

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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New royalty to be crowned before Homecoming Game

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The votes are in, and all that's a week of suspense.

Union County High School will crown its 2021-22 Homecoming Queen from among the 15 members of the school's Homecoming Court this Friday night at Mike Colwell Memorial Stadium.

This week will mark the end of Katie Baumeister's reign when she, as last year's Queen, coronates the newest member of UCHS royalty.

2021-22 senior class representatives are Adaley Burnette, Niya Cobb, Savannah Evans, Tracy McCombs and Tori Mia. The Junior class is represented by Caroline Karnes, Chloe Potts, Lexi Starling and Sophie Truex. Katie Byers, Linley Jones and Georgia Patton represent the sophomore

class, while freshmen Ila Bragg, Abigail Pickelseimer and Mikala Souther round out this year's court.

Festivities kick off Friday at 1 p.m. with the Homecoming Parade. The procession begins at Union County High School and will visit each Union County campus.

The crowning ceremony is scheduled for 7 p.m., when each of the 15 young ladies will be introduced and escorted onto the football field. Afterward, the Panthers will host Banks County at 7:30 p.m. in a Region 8-AA showdown to determine state playoff positioning.

Other recent UCHS Homecoming winners include Cydney Rich in 2019, Aladryne Arnold in 2018 and Jessica Palomo in 2017. Joanna Irvin was voted the 2016 queen after Layne Colwell was crowned in 2015 and Emma Smith in 2014.



The 2021-22 Union County High School Homecoming Court

Photo by Todd Forrest

Sorghum Fest makes sweet return to Meeks Oct. 9-10

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
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A sweet tradition will return to the North Georgia Mountains this weekend after being canceled in 2020 due to concerns over community transmission of COVID-19. The Blairsville Sorghum Festival will run two weekends as usual, Oct. 9-10 and Oct. 16-17, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Parking for the festival located inside Meeks Park in Union County is free, and admission for everyone 13 and up is just \$5. Children 12 and under get in free.

Fifty-two years have passed since the Sorghum Festival got its start around the Old Courthouse on the downtown Blairsville Square, and syrup making by tireless volunteers remains central to the event, with organizers



pledging to spend proceeds on worthy local causes.

Since the beginning, festival proceeds have gone right back into the community by way of charitable giving to groups and individuals, which is why, when it comes to local traditions, they don't get much sweeter than the Blairsville Sorghum Festival.

Held for years at the Old Fort Sorghum on the corner of

School Circle and Young Harris Street, the event has taken place in Meeks Park since 2008, when volunteers realized a need for more space to accommodate the growing festival.

New this year is the addition of a Sorghum Festival hosting partner in the Enotah CASA for Children, which has been brought on board to assist the core group

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Habitat helps Morris Family following home explosion

By Shawn Jarrard
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Angela Morris is incredibly grateful for the outpouring of community support she and her family have received since their

home off Trackrock Gap Road exploded from a propane leak on Sunday, Sept. 12.

She's also thankful there was no loss of life that day, which could have easily been the case, as two of her children were inside the home when the

ballot shook the house off its foundation.

Unfortunately, the explosion rendered the home unlivable, and the six people staying there had to split up and take on temporary lodgings in

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Habitat for Humanity delivered this camper to the Morris Family last week. Pictured here is Angela Morris with several Habitat Board Members.

Photo/Facebook

2021 Indian Summer Festival a major success in Suches



Kindergarten through fifth-grade students at Woody Gap School put on an annual Cherokee Indian Drama at the Indian Summer Festival, pictured here Oct. 2. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

By Todd Forrest
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

SUCHES - The annual Indian Summer Festival has faced plenty of adversity in recent years, proving itself to be a thriving personification of the resilient community that it has represented for more than four decades.

Expecting to celebrate its 43rd year following an extremely successful weekend in 2019, concerns over the coronavirus pandemic forced the Indian Summer Festival's cancellation last fall.

The news came just three years removed from a 2017 festival that attracted more than

5,000 Day One visitors to the Valley Above the Clouds.

Those much-needed crowds in 2017 were a welcome sight after flooding from Hurricane Joaquin washed away the festival just two years earlier, damaging property belonging to vendors and the local community.

