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Winter storm results in some snow, icy roadways

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

As late as Saturday afternoon, the National Weather Service was calling for a "major winter storm" the likes of which had not been seen in years, but in many ways, Towns County dodged the winter weather bullet.

The worst predictions were calling for more than 8 inches of snow, greater than half an inch of ice on roadways, freezing rain on powerlines and trees, and winds over 50 mph, all potentially coming together to cause massive and terrible driving conditions.

Of course, many people lost power; Blue Ridge Mountain EMC reported Sunday 10 broken poles and 7,006

members without power systems, mostly in Shooting Creek, North Carolina; east of Hiawassee/Hightower in Towns; and the Trackrock, Choestoe and Suches areas of Union.

But the outages, which started occurring around 5 a.m. Sunday evening, were nearly completely restored by noon that day, and the lights stayed on for most people for the remainder of the winter weather event.

That's not to say the storm wasn't significant in other areas, like Habersham County, which had lower temperatures and therefore suffered more ill effects from the precipitation that dropped Saturday evening through Sunday. But here in Towns, most people got between 1 and 2 inches of snow Sunday night, with isolated ar-

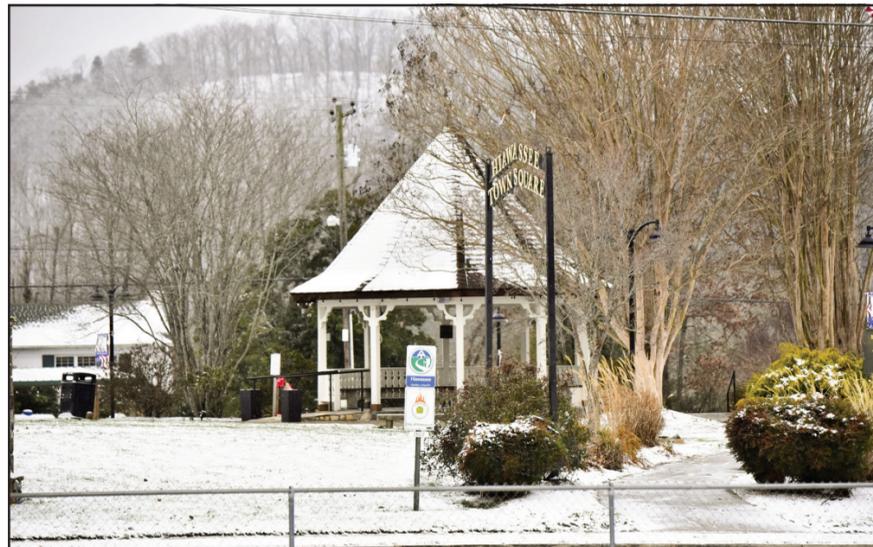
reas receiving slightly higher totals late Saturday and Sunday.

And fortunately, Snow stayed elevated until Sunday evening, so the formation of black ice was mostly limited to overnight Monday when it did finally get below freezing countywide.

The Georgia Department of Transportation worked around the clock over the weekend to keep main highways clear, and the county Road Department maintained secondary roads as well, though many areas remained unsafe for travel Monday morning due to lower temps and black ice.

As of Monday morning, many trees were reported down in roadways, though the Road Department said it could have been worse considering the initial forecast for the storm.

See Winter Snow, Page 8A



The Hiawassee Town Square got about as much snow as the rest of the county over the weekend, about an inch or so with isolated areas of higher snow totals. Photo by Todd Forrest

City Council talks booster surcharge, swears in officials

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

YOUNG HARRIS – In their Jan. 4 regular meeting, Mayor Andrea Gibby and the City Council fielded a renewed complaint about the \$26 monthly surcharge being added to the water bills of households located above a city booster pump.

