

Towns County Herald

Legal Organ of Towns County

www.townscountyherald.net

Your Hometown Newspaper Since 1928

75 Cents

Publication Number 635540 Volume 96 Number 16

Wednesday, February 12, 2025

GA 515 bypass construction to resume next week

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

The Georgia Department of Transportation is estimating that work on the Young Harris Bypass will start back Monday after a lengthy pause that began last summer when a boulder containing Native American petroglyphs was inadvertently damaged during construction.

Also known as Phase I of the Georgia 515 reconstruction project, the two-lane bypass will serve as one bookend of the project to widen to four lanes roughly 7.5 miles of the highway between Blairsville and Young Harris city limits.

The bypass will be about 1.25 miles of new roadway

running around the west side of Young Harris, starting with one roundabout at GA 515 and Brasstown Creek Road and ending with another roundabout just north of Timberline Drive on GA 515.

Construction is getting back on track after a meeting on Friday, Feb. 7, between GDOT and the appropriate tribal authorities at the site of the damaged rock carvings in Young Harris.

It appears that the boulder containing the petroglyphs had been previously marked by state archeologists but that a miscommunication with subcontractor C.W. Matthews Contracting Co. resulted in the boulder being moved with construction equipment and

subsequently damaged.

After Friday's meeting, the state has arrived at a solution to resume construction on Feb. 17. Part of that solution will include the on-site presence of archaeologists – both state employees and third-party professionals – to monitor the bypass project for the remainder of the build.

"There's going to be people out there monitoring the construction site, both for construction work and for the general public, because they don't want the general public being in those areas, either," GDOT District 1 Communications Officer Nathan Johnston said.

Archaeologists will also
See *Bypass Construction*, Page 12



Much work has already been done to cut in the new Young Harris Bypass, with construction slated to resume next week.
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Hiawassee seeking public input on House Bill 581

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Between the called meeting and work session on Jan. 27 and the regular meeting on Feb. 4, the Hiawassee City Council and Acting Mayor Jay Chastain Jr. have kept busy, addressing topics ranging from House Bill 581 to the water overpayment by the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

The only order of business from the called meeting was a motion to approve the Paris Business Center lease for the city-owned Paris Buildings to be operated by the Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority as a regional business incubator.

"If the city leases this or any part of it for more than 30 days, it basically has to be done like a disposition, with sealed bids or an auction," City Attorney Thomas Mitchell said. "This (lease agreement) makes it a little more efficient.

"The city leases to the DDA, and they sublease. None of the management agreement that we entered into with the DDA changes, and this is not a substantial change to our ar-



Hiawassee Acting Mayor Jay Chastain Jr., right, leading the Feb. 4 regular meeting of the Hiawassee City Council.

range ment." DDA Board members previously authorized their end of the lease agreement, and the City Council approved it unanimously on Jan. 27.

HB 581 DISCUSSION

During the work session, Mitchell discussed House Bill 581, a state law that went into effect Jan. 1 to establish a new homestead exemption supported locally and statewide by voters who approved a con-

stitutional amendment to enact the law in the November General Election.

State lawmakers passed the bill last year to give homeowners a tax break by preventing rapid increases in value assessments – and therefore property tax bills – amid a dramatically inflated housing market, as experienced in recent years with pandemic-era relocations across the state.

Another way to look at HB 581 is that it aims to re-

See *Hiawassee City Meeting*, Page 2

Commemorating 80 years since Battle of Iwo Jima

By Alton "Doc" Coleman
Marine Corps League 783
Commandant

In recognition of the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Iwo Jima, the Marine Corps League's Unicoi Detachment 783 will host the annual Iwo Jima Memorial Ceremony at the Towns County Recreation and Conference Center in Young Harris.

The indoor ceremony will commence at 10 a.m. on Monday, Feb. 17.

This year's keynote speaker will be U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Frank J. Lozano, Program Executive Officer Missiles and Space in Redstone Arsenal, Alabama.

As the Program Executive Officer, Gen. Lozano is responsible for the development, production, fielding, sustainment, and international program aspects for assigned missile and space systems. His operational and combat experience includes deployments to Bosnia, Kuwait and Iraq.

All Veteran Service Organizations, as well as the public, are invited to attend the anniversary event. After the ceremony, attendees are invited to remain and enjoy



Frank J. Lozano
U.S. Army Major General

cake, coffee and camaraderie. During the engagement at Iwo Jima 80 years ago, U.S. Marines would see some of the most horrific fighting during World War II.

U.S. Expeditionary Forces would be made up of Marines from the 3rd, 4th and 5th Marine Divisions, led by U.S. Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Harry Schmidt, along with the Navy's Fifth Fleet, command-

See *Battle of Iwo Jima*, Page 12

Young Harris to hold two more HB 581 hearings



Young Harris City Councilman Matt Miller in the Feb. 4 public hearing to considering opting out of the floating homestead exemption as outlined in HB 581.

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

On Tuesday, Feb. 4, the City of Young Harris held its first of three required public hearings to consider opting out of the statewide floating homestead exemption that was established by the passage of a constitutional amendment in

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

the 2024 General Election. By default, all local governments are "opted in" to the exemption and other stipulations of the new law, but the exemption has raised concerns by some elected officials about the ability to generate adequate operating revenues over time without having to increase the property tax rate.

Local governments – counties, cities and school districts – can opt out of the exemption, but to do so, they must hold three advertised public hearings and adopt a resolution by March 1. So, the clock is ticking.

Young Harris City Council members are still in the process of considering the exemption and are expected to decide whether to opt out at or before their last public hearing that has been scheduled for next week.

