



Happy 4th of July

Towns County Herald

Legal Organ of Towns County

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75 Cents

www.townscountyherald.net

Publication Number 635540 Volume 91 Number 35

Wednesday, July 1, 2020

Towns Countians to wish America a very 'Happy Birthday' Saturday

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

America will turn 244 this July 4, and no doubt many patriotic people in the community will want to take advantage of what Towns County has in the way of Independence Day celebrations Saturday.

One major event hosted by the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds every year is the ever-popular community fireworks show, which will return Saturday for residents by the hundreds to enjoy.

Fairgrounds General Manager Hilda Thomason said she is looking forward to 2020's offering, to feature live entertainment and a large

display for everyone who turns out.

"We are going to have a fireworks show and be shooting them off the ballfield at 9:45 p.m. on the Fourth," Thomason said. "I am also going to have a band here in front of the office called the Vintage Vixens. They have performed in Anderson Music Hall before, and they are really good. They will be performing from 6-9 p.m. in the parking lot.

"We will also have chairs for people to sit in, or they can bring their lawn chairs (or sit in their cars). Then, we will be selling hotdogs and chips and drinks. We will social distance with the band so people are not down here on the band, and guests can spread out with their

chairs and everything."

As always, the show is free to attend, though Thomason said they'll definitely be grateful for any donations to help offset the \$5,000 cost of the fireworks this year.

For more information, visit GeorgiaMountainFairgrounds.com.

Another returning event is the Fourth of July Boat Parade on Lake Chatuge. The parade lineup will begin at 10:15 a.m. behind Aqua Tiki in Sunset Cove, with two of the best viewing locations being the boat ramp at the fairgrounds and the Hiwassee Beach.

People wishing to participate in the parade contest See 4th of July, Page 6A



The Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds hosts a locally beloved fireworks show every single year. Unlike this event in 2017, expect to see more face masks in 2020 due to COVID-19. Photo/TCH

SPLOST Committee dissolves after referendum passes countywide vote

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer



Members of the Towns County SPLOST Committee met with Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw and Mayor Liz Ordiales for their last meeting on June 22 following the June 9 passing of the SPLOST.

2020 SPLOST referendum to garner as much support from the community as possible in the June 9 General Primary Election.

Fortunately for Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw and the committee, the 1-cent Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax passed with 63.49 percent of the overall vote and 2,876 votes.

The estimated \$12 million SPLOST will pick up collections Oct. 1 following expiration of the Education-SPLOST on Sept. 30, meaning the local sales tax rate will remain the same at 7 percent.

SPLOST funding will go largely toward financing major renovations and an addition to the Towns County Courthouse, See SPLOST Committee, Page 6A

Large crowds turn out for inaugural Pro Rodeo at GA Mtn. Fairgrounds

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Upwards of 3,000 rodeo fans from all over headed to the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds Ballfields over the weekend to catch the first-ever Hiwassee Pro Rodeo June 26-27.

Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw attended both nights of the rodeo to welcome folks to the area and to wish them a good time during all the bull riding, calf roping, barrel racing, bronc riding and more.

"We are excited - we have been preparing for this for a long time," Bradshaw said Friday. "We have a lot of people to thank, so I am not going to (try) remembering all the names. I just appreciate everybody for making this possible."

Rodeo contestants were



Bronc Riding was just one of the many fast-paced rodeo pastimes performed during the 2020 Hiwassee Pro Rodeo. Photo by Lowell Nicholson Memorial Day weekend to the end of June due to COVID-19. See Rodeo, Page 8A

Former hospital CEO Gowder receives 1 year, 1 day in federal prison

By Linda Erbele
Towns County Herald

GAINESVILLE—Former Union General Hospital CEO Mike Gowder was sentenced to a year and a day in prison by U.S. District Judge Richard W. Story in a hearing Wednesday, June 24, at the federal courthouse in Gainesville.

In addition, he will have to pay a special assessment of \$10,200, a fine of \$2,000 and will serve two years of supervision following his prison sentence.

Gowder and former physician James Heaton, who ran a family practice clinic in Blairsville, were each found guilty on more than 100 counts of prescription drug fraud by a federal jury last October.

In a hearing that occurred earlier the same day, Story sentenced codefendant Heaton to six years in prison for his crimes. Heaton will also have to pay a special assessment of \$12,900 and undergo two years of supervision following his release.

Federal prosecutors had previously recommended 10-year sentences for both Gowder and Heaton, with Gowder asking for probation and house arrest over prison, and Heaton requesting no more than five years in prison. Both



Mike Gowder



James Heaton

men received their requested prison time plus one year.

Their sentencing had been delayed several times due to judicial interruptions brought on by the novel coronavirus.

Also due to COVID-19, they will not be required to surrender themselves into federal custody until at least Jan. 2, 2021, as both Gowder and Heaton, being 62 and 63 respectively, fall into the "at-risk" age category for the virus.

The two men were convicted under a federal indictment that originally included former Union General Hospital Emergency Room Director David Gowder, brother to Mike Gowder.

Interestingly, Mike's sentence ended up being six months shorter than his brother's, despite the former having been convicted on more than 100 federal charges compared to David's single crime.

David Gowder, 63, pleaded guilty in March 2019 to one count of prescribing oxycodone to a patient without a legitimate medical purpose, and Story sentenced him to 18 months in prison on June 10.

Last week, Blairsville restaurateur Randy Brunson addressed the court on Heaton's behalf, saying he had known the former family practice doctor for 50 years.

"I have never heard him utter an illegal thought," See Sentencing, Page 6A

EMC general manager to resign in September; director candidates nominated

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

YOUNG HARRIS — The Blue Ridge Mountain Electric Membership Corporation announced June 26 that General Manager Jeremy Nelms would be resigning his position at the end of September.

EMC Board directors learned of Nelms' decision the previous day, when he informed them he'd be leaving to become the new CEO of Flint Energies, effective Oct. 1. Flint is an

electric membership corporation headquartered in Reynolds, Georgia, serving customers in the Warner Robins area.

"Nelms began his career at Blue Ridge Mountain EMC in August 2016," according to the EMC's announcement. "He was hired as the seventh general manager since the inception of BRMEMC in 1938.

"During Nelms' four-year tenure, the EMC has seen a growth in its membership that now exceeds 54,000 meters, 46,791 members and 6,200

See Nelms, Page 6A



Jeremy Nelms

Residents, visitors urge continued caution amid ongoing pandemic

By Jarrett Whitener
Towns County Herald
Staff Writer

Even with summer having officially kicked off and numerous patriotic celebrations planned for this Independence Day weekend, it seems many people in the area are still preoccupied with COVID-19 - and some worry that things could conceivably get worse than before.

Indeed, positive case counts seem to be going up nationwide, with Towns County experiencing a nearly 60 percent increase in positive cases in just the last month, going from 22 cumulative cases between the beginning of April through the end of May, to 38 cumulative cases as of press time June 28.

It's important to point out that testing capabilities have

See Pandemic, Page 6A



Customers have been enjoying the warm weather shopping at local businesses like Lakeview Vintage Market in Hiwassee. Photo by Jarrett Whitener

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