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New career firefighters, employee raises in budget

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

Towns County Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw was expected to adopt the proposed 2025 County Budget in a called meeting on Monday, Dec. 30, after press time. Prior to adoption, Bradshaw advertised the budget in the Towns County Herald legal organ and held a public hearing last month. Among the various funds of the county, the 2025 General Fund Budget – the main operating fund provid-

ing for county services like law enforcement, EMS, 911, roadwork, recreation, court services, general government, etc. – has been balanced to \$16,994,595. That's up about \$1.75 million, or 11.5%, over the proposed 2024 budget, largely from increases to employee salaries and benefits that are allowing the county to remain competitive with recruitment and retention. Increases to salaries and benefits, including a 2% bump in retirement contributions, amount to about \$1.1 million

in additional spending for the new fiscal year, though some of that expense is coming from the creation of four new county positions. For the first time, the Fire Department will be manning a station 24/7, and Fire Chief Harold Copeland will be hiring three full-time positions this year to make that happen. Each new career firefighter will work 24-hours-on/48-hours-off to cover the Hiawassee station around the clock. The expansion to 24/7 station coverage will improve on the already reliable service

Towns County Fire has provided for decades and will undoubtedly enhance emergency response times overnight, when there has historically been no one paid to man any of the local stations. These new career firefighters will be in addition to the county's two full-time firefighters and Chief Copeland, who also works full-time. Augmenting the full-time crew are the dedicated volunteer firefighters who operate primarily out of four other stations in the county. Also included in new

employee costs is an extra staff member at the Tax Assessors Office, which Bradshaw is optimistic will fix assessment delays that arose this year due to staffing issues. Two new employees have been hired at the Tax Assessors Office in the last month and a half, so following an extensive training period, the total number of field-ready assessors will be five as opposed to the two available for much of 2024. Of course, inflation has continued to drive materials



Cliff Bradshaw
Sole Commissioner

Whiskey Mountain Project nixes 'affordable housing'

By Shawn Jarrard
Towns County Herald
Editor

On Dec. 17, the Hiawassee Building and Planning Committee conditionally approved the proposed Whiskey Mountain Project, a 14.4-acre private development off Bel Aire Drive behind Chatuge Regional Hospital. The conditional approval will allow for a rough-cutting of roads for the project, with minimal, selective clearing, to develop a final layout as an additional preliminary plan for approval of a land disturbance permit to get construction underway. Local developer Scott Benton of the Whiskey Mountain Group had been considering building "affordable housing" as part of the development with assistance from a Georgia Rural Workforce



Housing Grant, for which an application deadline was coming up this January. If awarded and ultimately approved by the City of Hiawassee for use on the project, the grant would have saved Benton more than a million dollars in development costs, thereby making a section of the project more affordable for homebuyers in the local workforce. However, in the weeks since Hiawassee City Council

members unanimously voted to start the grant-writing process in their Dec. 3 regular city meeting, Benton said he has had time to dig into the details of the grant, prompting his decision not to seek such funding for now. These state-level grants are awarded to small communities across Georgia where there is high demand for lower cost housing. In this case, the grant would have paid for infrastructure like roads, water, sewer and fiber optic to service the development. Upon reviewing the numerous grant stipulations from a cost-of-doing-business perspective, Benton has decided that, unfortunately, it is "not the right fit for this particular development," meaning the plans have had to change; that is, "affordable housing" is no

TCHS Student Council thanks first responders



TCHS Student Council members served first responders with coffee, donuts and thank-you's on Dec. 19. Photo by Shelly Knight

The Towns County High School Student Council celebrated local first responders with donuts and coffee the last week of school before Christmas break, on Thursday, Dec. 19. For TCHS, Rachel Sur-

les and Ken Camp are the faculty advisers who sponsor Student Council. Surles spoke about the work she does with a group of 15 students. "Candidates run for office; they have to submit their grades and develop a campaign video, and then they are elected by their peers," Surles said.