No members of the public commented during last week's hearing, and City Attorney Marvin Harkins suggested that the county tax commissioner be invited to one of the remaining hearings to better inform the council on the potential impacts of the exemption.

The City Council and Mayor Andrea Gibby set the next two public hearings during their regular monthly meeting that followed the Feb. 4 hearing. The upcoming hearings will be Tuesday, Feb. 18, at 6 p.m. and Wednesday, Feb. 19, at 6 p.m. inside City Hall at 50 Irene Berry Drive.

Council members will
See *City of Young Harris*, Page 5

Annual Night to Shine welcomes 94 royal guests



Night to Shine once again featured the popular Party Bus that made its way around the Blairsville Square with plenty of local fanfare Feb. 7.
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

BLAIRSVILLE – Sponsored by the Tim Tebow Foundation, the Night to Shine has been a staple of community solidarity since 2015. This year, it was observed by 820 churches across 60 countries, including right here in the United States.

Closer to home, the an-

nual celebration is held at the First United Methodist Church of Union County and welcomes guests from Union, Towns and Fannin counties across Georgia, and North Carolina counties Clay and Cherokee.

The magical night fell on Friday, Feb. 7, with 94 guests enjoying the celebration with buddies and caretakers. In addition to that, 315

volunteers helped put everything together and kept things running smoothly. It's worth noting that attendance was slightly up compared with past events.

2025 was extra special because of the inclusion of a third bus, according to local event organizer Scott Terry. One of the highlights of the night is to ride one of the party
See *Night to Shine*, Page 6

12 Pages



Vol. 96 No. 16

Arrests - 2 Opinions - 4
Chamber - 5 Legals - 11
Church - 8 Obits - 9
Classifieds - 11 Sports - 10

Lake Levels

Blue Ridge 1,670.07
Chatuge 1,918.52
Nottely 1,762.47

Towns Co. High Student Achievement See Page 5

Senior Center Meal Fundraiser See Page 6

Quilt of Valor Recipient MacKim See Page 12

The support you need for your next big dream.
Talk to me today about your loan and line of credit options.

Tina Denton | 706-435-1104 | Hiawassee Main Office | NMLS #744611

© 2024 United Community Bank | NMLS #421841 | ucbi.com/borrowing
This is not a commitment to lend. Normal credit criteria apply.

United Community

Hiawassee City Meeting...from Page 1

duce local governments' reliance on certain homeowners to provide tax revenues for operating expenses by shifting the burden to sales taxes and other property classes such as commercial, industrial and rental properties.

It potentially accomplishes this by creating new tax mechanisms, one called a

Floating Local Option Sales Tax, or FLOST, and the other a Floating Homestead Exemption, or FHE, the latter of which is tied to a common measure of inflation such as the Consumer Price Index.

The new exemption essentially means that reassessments of homesteaded properties must be capped at the

inflation rate, which over time can significantly impact the amount of property tax dollars local governments collect unless they raise their property tax rates.

As a counterbalance to that concern, HB 581 allows taxing authorities to call a local referendum for a new 1% sales tax, that is, the FLOST, to offset losses in property taxes. All taxing authorities of a county must be opted in, however, to enable such a local referendum.

Thus, HB 581 provides relief to homeowners while potentially balancing the revenue needs of local governments.

Local governments are "opted in" by default but have until the beginning of March to opt out of the floating homestead exemption. One caveat: if they do opt out, the decision is final.

"We really need to have a vote on this as soon as possible," Mitchell said. "We'll need to hold three meetings, at least two of those at least a week apart. They have to be advertised similar to what we have to do when you set the millage rate.

"It sounds like Young Harris is going to opt out. Towns County isn't doing anything, so it looks like it will take effect in Towns County.

"There is going to be an impact. I don't think it will be as substantial as it sounds like it will be. For instance, when Hiawassee published its five-year history last year, the total value of real and personal property was \$162 million and change, and the exempt property was a little over \$13 million.

"I estimate that the (Floating Homestead Exemption) will impact about 8% of your digest here in the City of Hiawassee, somewhere between \$10,000 and \$20,000."

The City Council invites residents to attend the three upcoming public hearings to offer council members input as they consider whether to opt out of the new exemption.

These meetings will be held at Hiawassee City Hall in the upstairs training room on Feb. 12 at 5:30 p.m., Feb. 20 at 12 p.m. and Feb. 20 at 6 p.m.

HOTEL-MOTEL TAX CORRECTION

In other work session business, Attorney Mitchell noted that "the hotel-motel tax

the city adopted needs clarification."

"While the ordinance imposes an 8% tax, there is a provision regarding collection by the operators (that) still says 5%, and at least one of our operators has resisted the 8%," Mitchell said. "So, you will be amending the provision to make it consistent.

"The city went through the process and had the local legislation passed; this is just a clean-up."

Council members subsequently voted to enact the correction in their Feb. 4 regular meeting.

US 76 REPAIR BILL

Also in the January work session, Chastain provided a report on the road damage that occurred during a water main fix on US 76 at Sundance Grill in the aftermath of the Jan. 10 snowstorm.

"At approximately 2:18 a.m. on Jan. 11, I received a call from (Water Department Manager Carl Grizzle) saying we have a major problem," Chastain began. "It turns out we've got water mains busted in several different places and water gushing up through the pavement.

"Keep in mind that it was 12 degrees, and water was freezing on the road. We had to cut off water and do a lot of work to find the leaks. We had a tough time even finding the line; the maps we have are outdated.

"We had to cut through 18 inches of asphalt - pretty tough to do when it's that cold. It was all hands on deck. Please keep in mind if it breaks in one spot it'll probably break in another.

