

North Georgia News

Hometown newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

www.nganews.com

Legal Organ of Union County

Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1909

Wednesday, October 27, 2021

Children to get multiple chances to scare up candy

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

As the first chill winds of Appalachia, North Georgia is bracing itself for a holiday of ghosts, goblins, and other spooky – or silly – haunts.

And though preparations have been under way all month, Union and Towns counties are planning specifically for several days' worth of Halloween celebrations and events sponsored by multiple local organizations.

In the leadup to Halloween, the Blue Ridge Mountain EMC will host a Drive-Thru Trunk or Treat, to take place Tuesday, Oct. 28, from 4:30-6:30 p.m. at EMC Headquarters in Young Harris.

Also in Towns County will be the Young Harris Fall

Fest set in the courtyard of Young Harris College on Oct. 28 at 5 p.m. While this will be the main event, complete with trick-or-treat stands, the Rollins Planetarium will be hosting the "Ooky Spooky Lightshow" Oct. 29 at 8 p.m.

After a successful 2020 outing to give kids something to do amid COVID cancellations, family owned and operated Nottely Marina in Union County will once again host three days of Halloween, Oct. 29-31 from 5:30-10 p.m.

While there won't be access to banksides, docks or boats, the walkthrough event will feature 17 stops that Marina Manager Moriah Doucette estimates will take about 30-40 minutes to complete. Trick-or-treaters are being asked to restrict visitation to a single night so candy stores last.

At Vogel State Park, Halloween starts early with the Vogel Fall Festival on Oct. 30, beginning at 10 a.m. and running through around 8 p.m.

Also Oct. 30, there will be a Fall Harvest Celebration commencing at 6:30 p.m. inside the Haralson Memorial Civic Center in Blairsville.

Of course, Halloween's biggest regional celebrations have moved locations this year due to concerns over COVID-19 and social distancing, meaning that Hometown Halloween on the Blairsville Square will be known as Halloween in Meeks Park for 2021, to run 4-7 p.m. Oct. 31.

Local businesses and other organizations will be handing out candy at Meeks, and kids will be encouraged to enter

See Halloween, Page 2A



"Halloween at the Marina" was such a huge success in 2020, pictured here, that Nottely Marina is doing it again in 2021, Oct. 29-31. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Last week to vote early in person for TSPLOST election

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

This is the last week to participate in early in-person voting for the countywide Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax referendum ahead of Election Day voting on Tuesday, Nov. 2.

The first full week of early voting netted 675 ballots from among the county's 20,058 active registered voters, and through Friday of last week, a total of 1,652 people had voted early, giving a tally of 977 additional ballots cast in the second week of advanced in-person voting.

And so far, 128 voters have been sent absentee-by-mail ballots, with 63 returned for counting as of press time Monday.

Early in-person voting continues this week from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., ending at close



As with every election, campaigning is not allowed within 150 feet of a polling place, which is the Union County Courthouse during early voting.

of day on Friday, Oct. 29. Voting is taking place in the Jury Assembly Room of the Union County Courthouse and this year included two Saturday voting sessions, Oct. 16 and

Oct. 23. 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.

See Election, Page 2A

Booster doses approved for all three COVID vaccines

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com



The Georgia Department of Public Health announced Friday that local health departments would begin offering Moderna and Johnson & Johnson COVID vaccine booster doses to eligible

vaccinees on Oct. 26, "pending guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention."

This is in addition to the Pfizer-BioNTech boosters that were approved a month ago for certain individuals.

"These recommendations are another example of our fundamental commitment to protect as many people as possible from COVID-19," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky said last week. "The evidence shows that all

three COVID-19 vaccines authorized in the United States are safe – as demonstrated by the over 400 million vaccine doses already given."

