

Towns County Herald

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TCSO tests inmates, jailers and deputies for COVID-19

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

To get a better picture of coronavirus exposure at the Towns County Detention Center, the Sheriff's Office has collected samples from all inmates, jail staff and deputies testing a COVID-19 test, with results still outstanding as of press time.

"Currently, no one in the jail is exhibiting COVID-like symptoms," the Sheriff's Office said on April 29. "However, due to more test kits becoming available and our health care provider's current recommendation to allow inmates and staff to test,

27 inmates out of 31 currently housed at the Towns County Detention Center were tested after consenting to the test today."

Jailers, deputies and office staff were supposed to be tested on Friday, May 1, but the testing was rescheduled to Monday, May 4, to be conducted by the Georgia National Guard after press time.

Mass testing was not done previously because testing was only medically advised for people with symptoms, but more collection kits have become available recently, and recommendations have changed regarding the testing of asymptomatic individuals,

the Sheriff's Office said.

So far, a former inmate has tested positive for the disease, which he somehow contracted from inside the jail.

Additionally, five jailers received coronavirus tests the week before mass testing began, and the Herald learned after following up with the Sheriff's Office that all five of those results came back negative.

After falling ill, former inmate Ricky Keebler Martin was taken from the jail to the hospital on April 19, where he tested positive for the virus.

Martin had been incarcerated for nearly three

months when he came down with the disease, and it's not clear at this time how he contracted COVID-19, which is known to spread asymptotically.

Later that same week, five jailers required coronavirus testing and self-quarantining after developing COVID-like symptoms, as mentioned above.

The Sheriff's Office has taken a number of steps dating back to March 13 to keep inmates and employees safe during the pandemic, including altered procedures like no jail visitations, extensive cleaning and other mitigation efforts.

See *TCSO Testing*, Page 5A



Georgia leads the way as other states start to reopen

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Gov. Brian Kemp began allowing many businesses he'd closed earlier in the pandemic to voluntarily reopen starting April 24. Granted, these businesses must follow strict health guidelines to stay open, but now, a majority of states have begun to take Georgia's lead.

From Alabama's "safer at home" order to Minnesota's relaxation on industrial sector and other restrictions, a greater number of states are letting go of the reins a bit to allow individuals and business owners more of a say in how they choose to live their lives, albeit with new cultural norms firmly in place regarding social distancing, personal hygiene and sanitation.



Gov. Brian Kemp

Economically speaking, reopening responsibly means people getting their lives back on track, and sooner rather than later. The Georgia Department of Labor reported Thursday it had issued more unemployment payments during the pandemic

than in the past four years combined.

Fortunately, much of the COVID-19 data seems to be pointing in the right direction, demonstrating that Americans following the recommended safety measures has effectively helped to flatten the curve in most areas.

People will remember that the whole point of flattening the curve was to keep hospitals from becoming overwhelmed with patients who couldn't receive care. So far, this hasn't even come close to happening for most of Georgia.

Statewide, the curve appears to be flattening and is perhaps even on a downward trend, despite new cases still being diagnosed and increased

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Virus fears ease a bit as visitors cautiously venture out

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Spring is in the air – of course, so is COVID-19.

And while it's as important as ever to maintain social distancing and personal hygiene habits to avoid spreading the virus, as the weather improves and more activities become available, people in communities everywhere are starting to venture out of their homes.

"I think it is nice to see things opening back up," said resident Taylor Jacobs on a walk about Hiawassee last week. "I was doing some looking around town and shopping at some stores, like Linda's here."

"It is just nice seeing some places opening up and seeing people out around town; it just makes it feel a little more normal. I think we have started locked up for a month, and it is time to get back out as long as we stay safe."

"This is the right move,



Spring continues to encourage outdoor activities, with more and more people venturing out in public. Fortunately, the virus doesn't spread as easily outside.

Photo by Jarrett Whitener

but people need to make their own decisions about what is best for them."

Hamilton Gardens had its fair share of tourists on sunny days last week, with people visiting to enjoy the

rhododendrons, scenery and trails above Lake Chatugee inside the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

"I think it is gorgeous out here, and there are a lot

See *Fears Ease*, Page 6A

County, cities take tax hit during coronavirus pandemic

By Todd Forrest
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Following a decrease in March sales tax collections, Towns County and the cities of Hiawassee and Young Harris are battening down the hatches as they anticipate another gloomy economic report for April.

According to State Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw, sales tax revenues in March saw a \$14,000 decrease compared to March 2019. He also noted that since local businesses were fully operational for the first two weeks of March, it's the month of April that concerns him most.

April's financial statement won't be available until later this month, so the commissioner on what it will entail. However, he foresees another dip in revenue, despite Gov. Brian Kemp's recent moves to restart the state's economy.