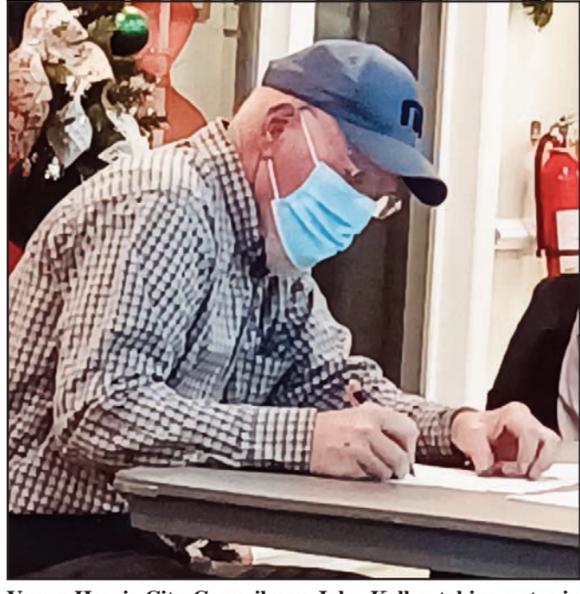
Approved by the council in October, the fee impacts only the 86 water customers currently living above booster pumps that City Hall says are subject to additional maintenance and repair costs, and city officials do not believe all customers should have to subsidize the minority.

Residents Keith and Sherry Walker attended the Oct. 5 public hearing concerning the issue, and they returned for January's meeting to voice further opposition to the charge.

"I'm very disappointed," Walker said. "You know, I can't vote here because I live three quarters of a mile outside of city limits, but I've stood behind every one of y'all."

Mayor Gibby reiterated that there are seven pumps, and that, though the Timberline pump is "getting ready to lose it" or replace it, there is no way to predict the stability of the other six pumps, as they were installed at the same time with the same hardware.

The city has determined that the Timberline pump suffers



Young Harris City Councilman John Kelley taking notes in the January regular city meeting at City Hall.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

from elevation issues that make it work harder than it should, leading to costly repairs throughout the year.

"So, it's just our responsibility to pay for all that? It's not every resident in Young Harris?" Walker asked.

Gibby said she had written a grant to pay for "Timberline and any other charges that happen with any of (the city's) booster pumps," but it will be a while before the city knows whether it will receive the money.

"The council knows that I

wrote it," Gibby said of the grant. "We're waiting, and we probably won't know anything until mid-year next year."

Walker suggested that the city table the fee until the grant disposition is known, but Gibby said that, while she is "hoping" the state will support the request, she has no way of knowing whether they will or how much they will pay.

"I did it because I know we have a lot of problems on the

See City Council, Page 6A

Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds excited for events in 2022

By Jeremy Foster
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds is gearing up for a huge schedule of events throughout the rest of this year after having minimal events in 2021 and none in 2020 due to COVID-19.

It will certainly be an exciting year filled with plenty of new and returning musical acts and event festivals, and, of course, many special vendors for everyone to get out and enjoy.

Christian pop band "for KING & COUNTRY" will perform at Anderson Music Hall on Jan. 29, as will classic rock's Three Dog Night on Feb. 26.

Chris Janson will travel to town on his "Halfway to Crazy Tour" April 16, and that month will also feature the Mile Long Yard Sale April 22-23, the monthlong Rhododendron festival starting April 22, the Memory Lane Classic Car



Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason is excited to show off the new seating that will be installed inside Anderson Music Hall in 2022.

Photo by Jeremy Foster

be represented.

People won't want to miss this new festival, which will include a souvenir wine glass for near unlimited tastings with the purchase of a ticket, plus enjoyment of musical acts such as Wyatt Espal-

See Fairgrounds, Page 6A

CVB Board discusses tourism, promoting Towns County

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

In their Jan. 11 meeting, members of the Towns County Conventions and Visitors Bureau Board focused discussions on the year ahead and making progress supporting and promoting the community.

