

# North Georgia News

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Hometown Newspaper of Blairsville, Suches and Union County

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## Hundreds of families attend Easter Egg Hunt

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The stormy weather from early Saturday morning may have delayed the Union County Recreation Department's Annual Easter Egg Hunt by an hour, but that didn't stop hundreds of families from showing up for the beloved local tradition.

For about an hour on April 1, kiddos and their families walked around the lower ballfields of Meeks Park, grabbing popcorn and balloon animals. The additional activities were new this year but will likely return in the future.

The Easter Bunny was there also, of course, posing

for pictures with the little ones. Truly, it was a hopping place, with even teens showing up to socialize and enjoy the afternoon's clear blue sky.

Around 1 p.m. was when the real fun began, with each of three age groups taking turns lining up. This year, the hunt was staged down at the lower ballfields, where the concession stands could be utilized.

While the setting was a bit different from prior years when the hunt occurred at the upper ballfields, the process was the same in 2023, with youngest to oldest having different areas in which to search for thousands of colorful Easter Eggs.

Scotty Thompson of the Recreation Department donned

bunny ears to address the kids, announcing when each age group could begin the race to gather eggs and signaling the beginning of calling out raffle prizes.

"Everybody worked really hard. There's a lot of people that's not here that helped us put this on. We're proud to do it and happy that everyone could come," Thompson remarked before hinting that next year may see a fire truck dropping some eggs on the field.

Rodney and Joy Kelley brought their daughter Arya to the hunt, and she and her cousin Haddie had a good haul with two baskets full of brightly colored quarry.

See Meeks Park Egg Hunt, Page 8A



It's always a dash to the finish when children are released to collect eggs in the annual Recreation Department Easter Egg Hunt. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## MECHS avoids closure with passage of HB 87

By Shawn Jarrard  
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The entire staff and countless supporters of Mountain Education Charter High School are celebrating after a bill drafted to save the school from closing cleared a crucial hurdle with passage on the last day of the Georgia General Assembly's 2023 Legislative Session March 29.

House Bill 87, aka the Nontraditional Special Schools Act, repeals and replaces detrimental aspects

of a 2021 Georgia law enacted by legislators to correct a state-level overfunding issue at MECHS, which alone would not have hampered the school's ability to educate students.

Unfortunately, the 2021 law also changed the way the second-chance school system acquires charter authorization, putting the burden back on local school systems whose students enroll in MECHS instead of the state.

This proved unworkable when none of MECHS' partnering districts signed on

as "authorizing local school systems" over the last two years due to the many unknowns around what such a relationship would entail for funding, accountability and governance.

And with no authorizing local school systems and no other way to secure its charter, MECHS was facing closure after June 30 this year. But the passage of HB 87 will allow the system to continue operations over the 2023-24 school year and beyond.

Essentially, HB 87 See House Bill 87, Page 2A

## Mother, daughter die in tragic car crash Saturday



Daughter Annie West and her mother Krystal Beavers tragically passed away from injuries sustained in a car wreck on Saturday, April 1. Photo/GoFundMe

By Shawn Jarrard  
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A mother and her young daughter died in an early morning car crash at the intersection of Kiutuestia Creek Road and Georgia 515 on Saturday, April 1.

A family friend has established a fundraising page to help cover funeral expenses

at <https://gofund.me/b7e7c8dc>.

Krystal Ruth Beavers, 46, and Annie Iryln Harley West, 15, of Murphy, North Carolina, were traveling north on Kiutuestia around 6 a.m. when their vehicle reportedly ran through the red light while crossing the intersection, according to authorities.

A truck hauling a camper westbound toward Blue Ridge

on Georgia 515 for a weekend getaway T-boned Beavers' car, and the mother and daughter were pronounced dead at the scene, according to authorities.

The occupants of the truck received medical evaluations for minor injuries, according to authorities.

Other contributing factors in the crash were not See Fatal Crash, Page 2A



Georgia lawmakers at the close of a recent legislative session in which it is customary to throw working papers in celebration of adjournment. Photo/Facebook

## Homeless man with local ties found dead at Lake Nottely

By Shawn Jarrard  
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A homeless man with ties to Hiawassee was found deceased in a tent next to Deavers Boat Ramp on Lake Nottely Wednesday, March 29.

Fred White, 44, had apparently been living in the tent, though the Union County Sheriff's Office is unsure how long he had been staying in the area, UCSO Inv. Rachel Mann said. It is believed that he passed away early Wednesday morning.