"I had to call (the Georgia Department of Transportation). We had to deviate traffic. They had requirements for fixing the pavement. We had to pour 8 inches of concrete and then leave 6 inches for the asphalt.

"You can't get asphalt until its 44 degrees and the temperature is climbing. DOT told us we could open the lane back up if we put 1-inch-thick steel plates over the hole, welded together and overlapping the pavement.

"Long story short, after many challenges imposed by DOT, we finally got it fixed, but much of it was out of my control. The bad news is, I asked DOT to help pay for the fix, (and) they said if you dig it up, you fix it."

Chastain said that "the bottom line is the city is going to be on the hook for it all," which came to \$19,241.01 to pay for the steel plates, welding, concrete, Bill Allen Construction and Caldwell Paving. The council voted to ratify the payments on Feb. 4.

"Something that went in conjunction with this is the snow," Chastain added. "I've been here 55 years and I've never seen snow hang around this long, at this magnitude or the temperatures that followed. The city does not and has never had snow removal equipment.

"The county's responsible for that, and they had all they could do to keep up with it. But we are responsible for utilities and roads within the city. We need to look at something regarding snowplows or spreaders or something. If it's going to be cheaper to contract someone for snow removal, I'm all for that."

WATER OVERPAYMENT

Georgia Mountain Fair Authority Board Member Terry Taylor asked to speak in the work session regarding the computer error by the city that resulted in the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds overpaying for water last year to the tune of \$26,571.91.

Taylor said that Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason had asked him to present a request to the council.

"As you know, we've had a problem with our water bill," Taylor said. "We've spent over a year to find a leak that the city said we had. Eventually it was determined that the billing has been incorrectly calculated by a computer glitch. We ended up overpaying the city by close to \$30,000, and we're asking for that to be reimbursed.

"But we also had expenses that we would not have spent unless the city had insisted that it was our problem. So, we hired leak detection companies and plumbers to come in and find the problem, but there wasn't one. The bills amounted to approximately \$30,000, and we're asking for reimbursements for that as well."

According to City Attorney Mitchell, it would be considered a gratuity if the city

paid the contractor expenses.

Chastain assured everyone that the "computer glitch" had been resolved, and on Feb. 4, the council voted to reimburse the \$26,571 in overpayment of the water and sewer bill.

In other business Feb.

4, the council appointed Municipal Court Clerk Sheryl Branson to serve as deputy city clerk under City Clerk Bonnie Kendrick. The appointment came after Branson started filling in for Kendrick during the latter's recent vacation.

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

- 02/07/25 David August Gott, age 39, Young Harris, GA Serve 30 days
- 02/07/25 Jacob Dale Morgan, age 26, Robbinsville, NC Serve 120 days
- 02/07/25 Nicholas George Sherman, age 24, Young Harris, GA Serve 60 days
- 02/04/25 Jarrett Evan Lee Thomas, age 24, East Point, GA Criminal trespass
- 02/04/25 John Henry Couch, age 21, Lavonia, GA Driving while license suspended or revoked (misdemeanor)
- 02/09/25 Cody James Watson, age 35, Hiawassee, GA Driving while license suspended or revoked (misdemeanor)

FIRE DEPARTMENT RESPONSE REPORT

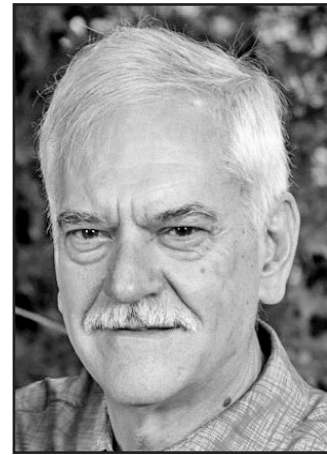
From: Fire Chief Harold Copeland



- 01/31/25 Medical assist, assist EMS crew (3) Extrication of victim(s) from vehicle Brush or brush-and-grass mixture fire False alarm or false call, other Smoke scare, odor of smoke
- 02/01/25 Setting up LZ for Air Evac/EMS Dispatched and cancelled en route Public service
- 02/02/25 Assist police or other governmental agency Setting up LZ for Air Evac/EMS (2) Dispatched and cancelled en route Gas leak (natural gas or LPG)
- 02/03/25 Medical assist, assist EMS crew (3) Dispatched and cancelled en route (5) Alarm system activation, no fire - unintentional Medical assist, assist EMS crew Brush or brush-and-grass mixture fire
- 02/04/25 Dispatched and cancelled en route Medical assist, assist EMS crew (3)
- 02/05/25 Dispatched and cancelled en route Brush or brush-and-grass mixture fire Medical assist, assist EMS crew (2)
- 02/06/25 Medical assist, assist EMS crew (5) Dispatched and cancelled en route (3) Motor vehicle accident with no injuries Dispatched and cancelled en route Medical assist, assist EMS crew (3)
- 02/07/25 Dispatched and cancelled en route (Fire Alarm)
- 02/08/25 Medical assist, assist EMS crew (3)



Movers & Shakers Welcome Danny Meeks and Elaine McEver from "Almost There"



Danny Meeks



Elaine McEver

It is a tenet of substance abuse dissuasion that the person must change their environment, as their current situation probably encourages continued abuse. New friends, new living arrangements, everything to break the cycle. But how? In Towns and Union Counties, we have Almost There, an organization dedicated to helping Women Break Free From The Cycle Of Addiction.

So we are honored to welcome Danny Meeks, President

and Elaine McEver, Founder/VP to explain how their organization works with the court system to bring women into a safe, supervised living arrangement. This is truly God's work, guiding these women back to society, and hopefully rejoining these women with their families and community.

