

Towns County Herald

Legal Organ of Towns County

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75 Cents

Publication Number 635540 Volume 90 Number 15

Wednesday, February 13, 2019

City Council awards \$1.3 million water treatment plant project to SOL

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The Hiawassee City Council officially awarded the water treatment plant expansion project to SOL Construction of Atlanta at the bid price of \$1.3 million at the monthly city meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 5.

Hiawassee Mayor Liz Ordiales said that the bids for the water treatment plant expansion project ranged from \$1.3 million to \$1.8 million. Given their good reputation and the fact that they had the lowest bid, her recommendation was to award the contract to SOL

Construction.

As previously reported, SOL Construction has pledged to use local contractors whenever possible.

The council voted unanimously to approve the award.

In other council news, a lengthy discussion took place concerning banner signs prior to the council's unanimous approval of the second reading of the new Hiawassee Sign Ordinance.

Councilmembers Nancy Noblet and Anne Mitchell had concerns about charging a fee for banner signs that were not meant to be displayed for more

than 30 to 60 days.

Per a written recommendation from City Attorney Thomas Mitchell, who was not present, one paragraph was replaced in the ordinance, removing the fee from banner signs permitted for 60 days or less.

Ordiales was concerned that there would be no sign ordinance in place between when the moratorium ended on Feb. 11 and the next work session on Feb. 26. She said the sign ordinance needed to be finalized in the meeting "as amended," which it was.

As such, there will be no lapse in ordinance coverage.

The 2019 to 2024 Strategic Plan, which was unveiled in December 2018, was also discussed in the Feb. 5 city meeting.

Councilmembers Kris Berrong and Noblet had questions about the flexibility of the plan, and Ordiales explained that the Strategic Plan was meant to be used as a guideline and an inspiration and was not to be taken as inflexible.

She also explained that having the Strategic Plan in place along with the PlanFirst Community designation qualifies Hiawassee for several

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Hiawassee Mayor Liz Ordiales with Joint Economic Development Director Denise McKay in the Feb. 5 regular city meeting. Photo by Mark Smith

Sparks shares concerns over next football season in BOE meeting

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County High School junior Shane Sparks addressed the members of the Towns County Board of Education in their monthly work session on Thursday, Feb. 7.

Sparks, who plays lineman and finishes end positions on the high school football team, voiced his concerns about the team losing over half its players to graduation this year, leaving only 13 returning players for the 2019-2020 football season.

"As a leader of this team, I am responsible for standing up and doing everything I can in order to keep my teammates safe and in a position to succeed," said Sparks, addressing the board.

The problem is that 15 members of the team are graduating seniors - 14 of them



Towns County High School students Chase Rogers and Shane Sparks in the Feb. 7 work session of the Towns County Board of Education. Photo by Mark Smith

starters - who won't be there next season, which only leaves, at present, a 13-man team to

compete in a very tough region, continued Sparks.

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Kendall Floyd named 2019 STAR Student at Towns County High

By Chad Stack
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Congratulations to Kendall Floyd, who has been named 2019 STAR Student for Towns County High School.

Floyd selected his Elementary School math teacher and FBLA adviser Ruth Taylor as his STAR Teacher, to highlight the impact Taylor has had on his academic successes.

STAR stands for Student Teacher Achievement Recognition, and the program is sponsored by the nonprofit PAGE Foundation.

"To obtain the STAR nomination, high school seniors must have the highest score on any single test date of the SAT taken through the November test date of their senior year and be in the Top 10 percent or Top 10 students of their class based on grade point average," according to PAGE Foundation.

"It was a welcome surprise," said Floyd. "Earning STAR Student wasn't a goal



Towns County High School's 2019 STAR Student Kendall Floyd with his STAR Teacher, Ruth Taylor. Photo by Chad Stack

that I had set for myself as much as I just wanted to do well on the SAT. It's an honor. I didn't anticipate it, but it feels good to have been recognized for such an achievement."

Speaking on why he chose Taylor to serve as his STAR Teacher, Floyd mentioned her

kindness and motivational nature.

"I always felt like I was learning something in her class," said Floyd.

Floyd earned a respectable 1340 score on the SAT. The first time he took it. See STAR Student, Page 6A

Lee, Thomason and Bradshaw host Mountain Movers and Shakers meeting



Grace Howard, Cliff Bradshaw, Hilda Thomason and Candace Lee in the Feb. 8 meeting of the Mountain Movers and Shakers. Photo by Mark Smith

By Mark Smith
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw introduced Chamber of Commerce President Candace Lee and Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds Manager Hilda Thomason at the Mountain Movers and Shakers meeting on Friday, Feb. 8, at the Sundance Grill.

"We have strived to increase and improve all the county services that we offer without raising our millage rate, increasing taxes," said Bradshaw. "The more people who come here, the more people that will come back and buy a lot and build a house."

