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Luckenbach honors area heritage with Hayesville mural

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

HAYESVILLE, N.C. - Last week, local artist Corrina Luckenbach put the finishing touches on her beautiful new mural adorning the side of the Clay County Chamber of Commerce building.

Prior to graduating Towns County High Class of 2020, Luckenbach spent time honing her artistic skills via programs with the Savannah College of Art and Design and Laguna College of Art and Design, and since graduating, she has studied communications at Young Harris College.

Now, the 20-year-old's talents are on full display just off the Hayesville Square, and Towns County residents are encouraged to go check out her artwork that will be honoring the heritage of the area for years to come.

The mural features a historical depiction of a Cherokee Indian man with native flora and mountain backdrop. It is an update of sorts, replacing the original mural painted there in June 1992 by Hiawassee's own Matt Smith as an Eagle Scout Service Project when he was just 13 years old.

Unfortunately, the 30-year-old mural had begun to fade over the years due to non-uptake and weather conditions, and several local entities decided it was time to refresh the space while preserving Smith's original painting with a formal exhibit inside the Chamber Welcome Center.

Involved in the decision to update the mural were the Cherokee Indian Tribe; Clay County Historical and Arts Council; Clay County Communities Revitalization Association; Clay Chamber Board of Directors; Small Town Mainstreet/Historic Hayesville; and

Hayesville City Hall.

As a local artist, Luckenbach got the painting job on a referral to the Chamber of Commerce. The new mural was completed thanks to donations by a benefactor and the Leadership Chatuge Program, and all stakeholders are excited about the finished product.

"A lot of research went into the project to prove historical accuracy and making sure the imagery was approved through the Heritage Commission," Luckenbach said. "It was all finalized around the end of October, and I started working on it the week of Thanksgiving break, so it took around three weeks to complete and was (mostly) finished by Dec. 10."

"The focus was to maintain a strong hold on the heavy Cherokee Indian heritage around here, so the Indian was my primary goal to get perfect,"

See Luckenbach, Page 5A



Corrina Luckenbach of Towns County has painted this vibrant mural on the exterior wall of the Clay County, North Carolina, Chamber of Commerce Welcome Center honoring the area's Cherokee heritage. Photo by Jeremy Foster

Schools brace for more COVID, plus strep and flu



L-R: Towns County School Board Members Sara Rogers, Stephanie McConnell, Stan Chastain, Superintendent Darren Berrong, Brandon Grimsley and Carolee Woods.

Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

In the Jan. 3 Towns County Board of Education meeting, Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong noted the likelihood of a spike in COVID-19 cases on campus given

the recent rise in community transmission, potentially compounded by an uptick in winter-borne illness generally.

Classes resumed on Jan. 4 following a two-week break for Christmas, and already, students and staff have experienced a modest increase in COVID cases that may ramp up this month.

"With three positive student cases and six positive staff cases of COVID, it's starting off the same way we started in August (2021)," he said. "The very first day, we started getting cases. If you look at the Georgia numbers, they have spiked significantly. It is just now getting to us."

See Towns Co. Schools, Page 5A

With new curator, changes come to Hamilton Gardens

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

The Fred Hamilton Rhododendron Garden inside the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds is undergoing major renovations at the direction of new Curator Catherine Luckenbach, who is focusing her efforts on simplifying and restoring Towns County's public botanical gardens.

Luckenbach was hired in the fall by Georgia Mountain Fair, Inc. to take over caretaking duties at the gardens following the dissolution of the nonprofit Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge, Inc. at the end of October.

This is a return to the gardens for Luckenbach. She previously served as a volunteer about a decade ago before coming on board to work with her then-husband Paul Hansen as one of the gardens' curators.

The pair's tenure ended about six years ago when the Hamilton Gardens at Lake



The Daffodil Project at the Hamilton Gardens has been relocated to the interior of the rhododendron and azalea garden. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Garden organization was being formed, and though the terms of their departure from the gardens were not disclosed publicly, it was not exactly an amicable parting at the time.