So please join us at the pleasant Sundance Grill this Friday, February 14 at 8 AM to learn more and how you might get involved. www.almostthere.org

YHC Website launches new look

The Young Harris College website is launching a new look and feel today, adding some new features designed to improve the user experience.

Highlighting the beauty of the Enchanted Valley and the spirit and energy of Mountain Lion students, the new site has incorporated a number of large photographs of the campus - each linked to a different area of the website.

In addition to the refreshed home page, the site features a new section designed specifically for students - Mountain Lion Central. The new section pulls together the most frequently visited areas by students into one page on the site, creating a one-stop shop.

One more new feature

to the site is a chatbot, Luke the Mountain Lion. Anchored at the right-hand bottom corner of the site, Luke can be accessed at any time and is designed to answer any question about YHC. Luke knows everything about YHC and can help visitors access information they need.

"We are constantly evaluating the performance of the website and working to improve the user experience for our Mountain Lions, their parents, our alums and donors - and anyone visiting www.yhc.edu," said Steve Esser, Communications director at YHC. "We hope visitors find the new features are helpful, and rest assured we are always monitoring the site and looking for ways to improve the experience." www.yhc.edu



Chamber Chronicles

The official source of Towns County Chamber News

Wednesday, February 12, 2025

Welcome to our Newest Members!

Blairsville Bikes & Gear- Hudson Terrell, Owner-49F Blue Ridge Street, Blairsville, GA Phone:(706)745-8141 Website: www.blairsvillebikes.com Facebook: Blairsville Bikes & Gear Email: blairsvillebikes@gmail.com Our dream is to provide bike enthusiasts quality equipment and gear so that they can do what they love: explore this amazing place we call home. We invite you to come along for the ride as we grow our service offerings to become your go-to resource.

Dock Cares- Blairsville, GA – Phone: (706)897-6449 Website: www.dockcares.com Facebook: Dock Cares. Serving Lake Nottely, Lake Blue Ridge, Hiwassee Dam, and Lake Chatuge. Dock Cares is an authorized ShoreMaster products dealer, specializing in customizing, installing, repairing, maintaining and monitoring boat docks and lifts.

The Richard Kelley Group- Emily Price, Realtor- 1352 Main Street, Ste 8, Young Harris, GA Phone; (828) 361-8323 Website: www.therkg.com Facebook: The Richard Kelley Group- “My background in finance and my insight as a local gives me a unique skill set to assist you in your home buying and selling process. I look forward to helping you find your dream home in the mountains.”

Lake Chatuge Cruise- Paul Roberts, Owner- 5192 Pine Crest Road, Young Harris, GA Phone:(706) 770-1026 Website: www.chatugecruise.com Facebook: Chatuge Cruise. Looking for an easy way to enjoy Lake Chatuge- without the expense of owning or renting a boat? Bookings begin April 1, 2025.

Chamber Events & Programs

Save the Date: Made in Georgia 2025- June 28 & 29, 2025- TC Recreation & Conference Center *Vendor Applications are open now!* Call us for an application.

Follow us: Facebook & Instagram: Visit Lake Chatuge & Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce
Thanks to all our members for their continued support! Additionally, we'd like to thank these Platinum and Gold Members:

PLATINUM MEMBERS: Blue Ridge Mountain EMC; Century 21 Black Bear Realty; Hiwassee Holiday KOA, Lake Chatuge Lodge; Mountain Realty; Peach State Federal Credit Union; SouthState Bank, N.A.; The Ridges Resort on Lake Chatuge; United Community Bank; Windstream Communications.

GOLD MEMBERS: Bennett Equipment; Brasstown Manor; Brasstown Valley Resort & Spa; Brother's Restaurant at Willow Ranch; Chatuge Regional Hospital; Chick-fil-A of Blairsville; Er-langer Western Carolina Hospital; Holiday Inn Express & Suites-Hiwassee;; Hughes Accounting; K. Boyer Photography; Little Bear Rentals & Property Management; MainStreet Grill; Men on the Move; NeuroSport Physical Therapy LLC; Phoenix Roofing Systems, LLC; Ridgeline Exteriors & Roofing; ServiceMaster Restoration; Tri-County Office Supply, and Young Harris College.

For information on becoming a member of the Lake Chatuge Chamber of Commerce, visit www.golakechatuge.com or call Mary Ann at (706) 896-4966 or email her at LCChamber2021@gmail.com.

Legislative Update: Georgia Representative Stan Gunter

The Georgia House of Representatives returned to the State Capitol on Monday, February 3rd to begin the fourth week of the 2025 legislative session. As we settle into the rhythm of our legislative work, our attention is shifting toward the policy areas that will shape our priorities for the remainder of the session. This week, our efforts were focused on fulfilling our constitutional duty to pass a balanced budget. The House Rules Committee convened for the first time this year and set the first Rules calendar of the session. House Bill 67, the Amended Fiscal Year (AFY) 2025 budget, which outlines the state's spending through the end of the current fiscal year, ending June 30, 2025, was added to the calendar for a full vote by the House and passed that day with bipartisan support.

The House's version of the AFY 2025 budget is set by a revised estimate of \$40.5 billion, including \$2.7 billion in surplus funds for a total infusion of \$4.4 billion, which is an increase of 12.2 percent over the original Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 budget. The House's version of the AFY 2025 budget emphasizes strengthening Georgia's economy while also prioritizing early education, healthcare, higher education and public safety. One of the most critical areas addressed in the House's version of the amended budget is the urgent need to provide ample relief and funding for Georgians impacted by Hurricane Helene. In light of the widespread devastation caused by the storm, it is essential that we continue to direct the necessary resources toward relief and recovery efforts for those who were affected.

