

Community reacts to divisive year ahead of Christmas

By Jarrett Whitener
North Georgia News
Staff Writer

COVID-19 and elections have taken the spotlight for pretty much all of 2020, resulting in ubiquitous lifestyle changes and impassioned political displays everywhere. Despite all that, Stella Dure of Union County said she feels folks ought to keep family first and spread holiday cheer to others – even if the feelings aren't exactly mutual. "With it being so close to Christmas, it is important for people to remember family and the reason for the season," Dure said at Home Depot Dec. 10. "We have spent a lot of time inside this year, and some of us may have grown tired of our families or frustrated, and that is OK."

"Part of being a family is not getting along sometimes. We just need to remember that we love each other. Christmas is the happiest time of the year, and people need some of that happiness and love."

"If I were to say anything to others or offer my advice, I would say that we need to stop and love the people that we hate. Just take them in our hearts and wish the best for them, because sometimes that

is what they need." Marie Martin of Murphy, North Carolina, believes the conflicts of 2020 have been on the minds of people for far too long, which is starting to affect how people think.

"The election has everyone worked up," Martin said at Ingles Dec. 9. "Every time I open anything, no matter where I open it, I see something about voter fraud or the election or people going against Trump or something like that."

"I'm a Republican to the end, but I really do not want to hear about all this stuff going on. I have my opinions on the matter, and that is that. I don't see the need for things like this to absorb people. They just go in it so heavy, and I don't see how they have the time for it, honestly."

"In all my 67 years, I have never seen so many people so involved with politics, and I still do not believe they are involved because they want to be. They are just doing it because that is what they are shown."

Henry Barker of Ellijay said he thought people needed to work on moving past the troubles of 2020 to minimize future harm.

"There is a lot to say



Fortunately, people are still able to get the supplies they need around town, despite 2020 and COVID-19.

Photo by Jarrett Whitener

about this year," Barker said during a trip to Meeks Park Dec. 10. "I think more has happened in this last year than any year I can remember in my lifetime. I don't know what has

become of this country, but it is sad, just sad.

"We don't even come together anymore for anything. You can't do anything without people complaining or raising

Cain. We need to get over ourselves and realize that some of these issues are only issues because we treat them as such."

"We live in this panic

and fear of something that hurts virtually nobody. I understand that lots of people have died, but that is just how these things work. We can't change that outcome."

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increased rate is expected to generate \$1,475,710 in property taxes over the rollback, though Paris said he's hopeful for lower individual taxes in 2021.

"We're currently in the process of a countywide property revaluation, which is required by the state," Paris said. "This will adjust property values to where they are supposed to be, so this time next year we hope to be able to lower the millage rate."

All told, budgeted expenditures and revenues balance to \$21,748,780, which is about \$2.3 million more than the 2020 proposed budget.

"As we do every year, our department heads and elected officials submit their budget requests to our office," Paris said. "We go through all the numbers and items, compare to previous year budgets and actual expenditures from the previous year, and cut anywhere possible to get our total budget as low as

we reasonably can. However, this is a difficult task.

"All of our county offices and departments do an outstanding job each and every year to be practical and responsible with their budgets ... we do the best we can to keep expenses as low as possible, but at the same time we have to realize what the true cost is and what it takes to run the county."

The commissioner cited an extensive list of reasons for the higher 2021 budget, including a need to raise pay for first responders to remain competitive with surrounding counties "so we don't lose good employees."

Other budgetary increases include the cost of the property revaluation, a 3% salary increase for all county employees, a \$500,000 potential local share for the planned Union County Gun Range, and many departmental increases for items and services, benefits, etc.

"The state of Georgia has

cut all their budgets at least 15%," Paris said. "This means the county has to pick up several of those increases, as they impact the library, the court system, the Health Department and more, roughly in the amount of \$70,000."

"Health care costs continue to increase. We're up \$100,000 for 2021. Vehicle and equipment repairs are up \$20,000, and our repairs and maintenance costs are up \$22,000. Our property and vehicle insurance increased \$25,000, while vehicle purchases are up \$40,000."

Paris listed several other cost increases, like funding to run the new Union County Sports Center. He also touched on increased revenues, as well as other spending cuts from the state in the 2021 proposed budget, which is available in its entirety at <http://www.unioncountygga.gov>.

"Information on the two land purchases that we recently made," Paris said, "the land purchase where the old shoe factory was located will be

purchased with (\$800,000 in) SPLOST funds, not General Funds, for the sheriff to have in the future when the need arises for a new jail facility to be built."

"There is no room on the existing jail site for expansion, so the new piece of property is going to be held until such time as a new facility is needed ... the other land purchase was on River Bend Farm Road, 3,382 acres ... in the middle of a 580-acre tract owned by Union General Hospital."

This second piece of property is the parcel once owned by former hospital CEO Mike Gowder, and Paris caused quite a stir earlier this year when he announced his intent to one day unify the land with the 580 acres by buying the parcel from a man who had acquired it from Gowder.

"The hospital was not in a position this year to purchase that land when it went up for sale," Paris said. "So, we bought it to help that large piece of property that the hospital owns, and the

county may at some point in the future be working with the hospital to come up with a best need and use for that piece of property."

Previously, the commissioner described the property – which features an active life estate on the county's piece – as the most beautiful in Union, outlining his vision for retirement living for seniors who want to maintain their independence while receiving help maintaining their homes.

Turning to the fund balance in the Dec. 17 hearing, Paris said the county's reserves had been steadily decreasing since 2010, which, when coupled with rising costs and a fairly steady millage rate in recent years, had "strained our budget several years in a row."

"We now must be able to start adding back to the fund balance to get it where it was and where it needs to be," Paris said.

The 2020 beginning fund balance was about \$1.8 million, though the Commissioner's

Office said the 2020 ending fund balance, and therefore the 2021 beginning fund balance, would not be known until the "2020 audit is complete." This audit should be available by summer 2021.

"We have not budgeted an amount to add to (the fund balance) in 2021 but know we should be able to add to it with the reassessment coming in next year," County Finance Director Laura Driskell said following the meeting.

There will be a called meeting on Monday, Dec. 28, at 4:30 p.m. in the Union County Courthouse, wherein Paris will adopt the 2021 proposed budget.

Be sure to read the Dec. 30 newspaper for coverage of the Dec. 17 regular commission meeting, which occurred the same night as the public hearing and featured several contracts, proclamations, and first responder awards presented by the Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter Sons of the American Revolution.

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