According to the CDC, COVID booster shots have become necessary for at-risk individuals because the efficacy of the vaccines against initial infection appears to diminish over time, though the vaccines remain "highly effective in reducing the risk of severe disease, hospitalization

See Booster Doses, Page 2A

Last Farmers Market of 2021 season on Saturday, Oct. 30

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The 2021 Farmers Market season will come to a close on Saturday, Oct. 30. And though there were still concerns about COVID this year, the 2021 season fared much better than the 2020 season.

"Our numbers were up above what we had last year," Market Manager Mickey Cummings said. "Our vendors tell us that a lot of their products sold, they had lots of customers. We had more people come than we had last year. I think it was much better this year than it was last year."

"We were worried about



Farmers Market Manager Mickey Cummings with some choice pumpkins on the second to last Saturday of the 2021 Farmers Market Season Oct. 23. Photo by Lowell Nicholson

Ag Center hosts costumed kiddos for candy and books

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

Boys and girls of every age headed out to the Union County Schools Agriscience Center on Oct. 23 in hopes of seeing something strange while picking up candy, and the Future

Farmers of America-sponsored event did not disappoint.

For one night of the weekend, killer clowns, dinosaurs, and even "Star Wars" characters were among the spooky visitors haunting the ag barn, with plenty of sweet treats being collected by the

costumed children.

Organized by Middle School FFA Adviser Katie Rittenhouse and High School FFA Adviser Hannah Taylor, the Union County Schools Trunk or Treat event made a spectacular return in 2021, with

See Trunk or Treat, Page 6A



Complete with the Mystery Machine, the cast of "Scooby-Doo" graced the Union County Schools Trunk or Treat Halloween extravaganza Saturday. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

TSPLOST opponents dominate October commission meeting



Several dozen guests attended the October commission meeting, many choosing to vocally oppose the upcoming TSPLOST referendum during the Thursday proceedings. Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The official Union County Commission Meeting lasted about 30 minutes on Thursday, Oct. 21, and was followed by a sometimes contentious 40-minute public comment period that featured a few dozen attendees frequently speaking over one another.

Up for discussion after adjournment of the main meeting was the 1% Transportation Special Purpose Local Option

Sales Tax, or TSPLOST, which Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris has placed on the ballot for consideration by the more than 20,000 registered Union County voters.

If approved, the new TSPLOST would increase the overall sales tax on goods and some services in Union County from 7% to 8%, with upward of \$35 million in revenues generated over five years to go toward the maintenance and improvement of local roads and bridges.

Resident Doyer Lively – a scheduled speaker in the county meeting who is opposed to TSPLOST – cited rising prices and an aging county population as major reasons not to add another tax. Lively was one of a vocal group of TSPLOST opponents to attend the meeting.

TSPLOST proponents say that, in addition to maintaining and improving local roads, the added tax would offset property taxes by spreading costs to

See County Meeting, Page 3A

Vol. 112 No. 44
4 Sections 24 Pages
Weather
Thurs: Rain Hi 54 Lo 44
Fri: Showers Hi 48 Lo 43
Sat: Showers Hi 52 Lo 39

Arrests 2D
Church 2C
Classified 3D
Opinion 4A
Legals 5D
Obits 4C
Sports 2B

SPORTS VOLLEYBALL
10/27 STATE ELITE EIGHT @ UCHS vs. Dade Co. 5:30 PM
FOOTBALL
10/29 7:30 PM vs. Rabun County

RELAY FOR LIFE
Survivor Fashion Show
Nov. 6
See page 6C

TSPLOST Election Results Available Wednesday, Nov. 3 Online at North Georgia News www.nganews.com

S.A.F.E. Remember My Name Memorial
See page 1D

Election...from Page 1A

2021 is an off year for countywide elections, so the only item on the ballot for this Special Election called by Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris is the Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax, or TSPLOST.

As previously reported, TSPLOST is a proposed additional 1-cent sales tax that, if passed, would result in Union County sales taxes increasing from 7 cents to 8 cents on the dollar effective April 1, 2022.

