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Lions congratulate STAR Students, Teachers

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County Lions Club members hosted their annual STAR Student and Teacher Recognition Dinner inside Anderson Music Hall on Tuesday, Feb. 11, inviting two very talented seniors from Towns County High School along with their chosen teachers to be honored that evening.

"We sponsor the STAR Student each year," Lions Club President Danny Meeks said in opening. "We're happy to do that. This is the first year we've had two students - I can't remember any other time in my tenure."

Lions Club Treasurer Julie Payne announced the 2025 STAR Student winners

as Callie Drew Livingston and Isaiah Christopher Burrell.

As noted by Meeks, for the first time in remembered history, two students tied for top SAT score in Towns County, but the truly unique aspect of that story is the fact that the same thing occurred in Union County this year as well. Students are outdoing themselves here in the mountains.

"Students are nominated for the award based on a single score on the SAT and being in the top 10% of their class based on grade point average," Payne said. "It is an honor and a pleasure to have you all with us this evening to celebrate their achievement."

After making STAR Student, each senior picks a STAR Teacher. Livingston se-

lected science teacher Kenneth Camp as the educator who has had the most profound impact on her academic development, and Burrell chose honors history teacher Shannon Floyd as his STAR Teacher.

STAR is sponsored by the Professional Association of Georgia Educators, which is committed to excellence in public education. To that end, PAGE offers such competitive programs as the Academic Bowl for Middle Grades, the Academic Decathlon and the STAR program.

"Since its inception in 1958, the (STAR) program has honored more than 30,000 seniors and their teachers," Payne said. "I am happy to say the Towns County Lions

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L-R: STAR Teacher Shannon Floyd, STAR Student Isaiah Burrell, STAR Teacher Kenneth Camp, STAR Student Callie Drew Livingston and Lions Club President Danny Meeks in the STAR Recognition Dinner on Feb. 11.

Photo by Shelly Knight

BOE approves multiple retirement requests

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County Board of Education members received a longer than usual list of impending retirements and resignations in their regular monthly meeting on Monday, Feb. 3.

In addition to the regular business of approving field trips and fundraisers, the board got acquainted with several upcoming job openings.

"We sent out our intent to retire notice a little earlier than typical this year, and I'm about almost regretting it because of the number that came back," Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong said. "Four employees are resigning based on health issues and/or relocations. The others are retiring."

"Our Middle School Counselor Lana Parker is super excited that after 34 years in education she is able to retire. She graduated from Towns County in 1987 and has worked as a teacher, coach and counselor all this time. She is ready and excited for the next chapter in her life."



Superintendent Berrong holding up a banner recognizing the Georgia Association of Educational Leaders Vision Award in honor of the strong leadership at Towns County Schools.

"Second-grade teacher Missy Moss is retiring, and though she didn't leave any comments, her children went

through our school system, and we will miss her.

"Peter Byrne, our speech

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Clint Hobbs returns to Young Harris College

News Special

Clint Hobbs, former vice president for enrollment management and external relations, returned to Young Harris College on Jan. 1, 2025, as Special Assistant to the President.

In his new role, Hobbs will serve as a member of new President John Wells' senior leadership team, focusing much of his efforts on the College's enrollment program, and advising the President on other matters related to the College.

A 1988 graduate of Young Harris College, Hobbs has enjoyed a career in higher education that has spanned more than 35 years.

He spent 27 years at Young Harris, serving the last 14 years as the vice president for enrollment management and external relations, before leaving to pursue enrollment consulting full-time.

While at Young Harris, Hobbs helped develop and execute the plan that resulted in unprecedented enrollment growth between 2006 and



Clint Hobbs

2014 when enrollment increased from 600 students to over 1,200 students.

After leaving Young Harris, Hobbs served interim stints as the dean of enrollment management at York College of Pennsylvania, and

vice president of admissions and financial aid at Benedictine University in Chicago.

In 2017, Hobbs joined Wesleyan College, located in Macon, GA, as their vice president for enrollment management.

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Hiawassee to hold two HB 581 hearings Feb. 20

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

On Feb. 12, Hiawassee City Council and Acting Mayor Jay Chastain Jr. held their first public hearing to consider opting out of the floating homestead exemption authorized in House Bill 581 and ratified by majority vote of both the Towns County and statewide electorates Nov. 5.