White was alone, and there were no apparent signs of foul play or injury, no drugs or weapons located at the scene, and no indications that he had committed suicide, Mann said, noting that an official cause of death is pending an autopsy.

Around 11:30 a.m. that Wednesday, a visitor to the



Fred White's campsite during the investigation into his March 29 death next to Deavers Boat Ramp on Lake Nottely. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

public ramp area off Deavers Road in the north end of the county spotted the nearby tent pitched in the woodline just up from the lake. He walked over

to check on the tent, saw a man lying inside, and called 911, Mann said.

When authorities arrived, See Homeless Man, Page 2A

## Bank OZK donates \$100,000 to UGH via Georgia HEART



Bank OZK presenting a \$100,000 check to Union General Health System last week as part of the Georgia HEART Hospital Program. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The Georgia HEART Rural Hospital Tax Credit Program is continuing to make strides for Union General Health System via another major financial contribution by Bank OZK, paving the way for more state-of-the-

art advancements becoming accessible to local health care providers.

Founded by lawmakers in 2016 as a response to an oncoming financial crisis facing the state's rural hospitals, the program "awards Georgia income tax credits to individuals and corporate taxpayers who contribute

to qualified rural hospital organizations located in Georgia," per georgiaheart.org.

For a hospital to qualify, it must be in a community with a population of 50,000 or fewer people, maintain tax-exempt status or public hospital authority management, accept See Bank OZK Donation, Page 2A



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# House Bill 87...from Page 1A

permits MECHS to reorganize as a “completion special school,” a new category of school that will let MECHS and the two other State Special Charter Schools in Georgia retain their state charter while enabling funding through local

school districts. The bill initially passed the Georgia House of Representatives in February before going to the Georgia Senate, which advanced it with a few beneficial modifications. The bill then went back to the

House for a third consecutive unanimous vote on “Sine Die,” the last day of the session.

“Up until (March 29), for a lot of people, there was always that nagging feeling in the back of their head, ‘Well, what if something happens and we don’t get this passed? Then there is no future for us,’” said Roger Fitzpatrick, MECHS Director of Community Outreach.

“Now that we have this passed by both chambers, we are in good shape, and it’s really a sigh of relief,” Fitzpatrick added, noting that the big winners of the legislative victory are the current and future at-risk students whose lives will be impacted by the self-paced evening high school.

As long as Gov. Brian Kemp signs the bill before the end of June, MECHS will continue to operate with behind-the-scenes changes that are not expected to affect students’ educations, Fitzpatrick said.

And Fitzpatrick has every reason to believe the governor will sign the bill, as Kemp has been supportive of the effort to keep MECHS alive every step of the way.

“I don’t think there’s any possibility at all that he will not sign it, much less veto it,” Fitzpatrick said.

Important details remain to be settled, such as the signing of memorandums of understanding with every partner school system, but MECHS will have a year to implement all the provisions in HB 87, and there’s always the chance to further tweak the legislation if need be.

“As we come across things that maybe were unforeseen, unintended consequences or maybe just difficulties, the main sponsor (of HB 87) has indicated he would be open to hearing suggestions,” Fitzpatrick said previously. “Not that there’s a guarantee that changes would be made, but he would at least be open to listening.”

Fitzpatrick would like to thank the education committees of both legislative chambers, particularly Rep. Chris Erwin, who was the primary sponsor of HB 87, and all the other lawmakers who signed on to the bill and

helped to guide it through to unanimous passage.

He also thanks Gov. Kemp and his staff who “really worked to get this thing taken care of,” and he commends MECHS staff members and people in the North Georgia Mountains community for writing legislators and helping get the word out about the effort to save the school.

MECHS began in 1993 with a unified site for Union, Towns and Fannin counties, and it has grown tremendously over the last 30 years, today serving the educational needs of students across 18 sites in 22 North Georgia counties.

The school offers students a unique educational experience based on mastery learning and scheduling flexibility, so pupils who would otherwise drop out are instead afforded the chance to work at their own pace and attend as needed in the evenings to accommodate other obligations

such as work or family care.

It is incredibly important for at-risk students to have access to second-chance opportunities like those provided by MECHS, as the attainment of a high school diploma is well established as a key factor in a young person’s success, and by extension, the success of whole communities.