According to longtime festival merchants Clark and Louise Chester of Dahlongea, significant weather changes are commonplace during early October in North Georgia, where Clark claims to have witnessed almost everything Mother Nature can dish out.

However, he chalks up the 2020 pandemic as something he

never expected to face during his many years of offering knives and hand-carved items to festivalgoers.

"I hate that it was canceled last year because we would have been here," Clark said. "We've been coming here for at least 10 or 12 years, and we thought we'd seen it all."

"We were here when the hurricane washed everything away, then a year or two after that, high winds came through and blew our tents upside down."

Added Louise, "But we just love coming here and will be back next year because (we do so well). Everyone

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TSPLOST early voting begins Oct. 12, runs three weeks

By Shawn Jarrard
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For the countywide referendum on the Transportation Special Purpose Local Options Sales Tax, advanced in-person voting will start next week in the Jury Assembly Room of the Union County Courthouse, running weekdays Oct. 12-29 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., even during lunchtime.

Election Day voting will take place Nov. 2 from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. at the 11 pre-assigned precincts of Union County.

New this year is the addition of a second day of weekend early voting, giving people too busy to vote during the week chances to cast ballots in person on Saturday, Oct. 16, and Saturday, Oct. 23, also from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Voters may pick up a copy of the new "Application for Georgia Official Absentee

Ballot" from the Union County Registrar's Office located at 65 Courthouse Street in Blairsville or print a copy at https://sos.ga.gov/admin/uploads/2021_Absentee_App.9721_2.pdf.

"Georgia law allows for absentee-by-mail ballots to be requested no earlier than 78 days and no later than 11 days prior to an election," per sos.ga.gov. "Absentee ballot applications can be returned by mail, fax, email (as an

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Fire Dept. hosts multi-county 'live fire' training exercises

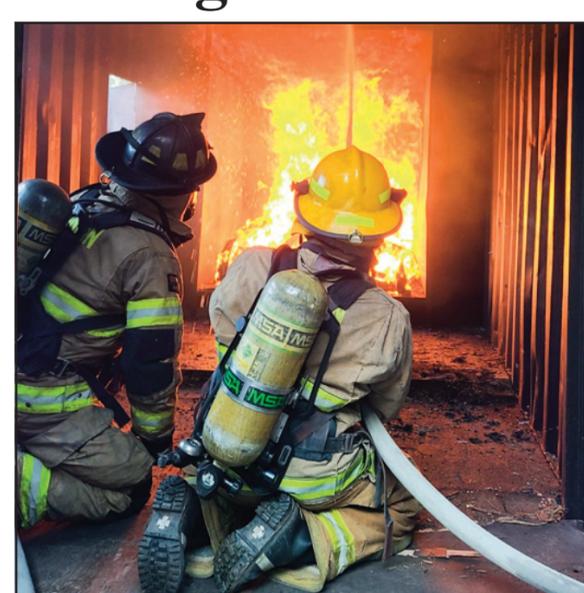
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There is a quote that is widely used in the fire service: "You can't train too much for a job that can kill you." It is a reminder of the dangers of the fire service and that training is essential.

Union County Fire Department hosted a live fire training on Saturday, Oct. 2, at the Union County Fire Department Training Facility. The training included firefighters, instructors and students from Union, Towns and Fannin fire departments.

The objectives of the training were to illustrate fire behavior and to allow students to demonstrate their skills at extinguishing a structure fire. The class also fulfilled the live fire training requirements for National Professional

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Union, Towns and Fannin County firefighters took part in live fire training on Oct. 2 here in Blairsville. Photo/Pat Schmidt

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FDA to consider Moderna, J&J boosters in meetings next week

By Shawn Jarrard
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For the entire Georgia Department of Public Health District 2, which includes Union, Towns and 11 other counties, a total of 286 fully vaccinated people opted to receive a third dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine during the wider rollout of the booster program Sept. 27-29.

This included boosters for people who first became eligible to receive a third Pfizer shot last week, and those who have had access since mid-August, when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention authorized Pfizer and Moderna boosters specifically for immunocompromised individuals.

Initial vaccination efforts in this area consisted primarily of Moderna vaccines, which likely contributed to the apparently low third shot uptake last week, as the new booster shot guidelines only apply to Pfizer vaccinees currently.