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Young Harris talks water, Timberline pump project



Young Harris Mayor Andrea Gibby leading the Dec. 3 regular city meeting, pictured here with City Attorney Marvin Harkins and Finance Officer Ana Hess. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

The December regular meeting of the Young Harris City Council featured some important updates to the Timberline booster pump project, which has suffered numerous setbacks in recent years due to topographical and other difficultly related to water delivery

up the mountain. Mayor Andrea Gibby said she had spoken with Lon Dillard of Byers Well Drilling, who related that the project was experiencing delays due to the need to acquire the proper parts. The project is in need of a box, according to Dillard, which would increase the final price tag to likely around \$100,000, or about \$16,000 more than the initial quote provided in March.

Public Works Supervisor Dean Stanley noted that contracting company CW Matthews had installed new water lines at the bottom of the Timberline community, adding 10 psi to the water being passed through the pump. In other water news, Stanley said that all the city's new meters had been installed. The only part of the process left

Council hears PBC updates, adopts rollback mill rate

The Hiawassee City Council's called meeting on Dec. 10 primarily revolved around speaking with John Sheahon of Storm Construction regarding the Paris Business Center, a business-incubating venture of the Downtown Development Authority in the city-owned Paris Buildings. Sheahon presented a slideshow in the upstairs conference room and offered an update on PBC finances and construction. Included in the slideshow were photos of the project before it began development, and some in-progress



John Sheahon is the owner of Storm Construction, which is leading the renovation efforts at the Paris Buildings in Downtown Hiawassee. He spoke with the Hiawassee City Council in December. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

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Hiawassee City Councilman Jonathan Wilson, Acting Mayor Jay Chastain Jr. and City Clerk Bonnie Kendrick in a meeting last month. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

pictures showcasing various stages of the interior construction and roof remodel.

The project consists of two buildings, with one serving as the business incubator and the other operating as a sort of “moneymaker” to support the endeavors of new businesses.

As of the meeting, framing was almost complete in Building B.

Regarding Building A, Sheahon said that “everything has been tested and approved by the city” insofar as the in-wall setup goes, and the interior is ready for application of spray foam and drywall. For the exterior, the front brickwork is complete. The roofing requires a bit more attention, but workers are scheduled to come out and put the finishing touches on.

Sheahon also went over delays faced during the project, starting with the switch between two contractors that resulted in a 16-week delay. Replacing the rear wall of one of the buildings with Hardie board was another hurdle, as was having to replace the rotten roof deck of Building B.

But the biggest wait, Sheahon said, was a result of easements and sitework delays. That resulted in almost a year of no work when Sheahon said the buildings needed underground piping done, including water and sewer connections running between the PBC and neighboring businesses.

“Between September and October, the design team kind of redrew some things, and in the month of November, we made sure pricing didn’t increase and costs didn’t overrun on the sitework,” Sheahon said.

Now that they’ve been given the green light, Sheahon said that sitework contractors and concrete layers have returned to work and were expected to wrap up within two weeks to a month.

There was still one more issue to tackle, though. The grant administrator covering much of the costs of the project iterated a few weeks before the meeting that the bathrooms and floors had to be completed in Building B.

The team has had to switch gears from viewing Building B as a so-called “white box” to be filled in later to putting much of their focus on its construction.

That said, Sheahon introduced a new receipt to the council, Acting Mayor Jay Chastain Jr. and an audience that included members of the Downtown Development Authority. Total costs for the new demands number \$89,437.85.

In the breakdown, flooring for Building B takes the lion’s share of the sum, coming in at \$37,423. Next comes five months of supervision, worth \$16,250, and general liability insurance at \$9,000. The bill also includes masonry, stair installation, plumbing and wall

construction.

Although not hotly contested, a talking point included the overhead and profit charge of 7.5%, or \$6,239.85. Sheahon expressed that while he would greatly appreciate – and indeed prefer – the council decide to cover that, he agreed that if they needed more financial wiggle room, the charge could be dropped.

Initially, Councilwoman Amy Barrett was opposed to the “optional” fee, but following conversation among fellow council members and Chastain, she agreed to the decision that the city would pay the full amount of Storm Construction’s bill, making the decision unanimous.

“I feel like you have done a great job,” Councilwoman Nancy Noblet said. “You have (taken) a lot of stabs in the back. You’ve been like a rubber band, pulled here to here in this situation.”

