

# Towns County Herald

Legal Organ of Towns County

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## County prepares for coronavirus as officials urge calm Schools close; elementary teacher tested for COVID-19

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

On Monday, March 16, the Towns County Emergency Management Agency reported that a resident had been transported Sunday night to Northeast Georgia Medical Center from Chatuge Regional Hospital with "suspicious symptoms."

"County officials were made aware of the transfer and circumstances late last night," the EMA said on Facebook. "Steps have been taken to mitigate any further exposure possibility."

"Two EMS employees will be on isolation pending test results. Please remember this is only a suspected case at this time. More information will be posted as available."

The transported individual - who was tested for the virus Monday morning - is a teacher at Towns County Elementary School, which was in session through Friday, March 13.

"Results for the test can take up to 72 hours, and we will inform everyone as we get more information," Towns County Schools said Monday. "Please understand that this is

NOT a confirmed case of the virus.

"Elementary school employees were informed to stay home and keep their distance from parents, grandparents and elderly populations until the test results come back. Our suggestion is the same for parents and students who were in the elementary school last week."

"This is not a time for panic, but a time for wisdom. Be smart, keep your distance from other people, wash your hands religiously, and monitor yourself and children for any symptoms. Working together as a community, we can minimize the effects of this virus in Towns County."

"Once we learn the results of the test, a decision on what school will look like for the next three weeks will be made and passed on to you."

Beyond even the shuttering of store shelves and closing of local institutions, these announcements on Monday brought home the larger international news story that is coronavirus, as officials at every level, both domestic and abroad, continued to take the virus threat seriously.

In the U.S. alone,

the disease has affected everything from the stock market, professional sports and elections, to local schools and policies by area schools, governments, hospitals and first responder agencies.

And across the planet, long held social norms and customs have been swept up and largely discarded, cementing the virus' cultural status as a happening of historic proportions.

It may sound mundane, but coronaviruses are actually quite common, representing one of the major sources of "the common cold." This "novel" disease, however, is a particularly contagious new strain of coronavirus known as COVID-19.

People who contract the virus may experience a fever, cough and shortness of breath two to 14 days after exposure, though symptoms of COVID-19 seem to be mild for most people.

However, all available information indicates that the elderly and/or chronically ill people with weakened immune systems are disproportionately at risk for dangerous and even deadly flu-like symptoms and respiratory complications

caused by the virus.

All Towns County stakeholders with access to government health and safety care levers have been closely monitoring the rapidly changing situation and coordinating behind the scenes to stay on top of any response to a potential local outbreak, with policies being fleshed out and adopted to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to the most vulnerable members of the community.

Out of an abundance of caution, Union General Health Systems decided on Friday to close their Union County Nursing Home, along with Towns County's Chatuge Regional Nursing Home, "to visitors and all public until further notice."

Additionally, Union General announced Monday it was halting all public visitations to its hospitals in Union and Towns counties, as well as putting into place special screening and entry procedures for patients exhibiting coronavirus symptoms.

People should contact their physicians for questions about elective surgeries and procedures.

Union General has also



President Donald Trump declared a national emergency over COVID-19 on Friday, March 13.

indefinitely closed its Wellness Center, though the hospital said that, once it determines the length of the shutdown, "all members will have that time added to the end of their membership."

Hospital Administrator Leslie Daniel described the hospitals and nursing homes' level of preparedness for the people in their care as "high" last week.

"With the current situation, we are fluid on all fronts," she said. "We have been meeting on a regular basis

on this issue to ensure that all staff is educated on our specific plan."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta recommend that people call their health care providers for medical advice if they think they've been exposed to COVID-19 "and develop a fever and symptoms," and people should also contact Chatuge Regional Hospital at 706-896-2222 prior to visiting with coronavirus-like symptoms.

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## Towns County man dies after two-car collision in Young Harris

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

James "Jimmy" Ernest Smith, 78, of Young Harris, passed away on Wednesday, March 11, two days after a car crash that sent him and another driver to Northeast Georgia Medical Center aboard separate life flight helicopters.

The crash occurred shortly after 1 p.m. on Monday, March 9, near Blue Ridge Mountain EMC Headquarters on Georgia 2 in Young Harris, according to GSP.

In the leadup to the crash, Smith's 2007 Ford Taurus was traveling east on Georgia 2 toward Hiawassee when it crossed over the centerline into the left westbound lane and oncoming traffic, according to GSP.

The right front of the Taurus struck the right front of a 2019 Cadillac XT5 in the left westbound lane of Georgia 2, after which the XT5 traveled across both eastbound lanes and onto the south shoulder before



Jimmy Smith

striking a guardrail and coming to a rest, according to GSP.

Smith's Taurus came to a rest in the westbound lanes of Georgia 2. He has been listed as the suspected at-fault driver in the accident, according to GSP.

Both vehicles were totaled in the crash, and their

drivers were flown to the hospital in Gainesville with serious injuries, according to GSP. Smith passed away two days later.

Authorities familiar with the crash investigation believe Smith may have been experiencing a medical event such as a heart attack at the time of the accident, which would have contributed to his vehicle crossing the centerline.

Smith was a lifelong resident of Towns County and member of McConnell Memorial Baptist Church, according to his obituary.

"To say Jimmy was a sports fan would be putting it lightly," his obituary continued. "He truly loved basketball, baseball and golf."

"Jimmy loved baseball under Coach Zell Miller at Young Harris College and diligently supported the YHC sports programs in subsequent years."