The tax is projected to generate between \$5 million and \$7 million per year over five years, with collections to go toward local roads and bridgework, including safety improvements around the county and maintenance for the more than 600 miles of county roads.

Per the Department of Revenue, sales tax is imposed on the retail sales price of tangible personal property and certain services, like the sale of accommodations, in-state transportation (e.g., taxis, limos), sales of admissions, and charges for participation in games and amusement activities.

Should it pass, the TSPLOST will be the third 1-cent Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax being

collected in Union County once it goes into effect, including the county's current six-year SPLOST and the School Board's five-year Education SPLOST.

The current longstanding 7% sales tax is made up of both state and local components, with Georgia imposing 4% of the sales tax.

In Union, the remaining 3% of the sales tax comes from ESPLOST, county SPLOST, and Local Option Sales Tax collections at 1 cent each. LOST was implemented decades ago in the Georgia General Assembly to provide cities and counties with sales tax revenue.

The deadline to request

an absentee-by-mail ballot for the Nov. 2 election was Oct. 22. People are encouraged to return their absentee ballots early to give "enough time to travel through the mail and resolve any issues that may arise when voting by absentee ballot," per georgia.gov.

Folks may also utilize the official drop box to turn in their absentee ballots. The drop box can be found in the Jury Assembly Room during early voting hours. Voters may even bring completed absentee ballots to the Registrar's Office through Election Day.

Early voting in the nonpartisan Blairsville Special Election to fill the unexpired term of Councilwoman Betty

Easter will likewise continue through the end of this week from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day at Blairsville City Hall.

Candidates are Teresa Moore, Kayla Phillips Hemphill and Frank Pack.

So far, only 12 of 299 total registered city voters have cast ballots through the second Saturday of early voting in the municipal election, with zero requests for mail-in ballots. The last day to request an absentee ballot by mail in the city's Special Election was Friday, 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.

Dwayne Patterson receives Georgia Mountain Research & Education Center Employee Recognition Award

Georgia Mountain REC and the Community Council once again, have the pleasure of recognizing one of our team for their exemplary service towards agricultural research and outreach. Dwayne Patterson has worked at GMREC for over 15 years as a research technician and as our mechanic. He was recognized by his peers, his supervisor, and the Community Council for the Dobson-McDowall-Mays Award of excellence. Mr. Patterson is a great communicator and well-liked by all. He has a challenging job keeping the many technical pieces of equipment at GMREC operational, while also contributing to field research. When we host educational field days, his candor and enthusiasm as a "Johnny Appleseed" actor has been loved by all.

Jim Dobson, Sonny McDowall, and John Mays are the honorees of this award and were instrumental in the creation of the Community Council. Today the Council continues to work closely with GMREC, supporting its mission and providing educational opportunities to adults and children. In years past, over 4000 children per year received standards-based enrichment through several programs in K-6. The Council also maintains a public ethnobotanical garden that highlights the uses and benefits of native plants. "Everyone



Superintendent Ray Covington and Research Technician/Mechanic Dwayne Patterson

who works at the GMREC has solid professional credentials, a strong work ethic, and a positive can-do attitude, and it isn't easy to pick one person. The Community Council is honored to select from a field of such outstanding people. Congratulations to Dwayne Patterson for being recognized as this year's top Dawg," said Community Council Chairperson Jared Ogden.

The "Experiment Station" and the Community Council would like to thank previous Superintendent Joseph Garner and the families of Dobson, McDowall, and

Mays for their continued support.

Georgia Mtn REC is a part of the University of Georgia system supporting agriculture related research for over 90 years. Specialists evaluate best management practices and new varieties of forages, ornamentals, and fruit that address today's challenges in agriculture. Being a Land Grant University, UGA freely shares this information to the public through the County delivery system at your local County Extension offices. Find us on Facebook @GeorgiaMountainREC or online at www.gmrec.uga.edu.

