, and help us keep these services great!

Just fill out the coupon below and mail it in, or send a donation through PayPal to foucl.blairsville@gmail.com. Every member receives an emailed quarterly newsletter about our activities. Join us!



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Georgia Southern Fall 2023 Dean’s and President’s List

Georgia Southern University recently recognized approximately 3,550 students for excellence in academics on the Fall 2023 Dean’s List. To be eligible for the Dean’s List, a student must have at least a 3.5 grade point average and carry a minimum of 12 hours for the semester.

Local students include: Elisha Denton of Hiawassee; Savannah Kirk, Emily Frizzell, and Rachel Ryals of Young Harris; and Kyler Rob-

bins of Blairsville.

Georgia Southern University recently recognized approximately 2,350 students for excellence in academics on the Fall 2023 President’s List. To be eligible for the President’s List, a student must have at least a 4.0 grade point average and carry a minimum of 12 hours for the semester.

Local students include: Bazya Smith of Hiawassee; and Sydney Snoderly of Blairsville.

Andrew Neal makes Dean’s List at Valdosta State University

Valdosta State University congratulates Andrew Neal of Young Harris, GA, for earning a spot on the Fall 2023 Dean’s List.

Dean’s List honors are reserved for the highest achieving students at VSU. Neal is one of nearly 1,800 distinguished and accomplished students recognized for exemplifying excellence in the attainment of their educational goals.

To qualify for Dean’s List at VSU, students must achieve a semester grade point

average of 3.50 or higher on nine or more semester hours with an institutional grade point average of 3.00 or higher.

Senate Majority Leader Gooch: Week Two Under the Gold Dome

Budget Week, a pivotal phase where the Senate and House Committees on Appropriations convene to interact with state agency leaders and finalize the budgets for the Amended Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 and the FY 2025, has concluded. These meetings involved discussions on budgetary requests presented by state agency leaders from every corner of Georgia. Amidst these deliberations and the ongoing legislative session, my focus remains unwavering in ensuring that our state maintains a fiscally conservative budget to pave the way for further prosperity.

On Tuesday, Governor Brian P. Kemp addressed the committee, emphasizing his commitment to growing our electric vehicle sector, among other key priorities. I commend the Governor for prioritizing this growing industry through a \$3 million allocation to equipment and vehicles for implementing the Georgia Electric Vehicle Charging Program. Last session, I sponsored legislation that provided a framework for regulations on electric vehicle charging equipment that will protect consumers throughout the state. This

marks an important step forward as Georgia continues to lead in this rapidly expanding sector of our economy.

As our state experiences growth, attracting and retaining a skilled workforce becomes imperative. I am proud to announce that the budget proposal includes a pay increase for all state employees, including educators. This proposal builds on the historic raises secured for teachers in recent years and allocates a 4% increase for every state worker.

Furthermore, I am deeply committed to sustaining funding for our state’s law enforcement, ensuring they receive the highest quality training. I want to express my appreciation for the allocation of \$6 million dedicated to facility upgrades at the Georgia Public Safety Training Center. Recognizing that a safe and secure state begins with education, I am pleased to see this item in the Amended FY 2024 Budget, as it remains a top priority.

Lastly, we can make all these investments while implementing a record state income tax cut, delivering on the Majority Party’s commitment to move towards the reduction



Majority Leader Steve Gooch of our state income tax. It is crucial that we allocate funds for critical issues such as public safety, workforce retention, election security, education, and technology improvement.

The Senate will reconvene on the Senate floor on Monday, Jan. 22. As always, please don’t hesitate to reach out to my office if you have any questions regarding legislative matters.

Sen. Steve Gooch serves as Senate Majority Leader. He represents the 51st Senate District which includes Dawson, Fannin, Gilmer, Lumpkin, Union and Pickens counties and a portion of White County. He may be reached at 404-656-7872 or via email at steve.gooch@senate.ga.gov.

Blairsville Cruisers Car Club Members to meet on January 25th



Blairsville Cruisers members from Union, Towns, Clay and Cherokee counties are urged to attend an important members meeting and elections on

Thursday, January 25th at 6 pm at the clubhouse on the Murphy Hwy (129 N). The Clubhouse is in Blairsville just south of Rick’s Rentals and is located in the former Heritage Propane Building.

This is a very important meeting with discussion on changes to the By-laws of the club. The agenda includes plans for the 2024

season, changes to the website and several other important items that require voting by club members.

The election of club officers and board of directors will be held at this meeting. All members are urged to attend to voice your concerns for the club’s future going into the new season.