Following the storms, rural Georgians are facing barriers to accessing quality healthcare and challenges in receiving timely medical care. To resolve this concern, the House's version of the AFY 2025 budget provides \$35.6 million in one-time stabilization grants to support Georgia's rural hospitals in their recovery efforts. Additionally, the House's version of the AFY 2025 budget includes \$10 million in grant funds specifically allocated for relief from Hurricane Helene, further reinforcing the state's commitment to aiding in the recovery of those impacted by the storm.

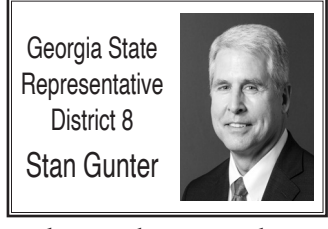
My colleagues and I remain committed to school security, and the House's version of the AFY 2025 budget includes \$50 million for school security grants, which would provide \$21,635 per school for one-time security expenses. When combined with the \$109 million in base funding, school systems would receive a total of \$68,759 per school in FY 2025. Additionally, \$3 million is allocated to the Georgia Emergency Management Agency (GEMA) to establish funds for a school risk assessment system, with the objec-

tive of safeguarding our state's young learners. Under HB 67, the House proposes \$7.42 million in new lottery funds for the Department of Early Care and Learning to implement recommendations from the House Early Childhood Education Working Group.

In addition to prioritizing access to healthcare in Georgia's rural communities, the House's version of the amended budget is also focused on improving healthcare access across the entire state, ensuring that all Georgia communities have the care they need. One way the House is prioritizing this goal is by recommending a one-time \$25 million investment for Mercer School of Medicine, aimed at expanding learning opportunities and training physicians to practice in rural, underserved communities where healthcare needs are most critical. Additionally, the House proposes another \$25 million investment for Morehouse School of Medicine, which would support faculty recruitment and retention, modernize the medical curriculum and expand the pathway and career academy program. Furthermore, the House's version of the AFY 2025 budget recommends \$2 million be allocated to the HOPE Grant program, which would support increased usage and expanded eligibility, as well as an additional \$6 million for HOPE Scholarships, bringing the total appropriation to \$852 million, which would benefit more than 300,000 students across the state.

The House is also dedicated to addressing the critical needs within Georgia's corrections system, including correctional officers, staff and inmates, which remains a top priority this legislative session. As such, the House's version of the budget recommends an infusion of \$333.6 million for the Georgia Department of Corrections, including \$214 million earmarked for safety, security and technology upgrades, with \$35 million allocated specifically for security technology to combat contraband. Additionally, the House recommends directing \$50.6 million for inmate healthcare services and \$15 million for the creation of a state-owned electronic healthcare records system. Further, \$10.5 million would also be allocated for new body cameras and tasers to enhance the safety of both officers and inmates, and \$7.2 million would be set aside for the Over Watch Logistics Unit to provide continuous surveillance and response coordination.

HB 67 now heads to the Senate for consideration, where it will undergo a similar review process. If the two chambers cannot reach an agreement on HB 67, a conference committee will be appointed to resolve any differences between the two versions. It is essential that my colleagues in both chambers



work together to advance this bill, ensuring we move quickly to bring this much-needed funding to the people who need it most. Once both chambers can reach an agreement, the final version of the amended budget will be sent to the governor for signature. This same process will be followed for the Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 budget, which is what we will turn our attention to next.

Beyond the amended budget, we took time to address other legislative initiatives, such as school safety. In response to the tragic shooting at Apalachee High School in Barrow County on September 4, 2024, the Speaker of the House unveiled a new school safety plan earlier this week. The plan, proposed under House Bill 268, would include the establishment of a state-wide School and Student Safety Database (S3), designed to consolidate student data in order to identify potential security risks. It would also require each school district to establish risk management teams, consisting of administrators, mental health professionals and law enforcement. To further enhance safety, the plan would mandate the use of an anonymous reporting app, allowing students and staff to report concerns confidentially. The plan would also allocate \$50 million in one-time school safety grants to support these initiatives and provide additional funding for the development of the S3 database. To address mental health, the plan would create mental health coordinator positions in schools and require instruction in violence prevention and suicide awareness. The plan would also encourage responsible gun ownership through voluntary tax incentives for safe storage equipment and gun safety training courses. I will update you as this legislation makes its way through the legislative process.

The Georgia House of Representatives will continue its legislative work on Monday, February 10th as we begin our fifth week of session. With Crossover Day quickly approaching, we're gearing up for a busy period ahead, where bills and resolutions must pass out of their respective chambers. As always, I encourage you to reach out with any questions or concerns about the work being done at the Capitol. Feel free to schedule a call or visit to discuss the issues that are most important to you and your family. You can reach my Capitol office at 404-656-5125 and via email at Stan.Gunter@house.ga.gov.

As always, thank you for allowing me to serve as your representative. (NFeb12,22Z)CA

FBLA competed at Region Leadership Conference



Seventeen Future Business Leaders of America members competed at the Region Leadership Conference during January, 2025. Three of these students finished in First Place with eleven competitors in the Top Ten!

Ten of these competitors will advance to State Conference competition in March. Congratulations to all!

(L-R) back: Leland Wilson – Intro to Public Speaking, Connor Williams – Word Processing, Kya Smith – Computer Applications, Jada Reynolds – Word Processing, Loftin Turpin – Public Speaking, Payten Wolf – Intro to Business Communications; front: Katelyn Walls – Intro to Business Procedures, Ansleigh Hardin – Spreadsheet Applications, Madison Molina – Spreadsheet Applications, Ava Thompson and Madilyn Walls – Intro to Business Presentation TFeb12,A5JH

Towns County Commissioner signs Proclamation: February 9-15 Future Business Leaders of America Week



Jada Reynolds, Katelyn Walls, Kya Smith, Ansleigh Hardin, Loftin Turpin, and Connor Williams with Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw signing the official proclamation.

Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw signed the official proclamation declaring February 9-15, 2025 as Future Business Leaders of America week here in Towns County. We will celebrate our student members and their achievements throughout the week! TFeb12,A5JH

City of Young Harris...from Page 1

vote on a decision immediately after the third public hearing, in a called meeting at 6:15 p.m. on Feb. 19. The public is invited and encouraged to attend all meetings of the city.

Young Harris receives a relatively small amount of revenues from property taxes compared to its operating budget, with most operating revenues coming in the form of Local Option Sales Tax collections, so the ultimate impact of the floating homestead exemption is likely to be low.

Backed by House Bill 581 that was signed into law last April, the primary aim of state lawmakers is to provide tax relief to homeowners by offering a new exemption limiting annual assessment increases on homesteaded properties to the prior year's inflation rate.

The inflation rate will be determined by the State Revenue Commissioner, who will use a common measure of inflation such as the Consumer Price Index, which has been hovering close to 3% over the last year.

For homes receiving the new exemption this year, 2024 will serve as the base year for setting the assessed value of a homesteaded property, while a property's base value will reset in the event of a home sale or can be adjusted upward if there is a "substantial property change."

According to the Association County Commissioners of Georgia, the new float-

ing homestead exemption "is in addition to and not in lieu of all non-floating homestead exemptions."

And if there is an existing local floating homestead exemption – as is the case in Towns County for county and school taxing purposes – "the taxpayer will receive whichever of the two exemptions is more beneficial."

Essentially, the exemption "floats" by increasing the exemption amount from year to year if applicable to reduce the taxable value of a homesteaded property that would otherwise be subject to inflation in the housing market, which went wild during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Legislators felt the bill necessary to assist homeowners who saw their values – and by extension, their tax bills – skyrocket after COVID, when many people re-located to less densely populated area like Towns County, driving up fair market values and causing rapid assessment increases.

As the exemption is for homesteaded properties, only people who have claimed a homestead on their primary residence stand to benefit from the assessment cap; commercial, rental and second-home properties, for example, will be fully subject to upward fluctuations in real-estate markets.

Ratified by local and state voters in the November election, the bill also creates a new 1% Floating Local Option Sales Tax "to further

offset property taxes" should voters decide to support such a measure via countywide referendum, and HB 581 includes some reforms to the property tax process as well.

Importantly, a referendum for the new sales tax could only be called if all governmental bodies in a county are subject to the exemption, that is, if none of the taxing authorities opt out. Like with the current LOST, FLOST would bring with it an additional rollback to the millage rate.

A local government "opting out" of the exemption is permanent at present, though the General Assembly could introduce legislation down the road to make changes to the process as deemed necessary.

Any government that chooses to opt out retains the option of enacting a local floating homestead exemption in the future.

Full coverage of the Feb. 4 regular city meeting that followed the first public hearing will appear in an upcoming edition of the Towns County Herald.

McConnell earns Faculty Honors

William McConnell of Hiwassee, GA, earned the distinction of Faculty Honors for Fall 2024 at the Georgia Institute of Technology. This designation is awarded to undergraduate students who have earned a 4.0 academic average for the semester. TFeb12,A2JH

Night to Shine...from Page 1

buses around the Blairsville Square.

"We were really hurting for our guests that were not able to ride the buses because of mobility issues, and so we started last year talking with some folks, and the county was generous enough to allow us to use one of their wheelchair-accessible vehicles," explained Terry.

The buses, decorated each year to match changing color schemes, allow the rest

of the community to interact with the event's kings and queens. It's become a tradition for people to line the streets of Downtown Blairsville when the party buses make their three rounds, waving and cheering for the riders inside.

For how much fun the kings and queens have, their caregivers are also treated to a night out. Families and partners are served dinner and can even participate in a raffle and play games like music bingo.

Samantha Matheson's sister Morgan was one of the queens for the night, and this was their third year attending from Hiawassee. Matheson admitted it brought her joy to see her sister get so excited in the months leading up to Night to Shine.

"It's a great opportunity for people in need with disabilities," Matheson said. "It's great for the community; everyone is willing to help no matter what."



2025 Night to Shine was a joyous occasion filled with music and dancing for the 94 special guests who arrived from five different area counties. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks



Dressed to the nines and sporting royal headgear, the Kings and Queens of the Night to Shine event on Friday were treated to the crowd-favorite balloon drop to close out the evening at First United Methodist Church. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Meanwhile, John Riley of Hayesville was cutting a rug on the dancefloor with his friends and his buddy for the night, Jan Teagle. Teagle, who lives in Union County, is a retired special education teacher, and she calls the Night to Shine attendees her "tribe."

"He's been the best date I've had in years," said Teagle with a grin. "I can't say enough about this charming young man, and he's the best dancer out there."

According to Riley, his mother taught him all his moves. Aurellia Riley was there to reunite with him at the end of the night, and she was thankful for the chance the Night to Shine gave for her son to go out and have a great time.

"I love it," John said of the event, echoing the sentiment of his peers, all of whom were crowned kings and queens at the end of the night. To wrap up, everyone was

given the chance to return to the dancefloor as their caretakers watched from the walkway above.

"Our Night to Shine," performed by Rascal Flatts, is the official theme of the worldwide phenomenon, and is always played as the kings and queens enjoy one final dance. Balloons, held in a net above the crowd throughout the evening, are released in one final hurrah, carrying the love of an entire community with them.