As a refresher, the Conventions and Visitors Bureau serves not as an organizer of local events but a support system. In short, any event or festival within the limits of the county may receive a CVB grant provided it meets certain requirements, like being a self-sufficient nonprofit.

See CVB Board, Page 6A



The Towns County Convention and Visitors Bureau Board welcomed the public to the Civic Center on Tuesday, Jan. 11.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Nichols, Roberts pay visit to Mountain Movers & Shakers

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County Parks and Recreation Director Stuart Nichols and Towns County Emergency Management Agency/911 Director Marty Roberts spoke at the Mountain Movers and Shakers breakfast meeting on Friday, Jan. 14.

Nichols, a Young Harris native, began with a brief description of his job responsibilities as head of Parks and Recreation for Towns County, jokingly saying that he does a lot more than lift weights and shoot basketball all day.

"It's very busy, it's multifaceted, and it's not just the recreation department – it's parks and recreation," said Nichols, adding that new Towns County-blue mulch had recently been put down at the County Beach as a start to re-dressing the area for next season.

Nichols said Towns is in District 7 of the Georgia Parks and Recreation Association, which is further categorized by population into categories A, B and C, with C being the smallest. He said Towns is the smallest of the C category, that is, the smallest of the small.

Though there are plans to have more activities for adults



Towns EMA Director Marty Roberts and Rec Director Stuart Nichols love working for the people of Towns County.

Photo by Mark Smith

within the recreation department in Towns County, Nichols admitted that the main focus of the Georgia Parks and Recreation Association is kids.

Of the just under 1,600 local kids from infant to age 18 reported in the latest census, Nichols said only about 25%, or less than 400, engage with the rec department through its sports programs: baseball, bas-

ketball, softball, T-ball and flag football.

"One of the things that I'm looking to do is increase that engagement with the kids of Towns County," he said. "And we're actively looking for programs and different things that we can do to get more kids involved in the rec department."

"I'm a firm believer in

See Movers & Shakers, Page 6A

January Term 2022 Towns Co. Grand Jury Indictments

The following individuals were indicted during the January Term 2022 of the Towns County Grand Jury, which met last week:

Andy Mathew Thurman, failure to register as a sex offender.

Brandon Scott Goforth, two counts child molestation; sexual battery against a child under 16.

Jennifer Lynn Williams, unlawful acts of violence in a penal institution; simple assault.

John Leo Lezinski, manufacture of marijuana; possession of methamphetamine; two counts possession of a firearm by a convicted felon; possession of marijuana with intent to distribute; possession of a firearm during

the commission of a felony; possession of drug-related objects.

Michael Keith Helms, terrorism threats; aggravated battery; simple battery.

Travis Justin Kelley, possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute; possession of a Schedule I controlled substance; possession of methamphetamine; possession of drug-related objects.

Michael Dafee Cragg, driving while license suspended.

Benjamin Jeffery Brown, possession of a Schedule II controlled substance; possession of marijuana, less than an ounce; driving under the influence (less safe) (drugs); failure to maintain lane; expired tag; distracted driving.

Candie Sue Merritt, possession of methamphetamine; possession of marijuana, less than an ounce; possession of drug-related objects.

Brittany Marie Collins, possession of methamphetamine.

Jarrett Evanlee Thomas, two counts burglary in the first degree; two counts criminal trespass.

Donna Lynn Livingston, trafficking methamphetamine or amphetamine; possession of methamphetamine; possession of drug-related objects; window tint violation.

The above individuals have been charged only and are presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

2 Sections 16 Pages

Arrests 2A

Church 4B

Classifieds 6B

Opinion 4A

Legals 6B

Obits 5B

Sports 2B

Inside

Lake Levels

Blue Ridge 1,671.39

Chatuge 1,918.03

Nottely 1,761.67

Barcode

SPORTS
BASKETBALL

1/21 vs. Greene Co. 6 PM

1/22 @ Lincoln Co. 5 PM

Top of Georgia
Speaking
Contest

Info.