Voting Center ...from Page 1A

modern security specific to the requirements of the offices.

Security cameras keep watch on all areas where election equipment is stored, as required by state law, and key access to Elections Office areas is limited to Elections Board members. When the building is being used for voting, the Sheriff's Office will provide security for the venue.

As people enter the center, they will find Voter

Registration straight ahead and the Elections Board offices to the right of the main entrance.

Early voting will take place entirely inside the Voting Center, with a dedicated room immediately left of the entrance where voters can cast their ballots and make their way right back out to the parking lot.

"It's going to be a walkthrough kind of deal," said County Manager Larry Garrett, highlighting a breezeway that is under construction to connect to the Multipurpose Gym that will be available for voting any time it is needed.

The Voting Center breezeway should be complete by the next month, but the rest of the Voting Center is as good as finished, and the Multipurpose Gym is expected to be up and running in six to eight months.

Garrett said the county will be implementing landscaping improvements at the Voting Center as time goes on, but already, the county has incorporated some of the recycled glass from the new setup at the Transfer Station out front of the center.

"It's been a long time coming for the voters and for the Registrar's Office," said Garrett, adding that, with the spacious interior and waiting room lined with chairs, "people will hopefully not have to wait on the outside (of the building to vote)."

The people staffing the Voting Center, which took about a year to construct, believe the facility is prepared to meet local election purposes for years to come.

"We needed to have a bigger place to actually set up the machines, and over at the courthouse, we were having to use the Jury Assembly Room, which created a conflict sometimes when they were having court," said Deputy Registrar Diana Nichols.

"So, that really pushed us to try to find ... a place so we didn't have to keep moving everything in and out and creating conflicts with the court system and everything."

Nichols wasn't the only one seeking a new facility; Union County Board of Elections Chair Elizabeth



The Union County Board of Elections will be debuting these new voting modules for the 2024 election cycle, offering both security and ease of setup for voting machines.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

"Libby" Stevens has also wanted a Voting Center "for a long time."

Concurring with Nichols, Stevens is happy with the storage space at the new HQ, which comes with easy, secure access for poll workers dropping off ballots on election nights.

She is also excited about the county's new voting modules – metal locking cabinets that house four voting machines instead of requiring separate cases and setup for individual machines. The modules come with wheels for ease of transport and simply need to be plugged in and turned on.

"The new center provides additional security, streamlines operations, and gives us an opportunity to work hand-in-hand with the Registrar's Office," Stevens said.

And though there has been talk of eventually consolidating a few precincts in the Voting Center location, for now, none of the county's 11 voting precincts will be changing.

Included in the new building are public restrooms to accommodate voters, and outside, there's plenty of parking available via adjacent county-owned property.

Above all, the county as well as the people directly involved in the local elections are grateful to have a new space dedicated and designed for the sole purpose of elections instead of having to rely on repurposed rooms and buildings.

"One thing that we've noticed in all the elections throughout the United States

right now," Garrett said, "the people working the elections feel threatened and not appreciated, and I think this will show that Union County cares about the employees here that take care of that."

"They are doing a service for all of us. Whether you use that service or not, that's your option, but voting is something that we should all take seriously and do."

"For our county to have this building here and the employees in it, it's something I think the voters should be proud of. It is their building."

The 2024 election cycle will be a busy one, with federal, state and local elections up for voting.

Candidates for local elections will qualify the week of March 4 for the May 21 General Primary/Nonpartisan Election, with a runoff date of June 18 if necessary. And the big General Election is slated for Tuesday, Nov. 5, with a runoff date set for Dec. 3.

The deadline to register for the Presidential Preference Primary is Feb. 12; for the General Primary/Nonpartisan Election is April 22; and for the General Election is Oct. 7.

Each election will feature an early voting period: three weeks for regular elections and as much time as possible for runoff elections.

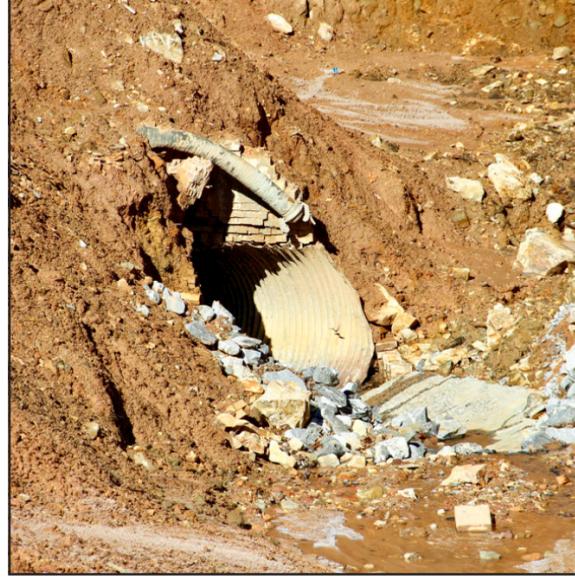
Active registered voters will have the option of casting ballots at the Voting Center during early voting, in-person at their predetermined precinct on Election Day, or via mail-in absentee ballot, which may be requested from the Registrar's Office in its new location.