But all that is in the past, said Luckenbach, who agreed last year to return once it became clear that the Hamilton

See Hamilton Gardens, Page 5A

Local patriots, Firewise make presentations in county meeting



L-R: Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter SAR Vice President Sid Turner, Towns EMS Supervisor Jay Chastain Jr., Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw and SAR President Jared Ogden. Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County EMS Supervisor and Paramedic Jay Vernon Chastain Jr. received the Emergency Medical Services Award and Medal in the December regular meeting of Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw.

Bestowed by the local Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter, Georgia Society, Sons of the American Revolution, the award recognized Chastain's 30 years of service to the people of Towns County.

EMS Director Ken Nicholson nominated Chastain for the award, which was presented to him by Blue Ridge Moun-

tains Chapter SAR President Jared Ogden and Vice President Sid Turner in the meeting.

"This is very humbling," Chastain said. "This comes from not only the community, but somebody - Ken is not only a boss, Ken's a friend. He was my first partner in 1987. We were both basic EMTs. I went to paramedic school. We've remained friends."

"It's an honor to have this, very humbling. Cliff, you don't know how good it is, brother, to be working for a commissioner like you. Your office has done nothing but help us, and I do appreciate it. Thank you again."

Moving along, Towns County Firewise Citizens

Coalition President Michael Courey addressed the Dec. 21 meeting to inform residents and the county of changes to Georgia's Outdoor Burn Notification System.

In a nutshell, Georgia Senate Bill 119, effective July 1, 2021, changed Georgia Code Section 12-6-90 to eliminate the need "to notify the Georgia Forestry Commission when a person, firm, corporation, or association intends to burn hand-piled vegetation/yard debris."

However, SB 119 mandates that the person burning "take full responsibility for keeping their fire contained and is required to ensure five safety standards are followed," referred to as "Take Five."

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Hiawassee swears in officials; council re-ups AirMedCare



Hiawassee City Clerk Bonnie Kendrick swearing into elective office Councilwoman Patsy Owens, Mayor Liz Ordiales and Councilwoman Amy Barrett on Jan. 4.

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Despite not having a December work session, the first Hiawassee City Council meeting of the year on Jan. 4 was a short but sweet gathering. In typical fashion, the meeting was open to the public at City Hall and streamed online via Facebook Live.

In the meeting, Mayor Liz Ordiales and Councilwomen Amy Barrett and Patsy Owens all swore into second four-year terms in office, having qualified unopposed in the 2021 Hiawassee Municipal Elections.

Ordiales held the Bible as Barrett and Owens put their hands on the cover. City Clerk Bonnie Kendrick conducted the swear-in, leading the trio in their oaths, and approving applause filled the room by the end.

"I'd like to thank the City of Hiawassee for allowing me to serve as mayor for another four years," Ordiales said after the meeting. "We are primed to complete projects that will truly make a difference in Hiawassee."

"The Paris Business Center is first and foremost. I believe this will be a catalyst to moving the city forward with the new business incu-

bator and the much-requested anchor restaurant.

"Our Water Treatment Plant project will hopefully be completed by mid 2023; that will allow us to continue to serve Towns County with water needs for many years to come."

"A huge goal that I would like to achieve is to be free of old debt by 2023. While the city will not be debt free (altogether), it will be free of long-term loans, which are high in interest payments."

"We will continue to follow our Strategic Plan and implement the projects iden-

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Blue Ridge	1,672.25
Chatuge	1,918.73
Nottely	1,763.43

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1/14 @ LAKE OCONEE

ACADEMY

6PM

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County Meeting...from Page 1A

“Essentially, the idea of not having a burn permit, from what I can tell, the intent is to place the responsibility more on the homeowner or the person conducting that burn,” Courey said, adding that it would be prudent for people to access the Georgia Forestry Commission website at Ga-Trees.org for more information before starting a small fire.

Courey said people or contractors wanting to burn trash, leftover building materials, or land-clearing debris are still required to get a burn permit for those types of fires, as they are not considered to be “hand-piled vegetation/yard debris.”