Mountain Lions hire Howard as next volleyball head coach

Young Harris College has announced the hiring of Ginny Howard as the new Head Coach for the Women's Volleyball Program.

Athletic Director Aaron Bessey expressed his excitement, noting Howard's passion for coaching and her ability to lead the program into a new era.

Howard brings extensive experience, including a successful stint as Head Varsity Volleyball Coach at J.H. Rose High School, where she led her team to the 2024 NCVBCA 3A Coach of the Year award and the NCHSAA 3A State Championship. Her coaching background also includes roles with various clubs and schools, where she has been recognized for developing athletes both on and off the court.

A former college player at Barton College, Howard



Ginny Howard

is excited to lay the groundwork for a successful future at Young Harris College and guide the team toward achieving their goals in the 2025

season and beyond.

In other news, on the morning of Feb. 7, Mountain Lions brass met with the local Mountain Movers



L-R: William "Scotty" Scott, John Lichtenwalner (Men's and Women's Golf head coach), Stephen Waggener (Baseball head coach) and Aaron Bessey (Athletic Director)

and Shakers Association, a nonpartisan civic group that meets every Friday at Sun-

dance Grill to foster community engagement and support the Youth Leadership

Development Program, with a focus this year on Helping Students Succeed.

Towns County High Celebrates Career & Technical Education Month



(L-R) front: Sarah Vardo, Christie Melton, Emma Schuette, Breanna Dye, Ava King, Lilly Cannon; back: Drew Livingston, Connor Williams, Ansleigh Hardin, Jada Reynolds, and Sen. Hatchett

Towns County Schools is excited to celebrate February as Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education (CTAE) month. To kick off the month's activities, Commissioner Bradshaw joined TCHS FBLA, FFA, and

HOSA members, officers, and sponsors to sign a Proclamation recognizing Towns County's CTAE programs as "rigorous, progressive, and vital part[s] of the total education system" committed to providing learning oppor-

tunities for "valuable career and life skills."

On February 5, the TCHS Career Technical Student Organization (CTSO) officers from FBLA, FFA, and HOSA joined other schools from across the state at the CTSO Legislative Day at the Capitol. This was an opportunity for students to see the legislative process in action, meet with legislators representing their local district, and advocate for continued support of CTAE and CTSOs. Members of the CTSO Leadership Teams visited the House and Senate galleries to hear discussions, watched Governor Kemp's photo sessions with visiting lobbyists and special interest groups, and had a chance



(L-R) front: Lilly Cannon, Katelyn Walls, Jada Dyer, Ruth Taylor; back: Sen. Hatchett, Haylee Krokonko, Loftin Turpin, Kya Smith, Payten Wolf, Gabe Eller, Sabrina Garrett

to meet Senator Bo Hatchett, who represents State Senate District 50. Senator Hatchett paused for a group picture then spoke with students about their CTSOs. The day provided a full slate of activities geared toward student learning and leadership growth.

Upcoming February activities will include preparations for CTSO state competitions and February and March Advisory Council meetings. Anyone interested in Career, Technical, and Agricultural Education or Career Technical Student Organizations at Towns County High School should feel free to reach out to Brooke Whitt, CTAE Director for Towns County Schools.



TCHS Principal Bryan Thomason watches as Commissioner Bradshaw signs Career and Technical Education Month Proclamation

NGTC President's List and Honor Roll for Fall Semester 2024

North Georgia Technical College (NGTC) recently announced students named to the President's List and Honor Roll for fall semester 2024. The President's List recognizes full-time students with a 4.0 GPA. The Honor Roll recognizes full-time students with a 3.5 GPA. Full-time students are those taking at least 12 credit hours with no developmental courses.

Union County students include: Alexandro Godinez, Air Conditioning Technology; Zade Houghlin, AS Degree in General Studies; Robert Marsh, Cybersecurity; Charles Nicholson, Business Management; Kaylie Pickelsimer, Business Management; Dalton Thomas, Air Conditioning

Technology; William Walls, Precision Machining & Manufacturing; and Lauren Marshall, Social Work Assistant.

Towns County students include: Lauren Parker, Young Harris, AS Degree in General Studies; and Alexis Altman, EMS Professions; Ian Arrowood, Electrical Systems Technology; Brittany Cabrera-Perez, Business Management; Bentley Floyd, Electrical Systems Technology; Colton Garrett, Electrical Systems Technology; Lindsey Giles, Practical Nursing; Whitaker Nicholson, Environmental Technology; Dawson Smith, Business Management; and Anabella Wilson, Early Childhood Care & Education all of Hiawassee.

Towns County Senior Center

This February, show your love and support for seniors in our community!

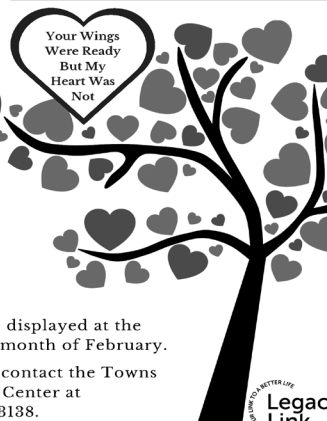
♥ Memory Heart Tree ♥

BUY A HEART AND SHARE A MEAL!
\$5 PER HEART TO FEED A SENIOR IN OUR COMMUNITY

All hearts will have the message below and on the front "In Memory Of" with your loved one's name

Please make checks payable to Towns County Senior Center - Senior Meal Program.

They can be mailed or delivered to
Towns County Senior Center
954 North Main Street
Hiawassee, GA 30546
or at
United Community Bank
214 N Main Street
Hiawassee, GA 30546



The heart tree will be displayed at the Senior Center the whole month of February.

