

Elections...from Page 1A

As it stood following the hearing, the board seemed poised to act on the precinct consolidation, though Board Chair Janet Oliva and Co-Chair Scott Ledford did say during the hearing that the board was open to ideas in the coming days that could potentially change their minds.

The consolidation measure received unanimous support in a vote during the board's regular monthly meeting in February, though board members Barbara Shook and Loretta Youngblood at the March 9 public hearing said that they no longer supported consolidation after further consideration.

In making their case for consolidation, Oliva, Ledford and board member Rob Murray took turns presenting information in the hearing, keeping in mind an overarching message of making sure that every vote counts.

Oliva highlighted the board's responsibility in adhering to strict state elections laws, noting that the risk of making a mistake is greater with more precincts, especially when the 2016 election season featured high turnover for poll workers.

She pointed out two state investigations involving Towns County, a 2012 investigation that has nearly reached conclusion but is currently in the Georgia Attorney General's office, as well as an ongoing investigation into a possible infraction from the 2016 election cycle.

And while neither of these investigations involves the precincts to be eliminated, Oliva said she was pointing to the investigations to show the level of scrutiny elections boards are under statewide.

Along with an unstable bevy of poll workers and all the training they need each election season, the board also argued that not having access to software that can only be used at elections HQ makes the precincts vulnerable to a variety of mistakes.

In other words, the board wants to bring everything in to one precinct in order to closer mind polling operations.

The board used other data to make its case, touting that 53 percent of the electorate in 2016 voted early in person at the Old Rock Jail, while only 10 percent voted in Young Harris, 6 percent voted at Macedonia, 5 percent at Hiawassee, 1 percent at Tate City, and 5 percent absentee by mail.

Another selling point for the board was the cost of elections, which currently run between \$12,000 and \$15,000 per election. Consolidating to one precinct would allow the board to save county taxpayers at least \$7,000 per elections, according to the board.

In the final points of its presentation last Thursday, the board pointed to other counties in Georgia that have successfully consolidated to one precinct.

According to the board, those other counties have been able to save tax dollars, allow board members to staff the one precinct properly, as well as meet required service levels,



Elections board members Barbara Shook, left, and Loretta Youngblood. Youngblood was appointed to the board by the Towns County Democratic Party in January. Both Shook and Youngblood expressed opposition to the consolidation in the course of the meeting.



Longtime poll worker Sally Varao expressed her concerns about consolidation in the meeting.

including elderly and disabled residents, who can request paper ballots by mail or make their way into town during the three weeks of early voting.

Of the pushback the board did receive, much of it seemed of the sentimental variety, as the people there didn't want to see the precinct their family had always voted in disappear.

A couple of commenters accused the board of doing what was easiest, and not what the people wanted, while others alleged potential voter suppression against those who live on the outskirts of the county, or against the elderly and disabled.

Board members—namely Oliva, Ledford and Murray—reminded those in attendance that their responsibility was to the law, and that they must do dispassionately what was best for the county to better uphold election law.

There was some discussion about the elections board's budget, which the board said was not sufficient to sustain the current cost of elections moving forward.

The current and many past budgets were set by former Towns County Sole Commissioner Bill Kendall, including the 2017 budget before he left office in December.

When reached for comment, Kendall said that the board of elections has always gotten every penny it has asked for, with the one exception of the initially proposed

salary for a new elections and registration supervisor after Irma Nichols retired but before Tonya Nichols was hired.

Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw couldn't be present for the meeting, but he sent a letter with County Finance Director Andrea Anderson, who shared his opinion that consolidation to one precinct was "totally unacceptable."

"I steadfastly believe that closing any of our precincts could discourage and prohibit some voters from coming out to the polls to cast their vote," read part of Bradshaw's letter.

According to Bradshaw, he had received numerous phone calls from concerned citizens opposed to the consolidation, though Oliva said that the board office didn't receive any.

County residents looking to propose ideas on how to save the polling precincts from consolidation are urged by the board to call the elections and registration office at (706) 896-4353, or visit at 67 Lakeview Circle, Suite A.

Oliva stated that evening that a total of 50 poll workers, with each worker pledging multi-year commitments, was one example of what the precincts would need to escape consolidation.

John Van Vliet moderated the public hearing, stepping in at times when it seemed board members and residents had reached an impasse in discussion.

understand would allow the opportunity to choose elected or appointed," Dr. Rayfield said. "There are only three states that currently have both. I believe the process of appointing superintendents by elected boards has been very beneficial for public education in Georgia. It has resulted in solid school governance across our state for several years. This model minimizes the involvement of politics in school governance."

Towns County Schools Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong does not support the proposal.

"I think you will hear vastly varying opinions on this subject as there are pros and cons for each side," Dr. Berrong said. "For me personally, I'm an educator and not a politician so I'm not in favor of this resolution. It is possible that elected superintendents would make decisions based on political agendas and getting votes. If the process changes back to an election for the local Superintendent in Towns County, I will continue to base my decisions on improving student achievement solely and will never make educational decisions based on politics. The education of our youth is far too important."

The change to elected school boards and appointed superintendents began in 1993.

The Georgia School Boards Association does not support SR 192.

Young Harris College's Annual Reece Lecture to feature acclaimed Poet and Critic Tony Hoagland

The annual Reece Lecture at Young Harris College will feature American poet and critic Tony Hoagland on Tuesday, March 28, at 7 p.m. in Suber Banquet Hall of the Rollins Campus Center on the Young Harris College campus. A book signing will follow the reading. Presented by YHC's Creative Writing Department and the Arts and Assemblies Committee, this event is free and open to the public.