See page 5A

TCHS
Wrestling
Senior Night

See page 2B

Josh
Turner
Tickets
On Sale Friday

See page 1B

Movers & Shakers...from Page 1A

movement – exercise and those kinds of things. It's not only good for your body, it's good for your emotional well-being, it's good for your mental wellbeing. We might be the smallest of the small, but we want to be the healthiest of the healthy."

Nichols said he wants to increase adult participation as well. There is a big local pickleball contingent, but he would like to see adults participate in other activities as well, and for the same reasons; movement and exercise make for emotional and mental stability and physical health.

"Of course, facilities management, field management, all those kind of things are constant and never-ending," he said. "There's always something going on that needs to be fixed or worked on. So, it's an interesting job, a fast-paced job ... and it's an honor to be able to serve Towns County in this capacity."

For more information on sports programs and activities, contact the Towns County Parks and Recreation Department at 706-896-2600.

Towns County EMA, 911 Dispatch and GIS Mapping Director Marty Roberts, also a Towns County native, said he has been with the Towns County EMA for about 14 years.

Roberts briefly described the evolution of Towns County's Emergency Management/911 program from an analog and paper map

dispatch system to a Computer Aided Dispatch system. He then transitioned to speaking about the current 911 system.

For a CAD system to work, a digital map of Towns County must be integrated into the Geographic Information System, or GIS, and that has been accomplished, he said.

"Mainly, today, I want to talk about our upgrade for the 911 system," said Roberts, adding that Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw had been instrumental in procuring the best 911 system available for the money, which they have, for about 30% under budget.

"In 2015 we started traveling around the state looking at different 911 centers – what they were purchasing, what they were putting in their 911 centers – because of Next Generation 911," he said.

At that time in 2015, the county was hearing that, by 2021, if the local dispatch center did not have the Next Generation 911 system in place, first responders would not be able to receive 911 calls.

"The problem with that is, there's still seven counties in the State of Georgia that do not have 911," Roberts said. "And for the Next Gen 911 to happen, everybody has to be on the new system. So, we're at 2022, and the Next Gen 911 system is still a few years off, but we are Next Gen compatible. We are ready to go. We have everything installed.

"We purchased a brand-

new CAD system, a brand-new phone system, brand-new GIS system. Our radios, in 2019, we changed from analog to digital," Roberts said, adding that digital radios came with a new set of problems operating in the mountains.

"But, at this point, we are up and running. We have everything state-of-the-art. When you call 911 now, it brings everything up in front of the dispatcher. We've put everything that we possibly could put into 911 to find people and get our ambulances, our Sheriff's Office, the Fire Department, whoever it might be, to you as fast as we can.

"I'm very proud of our dispatchers. We've got some excellent dispatchers. They really care about this county, and they care about getting people as fast as they can to you when you have a problem."

Roberts said the 911 center is closed to the general public at this time due to COVID-19 restrictions but is looking forward to allowing people to tour the facility when restrictions are lifted.

"We'll be glad to show you through the facility and a system that we're very proud of. We have one of the best 911 systems in the state," Roberts said, adding an encouraging word to people who may have a question about their address to call anytime.

The non-emergency 911 Dispatch Center phone number is 706-896-7460.

Fairgrounds...from Page 1A

in, The Murphs, Michael Jones and Austin Coleman.

Shows will be held on the Main Stage and the Sawmill Stage in rotation throughout the course of the event, and guests will have access to arts and crafts, food trucks, and tours of the blooming Hamilton Rhododendron Gardens.

Also in May, country music star Scotty McCreery will take the stage on May 14, and the wildly popular Hiawasee Pro Rodeo will return May 27-29.

The Happy Together Tour starring The Turtles, Chuck Negron (formerly of Three Dog Night), The Association, Gary Puckett & Union Gap, The Vogues and The Cowsills will occur June 4, and the Georgia Mountain Fair Fireworks will take off on the Fourth of July.