Halloween...from Page 1A

the costume contest of the Union General Hospital-sponsored event, said Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce President Steven Rowe.

Similarly in Hiwassee, Mayor Liz Ordiales said she was already nervous about "sugared up" kids running around close to the roads near the Town Square, but COVID-19 became an even better reason to move Halloween celebrations to the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds

this year.

Historically, the festivities were held on the square before moving to the Towns County Courthouse. In 2021, with more space and plenty of fresh air, Hiwassee will be boasting at least 32 trick-or-treat stops for kids to visit at the fairgrounds' booths from 5-7 p.m. on Halloween.

"The big players will be there," Ordiales said, noting the inclusion of local businesses

and organizations like the Rotary Club and Historical Society, churches, and anyone else who may want to hand out candy.

And back by popular demand, First Baptist Church of Blairsville's always family-friendly Fall Festival will return the evening of Halloween, on Sunday, Oct. 31, from 4-6 p.m. With fun for all ages, the church will be offering food and games, as well as a car show.

Booster Doses...from Page 1A

and death."

Currently, the CDC and its Advisory Committee for Immunization Practices are recommending COVID vaccine booster shots for millions of Americans who received a Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna primary series at least six months ago.

Per the CDC, individuals who received either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine are now eligible for a booster shot at six months or more following their initial series if they are 65 years and older.

Pfizer and Moderna boosters are also being recommended after six months for people 18 and up if they: live in a long-term care setting; have underlying medical conditions; or work/live in "high-risk settings," for example, as first responders, grocery employees

or teachers.

"For the nearly 15 million people who got the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine, booster shots are also recommended for those who are 18 and older and who were vaccinated two or more months ago," the CDC said Thursday.

With this major public health decision, there are now booster recommendations for all three available COVID-19 vaccines in the United States, with "mix and match" dosing of booster shots being deemed acceptable by the CDC.

"Eligible individuals may choose which vaccine they receive as a booster dose," the CDC said. "Some people may have a preference for the vaccine type that they originally received, and others may prefer to get a different booster."

In light of the

announcement, millions of people who have already been vaccinated are now newly eligible to receive a booster shot and will benefit from additional protection, per the CDC.

"Available data right now show that all three of the COVID-19 vaccines approved or authorized in the United States continue to be highly effective in reducing risk of severe disease, hospitalization and death, even against the widely circulating delta variant," the CDC said.

"Vaccination remains the best way to protect yourself and reduce the spread of the virus and help prevent new variants from emerging," the CDC continued.

In addition to the Health Department, local pharmacies will also be providing free COVID-19 booster shots for the abovementioned newly eligible vaccinees.

Local artists and galleries gear up for annual tour



Local artists will be showing off their work during the 2021 Northeast Georgia Arts on November 12, 13 and 14th from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day. The self-guided tour routes visitors from the region through Union and Towns then to White, Habersham and Rabun counties and the vistas and backroads of Clay County. The semi-annual tour will return in November.

Sundance Gallery and

Gifts in Blairsville has watercolors, acrylic paintings, wood carvings and jewelry. At Artworks Artisan Gallery in Hiwassee, members will be doing a variety of demonstrations of their crafts. A holiday gift basket of donated items from artists will be given away as part of the arts tour.

Another place to stop on the tour is the Farm, Felt, & Glass at Lasso the Moon Alpaca Farm. This is a working alpaca farm and art studio where you can meet the gentle alpaca up close and personal. You can learn how the fiber is shorn, dyed and felted. Glass bead making, yarn spinning, fiber dyeing and felting demos will be offered.

Lake Chatuge Lodge is also on the tour, where you can stop for a cool drink or dessert.

Visitors to the places on

the tour have the opportunity to bring home specialty hand-crafted painting, pottery, folk art, jewelry, photography, fiber, wood and much more. In addition, they'll have a story to tell about meeting the artist and some of the scenery they enjoyed on the drive.