A view through the glass wall of the tabulation room onto the reception/waiting area of the new Voting Center.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Sinkhole Repair ...from Page 1A



After installing a stormwater pipe and once the City of Blairsville's sewer pipe is replaced, GDOT will work to restore the sinkhole area to its original condition.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

pipe softened the ground that rainy evening in August, but an ultimate cause of the failure has not been determined, as the pipe is so old that clear records of it could not be found, according to GDOT.

Because the sinkhole "created a threat to the public" that required immediate action, GDOT said last week that the project received approval to proceed with Pittman Construction Company without following the standard bid process "to immediately address the situation."

"GDOT's main concern is public safety, regardless of the cause," GDOT District 1 Communications Officer Elizabeth Johnson said. "At present, we are not sure whether it is a result of weather-related impact, but multiple factors caused it. We are fixing it."

Now, maintenance crews are working to replace the stormwater pipe before they can begin to backfill the area, and the City of Blairsville still has a compromised wastepipe that must be replaced.

The state-owned

property is an important piece of right-of-way for GDOT, as the gravity-fed infrastructure channels stormwater across 515. That's why this has been a priority project for the state, which is projecting to spend \$5.1 million on the fix.

Two manholes, one owned in the sinkhole, collapsed by GDOT and the other by Blairsville for sewage transport, and since then, stormwater has been pumped from the First Baptist Church side of 515 to the downstream side of 515 into the pipe under Murphy Highway.

The city has been pumping sewage from the manhole behind First Baptist to another one up the highway, bypassing the affected area until Pittman Construction can complete the GDOT repair and transition to restoring the city's sewer access.

"Once the pipes have been replaced, the construction barriers which held back the earth so that work could take place will be removed," Johnson said. "The earth will be replaced to recover the pipes and fill in the hole."

Construction has resulted in a massive transformation of that area, including tons of dirt moved and the temporary removal of a Murphy Highway entrance to the Blairsville Quick Stop and Sherwin-Williams Paint Store on the corner.

The state transportation agency said last year that, "once completed, the area will be the same as it was originally."

Food Bank Donations...from Page 1A



Union County Government and the Rec Department recently visited Food Bank Manager Ann Sullivan to deliver what has become an annual joint donation of funds and food.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

people are doing this work for the betterment of Union County and our citizens. I couldn't be prouder for everybody."

There are seven food pantries in the county, with Sullivan's having been in operation for 14 years. The Food Bank started out as a "go-between," a place where food stamp applicants could get their groceries while waiting for their applications to be approved.

Nowadays, anyone interested in visiting must fill out paperwork. Whether they're able to take food depends on their income and the amount of people in their households, but Sullivan reassures people that turning anyone away is a rare occurrence.

Many families have taken advantage of the service over the years, and this season is already shaping up to be a difference maker for many more thanks to the generous monetary donations made by members of the community over Christmastime in December.

"We got food donations in November and December; the 4-H fourth- and fifth-graders collected for me lots of good stuff," said Sullivan, recalling the kids' involvement in sorting food and putting it away at the bank. With their help and the added funds, the Food Bank is well-stocked.

In fact, things are going so well right now that Sullivan

said, "We were giving out once every two months, and starting this month, we're going to start letting people come once a month because I have enough to keep it up for that long."

Sullivan has noticed an unfortunate trend at the Food Bank. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, there wasn't much activity. In Sullivan's experience, the Food Bank "wasn't needed" because food stamps were doubled and tripled, leaving families able to acquire food that way.

"When they decided there's no pandemic anymore, that COVID is a way of life just like the flu and pneumonia, (the government) cut (benefits) back," Sullivan said. "I'm not sure if the pandemic caused all this, or maybe greed didn't cause it, but the price of everything has gone way, way high."

Continued Sullivan, "The food stamps have been cut back to what they were pre-pandemic, and (families) can't afford it. But I'll tell you who suffers more than anybody – it's senior citizens out there," noted Sullivan, describing the plight of some elders who receive just \$25 monthly to spend on groceries.

