

School Safety...from Page 1A

these posts that this kid was posting in Florida, they would want to let someone know."

The sheriff encourages everyone in the community to report suspicious behavior immediately to the sheriff's office tip line at (706) 896-3697.

Residents can also leave a tip by visiting TownsSheriff.com, clicking on "Contact Us," entering their tips into the white text box on the screen and hitting submit.

"I understand that not all citizens are comfortable making a report in person," said Sheriff Clinton after the meeting. "I want all our citizens to know that if they see something suspicious, they can let us know anonymously."

"No one should be afraid to report any crime. Whether reporting a bullying incident, domestic violence, drugs, or something that just looks suspicious, I want them to know that they can tell their sheriff's office. It will be looked into without their needing to be involved beyond anonymously giving us the information."

Of course, the sheriff said he can't do anything to prevent a problem if he doesn't know about it.

"I can't make a file on any of you folks in here unless I have a reason to," said Sheriff Clinton to those in attendance. "Now, if somebody says you made threats, and you're stockpiling guns and you're threatening kids, guess what? I'm going to have a file with that person's name on it, and we're going to document everything we can find out about you, because we have a criminal nexus. We are going to follow up on it 100 percent."

Many people in the meeting were concerned about the reports from Parkland, Florida, concerning the school resource officer who waited outside the school building for backup.

"I truly don't believe that's the kind of men and women we have employed," said Sheriff Clinton. "I can promise you that's not the kind of man I am."

Budget is a big concern when the topic of additional spending comes up surrounding

safety measures in the schools, especially when the community is looking at the possibility of an additional school resource officer.

"Something we have to look at is, where does the money come from?" said Sheriff Clinton. "Something I always come back to is, how much is a life worth, how much are our children worth?"

There are safety measures already in place at the schools, and administrators are going to be doing additional training and planning to prevent any acts of violence.

"I just want to make sure that you realize that the Superintendent Dr. Berrong, the sheriff – they don't take this lightly," said Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw in the meeting. "They are dedicated 100 percent to safety for our children."

Continued Bradshaw: "The loyalty and the caring that Dr. Berrong has for his students and the sheriff has for the kids, you develop a love for these kids. I want to make sure we understand this is on our mind all the time, and they take it very seriously."

Seckinger...from Page 1A

so much." Others shared comments about Seckinger, how he had influenced their lives and the lives of others in the county.

"When you're elected, you meet a lot of people you didn't know, and Ernie was one of the people that I did not know," said Bradshaw. "Miss Betty and her family, I knew a lot of them, I didn't know Ernie. I got to know Ernie pretty quick, and it was in a good way." He came in one day, and we had an issue we were working on, and we got off subject. We probably talked for an hour in there. He came back another day and we talked another hour.

"And we were just talking about religion, the county, different things. And what a nice, sweet, kind man – he was to me, and I won't forget it."

Towns County Public Library Branch Manager Debbie Phillips spoke on Seckinger's leadership in life, as he helmed the library board as chairman.

"He had nothing but the library at heart," said Phillips. "He wanted the best for the library, he wanted the best for its employees, he wanted it to move forward. He was just a very concerned person to have on the board."

"I still miss him. I find myself thinking I need to send that to Ernie or I need to tell Ernie about this. So, we do miss him ... The first meeting we had in Ernie's absence, we reserved this spot."

Two family friends of the Seckingers attended the meeting, Sara and Janice Heidt, and library board members in attendance that evening were Joan Crothers, Jerry Taylor and Barbara Hale.

Hale inherited Seckinger's board seat in November of last year and will fulfill his unexpired term until it ends on June 30.

Also in the meeting, Commissioner Bradshaw held a first reading of a resolution to amend the county Code of Ordinances concerning variances.

Following a subsequent second reading and adoption next month, the amendment will require people to submit all variance requests to the



Photo by Shawn Jarrard
Barbara Hale of Friends of the Libraries will serve on the Towns County Library Board of Trustees to fulfill the unexpired term of Ernie Seckinger. Pictured here with Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw.