A native of Fort Bragg, N.C., Hoagland is the author of five volumes of poetry: "Application for Release from the Dream," "Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty," "What Narcissism Means to Me," "Sweet Ruin," which won the Brittingham Prize in Poetry, and "Donkey Gospel," winner of the James Laughlin Award of The Academy of American Poets. He is also the author of two collections of essays about

poetry, "Real Sofistakashun" and "Twenty Poems That Could Save America."

Hoagland's poetry has received many accolades over the years including fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, The Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, and the Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts. He has also received the O.B. Hardison Prize for Poetry and Teaching from the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Poetry Foundation's Mark Twain Award, and the Jackson Poetry Prize.

Hoagland earned a B.A. from the University of Iowa and his M.F.A. from the University of Arizona. As one of the nation's preeminent poetry teachers and thinker, his works are known for their acerbic and witty take on contemporary life. He currently teaches at the University of Houston and in the Warren Wilson M.F.A. pro-

gram. The Byron Herbert Reece Lecture Series was established in 1966 in memory of noted poet and YHC alumnus and former instructor Byron Herbert Reece, '40. This lecture series honors his memory and contributions to the world of letters by bringing noted writers to campus. Past lecturers include Poet Laureate of the United States Natasha Trethewey, National Book Award winner Mark Doty, American Book Award winner Kevin Young, President of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and celebrated poet Edward Hirsch, and award-winning poet and author Ellen Bryant Voigt.

To learn more about Byron Herbert Reece, visit www.byronherbertreecesociety.org.

For more information about this event, call (706) 379-5224.

Blairsville Garden Club 32nd Annual Landscape Seminar

Want to know more about planting native plants/wildflowers in your garden? This is the place and time to learn.

VIPs are coming to town! Blairsville Garden Club is holding their 32nd annual Landscape Seminar on April 12 at Haralson Civic Center, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., lunch included. "Here Come the Natives" is the topic, with an in depth study of wildflowers and their use in the landscape.

Coming to town to help with the seminar are the following:

Ray Dorsey, Agronomist Manager, Georgia Department of Transportation

Chris DeGrace, GDOT Department of Maintenance, Atlanta office

Brad E. Davis, RLA, ASLA, Associate Professor/Bachelor Landscape Architect Coordinator, College of Environment, UGA, (who was one of the Gateway judges appointed by the Governor that awarded the Gateway grants to Blairsville/Union County

Heather Alley, Conservation Horticulturist, Georgia Plant Conservation Alliance, State Botanical Garden, UGA

Henning von Schmelting, Senior Director Operations, Chattahoochee Nature Center, Roswell, GA.

This is an outstanding

smithing, hawk forging, leather crafting and forge building. Watch, meet and talk with several talented bladesmiths and blacksmiths.

Activities include blade-

group of speakers who will bring their knowledge and expertise to share with the public.

Registration is \$30 per person, which includes morning snacks and lunch with drinks. Door prizes will be given at the end of the program.

Mark your calendar for this day. There will be no walk ins at the door, and everyone must be registered ahead of time because of the catered lunches. E-mail to kathrlitt336@windstream.net for your registration form, telephone 706-781-4858 cell.

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This is an outstanding

smithing, hawk forging, leather crafting and forge building. Watch, meet and talk with several talented bladesmiths and blacksmiths.

See what it takes to transform old discarded steel scrap metal into functional works of art. Fine craftsmen from several states attend, some collectors bring their collections to display, knifemaking supply

vendors participate and others who come just like to look and talk knives.

More info at www.georgiaknifemakersguild.com or search YouTube for Trackrock Hammer-in fun. Information about the Campground and directions can be found at www.trackrock.com or on Facebook at Trackrock Campground & Stables. N(Mar15.F4)CA



Wilkinson...from Page 1A

by local boards of education and election of local school board members by voters.

It's the way Georgia used to select school superintendents and school boards more than two decades ago.

The proposed constitutional amendment passed the State Senate on Friday, March 3 by a vote of 40-12. The first reading of the proposal in the State House came on Monday, March 6.

SR 192 proposes a constitutional amendment to make superintendents elected. They currently are appointed by school boards, which are elected. SR 192 by Sen. Wilkinson, who

represents Towns County in Senate District 50, allows communities to change the rules by referendum if voters first change the constitution.

The proposed legislation is co-sponsored by District 51 State Sen. Steve Gooch, who represents Union County in the State Senate.

According to Wilkinson, the average tenure of superintendents dropped to three years from eight years using the appointment method.

Union County Schools Superintendent Dr. Fred Rayfield said the proposal does offer a choice for voters.

"This legislation as I

No Couples Counseling with Domestic Violence

The National Domestic Violence Hotline states that "the primary reason we don't recommend couples counseling is that abuse is not a "relationship" problem. Couples counseling may imply that both partners contribute to the abusive behavior, when the choice to be abusive lies solely with the abusive partner. Focusing on communication or other relationship issues distracts from the abusive behavior, and may actually reinforce it. Additionally, a therapist may not be aware that abuse is present and inadvertently encourage the abuse to continue or escalate."

Abusers need to admit they have a problem and attend a Family Violence Intervention Program (FVIP). Victims may choose to seek individual counseling and/or a domestic violence support group.

S.A.F.E. is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that provides services to victims of Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Child Abuse in Towns and Union counties. For information on training or to volunteer for S.A.F.E., call 706-379-1901. If you are a victim of domestic violence or sexual assault or know someone who is, call S.A.F.E. for confidential assistance 24/7, 706-379-3000. N(Mar15.Z10)CA