August will see the return of the annual nine-day Georgia Mountain Fair Aug. 19-27, with Dailey & Vincent's American Made Music Fest coming to town Sept. 15-17, and the 49th Annual Fall Regional Shelby/Mustang & Ford Meet happening Sept. 23-24.

Then, folks will get nine more days of festival fun with

the regionally renowned Georgia Mountain Fall Festival Oct. 7-15, plus the Appalachian Brew, Stew & Que Festival and a concert from 38 Special, both Oct. 22.

November will be the start of the holiday favorite "Mountain Country Christmas in Lights" Thanksgiving night, and in December, Dailey & Vincent will be back for their first ever local ChristmasFest for two days of country, bluegrass, gospel "and all the Christmas music you can handle!"

"In 2020, I was not able to have any concert events in the Anderson Music Hall," Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason said. "To be able to finally open back up and see people coming here locally and traveling all over makes me very excited for this year, because we are trying to promote tourism and local fun within our community.

"After the onset of the COVID pandemic, I believe we are full steam ahead. We were able to do more events and concerts last year in 2021, and this year we have many more things scheduled compared to last year, and we are continuing

to add to that.

"It is hard to pinpoint what we are most excited about promoting this year, because there is always something for everybody to enjoy, and everyone leaves here happier than the last time they came, so the whole process in general is worthwhile."

An interesting update for the fairgrounds this year is the refreshing of seating inside Anderson Music Hall. The plan is to replace the bench seats with cushioned movie-theater type individual seats.

"The project is proposed to begin in mid-April and hopefully finished by the end of June," Thomason said.

The benches will be put up for sale when the project is completed, and funding for the new seats will come from money raised between special events and donations. People will also be able to purchase individual seat placards in honor of or memory of someone else for a \$300 donation.

For additional scheduling information or to find out how to volunteer, visit www.georgiamountainfairgrounds.com, check out Facebook or call 706-896-4191. And stay tuned for events that will be added throughout the year.

CVB Board...from Page 1A

Every year, the CVB reviews incoming grant requests from planners and organizers, and while this is their primary function, the bureau has also "started doing PR" around the county.

"Really, by law, the only money we can spend is for advertising for the county," said Dr. Lanier Nicholson, Vice Chairman of the Towns County CVB. "We can't support their operational expenses or anything like that. It's got to be promotional.

"One thing that we do require is that the advertising be outside the immediate area. We don't want to pay for advertisement necessarily right here locally; we like to get outside 60 miles."

All the bureau's funding comes from local hotel-motel tax collections. The state set up a so-called "heads in beds" law specifically for taxing tourist lodgings. This is further reasoning behind the decision to advertise farther from home.

"It's grown (incredibly) since we got started in it," said CVB Board Chair Ronnie Phillips. "I think the first year we were doing this, we had about \$166,000 in hotel-motel tax revenue. Now, with the inclusion of the Brasstown Valley Resort and an increasing amount of bed and breakfast businesses, \$166,000 has become \$600,000 to \$700,000."

At the time of its beginning six years ago, the bureau

was only a tourism board, or a committee that consulted with the commissioner on local events. The council grew into the bureau it is today about four years ago with the election and involvement of Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw.

Currently, however, there are some hurdles to cross for the 2022 calendar. Perhaps the biggest blow to Towns County's tourism-specific plans is the fact that the annual Green Egg Festival has been canceled due to an unexplained lapse in communication by festival organizers.

Previously, EggFest organizers took on the responsibility of transporting green eggs for use by vendors to locations hosting festivals. But Phillips said that, out of 100 involved chefs, only three are willing to give it a shot because of how heavy and difficult the green eggs are to move.

Planning is underway to find a replacement for the event that will hopefully be "bigger and better" given the chance to grow over the years. Bradshaw said he liked the idea of using Blackstone Grills or a hosting barbecue festival to put more food-based events on the menu.