Booster doses of the Pfizer vaccine have been newly approved for people aged 65 and older; residents of long-term care facilities; people 18 and older with pre-existing medical conditions; and residents 18 and older who have an occupational or institutional exposure risk.

To be eligible to receive a booster under these new guidelines, people must have received their second Pfizer vaccine at least six months ago.

As previously reported, there is no booster available

for Moderna or Johnson & Johnson vaccine recipients at this time, "as right now there is not enough data to support a booster dose recommendation," District 2 Public Information Officer Natasha Young said recently.

On Friday, Oct. 1, the FDA announced that its Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee would be meeting Oct. 14-15 "to discuss the use of booster doses of the Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine and the Janssen (J&J) COVID-19 Vaccine."

The committee will also hear presentations and discuss available data on "mix and match" boosters, that is, "the use of a booster of a different vaccine than the one used for the primary series of an authorized or approved COVID-19 vaccine," per FDA.gov.

"Vaccines are one of the most important interventions for bringing an end to the ongoing pandemic," said Dr. Peter Marks, director of the FDA's Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research. "It's critical that as many eligible individuals as possible get vaccinated as soon as possible."

"Once vaccinated, we want to ensure that individuals continue to be protected against the adverse effects of COVID-19. The available data make clear that protection against symptomatic COVID-19 in certain populations begins to decrease over time, so it's important to evaluate the information on the use of booster doses in various populations."

Once the FDA Advisory Committee makes its recommendations, the FDA will follow suit, and the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices and the CDC itself will ultimately weigh in on the matter before additional vaccination policies are adopted and put into

effect.

For the foreseeable future, the Towns County Recreation Department at 150 Foster Park Road in Young Harris will be hosting vaccination clinics Mondays and Wednesdays from 1-4:15 p.m., and on Tuesdays between 1 p.m. and 5 p.m.

Towns will also host vaccine clinics at its Health Department every other Saturday from 8 a.m. to noon starting Oct. 2, for both flu and COVID vaccinations.

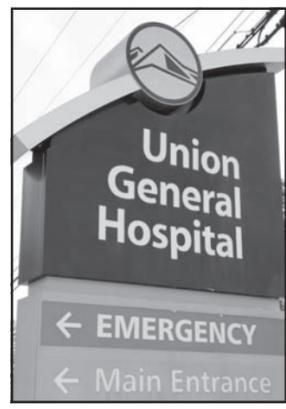
Union County will continue offering vaccines at its Health Department in Blairsville until demand requires a transition over to the Union County Sports Center, with every other Saturday vaccinations as well.

All doses of the Pfizer vaccine will be available. First and second doses of Moderna as well as the single-shot J&J vaccine will be available upon request. Appointments are not required to attend any day of vaccination, but people may schedule an appointment via <http://phdistrict2.org/>.

Turning to local COVID metrics, it appears the now weeks-long decline in community transmission continues unabated through press time, with fewer positive cases among the general public and in the schools and hospitals.

On Oct. 1, Union General Hospital had 28 COVID inpatients; that is still an elevated number, but it's half the record figure set a little over a month ago, and Chief Nursing Officer Julia Barnett said Friday that COVID-related emergency room visits had "dropped off to near nothing the last couple of days."

While local COVID hospitalizations are down from recent weeks, Barnett said that patients requiring hospitalization in this surge, predominantly among unvaccinated residents, "are



COVID-19 ER visits declined starkly last week at Union General Hospital in a trend local health care workers are hoping will hold.

so much sicker this time and have a longer length of stay so are taking longer to clear out (of) our COVID census."

Fortunately, the diminished inpatient census and drop in ER visits for COVID have allowed the health system to restart some of the elective outpatient procedures it paused at the start of the most recent surge, and to partially reopen the hospital's wound care and cardiac rehabilitation clinics.

Importantly, the virus that causes COVID-19 is still circulating in the community according to state and local data, and many doctors continue to advocate for vaccination to protect those most likely to suffer severe outcomes from the disease.

COVID vaccines are available for free and without appointment at local health departments, and people may also find them at any number of area pharmacies.

District 2 Public Health continues to offer free drive-thru PCR testing at Union General Hospital for anyone wanting or needing one.