Photo by Shawn Jarrard
J.C. Berrong spoke on the 2018 Clean Sweep Week litter pickup initiative in the February county meeting. This year's Clean Sweep Week will run April 16 to April 21.

county Planning Commission, which will then make a recommendation to the commissioner concerning said variances.

A fee to complete variance requests will be set in the March commission meeting.

The commissioner adopted a Zero Tolerance Drug Policy for Towns County Transit that Tuesday, and spent a few minutes updating folks on the goings-on of the county during his Commissioner's Report.

"Financially, the county's in good shape, as we have been," said Commissioner Bradshaw. "We started off to a very good year. I'm excited about this year. We're going to see a lot of events, a lot of things

going on.

"We think the economy's getting a lot better. I can't wait to see the Hotel-Motel Tax revenue to see what we're generating along with a good economy, so we're trying to take advantage of that."

Commissioner Bradshaw touched on the upcoming "Lake Chatuge Get Outdoors! Expo," which will feature fishing, boating, hunting, hiking and more between April 7 and April 8, as well as the "Made in Georgia Festival," which will take place June 30 and July 1.

Eli Phillips delivered the invocation for the Feb. 20 meeting, and his twin sister Zoe led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Iwo Jima...from Page 1A

nearly 7,000 soldiers lost their lives in the service of liberty and freedom for everyone back in the States and around the world.

Retired U.S. Marine Corps Maj. Gary Wimsett began the anniversary program by welcoming all in attendance to the ceremony to remember the battle that would pave the way for the end of World War II.

"Welcome to the 73rd anniversary of the Battle of Iwo Jima and the raising of the American Flag on Mount Suribachi," said Wimsett. "This is also a memorial service for those who gave their lives on Iwo Jima."

"While we will never forget those who fought and died on Iwo Jima, today we celebrate the veterans who were there on land, on sea, or in the air in that battle area. We also wish to honor our WWII veterans who are here today."

Charley Andrews, retired U.S. Navy, introduced Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw, as well as U.S. Navy World War II veteran Martha Warth.

Commissioner Bradshaw spoke to the group briefly, sharing his support for the veteran communities and the brave men and women who have served this country.

ago today, the United States Military started the invasion on Iwo Jima," said Commissioner Bradshaw. "We needed a base closer to the Japanese coast, and I stand here in awe of all those who fought for us. It is an honor to be here. I want to thank all of you who have served."

Warth set the scene of Iwo Jima for those present at the ceremony last week, explaining how the United States came to be at Iwo Jima, how the island was a fortress for the Japanese during that time, and all the bravery, dedication and perseverance that led to U.S. victory.

"We were able to conquer the Japanese because of the Army, Navy, Marines, Coast Guard, Seabees, Air Force and all those who fought," said Warth.

Following Warth, the guest speaker for the ceremony was retired U.S. Marine Corps Col. Howard Lovingood.

Col. Lovingood enlisted in October of 1952, working his way through the ranks before retiring from the service in 1997 and taking a position as the executive director of the National D-Day Museum in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Now, Col. Lovingood lives in Murphy, North Carolina, and teaches at Tri-Corona Community College.



Photo by Lily Avery
Retired U.S. Marine Col. Howard J. Lovingood in the Feb. 19 commemoration of the Battle of Iwo Jima.

Col. Lovingood picked up where Warth left off, focusing on what the Battle of Iwo Jima did for the U.S. military and what it symbolizes to this day.

"The sacrifice that defined the generations of Americans was evident everywhere on Iwo Jima," said Col. Lovingood. "Make no mistake about it, it's still there today with the young men and the young women we have serving our country. We have the greatest military across the spectrum."

"Iwo Jima provided proof that the U.S. military was one of the most effective fighting forces on the planet. We love our Iwo Jima veterans and we thank you for all that you did."