Also up for discussion was a longer-term project involving repairing the welcome signs at the county's limits. Nicholson said the "antiquated" signs, which were "not very pretty to begin with," should be

replaced with something easier on the eyes to "draw attention" to the county.

"We're looking at something with a stone base, maybe some heavy timbers, with a sign: 'Welcome to Towns County,'" he said.

Phillips cited inspiration from Union County's Sports Center sign, along with examples in Dawson and Dahlonega. Strategically speaking, the signs would work well somewhere along the highway expansion and relocation in the works for Young Harris.

"I think if we assume the two-lane road that's coming into Young Harris now would be the eastbound lanes – would work really good with our sign," Phillips said.

Regrettably, due to the current surge in COVID-19, access to the detainees who would normally have worked on the signs is limited.

"One of the biggest things that the county's dealing with right now is you haven't got the inmate crews anymore," Phillips said. "As far as what we've discussed, saving actually a ton of money using the state inmates and getting some of the specialized guys in there to do a lot of the work – I guess we'll just have to deal with that as COVID does its thing again."

On a positive note, there is another major car show on track for this spring at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

City Council...from Page 1A

mountain that we need to fix," Gibby said.

Walker once more forwarded the idea of having all water customers pay for the costs, as had been the practice until October, saying it was not fair to impose the fee only on people living above booster pumps.

"It could be spread out among every resident in Young Harris that gets water, and charge them \$3 instead of charging us \$26, which, like I said before, is like 75% of our water bill," Walker said.

Walker also requested again that the fee be placed on hold, and Gibby agreed to ask for a reconsideration at the upcoming Water/Sewer Committee meeting on Jan. 25 at 6 p.m. but said she could not predict the issue.

"I'm sorry, I really am," Gibby said, to which Walker replied, "Are you? Are you really?" before walking out.

Seven neighborhoods outside the city limits are affected by the booster pump surcharge, which comes in addition to the per usage water rates that start with a minimum monthly bill of \$24.62 for up to 1,500 gallons of water for customers outside city limits.

Also in the meeting, City Clerk Nicolette Wade swore in Mayor Gibby and Councilmen Donald Keys and John Kelley, who ran unopposed for re-election in the November 2021 Young Harris Municipal Elections.

In other business, for the annual departmental liaison assignments that are decided every January, Councilman Steve Clark suggested that council members remain on the same committees they were involved in during 2021, and all present agreed.

This includes Kelley, Clark and Terry Ingram on the Water/Sewer Committee; all council members on the Administrative Committee; Ingram, Keys and Matt Miller on the Tree Board/Street Committee; Clark as Planning Commission Liaison; Shirley Miller on the Li-

brary Board; and Shirley Miller and Clint Hobbs on the Ethics Commission.

Gibby said the plans for the ramp at Cupid Falls had gone to the Department of Natural Resources.

It was also announced that city worker Dean Stanley would be replacing Gary Willer to lead the Water/Maintenance Department after Willer retires this month. New maintenance workers have been hired, and Gibby believes they are promising due to their enthusiasm, hard work and intelligence.

Joint Development Authority Director Denise McKay said activity in the county is booming. She is looking for commercial properties that can be used for development, like Eastern Metal Printing, which will be expanding in Young Harris Industrial Park and should provide 10-15 new jobs in the first year alone.

Mayor Gibby thanked McKay for her part during the "exciting times" of expanding the city.

Attorney Harkins reported that, while the recent annexation of the Kaiser Dean Property and the old Fire Station was done properly, there also needed to be a public hearing.

The reason the public hearing is required is because the property must be zoned when it is annexed from the county, which does not have zoning, to inside city limits.

Harkins asked for a hearing sometime before the Feb. 1 regular city meeting. The plan is for Harkins to draft an ordinance to modify the annexation points so that it will be properly zoned into the city.

"So basically, it would be fully signed, sealed and delivered at the February meeting as soon as y'all are willing to approve it," he said.