There’s even a silver lining to this whole dramatic process having transpired in the first place, as HB 87 contains seed money funding to encourage the establishment of similar second-chance schools around the state.

Ultimately, MECHS could one-day serve as a model for success for the rest of the nation if more Georgia school districts adopt the approach and the benefits become apparent enough to convince neighboring states to similarly expand their own options to help struggling students.

## Fatal Crash...from Page 1A

immediately available, as the Georgia State Patrol had not responded to a request for information by press time, though it was dark and stormy that morning.

Reportedly, Beavers had recently moved to Blairsville, and her daughter West was a freshman at Murphy High

School who was “loved dearly by family and friends,” according to the GoFundMe.

“Krystal was also a Murphy alumni and leaves behind two sons Jaron 21 and Eric 18,” said Raegan Curtis, the fundraiser’s organizer. “This is a devastating time for their family. “With permission from

the family I am making this go fund me to try to help cover the funeral cost of not just one but two beautiful lives. Anything is appreciated!”

Services for Beavers and West were held after press time at 2 p.m. on Tuesday, April 4, in the chapel of Mountain View Funeral Home. People may sign the family guestbook and send condolences at [www.mountainviewfuneralhome.com](http://www.mountainviewfuneralhome.com).

## Homeless Man...from Page 1A

they found a shirtless White deceased inside the tent. Mann said they identified him from some papers he had with him and were able to look up his driver’s license, which helped them to locate family members to notify in Hiawassee.

After processing the scene, the Coroner’s Office took possession of White’s body and the Sheriff’s Office collected his personal belongings and

packed up the campsite.

According to his multiple Facebook profiles, White was an outgoing individual who grew up in Casa Grande, Arizona, worked in various restaurants in life and lived in multiple locations around Georgia over the last couple of years, including Gumlog in May 2020. He also listed Tennessee as a place of residency as recently as May 2022.



Fred White

## Bank OZK Donation...from Page 1A

Medicare and Medicaid, and offer minimum annual provision of indigent or uncompensated care.

And HEART is the gateway through which Bank OZK donates to Union General. In fact, the bank has been a longtime supporter of UGH through HEART funds, having partnered with the hospital’s administration team since 2017, the first year the program could be administered.

Over the past six years, the bank has donated more than \$400,000 to hospital projects, including the new Medical Office Building with suites specializing in OB-GYN services, orthopedics and sports medicine, and cardiology in partnership with the Piedmont Heart Institute.

This year, Bank OZK graciously decided to continue that support by donating \$100,000 to the Health System on Thursday, March 30.

“For our 2023 fund, we’re actually going to be focusing on expanding our ER suites,” said Lindsey Townsend, UGH’s Director of Philanthropic Outreach. “We’re going to go from four suites to eight, so that’s a pretty big deal.

“We have some other renovations that we’re going to probably look into using the funds for as well, but that’s what the majority of the 2023 funds will go to.”

Hospital and bank officials gathered outside the new office building at 2 p.m. last Thursday, where the check was presented to Union General’s Chief Executive Officer Kevin Bierschenk.

“Bank OZK is committed to the communities it serves and the financial health of our neighbors in Blairsville,” Bank OZK Market President Jason Karnes said. “A strong community is also dependent on convenient access to quality health care services, and Bank

OZK is proud to support Union General Hospital with a contribution for the sixth consecutive year.”

“We can’t say how much we appreciate what OZK has done over the years. Somebody asked earlier, ‘How do we attract doctors? How do we get doctors up here?’ And having the best equipment, having the MOB building ... that’s kind of turned the pattern around,” Blairsville-Union County Chamber of Commerce President Steve Rowe said later when everyone gathered in the hospital cafeteria for celebratory refreshments.

“It’s more than just the banking and hospital relationship – it’s truly about the community of the hospital,” UHG Chief Financial Officer Nick Townsend said.

Members of the community interested in learning how to make contributions via the tax credit program may contact Townsend at 678-735-1180.



## GA Regional Commissions see mostly lower February Unemployment Rates

Georgia Labor Commissioner Bruce Thompson said that all Regional Commissions reported drops in unemployment rates except for the Atlanta Regional Commission, Coastal Georgia Regional Commission, Northeast Georgia Regional Commission, and Southwest Georgia Regional Commission which reported unchanged unemployment rates.

“Pro-growth policies that foster innovation and drive success are why Georgia remains the No. 1 state for business and a perennial powerhouse in talent development,” said Commissioner Bruce Thompson. “Even with a slowing nationwide

economy, communities across Georgia continue to thrive with low unemployment and high job growth.”

