

North Georgia News

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Federal jury finds Gowder, Heaton guilty in prescription drug trial

By Linda Erbele
North Georgia News

GAINESVILLE – A federal jury has found former hospital CEO Mike Gowder and Blairsville-based physician Dr. James Heaton guilty on all but one count against them in their prescription drug trial.

The jury returned the much-anticipated verdict to a completely silent courtroom in Gainesville on Thursday, Oct. 24, completing a not quite two-week criminal trial that had seen multiple delays since its original Feb. 11 court date.

All 12 jurors found Gowder and Heaton not guilty of one charge of conspiracy but guilty of all other charges facing them.

Neither of the men reacted as the jury foreperson read aloud the verdicts finding Gowder guilty on 129 counts and Heaton guilty on 129 counts involving illegal prescriptions.

The date for sentencing will be set following a sentencing investigation,



Mike Gowder



James Heaton

which Assistant U.S. Attorney Laurel Boatright said would probably take a minimum of three months.

Both men remain free on bond until a sentencing hearing can be scheduled.

Specifically, Heaton was found guilty on 75 counts of dispensing prescriptions to Gowder outside the scope of professional practice and not for a legitimate medical purpose, and Gowder was found guilty of aiding and

abetting in connection with those same charges.

Gowder was found guilty on 27 counts of acquiring controlled substances by fraud, and Heaton was found guilty of aiding and abetting in those counts.

Testimony showed that Mike Gowder filled those 75 prescriptions in three different states, though charges for the states other than Georgia were thrown out by the judge on a technicality.

Heaton was also found guilty of 27 illegal counts of dispensing prescriptions to two other patients. He had originally been charged with 35 counts involving a third patient, but those charges were dismissed by the prosecution during trial due to a problem involving the evidence.

The men face a maximum penalty of 20 years on each count of acquiring prescription medications through fraud and dispensing without a legitimate medical reason. The maximum penalty for each aiding and abetting count is four years.

Boatright represented

the federal government in U.S. District Judge Richard Story's courtroom, and she said the case was unusual because of the scope of the conduct, the number of pills, and the fact that it involved defrauding pharmacies in three different states.

"We have brought charges in this district before against doctors, including pharmacists," she said. "The fact that this involved a doctor and a patient made it a little more difficult."

The indictment was a part of Operation SCOPE, standing for Strategically Combatting

Opiates through Prosecution and Enforcement.

Boatright described the operation as the Northern District of Georgia's "umbrella" under the Department of Justice's larger opiate prosecution push that started years ago.

"The Department of Justice as a whole has been focusing on the opioid epidemic and the impact it is having across the nation, including smaller communities like Blairsville," Boatright said.

She expressed gratitude to the men and women of the jury, who took the case very

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Federal prosecutors used these seven containers holding 15,000 navy beans to show the jury the quantity of pills Mike Gowder filled over roughly two-and-a-half years.

Halloween on the Square moved to Saturday due to inclement weather

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

With October about to meet its end, Halloween is the next holiday knocking at everyone's door, and the Blairsville Downtown Development Authority is inviting children of the community to dress up and get candy around the Historic Courthouse on the Square.

Due to rainy weather forecasts for Oct. 31, Halloween on the Square will take place this year on Saturday, Nov. 2, and DDA Program Manager Darren Harper said the wait will be well worth it.

"Setup is from 5:30-6

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Even though Halloween on the Square will take place on Saturday this year, it still promises to be just as much fun as in years past.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Rich crowned UCHS Homecoming Queen in Mike Colwell Stadium



Cydney Rich being crowned 2019 Homecoming Queen by her 2018 counterpart Aladriel Arnold on Friday, Oct. 25.

Photo by Todd Forrest

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Baughn, Entwistle win Mirror Ball Trophy in Enotah CASA fundraiser

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

The Fourth Annual Dancing with North Georgia Stars fundraising extravaganza benefiting Enotah CASA took place Saturday, Oct. 26, at the Union County Schools Fine Arts Center.