"He had a very

See Collision, Page 8A

## Secretary of State postpones Presidential Preference Primary

News Special  
North Georgia News

ATLANTA - In light of the public health emergency posed by COVID-19, the illness caused by the coronavirus, in-person voting presents increased risk to voters and poll workers. Gov. Kemp has declared a public health emergency and Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger has declared a national emergency.

"Events are moving rapidly, and my highest priority is protecting the health of our poll workers, their families, and the community at large," Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger said over the weekend.

Maintaining the integrity of the election depends on the talents of poll workers who are in the high-risk group, because their average age is over 70. So, concern for their health is a central consideration in this decision.

"Our priority is to protect the health and safety of all Georgians and to ensure that as many Georgians as



Brad Raffensperger  
Secretary of State

possible have an opportunity to vote," said State Sen. Nikema Williams, the Chairwoman of the Democratic Party of Georgia. "Continued in-person voting could compromise both goals."

"Georgians who have already cast their vote in person or by mail for the March 24 primary will be able to vote

again in the May 19 primary for the elections already scheduled for that date. If Georgians who have already cast their vote for the March 24 primary do not vote again in the May 19 primary, their votes for the Presidential Preference Primary will still count."

Secretary Raffensperger has represented that all votes already cast in person and all absentee ballots will be counted, and every Georgia voter that has not yet had a chance to cast a ballot in the March 24 elections will be able to do so on May 19, along with the elections already scheduled for that date.

"Given these circumstances, I believe it is necessary and prudent to suspend in-person voting in the Presidential Preference Primary, and the local elections associated with them, and resume in-person voting for those elections as part of the already scheduled May 19 General Primary."

See Primary, Page 8A

## Sheriff candidates answer questions for public at GOP forum



Five Republican sheriff candidates met for a Q&A forum on March 14 at the school auditorium. L-R: Kenneth "Ode" Henderson, Linda J. Curtis, Jim Couch, Daren "Bear" Osborn and Lisa Joseph.

By Shawn Jarrard  
Towns County Herald  
Editor

The five Republican candidates for Towns County Sheriff participated in a friendly forum inside the Anne Oliver Mitchell Auditorium at Towns County Schools on Saturday, March 14.

Towns County's own Republican Party facilitated the forum, which was moderated by Young Harris College business professor Dr. John Van Vliet.

attended the forum, filling about a third of the auditorium that Saturday evening. Towns GOP leaders made it known beforehand that they'd be sharing a video of the event for folks wanting to watch from home out of caution over COVID-19 and public spaces.

The forum consisted of opening and closing statements from each candidate, plus 12 audience-submitted questions to which each candidate had two minutes to respond.

Topics discussed during

the forum included drugs, community policing, visibility of the sheriff, campaign backers, interagency cooperation, grant funds, working with the Commissioner's Office, active shooters, budgets, certifications, departmental management styles and more.

The candidates are Linda J. Curtis, retired law enforcement officer; Jim Couch, a captain with the Towns County Sheriff's Office; Daren "Bear"

See GOP Forum, Page 8A

## Sheriff's Office arrests 10 more suspects on meth charges

News Special  
Towns County Herald

Towns County Sheriff's Office investigators and deputies continue to identify and arrest suspects on drug-related charges.

These 10 suspects arrested come on the heels of 27 other suspects arrested during the two previous months.

The arrests were the result of a traffic stop and the execution of a search warrant, as the Sheriff's Office continues to make good on its promise to seek out suspects involved in illegal drug possession and activity in the Towns County

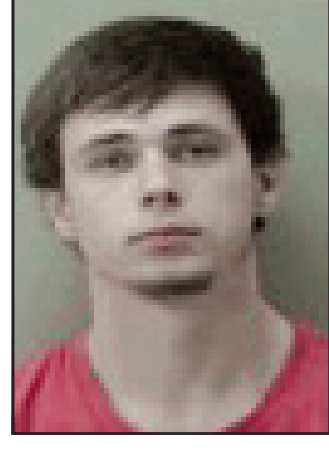
community.

On Monday, March 2, a deputy made a traffic stop on a Ford Expedition on US 76 in Hiawassee.

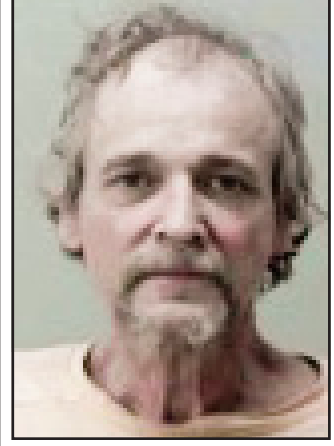
Upon further investigation, the driver, identified as Derek John Bowen, 39, of Clarksville, was arrested and charged with possession of methamphetamine, possession of drug-related objects, defective equipment for a cracked windshield and a headlight violation.

On Monday, March 9, Sheriff's Office investigators and deputies obtained and

See Arrests, Page 8A



Lessie Montgomery



Curtis Cooper



David Chastain II



Derek Bowen

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Lake Levels	
Blue Ridge	1,675.52
Chatuge	1,920.31
Nottely	1,766.19



**ALL SCHOOL SPORTING EVENTS POSTPONED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE**

**IMPORTANT NOTICE: UNION GENERAL HEALTH SYSTEMS**  
See page 7B

**Turkey Hunting Season Opens March 21st**  
See page 7A

**We Are Towns County Schools**  
See page 2A