He also mentioned that this time of year, when humidity is low and weather tends to be windy, small fires can easily get out of control and turn into forest fires.

For additional info on the new burn laws and “Take Five,” go to GaTrees.org, or contact Georgia Forestry Chief Ranger Blake Melton at 706-781-2399.

In other news, Bradshaw said in his Commissioner’s Report that it had been a very busy time of year for county government in the leadup to the holiday season.

“We got the (Towns County Joint Comprehensive Plan Update) done; that was a major undertaking,” he said, thanking Joint Economic Development Director Denise McKay for her help with that.

Bradshaw said the 2022 Service Delivery Agreement between the county and its cities was also concluded and thanked Hiwassee Mayor Liz Ordiales and Young Harris Mayor Andrea Gibby for their cooperation.

Improvements and renovations to the Towns County Beach area are ongoing and will continue, Bradshaw said, adding that swings, benches, and a walking trail will be installed in Spring 2022.

Regarding the separation of residential and commercial trash at the Transfer Station, Bradshaw said the county “finally got the poured wall done.” There is still a lot more work left to complete the project, but progress is being made, he said.

“We’ve already ordered three roll-off commercial dumpsters,” Bradshaw said, noting that the county will need to procure a truck to haul the dumpsters to the commercial side daily so that household bagged garbage can be transferred to the landfill.

Bradshaw said that architects have designed space at the Old Rec Gym to house courthouse employees for when construction on the courthouse renovation and addition project begins, and upgrades to the HVAC system in the old gym are in the works.

The county will start the process of interviewing construction companies and taking bids on the massive SPLOST-funded courthouse project in the first quarter of 2022, Bradshaw said, hopefully right after the first of the New Year.

“We dread the move, it’s going to be aggravating, but once we get it all done and we’re back in here, it’s going to be very, very nice,” he said, adding that he is confident that the residents of the county will be proud of the new courthouse.

The commissioner said the county purchased two dump trucks for the Road Department, a 2019 model and a new one, because the two dump trucks the department is currently using, though still operational, are getting old.

“These are two nice machines that I’m proud that the county is able to purchase,” Bradshaw said. “That puts the Road Department in good shape for now.”

Finally, the Commissioner said, he wanted to take a minute to thank all the residents of the county “for their support for the commissioner and Commissioner’s Office, especially during the holidays.”

“The cards, the letters, the cookies, that candy, the cakes, all this stuff that has been sent to our office is humbling, and we’re very thankful for all of that,” he said. “And I want to take the time to wish all of our citizens a very Merry Christmas, and I pray for a very healthy 2022.”

Bradshaw holds his regular county meetings on the third Tuesday of every month, beginning at 5:30 p.m. in the Towns County Courthouse. The next regular meeting will take place next week on Tuesday, Jan. 18.

Feline feeder needed

Homeless cats are looking for a tender-hearted volunteer to feed them on Saturday evenings. These needy cats are in six cat colonies, all off a 2-mile stretch of Route 76 from the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds to the Dairy Queen in Hiwassee. The colonies are easy to get to, and feeding takes about 35 minutes. If you have a heart for disadvantaged cats and would like to be a Towns county “Feline Feeder,” please contact Sue at slaraines@protonmail.com. TJJan12.G1|SH

American Red Cross Volunteers

Make a difference in your community! As a volunteer with the American Red Cross, you can help families recover after a home fire, train individuals in first aid and CPR, support America’s military families, or take on any number of other roles that make our communities safer, stronger and more resilient. Get started at <https://www.redcross.org/local/georgia/volunteer.html> or call your NWGA chapter office to ask about volunteer opportunities 844-536-6226. NT|Oct13.Z1|CA

Board of Health meeting

The Towns County Board of Health will hold its quarterly meeting on Thursday, January 20th, 2022 at 9:30 a.m. in the 911 Conference Room located at 1104 Jack Dayton Circle, Young Harris, GA 30582. TJJan12.F1|SH

Arrest and Fire Reports

Local law enforcement provides the following information for publication. Names are spelled as they were when received from the law enforcement agencies. It is important to remember that the following individuals have been charged only and are presumed innocent until such time as they are found guilty by a court or enter a guilty plea. Addresses of persons under arrest are no longer available from Sheriff’s Office.