All local taxing authori-

ties in the state are automatically "opted in" to the exemption. However, legislators included a limited "opt out" window for local governments concerned about the ability to generate property tax revenues over time without raising the property tax rate.

The deadline to opt out is March 1, and to do so, local governments must hold three public hearings to solicit feedback from residents and adopt

a resolution. Otherwise, they opt in, though state lawmakers are currently debating extending the opt-out deadline.

During the hearing, a majority of council members suggested they were leaning toward opting in, that is, simply allowing the floating homestead exemption to take effect, though they will utilize input from the next two public hearings this Thursday to

See HB 581 Hearings, Page 6



L-R: Hiawassee Acting Mayor Jay Chastain Jr., City Clerk Bonnie Kendrick and City Attorney Thomas Mitchell in their first floating homestead exemption public hearing.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Food Pantry 'badly' needs monetary donations



L-R: Towns County Food Pantry Coordinator Richard Thomas with community-minded volunteers Mark Lawson, Pete Jacoby, Daisy Noto, Kathy Carlson and Etta Kahofer during a recent distribution day.

Photo by Shelly Knight

By Shelly Knight
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Towns County residents who are in need and qualify based on income guidelines are eligible to receive food from the Towns County Food Pantry, located at 1294 Jack Dayton Circle in Young Harris. It is a non-profit organization that depends solely on community financial support.

Donations include money, food, hygiene and clean-

ing products. Local churches, community organizations and hundreds of individuals generously donate food, money and volunteer time to keep the food pantry running successfully throughout the year.

However, according to Pantry Coordinator Richard Thomas, support tends to dwindle in the winter after Christmas, despite the need being ever present.

"Donations really die off in the wintertime," Thomas

said. "I don't really know why but they do. Our biggest need right now is the Backpack Program (feeding schoolchildren). It would be a worthy cause, and it would really help that program."

"We had to shut the program down last year due to lack of funding, and the community responded, so we have restarted the Backpack Program for the school children. But we still need monetary

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Chatuge 1,919.17
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TCHS Student of the Week

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Amazon Coming to Clay Co., NC

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United
Community
Advisors

STAR Recognition...from Page 1



The Lions Club treated their STAR guests like royalty inside the Anderson Music Hall last week.

Club has been the local sponsor since its inception 67 years ago.

Always a tradition of the recognition dinner, the STAR Students each gave a speech, starting with Livingston, who thanked the Lions Club for inviting her and “the amazing teachers and staff that have shown me nothing but support for the last four years.”

She also thanked her parents, without whom she would be “completely lost.”

“I would not be set up for success the way that I am without such a tight-knit and nurturing community,” Livingston said. “I have already been accepted at University of Georgia and plan to attend there in the fall to pursue an English degree.

“With that degree I intend to begin a career in copy editing and work alongside authors in the novel writing process. I also hope to publish one of my own someday. With all of that being said, it probably comes as a surprise that I chose my science teacher, Mr. Camp, as my STAR Teacher.

“I think it speaks to his excellence as a teacher that I found him to be the most deserving, despite science being one of my least favorite subjects. I took an environmental science class as well as biology classes under his instruction and excelled in all three classes.

“As someone who has been a straight-A student her whole life, it has become the expectation for me to do well. Teachers don’t usually go out of their way to acknowledge my success. Camp, however, always made sure to commend me on my work and even went so far as to email my parents and let them know when I exceeded expectations.

“From the beginning I admired his mastery of what

he teaches and the engaging way in which he lectures it. He helped me and my classmates understand complex ideas I never would have otherwise. Once again, thank you to him and everyone else for setting me up for success.”

In response, Camp also thanked the Lions for their hospitality before diving into why he believes Livingston is “so deserving of the STAR Student.”

“Everybody knows how intelligent, driven, level-headed and pragmatic she is,” Camp said. “She is just the foundational person you want on your team. Her leadership shines through.

“I watched Callie Drew balance a really intense schedule between sports and every club imaginable and her academics. She has great time management skills.

“In my 20 years of teaching, she did some of the most impressive work I’ve seen in chemistry. She breezed right through it. She was meticulous.

“Whatever she does, she will be great at it. And I just want to say if there is a STAR Parent Award, Callie’s parents should get it.

“Lastly, I want to say I’ve really enjoyed teaching Isaiah, too. He’s extremely intelligent, but I’m not sure if I’m teaching the next Elon Musk or the next Megamind superhero.”