Testing is available Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. at 35 Hospital Road in Blairsville. No appointment is required to receive a test, but registration via <https://honumg.info/LTSGA015> is encouraged to decrease wait times at the testing site.

Sorghum Festival...from Page 1A

of volunteers who have for decades kept the community-focused event alive.

The Blairsville Sorghum Syrup Makers will continue the time-honored tradition of cooking up the sticky sweet stuff in Meeks Park during the festival, while Enotah CASA will run all other aspects of the festival, from the gate and the games to the vendor booths and live entertainment.

As always, the festival will help organizers raise money to go toward their special causes, which for the Blairsville Sorghum Syrup Makers include annual scholarships for graduating seniors as well as other forms of local giving.

Enotah CASA is a child advocacy organization specializing in assisting abused and/or neglected children from Union, Towns, White and Lumpkin counties in navigating the legal system, with CASA's portion of festival proceeds going toward operations costs to maintain the professional efforts of the volunteer Court Appointed Special Advocates.

More than 100 hand-picked vendors will be bringing their arts, crafts and delicious food products to the Sorghum Festival this year, including at least 50 returning vendors and plenty of new ones.

Among the many vendors arriving from all over the area will be makers of soap, candles, honey, stained glass, wreaths,

sewed and crocheted items, dresses, pottery, jewelry, metal yard art, knives, handbags, scarves, dog collars, rope baskets, quilts, handmade plastic fishing bait, photography and more, said Enotah CASA Board Member Jennifer Mahan, who is overseeing coordination of the non-syrup making parts of the festival.

Food options will be numerous also, to include cookies, brownies, caramel apples, lemonade, corn, pork rinds, funnel cakes, boiled peanuts and candied nuts, barbecue plates, fried pies, shaved ice, mini donuts, cotton candy, hamburgers and hotdogs, brats and sausages, jerk and pineapple chicken, steamed vegetables, goulash, chili cheese fries and more.

"Then we've got some people doing dry dip mixes and hand-blended spices," Mahan said. "And we do have our demonstrators. We've got a guy demonstrating pottery, someone demonstrating blacksmithing, weaving and log hewing, and a moonshine demonstrator."

"The Speed Pitch game will be there and the bungee jumping activity."

Returning too will be the beloved Sorghum Festival Games, running each day of the festival from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m., offering fun for the whole family.

There will be plenty of Rock Throwin' and Log Sawin' for people looking for a physical challenge, with

children's games as well, including a sack race that is new in 2021.

Then there's the Biscuit Eatin' Contest, which pits participants in a sorghum-drenched showdown to see who can eat the most biscuits. This contest will start at 9:30 a.m. all four days of the festival.

Of course, the Sorghum Festival wouldn't be the same without the amazing slate of musical and other performance talent over the four-day event, and folks can check out the Special Section insert in this edition of the newspaper or <https://blairsvillesorghumfestival.com/> for a full rundown.

From classic competitions to musical gatherings, the Sorghum Festival offers a glimpse into times gone by, when communities used to assemble at the end of a harvest season to commemorate a successful crop.

As per usual, this year's festival features crop yields from fields of cane grown and harvested locally, with syrup cooked during the festival down at the big 16-by-3 wood-fired pan located just off the Butternut Creek in the lower field of Meeks Park, starting at 9 a.m. each day.

Unfortunately, there will be no parade or square dancing this year due to ongoing concern over COVID-19, but there's still plenty for families to do at the 2021 Blairsville Sorghum Festival.

Early Voting...from Page 1A

attachment), or in-person to the local County Board of Registrar's Office."

People are encouraged to request and return their absentee ballots early to give their ballot "enough time to travel through the mail and resolve any issues that may arise when voting by absentee ballot," per georgia.gov.

For the November election, the deadline to return absentee-by-mail ballot applications is Oct. 22. Folks wanting to utilize the official drop box to turn in their absentee ballots can find it in the Jury Assembly Room during early voting hours.

Voters can also drop completed absentee ballots off at the Registrar's Office through Election Day.

Currently, there is a mask mandate in effect for courthouses of the Enotah Judicial Circuit, so all early voters will be required to wear a mask unless the judicial order requiring them is lifted or expires during the three weeks of advanced



Early in-person voting starts next week at the Union County Courthouse.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

in-person voting.