Chastain added, “John’s went through a lot of trials and tribulations that (are) not his fault. I respect him as a man for staying (on the project).”

In another special called meeting on Dec. 19, the Hiawassee City Council adopted the rollback millage rate of 1.557 mills for 2024 city property tax bills.

Also Dec. 19, the council featured a discussion about a water overbilling issue at the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds, which will be covered in an upcoming edition of the newspaper.

City of Young Harris...from Page 1

to complete was signing off on the invoices.

Stanley said he was also in the process of gathering quotes for 2025 tank inspections and tallying pre-emptive costs to replace older booster pumps in the city.

Additionally, he revealed that the sewer main was experiencing an air lock on a newly installed line, and troubleshooting conversations were due to follow between Turnipseed Engineers and CW Matthews.

Yearly water quality monitoring for 2024 cost the city \$11,667; a quote for 2025 measures up to \$24,092 due to the addition of every-other-year biological monitoring. Watershed monitoring is a legal requirement per the Environmental Protection Division, according to Gibby.

Councilmen Matt Miller and Steve Clark motioned to have Turnipseed oversee upcoming testing as usual, but fellow Councilman Dr. John Kelley proposed looking into

alternatives.

City Attorney Marvin Harkins said getting monitoring services without going through Turnipseed would require a bid process, and Gibby said she would investigate the possibility in the next budget cycle.

Thanks to more than 10 hours of work on Harkins’ part, the Young Harris Employee Handbook is in the process of being updated from its 2009 iteration. One big topic still on the table is paid time off.

For his part, Councilman Miller suggested offering a quarter or half-time at the beginning of the year, citing personal emergencies or a desire for downtime during winter. Gibby, meanwhile, answered extensive discussion about disability by stating that the handbook would define two weeks for short-term disability.

Main Street Director Rosemary Royston shared that the official City of Young Harris website was in the process of undergoing some changes, like

getting a new front photo and switching to a “.gov” address. She also said Master Planning meetings will resume in early 2025.

Toward the end of the meeting, Gibby said there was a crosswalk light out on Main Street at Sharp Memorial United Methodist Church. The Department of Transportation has been notified about the issue; the city must go through a DOT-approved contractor.

The light is unfortunately obsolete in make, and because a replacement can’t be found, both lights in the crosswalk may need to be replaced with newer models.

In a called meeting on Thursday, Dec. 19, the council approved the city’s proposed 2025 Budget and adopted the rollback millage rate for 2024 city property tax bills.

Young Harris City Council meets the first Tuesday of each month at 6:30 p.m. inside City Hall, located at 50 Irene Berry Drive.

Cheryl Hamby Williams retires after 50 years of nursing

Cheryl Hamby Williams, a local girl, with 50 years of nursing experience, is retiring December 31, 2024. Longstreet Clinic Administrative Department honored her and her many years of service with a reception December 2, 2024.

Cheryl’s first experience in nursing came when at the age of 14 she served 3 years as a Candy Striper at Union General Hospital. After graduating from Union County High School she attended Young Harris College for a year and two quarters acquiring the core college classes needed to transfer to nursing school. She worked spring and summer quarters in Towns County Hospital as a nursing assistant. Fall quarter of 1974 she attended Hall County School of Nursing, graduating in 1977 with a Registered Nurse degree.

Cheryl began working at the Hall County Medical Center from 1977-78, then went to Lanier Park Hospital. In 1990, she started the Diabetes Program at Lanier Park. In May 1998, Philip Marler, MD, hired Cheryl as the first Diabetes Educator in a clinical setting in Gainesville, GA and the surrounding area. Her job title was Certified Diabetes Care and Education Specialist. Cheryl worked 35 years in Diabetes Education and Management, where she educated the patients about diabetes and managed their care. Cheryl helped start the first insulin pump program at Longstreet



Cheryl Hamby Williams

Clinic in 1993. Cheryl truly enjoyed her career as a nurse. She said, “Heard a career as a nurse was worthwhile helping patients prolong their life and their quality of life.” During her time as a diabetes education she would meet her husband, Richard and they were married for 24 happy years! (NJan1.26)

Cheryl truly enjoyed her career as a nurse. She said, “Heard a career as a nurse was worthwhile helping patients prolong their life and their quality of life.” During her time as a diabetes education she would meet her husband, Richard and they were married for 24 happy years! (NJan1.26)

Student Council...from Page 1

“Depending on age, we have two to five council members representing each grade level.