Burrell spoke next, making sure to extend his gratitude to the Lions Club for inviting him, and he also thanked his family and school.

“I plan to attend either UGA or North Georgia Technical College – I haven’t heard back yet,” Burrell said. “I have an interest in engineering, but I also have interest in quantum physics and chemistry. I like complex math. I’ve also worked with my father, who

happens to be an electrician, so the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.

“I picked Mr. Floyd because I also have an intense interest in history, and he made the classes fun and engaging. And he told a joke once about Bolsheviks and he was the only one who knew what a Bolshevik was.

“Also, he was a pastor of (Fellowship of Christian Athletes) – it was refreshing to go on Fridays and spend a little time listening to him speak and have a little bit of time with God, because most days, you’re just on the bus and going. That helped me a lot.

“And despite disagreements, we still have a great relationship, like we disagree with the fact that he likes Taylor Swift so much, but we still get along. Thank you, everybody.”

For his part, Floyd touched on his experiences teaching over 33 years and how unique Burrell is as a person and student.

“I’m not a pastor but I do serve as a deacon in our church, and I enjoy Friday mornings as well,” Floyd said. “Isaiah came in as a freshman and had energy off the charts. One of the things that impressed me the most about Isaiah is that he thinks outside the box.

“He is definitely one of the top students that I’ve had. I think both of these students that we see here today are going to change the world.”

Payne closed out the evening by congratulating the students once again on such commendable achievements and welcoming anyone to join the Lions Club.

Lions Club International is the world’s largest service club organization with more than 1.4 million members in over 200 countries around the world.

those working part-time it was 23.86%, according to the Census Bureau.

The Food Pantry has been operating since 2008 and aims to serve at-risk populations of seniors, underemployed, and unemployed families and individuals, disabled people, and veterans. The goal is to help everyone with a demonstrated need get nutritional, healthy food while being treated with dignity and respect.

It’s important to note that receiving food from the Food Pantry does not affect Social Security, food stamps, unemployment or any other program that a person may be participating in.

For more information, visit <http://www.townscountyga.org/food-pantry.html>.

home at Young Harris College,” Hobbs said. “My heart has always resided here, and I look forward to serving the College once again.”

Young Harris College is a private baccalaureate and master’s degree-granting institution located in the beautiful mountains of North Georgia.

Founded in 1886 and historically affiliated with The United Methodist Church, Young Harris College educates, inspires, and empowers students through an education that purposefully integrates the liberal arts and professional studies.

“I am thrilled to be back

sultant, Hobbs has worked with over 25 different colleges and universities across the country, helping them improve their enrollment results.

“I am thrilled to be back

majoring in Journalism and Emerging Media-Interest.

Kennesaw State University has named more than 6,400 students to the President’s List in recognition of their academic excellence for the Fall 2024 semester.

Food Pantry...from Page 1

donations badly.

“We have to buy the items we put into the backpacks from US Foods, and God knows it isn’t cheap; we spend between \$1,500 to \$2,000 every week. Monetary donations toward that program would be awesome.

“Right now, we feed 179 children and their families with that program. I hate to see that program shut down, but if the donations don’t come, we have to put the priority on the promise we’ve made to do the drive-through distributions.

Any help we can get would be greatly appreciated.

“We do the drive-through distribution every other Wednesday between

11 a.m. and 2 p.m. If people can’t make it to that, they can come pretty much anytime Monday through Thursday from 8 a.m. until noon. We have anywhere from 10 to 12 volunteers on any given distribution day.

“Food boxes include lots of canned goods, vegetables, instant potatoes, and meat if we have it. We serve about 80 cars each time we do the distribution. We’re serving fewer people than we used to, but I think it’s because we can’t get much variety.”

Of course, the need is still there. In 2024, the poverty rate for those working full-time for the last 12 months was 6.65%, while for

Hobbs at YHC...from Page 1

agement, a position he held for five years. While at Wesleyan, he was responsible for five of the largest freshman classes to ever enter the College.

As an enrollment con-

sultant, Hobbs has worked with over 25 different colleges and universities across the country, helping them improve their enrollment results.

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Undergraduate students enrolled in at least nine credit hours and with a term grade point average of at least 3.5 were named to the list.

Kennesaw State Fall 2024 Dean’s List and President’s List

Kennesaw State University congratulates the more than 9,000 students named to the Dean’s List in recognition of their academic achievement during the Fall 2024 semester.