Early voting in the Blairsville Special Election to fill the unexpired term of Councilwoman Betty Easter, who passed away on Aug. 31, will begin Oct. 12 and continue each weekday through Oct. 29, and on Oct. 16 and Oct. 23, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day at Blairsville City Hall.

Blairsville Elections

Superintendent Kaye McCann asks that registered city voters wishing to request an absentee-by-mail ballot contact her at 706-745-2000. The last day to request an absentee ballot by mail in the city's Special Election is Oct. 22.

City of Blairsville Election Day voting will take place on Nov. 2 inside City Hall from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. at 62 Blue Ridge Street.

Fire Training...from Page 1A

Qualification Firefighter 1 and for Georgia Firefighter Standards and Training.

Training began with a safety briefing, a walkthrough of the training facility, and turnout gear inspection. Safety is essential, and all participants were briefed on safety procedures.

Students then donned their turnout gear and Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus, which added approximately 50 pounds of extra weight. This specialized gear is essential for structure firefighting.

Teams of students were escorted to the burn room of the training facility, where instructors began igniting the training fire. Students were able to see the thermal layering of the smoke and hot gases seen in a structure fire.

They were also able to experience the heat and the change of the environment when water is applied to the fire. Students learn about these subjects in class but have a better understanding when they see and experience the real situation.

Once the fire demonstration was completed, the firefighting began. Teams were rotated through the burn

building, and each student was given an opportunity to "be on the nozzle," demonstrating their knowledge and skill on how to correctly place water and extinguish a fire in a structure.

This involved crawling to the fire room, cooling the

super-heated gases above the fire, and then hitting the base of the fire to extinguish it. Students were able to use the skills they had been taught, and each had a better understanding how a fire reacts following the training.

"Structure firefighting is more than 'putting the wet stuff on the red stuff,'" Union County Fire Chief David Dyer

said. "Firefighters must have situational awareness. They must read the structure, the environment, and the fire conditions. They must also know how that fire will react when water is applied and steam is generated."

"Union County Fire Department is honored to host training events such as these. We are very proud of our

training facility and blessed to have such resources to conduct training, not only for our department, but for surrounding departments.

"We conduct many types of training at the training facility, but the live fire training is most beneficial. Firefighters can learn and practice in a controlled environment with instructors there to give them

pointers. They can practice techniques and hone skills using live fire, making this training as realistic as possible. This training also builds firefighter confidence."

Concluding, Dyer said "We would like to thank Towns County and Fannin County Fire Departments, the instructors and the students for training with our department."



Area firefighters pose for a photo after a hard day's training at the specialized facilities at Union County Fire Station No. 1 Saturday.

Photo/Pat

Indian Summer...from Page 1A



Suches' own Nealy Webster performing in the 2021 Indian Summer Festival Saturday.

Photo by Lowell Nich-

is so friendly, and we had a wonderful day (on Saturday)."

The festival opened with perfect autumn weather Oct. 2, but to no one's surprise, everything changed on a dime when heavy rain showers moved through North Georgia Sunday afternoon. But that didn't prevent visitors from beating the wet weather with a morning visit to Suches.

"This is such a neat little festival, and I found some hard-to-find items here," said Janet Greene of Dawsonville. "I was able to get some Christmas shopping done and did a little for myself. The soaps and candles make great stocking stuffers."

Along with crafts, raffles and food vendors, local youth camps were among the vendors set up in the field behind Woody Gap School.

Mountain Fellowship Camp, located off Johnny Gap Road in Suches, promoted its upcoming 3D archery and skeet shoots this spring. The camp is a nonprofit family venue serving church youth groups

and adult retreats.

"We're here to get the word out (about our camp) and to show our support for the community and (Woody Gap School)," said Jim Curtis, representing the camp at the festival. "We want people to know we're not the old Eckerd Camp anymore, and we've turned it into a Christian youth camp."

Icthus Camping Ministry of Blue Ridge also attended to promote its Oct. 9 "Refresh and Renew" event at the Mountain Fellowship Camp. The ministry tent provided youngsters with an opportunity to test their skills on an old-fashioned, three-strand rope-making machine.