The hearing will take place on Feb. 1 at 6:50 p.m. inside Young Harris City Hall.

As background, Young

Harris received the Kaiser Dean Property as a donation in 2018. John Kelley and Alvie Gibson purchased the Kaiser Dean Property and adjoining Fire Station Property at the end of last year.

Toward the end of the meeting, Gibby suggested that all seven booster pumps be thoroughly inspected pertaining to their hardware and condition in order to prioritize what comes after the Timberline pump.

She also suggested the city wells be checked for safety by engineering firms and painting contractors "when it comes to tanks." Gibby said this will be a push toward preparing for the future rather than simply reacting.

Councilman Miller asked for an update on the progress of the Georgia 515 bypass around Young Harris, which has been in the property acquisition stages for some time now.

Gibby and Harkins said the project was waiting on several disputes to be settled in court over how much money is being offered by the Georgia Department of Transportation for the properties needed to create the bypass.

Finally, the new city park has "continued to evolve," according to Councilman Kelley.

"Everything on the creek-side, from Brasstown Creek, has been totally underbrushed, totally cleaned up, and we're now putting about 6 inches of chips (donated by Blue Ridge Mountain EMC) all the way down the whole creek side," Kelley said. "It will be a nice place."

Mayor Gibby mentioned she is still looking to hire a new finance officer after the position came open at the end of 2021, and that she has a candidate. In the interim, Wade and Gibby continue to make sure the city's bills are paid.

In the December city meeting, council members adopted the 2022 budget and discussed the new Young Harris City website that will launch soon featuring a .gov address instead of .net.

The City Council and Mayor Gibby meet the first Tuesday of each month beginning at 7 p.m. at City Hall.

Winter Snow...from Page 1A

The Towns County Sheriff's Office kept people abreast of road conditions over the weekend and had reported no major weather-related accidents by press time. They strongly urged people Monday morning to "stay off the roads if you do not need to be out until it warms up," describing local roadways as "extremely treacherous."

Temperatures Monday were not expected to get above freezing after press time, meaning that black ice conditions likely persisted on some side roads into Tuesday, but temps were predicted to reach into the upper 40s Tuesday to resolve lingering icy conditions.

"We've been very, very fortunate - we did not get the brunt of this storm like, say, Habersham and some of the other counties did," Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw said

Monday morning. "We are very lucky. The biggest problems we had were downed trees.

"Right now, the Road Department's out working on ice spots here and there on the secondary roads around the county, and they have done a phenomenal job working around the clock to keep the roads open as far as trees go.

"I want to thank the Sheriff's Department as well for relaying messages and road conditions to the Road Department; they've been working very closely together. And thank you to all the public safety people, our volunteer Fire Department as well.

"They have all done a great job, but the biggest thing is, we were very fortunate that we did not get the worst part of the storm."

Out of an abundance of caution, Bradshaw announced

Monday that county government would be closing Tuesday, and he canceled his regular county meeting scheduled for Jan. 18.

Residents are advised to always prepare the best they can any time extreme weather is forecasted by, No. 1, staying at home if possible, and No. 2, making sure to have enough supplies to last several days if the power goes out.

Thankfully, Monday was the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, so students did not have to travel to school in icy conditions. As a bonus, kids ended up getting enough snow to play in, and it even snowed a little bit more in places Monday morning.

Towns County Schools announced Monday that, due to inclement weather, students in the system would be having an online learning day for Tuesday, Jan. 18.



Towns County was fortunate to have been spared a major snow event, though plenty of side roads were slick enough to keep many people home Monday morning. Photo by Todd



Like many places, SouthState Bank was closed in observance of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, though the weather may have been enough to have resulted in closure anyway.

Photo by Todd Forrest



McConnell Memorial Baptist Church in the snow Monday morning. Photo by Todd For-



A view of Hiawassee from above Brasstown Manor Sunday morning. Photo by Todd