ARREST REPORT

Towns County Jail
Sheriff Ken Henderson

- 1/8/22 Jeffery Wayne Kelley, age 44
DUI, Possession of meth, Speeding
- 1/6/22 Sheila Marie Larson, age 35
Hold for Clay County, NC
- 1/5/22 Brittany Marie Wright, age 33
Failure to appear
- 1/6/22 Dusty Levi Allen, age 33
Hold for Habersham
- 1/8/22 Dominic Joseph Claar, age 18
Furnishing, purchasing & possession of alcoholic beverages by minor (2 counts), Open container in vehicle, Possession & use of drug-related objects, Reckless driving, Tag light illumination
- 1/4/22 Rex Richard Denoi, age 39
Hold for Cherokee County, GA
- 1/4/22 Paul Bruce Moody, age 29
Resist, obstruct, oppose law enforcement officers, Driving while license suspended or revoked, Speeding, Expired vehicle tag or decal

TC Fire Department

RESPONSE REPORT

From: Fire Chief Harold Copeland



- 12/31/21 Medical assist, assist EMS crew (2)
Public service
Motor vehicle accident with no injuries
- 1/1/22 Medical assist, assist EMS crew (3)
Dispatched and cancelled en route
- 1/2/22 Medical assist, assist EMS crew (3)
Smoke scare, odor of smoke
Dispatched and cancelled en route
- 1/3/22 Medical assist, assist EMS crew (4)
Dispatched and cancelled en route (2)
- 1/4/22 Medical assist, assist EMS crew (4)
Motor vehicle accident with no injuries (2)
- 1/5/22 Motor vehicle accident with injuries
Dispatched and cancelled en route (5)
- 1/6/22 Medical assist, assist EMS crew (3)
- 1/6/22 Medical assist, assist EMS crew (9)

Habitat’s Cathy Wheeler speaks to Movers and Shakers

Everyone knows Habitat for Humanity and their most famous Hammer Swinger, President Jimmy Carter. But did you know we have a very active Habitat for Humanity chapter right here in our mountains?

And so please welcome the Vice President of Development, Ms. Cathy Wheeler, Habitat for Humanity, Towns/Union Counties, Inc. She joins us to share the Towns/Union Chapter’s history, explaining what they do, and how their programs work. Did you know Habitat does not give housing away? Recipients pay back in ways Ms. Wheeler will explain. She will also introduce a sensational new program involving both Union and Towns High School students. So get to the Sundance Grill early this Friday, January 14 and get a good seat and find out how you can get involved helping your neighbors with this most basic need.

Everyone is invited to join the Mountain Movers &



Cathy Wheeler
Shakers, a grass-roots, non-partisan civic organization, dedicated to serving the North Georgia/Western Carolina Mountain Region.

Come join us for information, conversation, and breakfast every Friday at 8 a.m. at the Sundance Grill, as we welcome civic leaders, elected officials, safety and forest officials all coming to share information of vital importance to all.

Like us on Facebook: Mountain Movers & Shakers.

TCHS Student of the Week



Haley Berrong and Maureen McClure

The PBIS Student of the Week for TCHS is sophomore Haley Berrong. Spanish and Education teacher Maureen McClure states: “Haley Berrong is an outstanding student at TCHS. She is conscientious, responsible, respectful, hardworking, and is respected by her peers and teachers. She is my student this year in Spanish I and II, along with being a part of the CTAE Teaching Pathway.”

Haley’s favorite school subject is reading as it comes natural to her as an avid reader. She plans to attend the University of Georgia after graduation pursuing a degree in elementary education as she loves kids. Outside of school, Haley enjoys dancing at Stardance where she participates in many styles, but her passion is contemporary dance.