Undergraduate students enrolled in at least nine credit hours and with a term grade point average of at least 3.5 were named to the list.

Students from your area earning Dean’s List honors are: Kaylee Dillard of Hiawassee, majoring in Human Services, MacKenzie Justice of Hiawassee, majoring in Integrated Health Science, Quincy Rosser of Young Harris,

School Board...from Page 1

pathologist, has put in his letter of retirement as well. He had some health issues last year and was able to come back and make it through, but he is still having some problems and so will retire.

“Rachel Pietz, high school special education teacher, has a similar situation. She graduated from Towns County in 1980 and expressed her love of our schools for all the years of growth for herself and her family.

“Diane Adams, our system bookkeeper, dropped this bomb on me on Friday (Jan. 31), and we will be accepting her resignation as well. She’s been here as long as I’ve been superintendent.

“Another unexpected resignation is that of the newly appointed personnel/curriculum director, Dr. Connie Hobbs. This one is going to be a tough one as well. Dr. Hobbs has been in education for 34 years, the last 19 of them with us.

“This is because of her mother’s health issues. She is one of the main caregivers for her mother, who lives seven hours away in St. Simon’s Island. Dr. Hobbs wrote a great letter as well, speaking to the sadness she feels due to her resignation. She says Towns County has been like a family to her. We’re going to miss her.”

Board members approved all personnel recommendations that evening before moving on to tackle the 2025-2026 school calendar.

“We put together three different models, and they are

all the same with the exception of fall break,” Berrong said. “We noticed this past year that many districts were having their break a little earlier than we were.

“If you look at the calendar, you’ll notice that our fall break was after we were in school for 12 weeks before the break and with only five weeks to go until Thanksgiving break. So, we looked at scheduling fall break a little earlier.

“We’ll be moving it up one week to the week of Oct. 8-10 instead of the 15th through the 17th, but everything else stays the same. Same number of student contact days and teacher days.”

The board also discussed alternatives for two outstanding trainings they are required to complete this year and agreed upon System Wide Technology Initiatives and Legal Issues, which will be scheduled soon.

School Finance Director Myra Underwood provided a numbers update, noting that, as of the end of December, “we have completed 50% of the year and our revenue has come in at 24%.”

“Our expenditures are still under budget, as we have 60% unused,” Underwood said. “Since December, we have received our first big property tax payment of \$1.3 million, and we should be getting another payment this week of about \$2 million.

“Our sales tax compared to this time last year is up about \$400; I think it’s going to stay about the same. Evi-

dently, people are still buying cars, because our title ad valorem tax is up about \$5,000.

“And believe it or not, it is time to start thinking about FY 2025-26. In March I’ll give you budget projections, and then we’ll advertise for our first budget meeting tentatively in April.”

As a part of Elementary School Principal Dr. Crystal Beach’s monthly report, she presented Superintendent Berrong with the Georgia Association of Educational Leaders Vision Award. The award celebrates educational professionals who build up leaders within their organizations.

“Thank you, Dr. Berrong, for doing such a great job supporting us and all that we do within our buildings and having our backs,” Beach said.

Berrong closed out the meeting with a short update on the Agriscience Center, which he believes can still be opened by the end of March.

“Obviously, there have been a lot of delays because of the weather,” Berrong said. “We haven’t had a meeting with the architects or the construction manager since December, but we’re hoping to have one this month.

“Looks like they have finished all of the insulation of the outside, so the siding will go up pretty soon. Once the exterior gets finished I’m hoping that, even if it’s just a month, our kids can actually get in there before the end of the school year.”

The Towns County School Board meets the first Monday of each month beginning with a 6 p.m. work session at the High School Media Center.

HB 581 Hearings...from Page 1



L-R: Hiawassee City Council Members Nancy Noblet, Amy Barrett, Patsy Owens and Jonathan Wilson went over HB 581 details with the public on Feb. 12. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

make their final decision as a group.

At this time, opting out is a permanent decision, and it was revealed in the hearing that there are conversations happening now at the State Capitol to potentially cancel any opt-outs to force all taxing jurisdictions to opt into the floating homestead exemption statewide.

The new exemption caps the annual increase in a homesteaded property’s assessed value for taxing purposes. The cap is set by the Department of Revenue using a common measure of inflation, likely the Consumer Price Index, which has recently measured inflation at about 3%.