"If March was down



Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw

\$14,000 from last year, I could imagine that April will be way down," Bradshaw said. "Most of the businesses (in Towns County) have stayed closed, so nothing really has changed. People are still scared, and they're remaining cautious, as they should."

In light of the discouraging news for March and a dreary

forecast for the near future, Bradshaw reemphasized that, due to self-imposed fiscal restraint, his office has yet to have to dip into the county's emergency savings.

"We're in very good shape," he said. "We haven't had to tap into our rainy-day fund, and we hope we don't have to. If we do, we'll come up with a plan to put it back."

"But to be honest, we don't think we'll have to tap into it. We have cut the spending in each (county) department and have been extremely frugal."

The city of Hiawassee's revenue stream has dropped off due to business restrictions put in place during the pandemic. According to Mayor Liz Ordiales, property taxes were due in January, so the virus didn't impact their collection; however, the city is making a concerted effort to collect delinquent tax bills.

"After getting a report from the Tax Commissioner's

See *Tax Hit*, Page 5A

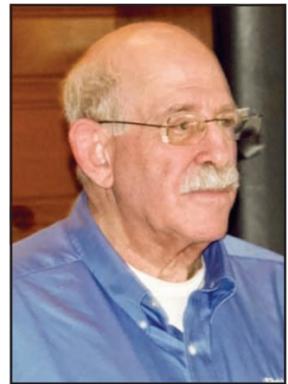
Towns County volunteer groups work to support community

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Since COVID-19 first swept the region, area volunteer organizations have worked to stay connected with their memberships and make sure their communities are cared for and safe.

"The shutdown caused us to have to shut down as a club in terms of our weekly meeting over at Brasstown (Valley Resort)," said Kerry Clem, former president of the Rotary Club of Lake Chatugee-Hiawassee. "What we have been able to do, however, is continue meeting by Zoom, and that has been working very well. People seem to be enjoying the meetings, and we are still able to have speakers."

According to current



Gerry Gutenstein

President Gerry Gutenstein, Rotary of Lake Chatugee-Hiawassee aims to stay in contact with speakers in the area and help in ways that the community needs most.

"We have speakers on

the subject of the coronavirus, and we had (Towns County Schools Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong) this past meeting talking about what the schools are doing," Gutenstein said. "We are giving money to the Chamber of Commerce for supporting the first responders."

"We are helping pack meals for the Food Pantry ... (and) we are doing Meals of Hope, since that event couldn't happen and was supposed to be on the weekend they shut everything down."

"We have been using small groups to do that, and that is really what we have been doing out in the community. We are all supporting each other, and we are trying to do as much as we can for the community. If there are needs, then we want

See *Volunteers*, Page 5A

Some local business owners move forward with reopening

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The state forced many businesses to close down last month in an effort to slow the spread of coronavirus. After the closures reversed most of those closures in late April, some area businesses are starting to reopen to provide much-needed services to the community again.

Hair Dimensions in Hiawassee opened its doors to customers on Friday, May 1, taking appointments from people who'd gone weeks without a proper haircut.

"I know we could have opened last week, and I prayed about it, and I didn't have a good feeling," said salon owner Patty Burns. "I did talk to the commissioner and the mayor, and they didn't decide for me,

See *Local Businesses*, Page 6A



Hair Dimensions owner Patty Burns gave client Peggy Taylor a haircut at her salon in Hiawassee on Friday, May 1. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

US attorneys urge decade behind bars for Gowder, Heaton

By Linda Erbele
Towns County Herald

More than four years after their highly-publicized arrests and seven months out from their multi-count convictions for prescription drug crimes, two Blairsville men will learn their fate when a federal judge hands down their sentences later this month.

On May 28, former hospital CEO Mike Gowder and physician James Heaton will stand before U.S. District Judge Richard W. Story inside the U.S. Courthouse in Gainesville to receive sentences based in part on recommendations provided last week by federal prosecutors and the men's legal defense teams.

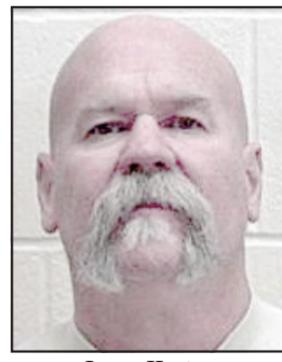
This will be the federal court's third attempt at sentencing the pair due to prior delays caused by ongoing



Mike Gowder

concerns over the novel coronavirus, after a jury found Gowder and Heaton guilty on more than 100 counts each involving prescription drug fraud on Oct. 24, 2019.

Following their convictions, federal probation officers conducted extensive



James Heaton

presentence investigations for the co-defendants to help the court arrive at "the appropriate sentence from the range of possible sentences set out in the statutes," which is standard practice according to the American Bar Association.

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