Follow the Arts Tour signs here in Towns and Union counties, then to 40 locations in Habersham, Rabun, and White counties in Georgia and Clay County, N.C. Map brochures are available at welcome centers around the state and participating vendors in each county. The route is online at artstour.org. For updated photos and links, visit the Facebook NGAARTSTOUR for participating artists at each venue.

For additional information, contact Mary Lightner at 407-973-1978 or mzlight1@gmail.com.

County Meeting...from Page 1A

residents, visitors and tourists, which would allow property owners to better support local businesses while keeping the millage rate lower.

Either way, voters will be the ones deciding the issue by the end of Election Day on Nov. 2.

In the main portion of the meeting, Paris said a change in the county business license fee is under consideration.

Union County business licenses are issued exclusively for vacation rental-type businesses to collect hotel/motel tax, which supports the local chamber of commerce. The proposed change would raise the fee from a one-time fee of \$10 to an annual \$100 fee.

In other business, Paris announced the awarding and

approval of a contract for the Union County Facilities Additions/Renovations Project to Winkler & Winkler Construction in the amount of \$698,075.

The project addresses the Senior Center in the amount of \$422,579 and an undisclosed property in the amount of \$275,496, totaling \$698,075. Personal safety of the residents, said Paris, is the reason for non-disclosure of the one property.

Paris accepted an affidavit of appointment of Dr. Riccardo B. Rivas to the Union County Board of Elections for the term Sept. 6, 2021, to Dec. 31, 2022. Dr. Rivas is completing the term of Mr. Carl Faust, who resigned. He is one of two Democrat appointees on the board.

Paris approved an

agreement with Cummins, Inc. for planned maintenance of the generator located at the Union County E-911 Dispatch Center in the amount of \$1,199.72 per year.

This contract is effective from Nov. 1, 2021, to Oct. 31, 2026, and covers two service visits per year, to include one full maintenance visit and one maintenance inspection during the agreement period.

The commissioner approved a \$4,800 agreement with Mobile Communications America for planned maintenance of radio repeaters used for communications between 911 Dispatch and emergency service personnel, effective Sept. 1, 2021, to Aug. 31, 2022.

An agreement was approved by Paris between the North Carolina Department of Transportation and Union County for the paving of 0.34

miles, or approximately 1,800 feet, of Tate Road.

North Carolina will reimburse Union County \$36,084 for the cost to pave the portion of Tate Road that crosses the state line into North Carolina.

Paris accepted a quit claim deed from Arthur L. McAfee, James P. McAfee and Melva Lynn Drake to Union County Government for a .0153-acre piece of land. This is property related to the extension of the docks on Canal Lake Boat Ramp.

He said that, in the winter months, the low lake level renders the existing dock ineffective, so the Georgia Department of Natural Resources has agreed to put two extensions on the dock, but the county had to acquire the land first.

Paris approved eight new business licenses for short-term cabin rentals, after which resident Laurie Brothers spoke on TSPLOST, the budget, vaccines and elections; Doy Lively discussed TSPLOST; and Joseph Paisley denounced vaccine mandates.

As stated in previous county meetings, Paris has no say regarding elections or voting machines, nor does he have any influence regarding vaccines or vaccine mandates. Those are state and federal issues.

People may contact the Commissioner's Office with questions about the county

budget, TSPLOST or any other subject related to county business.

Union County Purchasing Agent Pam Hawkins said that, when people have questions, "I am more than happy to sit down

and show you what we do."

The Commissioner's Office can be reached at 706-439-6000, with additional contact information for various departments available via www.unioncountyga.gov.

Farmers Market...from Page 1A

COVID, and we did our best to have a place where people could come and stay safe and still have shoppers and produce. We just outlined a bunch of things that we asked people to do," he said, like practicing social distancing and wearing masks.

"Our vendors did it and our customers did it, and to my knowledge, we didn't have any sick folks (at the Farmers Market in 2021). I can't say enough about our vendors."