City Attorney Thomas Mitchell provided an example of the impact of the new homestead exemption for a property owner.

“If you have a home that had been assessed the previous year at \$100,000,” Mitchell said, “and the market says that property would be worth \$110,000 (this year) but the CPI was only 3%, as it was last year, then the ... value for the homestead-exempted property would be \$103,000 rather than \$110,000.”

In this example, the difference between the \$103,000 value capped at the CPI and the \$110,000 value in relation to housing market inflation would be the additional floating homestead exemption, or \$7,000, which would, in turn, result in a tax break.

The base-year value of current homesteads is the 2024 value, with new base-year values taking effect every time a home is sold. A base-year value is also subject to change if “substantial changes” are made to a property, like additions.

To reiterate, without the exemption, the assessed value of a homesteaded property would be fully 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 areas like Towns County, driving up fair market values and causing rapid assessment increases.

There’s another aspect to HB 581: the Floating Local Option Sales Tax. Legislators created the new sales tax to

provide local governments the ability to offer additional property tax relief.

Property tax relief from the FLOST – up to 1 cent per dollar spent on local goods and services – would act similarly to the Local Option Sales Tax, which triggers the revenue-neutral calculation of a property tax rollback every time millage rates are set.

For FLOST to go into effect, it must pass via local referendum. The wrinkle is, in order for a county to be eligible to call a FLOST referendum, the county government and each of its cities must all “opt in” to the floating homestead exemption.

As discussed in the hearing, the exemption is unlikely to cause a big impact on city revenues, at least not immediately, as most properties in Hiawassee are not homesteads. Of the 931 real property parcels in the city, which include commercial property, only 177 parcels have homestead exemptions.

Additionally, it appears that Hiawassee is subject to the local floating homestead exemption that passed by popular vote in the 2008 General Election after former Commissioner Bill Kendall got state lawmakers to add the initiative to the ballot.

This longstanding local exemption caps annual assessment increases at 3%, so the impacts from House Bill 581 may end up being negligible. If a taxing jurisdiction has two such exemptions, as could potentially be the case here, the one that provides the greatest tax relief is applied.

Because the repercussions of the new exemption are unlikely to be felt until later down the road, after years of artificially suppressed local housing values, Acting Mayor Chastain still cautioned that, “I cannot guarantee you in two, three, five years, that that impact’s not going to hit.”

“As a property owner and a homeowner with a homestead exemption, did I vote (for it) – yes,” Chastain said. “Now, as somebody that’s trying to maintain and run a city, keep these essential services going, there will come a time that we’re going to have to do something if we’re faced with a decision of (losing a service or upping the millage rate). That’s the most common-sense way I can put it.”

Like Chastain, Councilwoman Amy Barrett has done extensive research on the issue, and she pointed out that the city collects “more in Local Option Sales Tax in five months than we take in in property (taxes) all year,” adding to the thought that the impact should be minimal.

She also said the city potentially availing itself of FLOST – even at a fraction of a cent – would get all local shoppers to chip into the tax base, including tourists. And besides, the exemption passed here with 67% support, so “our voters wanted this ... and that’s who we’re accountable to.”

Attorney Mitchell commented that the possible extent of property tax revenue shortfalls “may not have been what people were thinking about when they walked into the polls in November,” but he said the city could always raise the property tax rate if it needed to in the future.

One of Barrett’s big concerns is making sure seniors, who make up a large percentage of the local population, are protected – especially those on fixed incomes.

“(The new exemption) helps our voters and helps our homesteads, because look at the age of the property owners here versus anywhere else,” Barrett said. “And that’s our voting public.”

Three members of the public attended to hear information on and ask questions about the exemption and FLOST.

Attendee Michael Courey told the newspaper afterward it appeared that tax generation was trending away from value-based ad valorem taxes toward user-based consumption taxes, which he views as “not a bad thing.”

The next two hearings are set for Thursday, Feb. 20, one at noon and the other at 6 p.m. inside Hiawassee City Hall at 50 River Street. Chastain and City Council members encourage the public to attend the remaining hearings this week.

“There’s really no one talking about it (to us), but that’s the reason I wanted to have the public hearings so we could get the public’s input on what they want,” Chastain said. “It was overwhelming what they wanted when they went to the polls, but just go ahead and tell me what your thoughts are.”