"One of our recent camp themes was how strands of three are not easily broken," representative Eddie Rew said. "It's just something we like to let the kids try. It has no electricity or batteries, and it doesn't make a sound. This is our first time here at the festival



The Woody Gap Band of Steel wowing audiences at this year's Indian Summer Festival.

Photo by Lowell Nich-

and we love it. This place has a family atmosphere that you don't find many places."

The Indian Summer Festival continues to serve as a fundraising event for the Woody Gap Sports Club. Along with the festival, the club hosted an auction Sunday, accepting bids on items and gift certificates provided by local businesses.

Funds from the weekend festival have helped purchase equipment, uniforms, trophies, computers, electronic equipment, learning devices and more for local students.

Something missing from the weekend was the annual Run Above the Clouds 5K race. Due to last year's cancellation, the race has been rescheduled to April 23, 2022.

Morris Family...from Page 1A



The Morris Family home off Trackrock Gap Road had to be torn down recently after a propane explosion shook the structure loose from its foundation.

Photo/Face-

book different places, including in a tent and at the homes of nearby family members.

"The only thing we can do is start over," Morris said the week of the accident. "Several people have asked are we going to fix the house, but there's not any fixing it. That leaves us with nothing but the land and a lot of Irish stubbornness, so our plan is to start another house."

"But I am beyond grateful, because we can build another house, but I can't replace children. So, there are so many things to be grateful for."

The home was uninsured, as it was going through nearly completed renovations at the time, so the family is relying heavily on community support presently.

One of their requests has been for the donation of a trailer to give some of the displaced Morris a roof over their heads again as they strive to re-fit the pieces of their lives.

Answering that call was the local Habitat for Humanity (Towns/Union Counties, Inc. and its Board of Directors, which quickly provided Angela and her children with a camper big enough to accommodate everyone affected by the blast.

"Habitat bought the trailer and will be graciously letting the Morris family use it for 'Home Base' until her house is ready," said Mary Barnard, Angela's eldest daughter who lives in Murphy, North Carolina. "They have been absolutely amazing in getting the trailer there, set up, and are working to get water and power

to the camper as well."

In the meantime, people from the community can contribute to the cause by searching gofundme.com for the fundraiser titled "Help my mom and siblings rebuild!" by Mary Barnard.

Donors may also make deposits to the "Angela Morris Rebuild Fund" at United Community Bank.

Habitat is known for its once-a-year home builds for local families who can afford mortgages but need a little assistance getting the ball rolling. The organization has been attempting to expand its reach beyond the basic traditional approach, and the Morris Family helped them do just that.

"A lot of us use propane, myself included, so it could happen to any of us," local Habitat Board President Darren Harper said. "Now that we've kind of reorganized our chapter (this year), we're looking for ways to be more responsive to situations like these and to do something different than just building a house per year."

"So, we're looking into all kinds of things that Habitat can do to maybe help alleviate the affordable housing issue and do things that are more community oriented."

Moving forward, Towns/Union Habitat will be considering a variety of options to make the biggest impact locally, including potentially building tiny home communities to get homeless veterans and others back on their feet or to provide housing opportunities

to support workers.

"Not everybody wants a house, and not everybody is suitable for home ownership," Harper said. "But that doesn't mean we can't do things to help people."

"We're thinking bigger picture about being more of a community resource for folks who may need a leg up or access to financial planners or to people that can help them get their credit in shape so when they are ready for home ownership, they can either go through us or apply on their own."

In pursuit of that "bigger picture," Harper and his fellow board members are currently searching for property inside the city limits of either Hiwassee or Blairsville with access to water and sewer service.

"We need that for any kind of multi-housing opportunities," Harper said, asking that anyone with leads on such property please contact Habitat.

As for their next home build, Habitat will soon be holding two Family Selection Orientations per county, on Nov. 6 at 10 a.m. and Nov. 9 at 7 p.m. in the Towns County Civic Center, and on Nov. 11 at 7 p.m. and Nov. 13 at 10 a.m. at First Baptist Blairsville.

For information on how to volunteer or otherwise help to support Habitat's mission, email operations@townsunionhabitat.org. People may also visit the Habitat ReStore at 225 Wellborn Street in Blairsville.