Local students achievements from Georgia Southwestern State University

The following area residents were among nearly 500 students who earned an undergraduate or graduate degree from Georgia Southwestern State University during the Fall 2021 Commencement Ceremony held on Friday, December 17 in the Convocation Hall of the Student Success Center.

Amber Holden of Young Harris, GA earned a Bachelor of Business Administration in accounting; and Emma Arnick of Young Harris, GA earned a Bachelor of Science in nursing cum laude.

Emma Arnick, a resident of Young Harris, GA, made the Fall 2021 President’s List at Georgia Southwestern State

University and was among 606 students recognized for scholastic achievement.

To be eligible for the President’s List, a student must earn a semester GPA of 4.0 and take a minimum of 12 credit hours.

Cynthia Story, a resident of Blairsville, GA, made the Fall 2021 Academic Achievement List at Georgia Southwestern State University and was among 606 students recognized for scholastic achievement.

To be eligible for the Academic Achievement List, a student must previously earn at least 12 credit hours at GSW, be enrolled in 3 to 11 hours of courses, and earn a 3.5 or higher GPA. NT|Jan12.Z6|CA

Luckenbach...from Page 1A

and I was fortunate enough to even get paid to do it through a private donor."

Luckenbach is no stranger to public murals, having designed local window displays in the past, including at the Paris Buildings for the City of Hiwassee.

Her main goals in life are to be creative and "leave anywhere I go a little bit prettier than the way I found it," and people can see the evidence of her words now in multiple places around the area.

And though feedback on the new mural has been mostly positive, Luckenbach has fielded a few negative comments, and ultimately, the experience has been a valuable one.

"The best thing is that, through this, I learned how to take and combat some criticism in a way that was healthy and for the sake of art while making sure everyone ended up happy with it, so I certainly came out a better person," Luckenbach said.

She is currently working a few days a week at North & Main Clothing Company and will be taking a semester or so off from college to explore different career paths.

"I am still figuring out other things I like, but I am also going to be getting my real estate license soon, because I like homes and I know I can be creative in that as

well," she said.

As for Smith, he was "very excited about the idea of the new mural highlighting the heritage of Hayesville and Clay County."

Like Luckenbach, Smith also chose to highlight local history with his original mural, showcasing the De Soto Expedition of 1540, the founding of Clay County in 1861, the establishment of the Western North Carolina Wagon Train in 1958, and the beauty of the mountain countryside.

"I knew mine would not last forever, so the idea of a new facet of what I did was a great thing for the legacy of my original," Smith said. "The idea was to showcase the early days of our explorers and European contact of that area."

"I was very excited that they chose a young budding artist for this, and I fully support anyone willing to put themselves out there with their art for us to look at and enjoy. It is very important that artists do that because it can be such a boost in confidence."

As noted above, the history of Smith's mural is being preserved, with the help of his father Stephen Smith, for a formal exhibit inside the Chamber Welcome Center. And pertaining to the new mural, the goal is to enroll it as part of the Appalachian Mural Trail in the near future.



Luckenbach's mural in Hayesville features a Cherokee Indian and beautiful native scenery.

Photo by Jeremy Foster



Matt Smith, formerly of Hiwassee, painted this historical mural in '92 to showcase "the early days of our explorers and European contact." People can still view this mural in an exhibit inside the chamber's Welcome Center in Hayesville.

Hamilton Gardens...from Page 1A

the more than 1,000 rhododendron and azalea plants donated by Fred and Hazel Hamilton in the early 1980s.

With the help of Assistant Curator Charles Smith and a small crew of groundskeepers from the fairgrounds, Luckenbach has made changes she hopes will enable a more sustainable garden grounds moving forward.

Together, Luckenbach and Smith have nearly 70 years in professional landscaping; she got her start on large projects out West and eventually began a landscaping business locally, and Smith retired from landscaping in Florida before moving to Hayesville, North Carolina, several years ago. The two became friends up here, and the rest is history.