Cummings said the last day of the Farmers Market will feature all of the late-season vegetables people know and love, as well as the usual locally made arts and crafts, many of which are now geared toward the fall season.

After the last Farmers Market on Saturday, Oct. 30, Cummings said they would start getting ready for the Dec. 4 Kris Kringle Market.

"We're planning on having some kids' events. I think our COVID numbers have come down enough now that we can have Santa Claus and the Christmas Train," he said, adding that the market would be able to welcome lots of vendors now.

Cummings said they had already started the vendor sign-up process for the Kris Kringle Market and were figuring out what spots to assign them.

"We're going to have a big market, we think, on that first Saturday in December, and we're really looking forward to it," Cummings said.

In terms of next year, Cummings said he and his staff will be undertaking an evaluation process to see how best to proceed with the 2022 season.

"We collect data from our vendors, then we'll see if we need to tweak things to make things easier or a little better for the market," Cummings said. "We're talking about starting Trash to Treasures in the springtime like we used to do (before COVID), and starting the Farmers Market in June like we always do. We'll have a couple of special days early on, like Ramp Day."

"We're going to work this winter to try to get our farmstead (with the Hunter-England Cabin) up to speed. We've got a new building built and we're in the process of building another. We'll have a lot of displays up there."

"We hope to open everything up next year with some sort of special open house," said Cummings, adding that the plan is to have live demonstrations on old-fashioned ways of doing things like soapmaking, curing meat, blacksmithing, and things of that nature.

"We're just trying to put together a hands-on heritage

museum, if you will," he said. "We hope to have all that in operation early next year."

Cummings is grateful for local residents and those of surrounding areas for making the market a popular destination that supports local producers of farmers and craft goods.

"We've had a lot of people come through this year, we had a lot of people that brag on the Farmers Market and what it's trying to do for the area," Cummings said. "I'm just really happy that those people enjoy it, and I want to thank them and ask them to come back."

"And I want to thank our vendors. We've had a lot of really good vendors this year, and we look forward to having them back with us next year."

Last but not least, Cummings said he wanted express appreciation for his Farmers Market staff, noting that they've all worked very hard this year and are very much appreciated.

The usual Halloween Pumpkin Carving Contest will not be held in 2021, canceled earlier in the year because of COVID-19.

During the regular season that runs June through October each year, Farmers Market hours are 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturdays and 2-5 p.m. Tuesdays. For more information, visit <https://www.unioncountyga.gov/farmers-market/>.

LOCAL BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT

MONTGOMERY CONCRETE
 ~ FOR ALL YOUR CONCRETE NEEDS ~
 Forming through Finishing, House Slabs, Driveways, Sidewalks, Stamped Colored Concrete. Top Quality Work! Big Jobs and Small Jobs! • Insured
 See photos on Facebook under Lee Montgomery
Call 706-781-1806

SHAWN'S HOME FURNISHINGS
Mattresses, Porch Rockers & More!
"From the Front Porch to the Back Door We've Got You Covered!"
 568 Blue Ridge St. • Blairsville, GA
706-835-1209
 Mon-Fri 9am-6pm • Sat 9am-4pm • Closed Sun

MEDICARE
12 Years Experience with Medicare!
ANNUAL ENROLLMENT PERIOD
 Medicare Supplements & Medicare Advantage Plans
 See me at CVS every Friday from 11 AM to 1 PM
 208 Hwy 515 Blairsville, GA
Susanne Johnson: 706-897-3551

Specializing In:
 Alignment • Computer Balancing
 Brakes • Auto Repair
 Industrial Foam Fill
 Oil Changes
Thomas Tire, Inc.
 Auto & Big Truck Service
 Oscar Thomas - Owner 76 Shoe Factory Road
 (706) 745-0264 Blairsville, Georgia 30512

