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Pastors stream 'National Day of Prayer' event for area residents

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Area churches came together on May 7 to "Pray God's Glory Across the Earth" for the National Day of Prayer last week.

The event was originally planned to be held at the Towns County Recreation and Conference Center, but it had to be held online instead due to COVID-19.

"National Day of Prayer has been around for a long time," said Bradley Thomas, chair member on the committee for the event and Associate Pastor of Macedonia Baptist Church. "President Truman and his Congress put it together,

and in '88, Reagan actually signed it in designating the first Thursday in May as the official Day of Prayer for the nation.

"It is just an effort to assemble and pray. Normally, we would have it at Foster Park or some other venue where we could have a lot of folks come in and join us, but obviously, with all the COVID-19 things going on, we decided to put it online."

Area churches pre-recorded the event to host on Facebook, giving the community the opportunity to pray together and talk with one another in the chat.

"The whole purpose for this is just for prayer, and the whole country needs prayer

right now with everything going on," Thomas said. "This is just a real positive event to uplift folks' spirits, and this is a real effort for prayer. I am so excited that we are able to have this event, even though it is a little different from how we planned."

As of Sunday, more than 1,600 people had tuned in to watch the event featuring pastors praying over various aspects of society. The roughly hour-long program opened with a brief introduction, with the first local prayer warrior being Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw.

Ryan Wilson of North Mt. Zion Church of God played music between prayers, and

participating pastors stayed hopeful, recommending that the community trust in God and support each other in these times where there are those in need and people worried.

"I just want to encourage everybody to keep their eyes on the Lord and not to lose hope in this time," Thomas said. "Right now, I know there are a lot of people who are discouraged because things haven't gone the best way."

"We are very much a people of habit with our lives, and with that interrupted, it has been a little discouraging. I just want to encourage our community to keep their eyes on the Lord and not to lean on



Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw led the opening prayer for the National Day of Prayer event, which can be streamed anytime over Facebook.

Photo/Screenshots

Young Harris discusses city development, COVID-19 pandemic



The Young Harris City Council convened via Zoom teleconferencing for its May 5 regular city meeting.

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Young Harris Mayor Andrea Gibby and City Council members discussed the current state of the city via Zoom for their Tuesday, May 5, regular meeting.

Economic Development Director Denise McKay made

an appearance to talk about the forthcoming Rural Enterprise Zone, which is being undertaken for the purpose of eventual job development in the city.

"It is a little over halfway done," McKay said of the Enterprise Zone. "Back when we were working on the community development plan and the master plan, you had

said you wanted to be proactive in getting that in place so when the (Georgia 515) Bypass was done, the city would be ready to move forward and start working on development."

"The Enterprise Zone would be another tool that we have, and the council retains control over how much if they

Berrong, school board talk budget shortfall amid coronavirus

By Todd Forrest
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

The local effects of an impending budget deficit due to the economic impacts of COVID-19 were front and center in the livestreamed May 4 meeting of the Towns County Board of Education.

Superintendent Dr. Darren Berrong opened the session by addressing the 14 percent budget cuts that are looming over the upcoming school year.

According to Berrong, an email from the Georgia Department of Education affirmed the shortfall would affect all state organizations. But for the Towns County School System particularly, a 14 percent cutback would represent losses approaching \$600,000.

When the state cuts are combined with the county's weak sales tax returns in recent



Dr. Darren Berrong

years, Berrong is projecting a loss between \$800,000 and \$1 million for the Fiscal Year 2021 budget.

Berrong discussed the possibility of reduced calendar days for all school employees, similar to the recession at the end of the previous decade when Towns County carved six days from its calendar,

while other systems furloughed employees 10 days.

"If we do three calendar reduction days (during the next school year), that will save the system \$147,000," he said. "If we did five reduction days, that would be \$245,000. If we did seven reduction days, that's \$344,000. And if we did 10 reduction days, that would be \$491,000."

Towns County should receive \$266,000 from the federal CARES Act, but Berrong emphasized those funds are only available once and won't be an option in the future, despite reduced budgets likely becoming the norm for years to come.

"This budget cut, for us, will probably be a four or five-year deal," he said. "This isn't just going to turn around and all our budget's back next year. Obviously, (the CARES Act) check will help, but it's

Hiawassee PD warns public about fake \$50 bills from China

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Someone has been passing fake \$50 bills off as real at a local business, and the Hiawassee Police Department wants residents and business owners to know what to look for.