Baseball...from Page 1A

chasing a ball.

"We think, for this field to be playable, it would have to be seven to 10 days minimum of pure sunshine, and then it's still going to be wet," said Dr. Berrong. "But if it rains again, you're another seven to 10 days before you can play again. So, we're not certain we will play a single home game this year."

The schools experienced a similar problem two years ago, in a portion of deep centerfield where water seemed to be saturating the earth from below.

They solved the problem then by installing a drainpipe that carried the water off the field, though the current problem is substantially larger and will therefore require a much bigger fix.

So far, Dr. Berrong has called in a couple of experts to look at the problem, and none of them have ever seen anything like it, including the system's construction management company, Charles Black Construction.

"They're writing up what their feelings are of what's causing this, and they're going to get us some prices on different options of how to fix it," said Dr. Berrong. "Some of those are Band-Aids, some of those, the cheaper options are, well, you can do this and see if it works, but it may not work."

"So, we're just right now looking at all of our options, just so our kids will have a facility to play on."

Continued Dr. Berrong: "This field is not fixable this year – it's an impossibility. If you come in and put drain lines, you would have to put them every few feet minimum through the entire outfield."

"You would have to tear up all of your irrigation system. You would have to re-sod the entire outfield. So, just to do that, you're in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, just to patch it."

Another option would be to move the field, though Dr. Berrong said there's not a facility big enough to house a new field, which would cost more than \$750,000 anyway, to re-sod and install fences, dugouts, bleachers and more.

"The other option that I'm even reluctant to mention is turfing the field," said Dr. Berrong. "I know a lot of people have a lot of thoughts about turf, but we're not talking about something we want, we're talking about

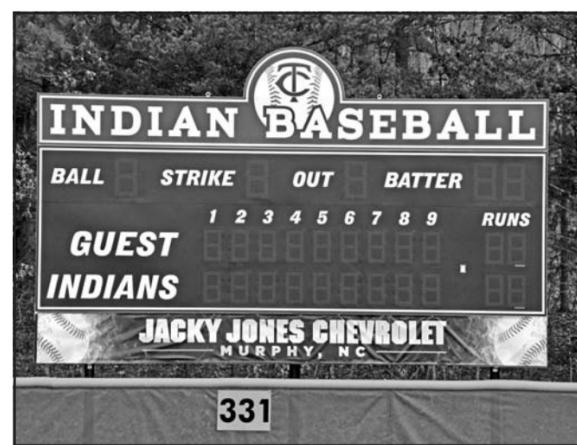


Photo by Shawn Jarrard
The brand new Towns County Baseball scoreboard, installed last fall.



Photo by Shawn Jarrard
Groundwater has made the TCHS baseball field unplayable and has worked its way down to the concrete bleachers in Frank McClure Memorial Stadium.

something that is in need here desperately."

Added Dr. Berrong: "I want to get numbers back from our construction management team to see what it would cost us to patch this."

Installing artificial turf would be an expensive solution and would probably cost more than building a new facility with a sod field, though it would be a way to completely solve the water problem and keep the field in the same spot it has inhabited for 40 years.

"As I see this field, if we do nothing to it, unless for some reason we have a significant drought during a year, I don't see this field being playable," said Dr. Berrong.

For now, the team is looking at the possibility of playing some of their home games on the Young Harris College ball field or in neighboring counties.

"It's definitely a big impact – kids like playing at home," said Coach Floyd. "This is beyond anything that I've seen since I've coached."

We wouldn't be able to play a home game unless it dries up considerably."

Added Coach Floyd: "These guys love playing baseball, so that part is not going to make a difference. But you enjoy playing at home, that way you get more of the student body and more family besides just mom and dad. Our parents travel well, but we do like playing at home."