For more information, contact the Towns County Senior Center at 706-896-3138.

US Army veteran MacKim thanked with Quilt of Valor



Jeffrey MacKim

On 28 January 2025, with his family and friends present, it was an honor for the Misty Mountain Quilts of Valor Outreach members Linda & Jim Gorman to award a Quilt of Valor to Jeffrey MacKim a U.S. Army veteran. Mr. MacKim was awarded his Quilt of Valor in a ceremony at the Leon Davenport Veterans Center, Blairsville, GA, during the VFW's monthly meeting. He joined the U.S. Army on 26 October 1982 retired on 31 December 2021 a total of 39 years.

Duty Stations: Basic Training – Fort Jackson, SC, AIT (MOS 26L) – Fort Gordon, GA, Schofield Barracks, HI – HHC 125th Signal Battalion, Exercise Team Spirit '85 & '86 (Korea), Fort Benning, GA – 598th Maintenance Company, OHIO National Guard – HOW Bat 2/107th AC, Georgia Na-

tional Guard – 227th Maintenance Company, Atlanta, GA; participated in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Georgia National Guard – Bravo Company 148th FSB; participated in Operation Enduring Freedom – Afghanistan, Georgia National Guard 277th Maintenance Company, Overseas training sites – Germany, Belgium, Norway & Kuwait; participated in support of snowstorms, floods, hurricanes and Olympic support.

Awards: National Defense Service Ribbon (2), Southeast Asia Service Ribbon w/Bronze Star, Afghanistan Campaign Ribbon w/2 Bronze Stars, Global War on Terrorism, Armed Forces Reserve Ribbon(3), NATO Medal, Meritorious Service Ribbon (2), Army Commendation Ribbon (2), Army Achievement Ribbon (4) Army Good Conduct Ribbon (2), Reserve

Components Achievement Ribbon (9).

Quilts of Valor are presented to those veterans who have been touched by war. The Quilts of Valor Foundation is a national organization founded by Blue Star mother, Catherine Roberts, in 2003, and to date has awarded over 401,361 quilts to our military heroes. Information about Quilts of Valor may be found at www.qovf.org. You can nominate a veteran for a Quilt of Valor by going to www.qovf.org select Nomination & Awards, Select On-Line Nomination form, fill out the request and submit.

The patriotic quilt awarded to Jeffrey MacKim, represents a thank you to him for what he has done to defend and protect our nation.

Each Quilt of Valor is unique, just as each recipient and his or her story is unique. Each is stitched with love and thoughts of the honor and respect that our veterans deserve.

Bypass Construction

...from Page 1

be keeping an eye on another boulder with petroglyphs that has not been disturbed in the construction area, and they will be on the lookout for artifacts that may have been missed during the initial survey.

“It’s to cover the known areas and also the potential areas of something else being found, which is common in any construction,” Johnston said. “Anytime artifacts or anything like that come into play, construction will be halted.

“But they don’t anticipate anything else being found; it’s just a general precaution as it is for any type of construction.”

Additionally, there will be heightened security around the petroglyphs, and construction will remain paused within 150 feet of the historical boulder until more meetings can be held to decide how best to proceed with construction at the site of the ancient carvings.

Currently, GDOT has the bypass listed at about 46% of the way to being done, with a September 2026 completion date, though it remained unclear at press time how the

significant delay in construction would alter the timeline to finish.

Phase II of the three-phase reconstruction project is well underway between Sampson Road in Towns County and Earl Shelton Road in Union County.

And since GDOT awarded a \$110,976,976 contract to AIS Infrastructure last month, Phase III construction will begin soon between Blairsville city limits and Earl Shelton Road.

Britta Larson-Bowers, a spokesperson for AIS Infrastructure, said that the Notice to Proceed date for the final phase of construction will be set on or shortly after a pre-construction meeting that is expected to take place at the end of February.

“Construction will begin in Stage 1, which is in the city limits of Blairsville,” Larson-Bowers said, referring to the starting location of the project near Young Harris Street in front of Home Depot.

Continuing, “There will be staged traffic control for each stage of this project. But due to the sheer number of vehicles within the city limits, there could be some delays.”

Battle of Iwo Jima

...from Page 1

ed by Rear Adm. Raymond A. Spruance.

In opposition were 21,060 soldiers of Imperial Japanese Army's 109th Division, commanded by Lieutenant General Tadamiichi Kuribayashi, along with four anti-aircraft defense units from the Imperial Navy.

The epic battle would prove to be one of the deadliest conflicts in United States Marine Corps history, with American casualties exceeding those of the Japanese with a ratio of three American casualties for every two Japanese.

By the end of the 36-day battle, there would be approximately 26,000 American casualties, including 6,800 dead. Among those Killed in Action was Gunnery Sgt. John Basilone, Congressional Medal of Honor recipient from the Guadalcanal campaign. For his heroic actions on Iwo Jima, he was posthumously awarded

the Navy Cross.

In addition, 22 Marines (12 posthumously) and five Navy sailors (two posthumously), four of whom were Hospital Corpsmen attached to Marine infantry units, were awarded the Medal of Honor.

Medals of Honor awarded for the Battle of Iwo Jima accounted for 28% of the 82 awarded to Marines during the entirety of World War II.

The mission of the Marine Corps League is to promote the interest and to preserve traditions of the United States Marine Corps; strengthen the fraternity of Marines and their families; serve Marines and FMF Navy Personnel who wear or who have worn the Eagle, Globe and Anchor; and foster the ideals of Americanism and patriotic volunteerism.

MCL Unicoi Detachment 783 is represented by veterans in Towns and Union counties.