"Moms and grandmas like to feed their young ones when they come in the door – that's our mindset, you know?" she said. "You come in the door, the first thing out of your mom or grandma's mouth, 'Are you hungry? You want something

to eat?' That's just the way we are – that's our job in life."

Having raised her sons as a single mother for years, Sullivan sees herself in many of the women who come to her for help. And as a grandmother, she still identifies with those needs.

"It's a good job," Sullivan said of her position, noting that, "sometimes, it's heartbreaking."

In addition to monetary donations, people looking to help the needy can start by dropping off meat. Protein is especially expensive, and Sullivan said the Food Bank needs hamburger meat to go with all the Hamburger Helper kits in the inventory.

The pantry is stocked with a ready – and roomy – freezer. While most families don't have the oven space to fit a whole turkey or ham, things like pre-cut chicken breast or other small packages would be perfect because they can round out multi-ingredient meals.

Food drop-offs are welcome at the Haralson Memorial Civic Center at 165 Welborn Street, and anyone interested in utilizing the Food Bank may call 706-745-6596.

Sullivan also represents the Ninth District Opportunity Program in Union County, currently offering low-income heating assistance while all other programs are on hold. For more information, contact Ninth District Opportunity at 855-636-3108.

Drug Court Success...from Page 1A

our community in Towns and Union County.

"And we support him and surround him and say, 'This man has earned trust and respect. This man, because of his own work and his own efforts – and because of your work and faith and support – is being reintroduced with our confidence into this community."

"You can hire him. You can employ him. You can be sure that he is going to take care of his family. He is redeemed.' That is what today is about. We celebrate that and we honor it. He has earned it."

Garrett started his journey on the wrong foot, something Public Defender Kat Smith jokingly reminded him throughout the ceremony. She had him revisit his history of legal trouble before reading a line from his Drug Court referral form.

"We talked about Drug Court and what it could do for you," she said. "You told me that you needed help, and you told me you were ready. I told you all about the program, and I kept this (referral form) on purpose."

"What you said was, 'I'm done with that part of my life. I know I'm better than this. I know who I am without this. I think doing this will help me. I can do it on my own, but I want to take every precaution to get through this. I went to the top fast, and I hit bottom faster. My kids need their dad, and my grandma needs her grandson.'

"Most importantly, you not only did that, you got away from the people that you needed to get away from, and I know that's hard. It's hard to say goodbye to old friends, (but) you did that."

"And you did that for your kids, and you did it for your grandmother, and you did it for the rest of your family, but most importantly, Ethan, you did that for you. You've got to help yourself before you can be there for other people, and you've done it."

Smith, like all of the other speakers at the ceremony, hoped that her words might guide other people down Ethan's path of improvement.



Drug Court graduate Ethan Garrett receiving his Certificate of Completion and Program Coin from Superior Court Judge Buck Levins earlier this month.

Photo by Daysha Pandolph

At that, she handed over the papers documenting his criminal history and allowed him to shred them as a symbol of freedom from the past.

As he moves into the next chapter of his life, Garrett's supporters expect him to use his experiences to help other recovering addicts find a path to sobriety.

Garrett's friend from Drug Court, Isaiah Allen, spoke on the importance of spreading generosity to other people suffering from addiction. Allen has been clean for four and a half years and feels that with his sobriety came a newfound purpose in life: to serve other recovering addicts.

"If you've been through any kind of addiction and you have come out of it, your goal in life is to help others come out. If not, something is not right," Allen said. "I didn't get the displeasure of meeting Ethan before Drug Court; I got the pleasure of meeting this freed, sanctified, righteous man of God that he is right now."

Garrett himself also attributes his success in the Drug Court to his firm belief in Christianity.

"It's going to be hard to leave Drug Court, not because

of Drug Court, but because of everybody in Drug Court," Garrett said. "We all had each other's backs, we were all there for each other, and we all became a family."

"What I want to encourage to the participants that I'm leaving behind is: continue to be there for each other; continue to speak Jesus into people and to speak life into them."

"If you see a weakness or something, be there for them. Maybe your strength is their weakness; maybe your weakness is one of their strengths. So all y'all, stick together and just keep doing what you're doing."

For other addicts walking the path to recovery, Garrett imparted these remarks:

"Be there for each other. Notice that recovery isn't a path you take on your own; it's a path you take with other recovering addicts. Keep doing it, guys. There is a light at the end of the tunnel, I promise."

After receiving his certificate of completion and program coin, Garrett gave thanks to everyone involved in clearing his path to success. All of his supporters then gathered for refreshments.