TOTAL RECOVERY
PAINT & BODY
(706) 745-9703
 391 BLUE RIDGE HWY
 ALL INSURANCE ACCEPTED

A CUT ABOVE CARPENTRY
Paul Bryan 706-897-7135

Southeast Geothermal & Spray Foam
706-745-8685
1442 Blue Ridge Hwy.
www.segeothermal.com
www.sesprayfoam.com

KELLEY HOME IMPROVEMENTS
"May you have joy in the work of the LORD"
Remodeling • Painting
Yard Maintenance & Much More
Mark A. Kelley, Owner
706-897-9485
FREE ESTIMATES

RidgeRunner TAKEOUT
706-528-6792

LICENSED INSURED
GIBSON LAND SERVICE
706-897-8564

DOWNTOWN BLAIRSVILLE
 VISIT www.visitdowntownblairsville.com/shop

iFixit PC Repair
Call Us: (706) 487-0686
 Computer, laptop, Phone repair
 On-Site Services, & Lessons
 RAM, Drive, Accessories Install
 Virus Removal & Optimization
1323 MURPHY HWY STE 1 BLAIRSVILLE

Shook AUTOMOTIVE
 2307 Murphy Hwy.
 Blairsville, GA
706-745-9596

Book Bound Bookstore
Where your journey begins...
 35 BLUE RIDGE STREET
 BLAIRSVILLE, GA 30512
 706-897-4198

Gifts Decor Art Classes Custom Artwork
MK Art Expressions
 1063 Murphy Highway
(706) 994-1402

OPENING SOON!
TOP GUN FIREARMS
190 BLUE RIDGE STREET, BLAIRSVILLE, GA 30512
(706) 745-GUNS (4867)

JACKY JONES AUTOMOTIVE GROUP
We Make Buying Easy!
JACKYJONES.NET
 Ford • Hayesville, NC • 888.342.2282 • Chevrolet • Murphy, NC • 888.614.8960
 Chrysler, Dodge, Jeep, Ram • Hayesville, NC • 888.384.3145 & Franklin, NC • 828.369.5003

Community members express optimism amid COVID-19

By Brittany Holbrooks
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

While COVID-19 continues to hover like an unwelcome presence over the nation, state and region, its threatening shadow is gradually being beaten back by residents who are ready to resume their lives.

As it has for several months now, Blairsville's town square bustles daily with not only activity but also differing opinions, as captured in several interviews taken by the North Georgia News over the last few weeks.

"I stayed in for a year, but I'm out now," Kathryn Garner said. "I'm wearing a mask where it's necessary. I don't often think it's essential, but I do it. I've been vaccinated; it took me a year to make up my mind to do it, but I finally did it."

And while she was worried about the effects of the Johnson & Johnson COVID shot after hearing national media reports about blood clots and other complications, she decided to receive the vaccine because "there was so much misinformation about everything."

A visitor from Metro Atlanta who wished to remain anonymous agreed with Garner, saying he thought that the vaccines had proven to be, for the most part, "safe and effective." He related that the virus has had a very personal impact on his life.

"I do have several extended family members – some of those who I'm pretty sure have not been vaccinated because of what I've gathered of their opinions – (who) have required hospitalizations, and furthermore, I'm not sure all of them are going to survive," he said.

Many people are choosing to take the middle road when it comes to vaccination against COVID-19, like Union County resident Mike Osborne, who expressed his belief that getting vaccinated ought to remain a personal choice.

"My wife has not been, but I'm a double cancer survi-



The Historic Courthouse on the Downtown Blairsville Square is a popular gathering place, currently decorated with a full fall festive theme.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

vor and have Type 2 diabetes, so I was vaccinated," Osborne said. "Plus, I travel, and my employer asked that when I travel that I go ahead and get a vaccination. I don't think that we should be forced or be told how to make those kinds of decisions."

Over at the Blairsville Cinema, theater employee and Union County High School senior Austin Abercrombie said he believed there was "too much arguing about it."