This yearly event pairs local celebrities and civic leaders with talented dance partners in a competition to see who can raise the most money and come up with the best dance routine to win the coveted Mirror Ball Trophy.

2019 couples included Lynn Hayes and Harvey Cohen, Sharon Penner and Marty Evans, Susan Stalcup and Heath Ledford, Katherine and Joey Nicolella, Julie Wilson and Mai Lim, Renee Deibert and Barbara Wheatley, Sandi Entwistle and Harry Baughn, and Dana Nelson and Mary



Sandi Entwistle and Harry Baughn won coveted Mirror Ball Trophy for their fantastic dance routine at the 2019 Dancing with North Georgia Stars fundraising competition.

Photo by Jarrett Whitener

Last week to vote early ahead of Nov. 5 Blairsville Municipal Elections

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The three-week early voting period for the Blairsville Municipal Election will come to a close Friday, Nov. 1, with the official election set for next Tuesday.

Blairsville residents who are registered to vote can do so early at City Hall from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. between now and Friday.

Election Day for the three City Council posts up for

election will be Tuesday, Nov. 5, with voting to take place between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. inside City Hall.

The Nov. 5 council elections will occur after press time next week, so readers should look for results at nganews.com on Wednesday, Nov. 6, and in the Nov. 13 edition of the North Georgia News.

Anyone with questions can contact Election Superintendent Kaye McCann at 706-745-2000.

Four candidates qualified

in August to fill the three City Council seats, including incumbents Rhonda Mahan, Betty Easter and Mary Ruth Cook, along with Blairsville resident Frank Pack.

As city election outcomes are determined by plurality vote, the Top Three vote-getters will each win one of the seats up for election in November.

"Terms of office will begin Jan. 1, 2020, and will expire on Dec. 31, 2023," according to a notice from City Hall.

Blairsville DDA grants third contract extension for Arby's developer

By Shawn Jarrard
North Georgia News
editor@nganews.com

The Blairsville Downtown Development Authority Board has agreed to a third contract extension with the Arby's Restaurant developer for the Haralson Property lot across from Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen on Georgia 515.

Earlier this month, the DDA Board signaled its potential disinterest in extending the contract for yet another 30 days if an offer to buy the property wasn't made by the "drop-dead

date" of Friday, Oct. 18.

The developer reached out on Oct. 18 and requested the third extension, citing the need for more time to work out permitting and construction logistics, and the board decided it would be in the best interests of the DDA and city to go ahead and grant the contract extension.

"I think this shows that they're interested and that they really want in this market," DDA Program Manager Darren Harper said of the potential Arby's deal. "At the same time, it shows that

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Darren Harper

Paris updates guests on double gym progress, other projects in meeting

By Mark Smith
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

In his regular monthly meeting on Tuesday, Oct. 22, Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris shared welcome news regarding the county's most recent recreational endeavor – construction on the \$3.32 million double gymnasium had finally begun.

The double gym contract was awarded in May to BM&K Construction & Engineering, though the company failed to begin construction on the SPLOST-funded project for several months.

In his September meeting, Paris gave BM&K an ultimatum that apparently got the project

back on track, saying the company would lose the job if construction was delayed any longer.

"They have now poured all the footings for the structure and reinforced the concrete support placement for the steel beams," Paris said last week. "The structure is a total of 31,565 square feet, with two gymnasiums separated by an office, restrooms, dressing rooms and a meeting room. The upstairs area will allow storage for equipment only.

"There will be an inside walking trail on the main floor – not a suspended (track), but one on the floor – and the facility will serve as not only basketball courts for youth and adults but also as an area for many types of adult activities, including exercise



Lamar Paris

classes, dancing, aerobics, volleyball and much more."

Paris pointed out that the facility, located across from Union County High on Glenn

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Nov 1 @ Social Circle
7:30 PM
CROSS COUNTRY
Nov. 2 STATE AT CARROLLTON
Boys 11 am | Girls 11:45 am

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Fall Festival
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