Specifically, Luckenbach and Smith are working to restore the terraced gardens themselves, which have become overgrown with brambles, saplings and other unwelcome plants that are both an eyesore and degrading the health of some of the rhododendrons and azaleas.

It is a daunting task, she said, and one that requires tremendous care and attention to the 30-plus-acre interior.

Down in the gardens, they will be re-grading and mulching the walking trails; pruning hundreds of plants; removing tree saplings as well as large poplars that have sprung up over the decades; drawing up plans for a new events venue; installing nighttime features to extend the hours people can enjoy the gardens; and more.

Additionally, the duo will be resurfacing and stripping the entire parking lot; adding space to the Paris Pavilion; creating a new "Garden Shop" to be used for plant sales during festivals; updating promotional materials; planning classes; seeking grant funds to restore the greenhouse to allow for propagation of rare native rhododendrons and azaleas; and much else besides.

To accomplish these goals, especially with such a small workforce, Luckenbach has been striving to make the "front of the house," so to speak – the areas adjacent to the parking lot outside the actual terraced gardens – more low maintenance and therefore easier to manage.

By replacing half a dozen perennial flowerbeds with plants requiring less attention throughout the year, she and Smith said they will be able to focus more of their time inside the gardens themselves, where they hope to restore the name-

sake gardens to be more inviting to visitors.

And while the work ahead of them will require multiple bloom seasons to complete plus ongoing management, the pair of curators are pledging to have the gardens beautiful and spectator-ready in time for the return of the annual "Rhododendron Festival," to run four weeks starting April 22.

Luckenbach took over the grounds on Nov. 1, and some of the changes she has made at the gardens have proved unpopular with former stakeholders of Hamilton Gardens at Lake Chatuge, who see her efforts thus far as uprooting years of hard work and thousands of donor dollars.

None of the changes have been made "out of disrespect and spite," Luckenbach insists, adding that, while she understands why people may be upset with change after so much sweat equity and donor funding went into the gardens under the previous caretakers, the extensive acreage is now in her care, and she is simply doing what she thinks is best to safeguard the legacy of the Hamilton Gardens.

She is thankful to have inherited many upgrades completed by her predecessors, including a repaired pump house, new storage barn, rebuilt Main Trail bridge, and the addition of a lookout deck at Fishing Hole Rock.

But after much consideration, Luckenbach has made some aesthetic changes based on her judgment as official curator, as well as changes aimed at making the areas outside the main gardens easier to maintain so she and her crew can focus on the gardens themselves.

For starters, she has relocated The Daffodil Project from its original home across from the Paris Pavilion at the front of the grounds to the garden interior, at the fork of the Main and Memorial Garden Trails, to feature daffodils planted all the way down the Main Trail toward the lake.

The Daffodil Project was installed in December 2017 as a "Living Holocaust Memorial" dedicated to the lives and memories of the 1.5 million Jewish children murdered in the Holocaust.

And though the new location will require the blessing of a rabbi, which Luckenbach said is in the works, she feels the memorial's new home, with its proximity to the Memorial Garden Trail and prominence inside the actual gardens, is a more fitting place for the sa-

cred tribute.

Where The Daffodil Project used to reside now sits a freshly planted Kwanzan cherry tree, which Luckenbach said was one of Fred Hamilton's favorite trees, several of which he personally planted inside the gardens. To accompany the tree, she is getting a plaque made up detailing the history of the Hamilton Gardens.

Among other changes, Luckenbach has also transitioned the commemorative water fountain from the Celebration Plaza near the parking lot to be situated next to the greenhouse in the back, with plans to install a bubbling boulder feature up front in its place.

She said this was both a practical and an aesthetic decision, reporting that water from the fountain was subject to spraying in the wind, and that a natural-looking boulder feature would be better suited there.

As for the relocated fountain, paid for by an anonymous donor in honor of the Forrest and Maggie Deal Family, Luckenbach said she plans to restore it to working order in the future.