The labor force rose in all Regional Commissions except the Heart of Georgia Regional Commission.

Employment was up in all Regional Commissions.

Historically, claims increase every January due to temporary seasonal manufacturing shutdowns and the retail sector shedding workers hired for the holiday season. In February, initial unemployment claims decreased in all Regional Commissions, dropping back to normal levels.

Please see a synopsis of each regional commission below: o-t-m – over the month;

o-t-y – over the year.

Georgia Mountains Regional Commission - Banks, Dawson, Forsyth, Franklin, Habersham, Hall, Hart, Lumpkin, Rabun, Stephens, Towns, Union, and White counties.

The unemployment rate was down one-tenth to 2.8 percent o-t-m, the rate was 2.8 percent one year ago.

The labor force was up 1,347 o-t-m and up 3,916 o-t-y, to 244,792, an all-time high.

The number of employed was up 1,582 o-t-m and up 3,657 o-t-y, to 237,855, an all-time high.

Initial claims were down 634 (-48%) o-t-m, and up 133 (24%) o-t-y, to 681.

# Recovered stolen equipment connected to crime ring

By Shawn Jarrard  
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The Criminal Investigation Division of the Union County Sheriff's Office has located and returned two pieces of stolen digging equipment connected to an Atlanta-based theft ring known to have been operating in several North Georgia counties since at least last year, including Union and Towns.

Recovery of the equipment sheds more light on the ring's alleged operation, the leader of which is incarcerated elsewhere; the ring organizer would pay people to "rent" equipment from one area, then pay other people to sell it in a different area, UCSO Capt. Daren "Bear" Osborn said.

One of the pieces of equipment recovered last month was stolen from Home Depot about a year and a half ago, Osborn said, so the criminal activity has been ongoing for some time.

The recovery process started when Osborn received a call on Friday, March 24, from the Home Depot Asset

Protection Manager for Northeast Georgia about a GPS-linked mini excavator that had been taken from an Atlanta store.

Osborn followed the GPS coordinates, locating the equipment at a residence off Tate Road and informing the man who had it that the equipment had been stolen, Osborn said.

The new "owner" of the equipment had acquired it legally March 11 from an auction company, which in turn auctioned the excavator, also legally, for a private seller in Towns County.

UCSO took possession of the equipment to return to Home Depot and contacted the auction company, which informed Osborn that the Towns County resident who originally consigned the equipment had brought a second excavator that was also auctioned March 11.

Osborn requested information about the second piece of auctioned equipment, which he learned had been stolen from a Home Depot in Lubbock, Texas, and he was able to recover that excavator from the auction purchaser at

a property on Georgia 515 near the Towns County line.

He then got in touch with the Towns County seller while the auction company returned the money for both auctioned excavators to the most recent buyers, Osborn said.

Unfortunately, this left the Towns seller, who acquired the equipment without knowing it had been stolen, out about \$40,000 of personal money he used to buy the excavators, Osborn said.

Osborn determined that a single suspect, a man currently incarcerated in another county for activity linked to the Atlanta-based crime ring, was connected to the initial sales of both stolen excavators.

The Towns resident had purchased one of the excavators directly from the suspect in September 2022. He got the other excavator a month earlier from a seller in Hayesville after the equipment had changed hands a couple times there, originating with a sale by the suspect, Osborn said.

Both purchases made by the Towns County resident were arranged via Facebook Marketplace, Osborn said.



UCSO recovered this Kubota mini excavator that was originally stolen from a Home Depot in Lubbock, Texas.

Pertaining to the history of the ring's operations in North Georgia, UCSO is in the process of investigating a December 2022 theft of construction equipment from Rick's Rental in Blairsville, with a potential location of the stolen equipment having been identified in Jefferson County.