Abercrombie believes the debate has become politicized, unfortunately, and voiced the opinion that everyone should be working together to tackle the issue of COVID-19.

"In order for there to be a resolution, you have to come together and say, 'Alright, here's what we're going to do,'" he said.

Fellow high school students Mia McCombs and Michael Bruce talked about the virus' effects closer to home, with McCombs saying that last year's learning environment "was a lot more strict," including a masking requirement at the schools.

Bruce noted that the school system "put on a big

vaccination" in which much of the teacher body received the shot. Based on his perceptions, Bruce believes the greatest fear among the student body has been the looming threat of cancellation for important events.

Especially impacted was the Class of 2020, which was unable to have a traditional graduation ceremony recognizing the students' accomplishments. But this year, things are looking up.

Only one football game has been canceled so far, and masks are no longer required. Much like the busy adults on the square, students are beginning to slowly but surely return to their routines.

With COVID continuing to decline following the summer delta surge, shops are experiencing success, and though some businesses sadly closed their doors for good, others are undergoing a comeback with increased traffic and commerce that has come with cautiously lifted restrictions.

As such, the tuned bells ringing out from the Historic Courthouse on the Downtown Blairsville Square provide a lovely soundtrack for newfound and enduring hope alike.

Trunk or Treat...from Page 1A



Union County High School Cheerleaders painted the faces of youngsters during the Oct. 23 Trunk or Treat event.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

the agriculture teachers setting up the candy-filled bash around the perimeter of the property.

The Trunk or Treat has become one of Blairsville's most successful Halloween-themed offerings, and although the planning begins as early as July, most of the preparations happen the week of the event.

In preparation, Rittenhouse sent out emails to school employees to invite "their clubs, their organizations, sports teams, church groups – anybody that they knew was welcome to come and have a trunk," or decorated car, to hand out candy.

Participants also kept up the educational angle with the school by handing out books in addition to the holiday favorite sweets.

Last year, Union County received the Literacy 4 Georgia Grant, which lasts for five years at a time and provides money to school districts to fund greater strides toward literacy.

The school system was

free to decide how to use the money, and in order to reach children who may not have access to their own reading materials, the books were offered at the Trunk or Treat.

Some 5,000 books, ranging in reading level from birth to age 12, were set up in a semi-circle, with school staff – their familiar faces obscured by pirate costumes – guiding curious kids around the free reading material.

Lisa Vaughn, a Central Office employee, offered some insight into why books were being handed out alongside all that candy.

"Children that read at home, it improves their reading skills," she said. "That's been a main goal, is to get the books at home so that they start loving to read."

And the book table was a monster hit, with parents and children alike taking the time to choose from among the stacks upon stacks of classics and new publications.

Parent Julie Payne was there with her sons Brooks and Fisher, and although it was their first Trunk or Treat, they were impressed.

"I think it's great that they can come out and have fun and that the community is so supportive," Payne said. "They come out in droves and support the kids."

Overall, the Trunk or Treat proved to be a major success, and staff member and parent Emily Cobb had her own theory as to why it's so easy for Union County residents to come together and do good things for the community.

"I think we still have a great sense of community here and we want to provide an atmosphere of family fun for our kids so that they have a sense of community, too," Cobb said. "And I think that's what happens."

"We have events like this, and our kids get to participate ... and they have this pride from being from Blairsville. Then they come back with their kids, and we're able to continue these types of traditions."

For her part, Rittenhouse said the Agriscience Center has been a tremendous addition to the community that has much more to offer than just cow and pig shows.

"This isn't just a barn – it's an event center," she said. "We've had weddings, funerals, and meetings here."

With its popularity and varied uses, the ESPLOST-funded ag barn was the perfect choice not just for trick or treating but also for ice cream from Nana and Papa's and, as it turned out, delightfully frightful books to be enjoyed by both parents and students.