Then there is the Marsha Elliott Memorial Garden planted in honor of the beloved community volunteer who passed away in 2018. Previously, the garden featured flowers in Elliott's favorite colors and was approved by her family prior to its planting.

Luckenbach has graded a stone path through the memorial area for a better walkthrough experience and replaced the perennials with plants that require less maintenance after bloom season. She said she knew Marsha and believed she would approve of the memorial's redesign.

The returning curator has made still other changes, including removing the high maintenance Pollinator Garden that was certified through the University of Georgia, and moving the event stage from the parking lot about 20 feet closer to the pavilion to sit atop the edge of the West Lawn, which will make room for the creation of a landscaped backdrop for the stage.

All told, Luckenbach said she believes the alterations she is making after the recent changing of the guard will improve the walkability and beauty of the Hamilton Gardens from a more front-focused approach that the previous caretakers and even she herself took in years past.

Georgia Mountain Fair Inc. President Matt Turpin said last week that Luckenbach has the blessings of the Fair Board of Directors to carry out her vision, which includes revenue generation with special events, paid tours, plant sales, and admissions during the annual Rhododendron Festival.

As far as volunteers go, Luckenbach and Smith said they welcome anyone from the community who wishes to lend a helping hand inside the gardens, including the Towns-Union Master Gardener Association.

After all, the Hamilton Gardens is a state botanical garden that is an official park of Towns County, and therefore a public resource for use and enjoyment by the people from 8 a.m. to sunset.

Towns Co. Schools...from Page 1A

In their respective January reports, Elementary School Principal Shannon Moss said five staff members had tested positive for COVID, and High School Principal Roy Perren said three students and one staff member had tested positive.

"So, I expect a large spike in our county over the next two weeks," Berrong said. "(However), if the data does what it did in South Africa and what it did back in August and September (2021), we should see just as fast of a decline as we're seeing an incline."

"Everything that I have read (suggests) that (the widely circulating variant omicron) is not as dangerous as the other variants are, but it seems to spread much more quickly. So far, the cases that we have in the school system ... are mild cases. But I do expect more cases as the weeks go on, so we're going to be watching that closely."

"What's different this year is we also have several teachers out with strep throat and several teachers out with flu. So, not only are we dealing with COVID this winter like we did last winter, but we're also dealing with everything else."

"We're going to watch that closely, and as long as we have teachers in the classrooms, then we will keep our doors open."

Berrong said the school district sent out updated COVID protocols for students on Monday, Jan. 3.

"As most of you know, the (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) updated their guidelines back on Dec. 27 saying that there's no longer a 10-day quarantine for positives; it's a five-day quarantine, and then a five-day mask mandate," Berrong said, adding that the CDC may change that to add post-quarantine testing, but that's just speculation at this point.

"We are going to have students who are close contacts inside the home," he continued. "We are going to follow those quarantine guidelines. If there are close contacts outside the home, then we are going to leave that option open for parents to allow their children to come to school, or to quarantine if they feel like they need

to quarantine."

Moving along, Berrong said the system's 16-acre property on Plottown Road in Young Harris had been sold for \$168,000 and the transaction closed. The system acquired the land years ago from Young Harris College in a swap for property that used to house a local elementary school.

The \$195,000 purchase of approximately 10 acres bordering school property on Bugscuffle Road will close about mid-month this January. There is much potential for future use of this property due to its proximity to Towns County Schools, so the school board approved its purchase.

In other news, the board approved the financial statements for December 2021. Dr. Berrong gave the financial report as Finance Director Myra Underwood was not feeling well and could not attend the meeting.

"Financials, once again, continue to look good month after month," he said. "The total property taxes collected for December 2021 is \$2,621,134."

"We said last month that we got that \$1 million check, and that that was really large and really early. Well, the same is true with this one. So, with that amount for December (though not received yet), the total we will have collected through December 2021 is \$4,173,000."

"As of that same time last year, we had only collected \$2.7 million. But, once again, as we discussed last month, that doesn't really mean we're \$1.3 million ahead. It just means we received it earlier than we typically do."