In December, the Sheriff's Office arrested a woman in the Rick's Rental theft, which traced back to the same crime ring involved

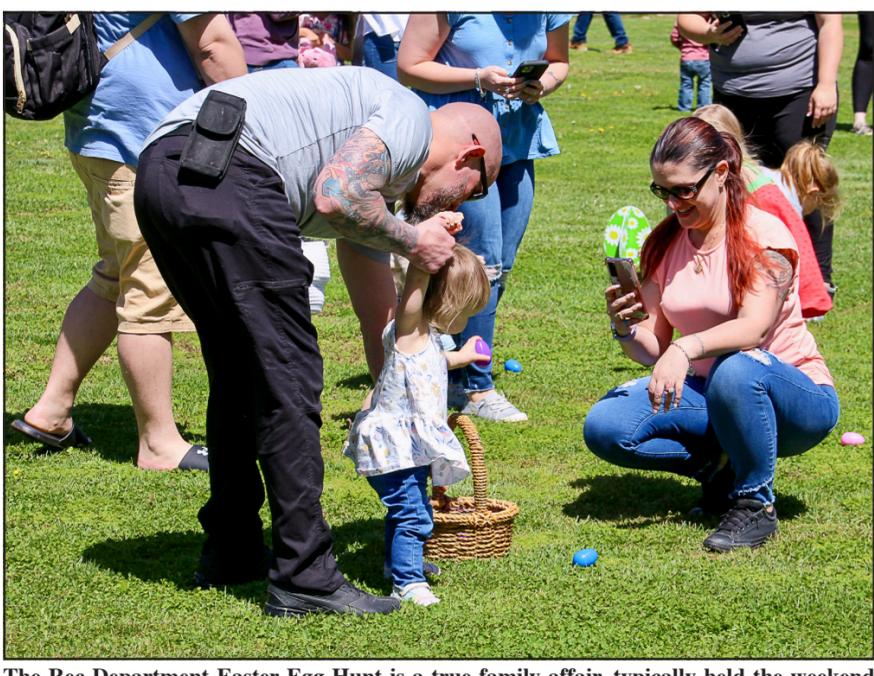
in two other cases of stolen excavators investigated by the Towns County Sheriff's Office, also in December.

After receiving tips of suspected criminal activity, Towns County Sheriff's Investigators set up a sting in one of the cases that resulted in a felony pursuit and arrest of four suspects Dec. 7, and a week later, TCSO arrested three other individuals hauling another stolen excavator for sale.

The Union County Sheriff's Office has turned over the materials related to its March 24 investigation to Home Depot, which is in touch with the agency handling the larger investigation into the crime ring, the Cobb County Sheriff's Office, Osborn said.

"If you go to Atlanta or buy anything off of Facebook and it seems like a good deal, be careful, because it really might not be a good deal," Osborn said.

## Meeks Park Egg Hunt...from Page 1A



The Rec Department Easter Egg Hunt is a true family affair, typically held the weekend before Easter to accommodate holiday travel plans. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

"We come every year," said Joy, as Arya showed off her 11 eggs and added, without a doubt, "I like it."

Meanwhile, Lillian Morrow was there with her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother representing four generations of women from the same family.

"It's beautiful here, just lovely. And they told me about the Easter hunt, so I said, 'Well, I have to go to that,'" said Elizabeth Williams, who came all the way from Newfoundland, Canada, to visit her great-granddaughter. "It looks like it's well-organized, too, and the kids certainly love it."

Williams' daughter-in-law, Denise Robson, said her daughter and granddaughter live in Blairsville, and she's looking forward to building a house near Blue Ridge so she can be closer to her family here.

"My daughter grew up in Canada until she was 5, then we moved to Florida ... When she moved up here, we loved it so much that we wanted to build a house up here," Robson said, explaining how four generations from two different countries ended up together that day.

She, too, was impressed with the egg hunt and found her granddaughter's antics especially amusing.

"I said to her, 'Your bag is so tiny,'" Robson chuckled, holding up the bunny-shaped bag in question that had been abandoned while the youngster went to play. "She said, 'Grandma, it's OK.'"

As for youth Mackenzie Monsrud, she admittedly "loved" the egg hunt, but her favorite part was getting a balloon flower, and she and her little brother Miles hope to return next year.

That should work out well considering that Thompson said the Rec Department has plans to make the Egg Hunt bigger and better every year.

Close to the end of the day and between raffle prizes, Jerry Helton offered a few words on the true meaning of the holiday, which will experience its 2023 observance on Sunday, April 9.

"Easter is about this amazing, greatest historical event that ever happened," recounted Helton. "Jesus died for us, and He was buried, and if that had been all there was to it, maybe we could say He was a good man - maybe we could say He was a good martyr, but (we couldn't) say He would rise again."

"But He did, and because of that, we have the hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ. I want you to know He loves you today."



The Easter Bunny made a special appearance to take photos with children on Saturday. Photo by Shawn Jarrard