"What I'm asking for you guys to do is to get behind the chamber. If you're not involved, try to donate some

time to the chamber. Same with the Georgia Mountain Fair. Get involved with Ms. Hilda. Call her. You pick which one," he said, mentioning Hamilton Gardens as another option.

And with that introduction, Lee took the floor.

"Last year, we fulfilled 1,549 leads, which means anytime somebody writes to

See MMS, Page 6A

Union General ready to move on after \$5 million DOJ settlement



Physicians and medical staff at Union General Hospital pose for a photo to show their solidarity in support of the hospital.

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

The U.S. Department of Justice announced on Feb. 6 that Union General Hospital had agreed to pay a \$5 million settlement "to resolve allegations that it violated the False Claims Act by engaging in improper financial relationships with referring physicians."

These allegations stemmed from the findings of an independent internal compliance investigation commissioned by the hospital in 2016 following the arrest of former hospital CEO Mike Gowder on unrelated prescription drug fraud charges.

Resulting from the internal investigation, the hospital learned that, between 2012 and 2016, it had been out of compliance with part of a federal law requiring that all physicians be contracted for work billed through Medicare.

Infractions included payments to several physicians for services rendered outside contractual relationships, such as the retention of doctors to work on-call hours without a contract.

Following discovery of the infractions, the Board of Directors of Union General replaced most of the hospital's executive team, instituted "a robust new compliance program," and installed other

safeguards "to protect the integrity of the hospital and its ability to provide the highest quality of care to Union County residents," according to a board statement.

After receiving the results of the complete investigation in 2016, the hospital self-reported the period of non-compliance to the DOJ, which in turn announced the settlement on Feb. 6, 2019.

Included in the \$5 million settlement is the amount billed to Medicare for the services of physicians who were not contracted by the hospital, plus a multiplier of this amount serving as a punitive measure.

Retiring CEO Lewis Kelley said that the hospital paid the settlement out of its general fund last month, and he added that the hospital is still financially sound.

"The No. 1 thing that we would like to share with the public is that we're glad that this is behind us, because this has been looming out there for close to two and a half years now," said Kelley. "We're glad to put it behind us and glad to move forward."

"We had a Five-Star status last year. Chatuge's got a Five-Star status. We've put in a robust compliance team, and we're monitoring everything, making sure all the i's are dotted and all the t's are crossed."

"We're doing everything we can to protect ourselves

from slipping back into this. So, we have paper contracts for everything we do with all of our physicians."

Added Kelley, "In the eyes of the government, we were basically viewed as having done something incorrect. These physicians were performing services for us, and just because they didn't have a contract doesn't mean that we were paying them in excess to do that, because we went back and wrote contracts, and we're paying them about the same."

"But now, we've got written contracts, and we're not violating the law."

So, how did this happen, and why didn't anyone notice that the hospital was violating federal law?

As it turns out, hospital administrators, physicians and members of the Hospital Authority were simply unaware of the hospital's non-compliance with the law during that time.

"We didn't know about it until we started digging in and found out all of this was there (in 2016)," said Kelley. "When we found it, we self-disclosed it."

It's important to note that the hospital has admitted no wrongdoing as far as the federal government is concerned, as the settlement resolves allegations only, "and there has been no determination of liability."

See UGH, Page 6A

Sheriff's Office arrests two local women on prostitution charges

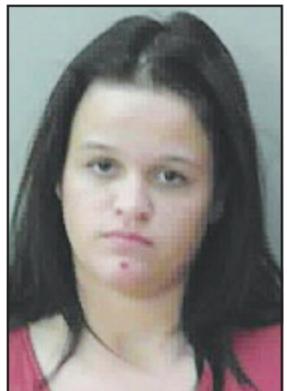
By News Special
Towns County Herald

Investigators with the Towns County Sheriff's Office recently received information that illegal prostitution activity had been occurring in the county.

Once investigators confirmed the information, the Sheriff's Office launched an undercover investigation and sting operation that took place on Saturday, Feb. 9.

Two female suspects were arrested without incident at an undisclosed location within Towns County and charged with one count of prostitution each: Samantha Dye, 24, of Hiawassee, and Cassie Cooper, 20, of Blairsville.

The two suspects were



Cassie Cooper

arrested when they arrived to meet the informant along with undercover officers.

The investigation



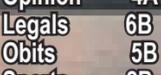
Samantha Dye

is active and ongoing and additional arrests and charges may be forthcoming.

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Lake Levels
Blue Ridge 1,673.47
Chatuge 1,919.50
Nottely 1,761.04



SPORTS

BASKETBALL - STATE
Feb. 15 Girls - vs. Lanier Co.

WRESTLING - STATE
Feb. 13-16 Macon Centreplex

Iwo Jima Remembrance
Feb 18 10 AM
New Rec. Center

Order your 4-H Vidalia Onions
See page 2A

Dual Enrollment Meeting @ TCHS
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