The same water problem impacting the baseball field appears to be affecting a straight-line path down to the football field, as the bleachers in Frank McClure Memorial Stadium have shifted over the years, and the concrete in the lower right corner of the stadium bleachers facing the field is deteriorating.

Currently, the football field does not appear to be impacted in the same way as the baseball field, though the school system will need to address the water drainage issue there sometime in the foreseeable future.

Watson...from Page 1A

CD that was released Dec. 8 ("My Gospel Roots"), so it's relatively new, and we've been traveling a lot," said Watson. "We always look forward to coming back out there to Georgia. Hiawassee is one of our favorite places, so we can't wait to come in there."

Watson has enjoyed a steady fan base throughout the years, with hits like "Farewell Party," "Love in the Hot Afternoon" and "Fourteen Carat Mind," and he credits his success to those who continue to value the more traditional side of Country Music.

"As many times as I've played Hiawassee, they pretty much know what to expect," said Watson. "Being the Farewell Party Band, we're going to get up there, and we do the whole career, kind of skip along through it, from the one that got me my first major recording contract plumb on up to date."

Added Watson: "We play a loose show. I never plan a show out, we never write it down. We play strictly to the audience that's in front of us and try our best to do what they want us to. So, it should be a good night. It's going to be custom-made for that audience, and we're really looking forward to it."

Watson will be glad to see his friends Johnny Lee and Ronnie McDowell on March 3, as the three artists came up in the business together.

"Gene and I go back to the (Mickey) Gilley days," said Lee. "And Ronnie McDowell just gave me a painting of George Jones being pulled over buy that cop on his riding lawnmower – he's an amazing artist."

As far as what fans can expect on Saturday night, Lee said he'll be performing plenty of his hits and a few cuts from his new album, "You Ain't Never Been to Texas." He'll also have copies of his recently published autobiography, "Still Lookin' for Love," on hand for fans to pick up.

"I expect to have a good time," said Lee of the upcoming show. "You're going to hear some good music, and hopefully I can put a smile on people's faces."



Johnny Lee

with the show, I'll be signing autographs. I'm still lookin' for love, man – I always get out there and sign autographs after the show."

McDowell is equally excited to see both his fans and his friends.

"Through the course of 40 years, I've run into (Watson and Lee) over and over and over again," said McDowell. "One of the first people I ever worked with was in '77 at Gilley's down in Houston, right after 'The King Is Gone.'"

"I was backstage, and there was a guy leaning up against the wall. I was a brand-new artist, and 'The King Is Gone' was huge, so they threw me everywhere. But I was excited about working at Gilley's because I loved Mickey Gilley."

"So, this guy was leaned up against the wall, and I said, you work here? He said, 'Yeah, I'm the house man, I've been here a few years, my name's Johnny Lee.' That's the first time I ever met Johnny, so that's 41 years ago."

McDowell has been working on a new TV show called "Painting America," and the pilot episode aired recently, focusing on Elvis Presley with an original painting by McDowell called "That Magic Moment," which highlighted when Elvis received his first guitar in Tupelo, Mississippi.

The show celebrates McDowell's love of distinctly American history, music and painting, and the artist plans to travel extensively while filming the series.

"I'm just glad to be out here still doing what I love to do," said McDowell. "The most



Ronnie McDowell

amazing thing about (Anderson Music Hall) is this – the first time I ever worked it, it was a Wednesday afternoon.

"I got ready, got a shower, and these two old men picked me up. I was kind of down in the dumps. I thought, why in the world am I playing something on a Wednesday at 2 o'clock in the afternoon?"

"I got in the car, and these old men were talking, and they said, 'Son, glad to have you here.' I said, yeah, I'm kind of down in the dumps. I can't believe somebody booked me on a Wednesday. And both of them turned around and said, 'Well son, that place is packed.' I've been going there ever since, and it is now one of my Top 5 places to perform in America."

The music will begin at 7 p.m. on March 3, and tickets are still available for the event at GeorgiaMountainFairgrounds.com.