"So, January and February of last year, which were our largest incomes for property tax, will (this year) be a lot smaller than they were, and it will all even out."

Berrong said sales tax income was also high again for December 2021, coming in at \$253,000, making the total sales tax income collected through December 2021 \$1.29 million.

"As of December 2020, last year, it was \$1.12 million, so we're a little bit ahead of where we were last year," Berrong said. "I expect that to continue to come in the rest of

the year."

In their monthly Principal's Reports, Elementary School Principal Moss said there are currently 448 students enrolled with only two electing to attend online.

Middle School Principal Dr. Connie Hobbs reported a current enrollment of 225 with nine students continuing to attend online.

High School Principal Roy Perren reported 307 students currently enrolled with possibly only two students remaining online. Perren said he didn't have an exact number at the time of the meeting.

All principals reported that classes, testing, sports and extracurricular activities were all going along well, with many exceeding expectations.

Additionally, the board officially approved Clay Livingston as Shane Riley's replacement as Middle School Girls Head Soccer Coach. Livingston was also approved to be the Varsity Girls Head Soccer Coach. Kaila Reece will be his Assistant Soccer Coach for both teams.

The board also approved Paul Lewis as a substitute teacher, Debra Cooper as a substitute bus driver, and Robin Welker as a special education paraprofessional.

Finally, former Towns County Board of Education Member Dr. Kilee Smith spoke during the Public Forum about the use of the Hometown Ticketing App for students and parents to pay for tickets to sports events at the school.

Smith was concerned that there was no way to pay cash for attending an event, and that paying through the Hometown Ticketing App involved a fee, which effectively escalated the cost of the tickets.

Berrong said that the school's use of the Hometown Ticketing App was in response to concerns about transmitting COVID by exchanging cash. However, both Berrong and Perren said that anyone wanting to pay for tickets with cash at any events would now be able to do so.

The Towns County Board of Education meets the first Monday of each month, starting at 6 p.m. in the Middle/High School Media Center.

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limits. This is separate from the medical helicopter membership the county has through Air Methods, which covers similar costs for life flights of Towns County residents by Air Life Georgia choppers. Residents of Hiwassee benefit from both memberships.

"The new rate only went up \$100, so it's \$5,390, and that's the annual rate for all the citizens and all the businesses in the City of Hiwassee," Ordiales said.

Hiwassee City Council and Mayor Liz Ordiales meet twice monthly at City Hall, on the first Tuesday of every month for a business session and the week before each business session on Monday, with all meetings beginning at 6 p.m.

been a long haul for her – six long months."

In new business, the council approved the renewal of the AirMedCare Network contract for medical helicopter transports.

AirMedCare coverage applies only to residents and businesses within Hiwassee City Limits, and it comes as a membership paid by the city to cover all current and future residents for medically necessary air ambulance events.

The service allows an unlimited number of uses, meaning that residents can use it whenever needed without the worry of ever having to pay out of pocket costs, with the only requirement for the coverage being that there is tangible proof of residency within city

limits.

"Being re-elected is a great honor, as I love where we live," Barrett said. Also in the Jan. 4 meeting, Mayor Ordiales shared the wonderful news that City Billing Clerk Marta Izquierdo was in cancer remission, and although she was not in attendance at the meeting, those present shared a hearty round of applause.

"We're very, very excited about that," Ordiales said, noting that Izquierdo plans to return to work this week. "It's

Towns County Community Calendar		
First Monday of each month:	HS/MS Media Center	6:45 pm
School Board		
First Tuesday of each month:	City Hall	6 pm
Hiaw. City Council		
Young Harris City Council	YH City Hall	7 pm
Second Tuesday of each month:	Civic Center	8 am
Conventions & Visitors Board		
Second Wednesday every other month:	Elections Office	4 pm
Board of Elections		
Third Monday of each month:	Civic Center	6 pm
Planning Commission		
Water Board	Water Office	6 pm
Third Tuesday of each month:	Courthouse	5:30 pm
Commissioner's Mtg.		