"We have received reports of counterfeit \$50 bills being passed in Hiawassee," Police Chief Paul Smith said. "The bills look fairly legitimate except for the Chinese writing on them."

"Each side of the bills has Chinese printed on them, which translates to 'practice voucher.' These bills are used



One of the fake \$50 bills circulating in Towns County.

in Chinese banks to practice recognizing and counting US currency."

According to Chief Smith, the suspect is a female who has used four of the fake bills on different occasions at one local business, which is not

being named at this time.

Anyone with more information about these bills or who can help to identify the suspect should contact the Hiawassee Police Department at 706-896-2888.

Early voting starts Monday ahead of June 9 General Primary

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Early voting for the June 9 General Primary, Presidential Preference Primary and Nonpartisan General Elections begins Monday, and for the first time in election history, voters are being encouraged to wear masks.

Of course, people don't have to wear a mask to cast a ballot, but the fact that mask wearing is being advised by officials across the state is certainly a sign of the times.

It's been a crazy election season, starting with the last-minute rollout of brand-new voting equipment, followed by the cancellation of the March 24 Presidential Preference Primary due to coronavirus, then the postponement of the May 19 General Primary to the June 9 for the same reasons.

Moreover, the Secretary of State's Office has initiated



Towns County residents can deposit absentee ballots and absentee ballot applications in this drop box outside the Board of Elections & Registration Office.

City Council continues livestreamed meetings; budget hearing May 26

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Sitting 6 feet apart in the main council chambers of Hiawassee City Hall, Mayor Liz Ordiales and City Council members came together May 5 for their Facebook Livestreamed regular meeting.

Councilwoman Amy Barrett led the invocation, noting her initial fears over the state reopening while reaffirming her trust in God to watch over all.

Ordiales then led the Pledge of Allegiance, after which she provided her usual update from a regular conference call she attends with Dr. Kathleen Toomey of the Department of Public Health.

"It seems like the cases overall are staying steady," Ordiales said. "There's more of them because there's more testing ... we're tracking

well." Added Ordiales, "I also got a status today from (Patrick) Malone about the census responses. We were leading the pack. Now, we're last."

"The state of Georgia is 53 percent. Towns County is 45.5 percent. The city of Young Harris is 45.5 percent. And we are 38.6 percent. So please, if you're listening and you haven't done your census, please do it."

Ordiales is hopeful that an accurate census count can help the city obtain development grants and other funding to improve the city moving forward while offsetting costs for local taxpayers.

Moving on, in recognition of Professional Municipal Clerks Week, May 3-9, the mayor held a special recognition for City Clerk Bonnie Kendrick, saying



Hiawassee Mayor Liz Ordiales bows her head in prayer during the May 5 regular city meeting.

Photo/Screenshots "This office would not run without her." The council and mayor then gathered - wearing

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Towns County Jail COVID-19 testing returns no positive results

News Special
Towns County Herald



Novel coronavirus results have returned for Towns County Jail staff members and inmates who received an opportunity to test recently after one inmate was reported to have tested positive in mid-April.

The elective mass

testing of 33 individuals was administered on April 29 and May 4, and all individuals from those days of testing have returned negative for the virus.

One inmate was retested last week due to an inconclusive result, and this person as well as three more inmates who initially did not want to be tested returned negative results Monday, for a total of 36 negative tests in recent weeks.

Two additional Sheriff's Office staff members elected to receive testing last week, and results for their tests were still outstanding at press time.

Currently, no staff members or inmates are exhibiting COVID-like symptoms. Sheriff Chris Clinton commends his jail staff along with all other staff members for

a "Job Well Done."

The Sheriff's Office as a whole began preparing for the spread of the virus early on. The jail and Sheriff's Office began putting safeguards in place on March 13, locking down outside contact coming into the jail.

Cleaning and sanitizing practices were stepped up in the jail and Sheriff's Office in the early stages and continue to be the current practices as well.

Many more steps were put into place and have continued to be the daily practice to safeguard the inmate population as well as the office staff.

The Sheriff's Office said it will continue to take the health and safety of all inmates and staff as one of its most

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