“They serve as the voice to administration. They help plan events like homecoming, dances, dress-up days and many other events. They also develop

community outreach events like this, donuts for first responders and Toys for Tots. They kind of do a little bit of everything.

“We’ve been hosting this event for the last three years. My former principal Roy Perren and I decided to reach out

to our first responders when we came up with the idea for this. We don’t have a lot of opportunities to interact with our first responders, as they are out there doing their job, and we are here in school all day.

“But we see the value of their work in our community, and we wanted to honor them. It’s our way to give a little thanks during the holidays.”

The kids really enjoyed handing out donuts and coffee to the men and women in uniform. Senior Max Baron certainly did, and he shared his reason for participating in the student group.

“Student Council is really fun,” Baron said. “I wouldn’t be here without the rest of my classmates since it’s a vote. We really try to make an impact on our school. Some of the stuff we do is to give back to our community.”

Jada Reynolds said that, in her senior year, she wanted to leave a positive impact on her community “and especially the classes coming up.”

“I wanted to leave a legacy and also help the people around me,” Reynolds said.

Chole Crowe has been on the Student Council since her freshman year, and she, too, wanted to make an impact on her school.

“I really think it’s impor-

tant that we stay involved with our community, and we can do that through Student Council,” Crowe said.

Emanuel Bihrachoff agreed that there is tremendous

value in being on the Student Council: “It gives me an opportunity to experience leadership and build my leadership skills, and everything that I’ll need for the rest of my life.”

Whiskey Mountain

...from Page 1

longer a provision of the project.

Benton said the updated plan actually matches the original plans submitted to the city, after which he began to consider – and eventually rejected – the idea of using the grant for the development.

Importantly, the change in plans does not alter the trajectory of the development, as the project is not seeking any variances from the city and is following the necessary steps toward completion.

Nancy Noblet, who serves on the Planning Committee as a representative from the Hiawassee City Council, confirmed last week that the development “meets all the requirements as of now,” and that the change in plans “doesn’t change anything” in terms of the project moving forward.

The entire development will be built on 14.4 acres, 11-plus acres of which are above 2,200 feet in elevation and therefore subject to the land-clearing standards set forth in the Georgia Mountain Protection Act.

On these 11-plus acres, Benton will be erecting 11 larger single-family homes of varying prices and square footage on 1-acre wooded lots. Previously, the development was calling for eight larger homes across 8 acres, so the upper part of the development has grown in the updated plan.

For the remaining 3 acres that fall below 2,200 feet, Benton said he now plans to build either six triplex townhomes equal to 18 units, or four to 12 smaller single-family homes of varying prices and square footage on individual wooded lots.

This is a key difference from the plans that factored in the housing grant, which would have required the building of eight to nine triplexes totaling between 24 and 27 units. So, the housing density will be smaller under the development’s new direction.

Deciding not to apply for and use the housing grant means that these homes will be sold at market value, with no purchasing limitations; one of the stipulations of the grant was that each of the triplex units would have had to sell for \$290,000 or less to qualify as “workforce housing.”

Benton points out that the development meets all existing city ordinances, with engineered drawings having been submitted to and approved by the Environmental Protection Division. Erosion control and drainage plans have also been approved, with the EPD having the ability to inspect and enforce these plans.

The development group says it remains committed to maintaining “the beauty of Whiskey Mountain by clearing only what is necessary to construct roads and homes,” all while using locally sourced labor and materials suppliers.

Benton is donating a 15-foot easement to the City of Hiawassee to install new water lines that will provide

fire hydrants to the bordering Bel Aire neighborhood “and eliminate the need for an existing pump that is currently supplying water to that same neighborhood.”

In addition to providing the city with new water and sewer customers, the development will grow the property tax base for local government revenue purposes.

Benton said the project should begin construction by early spring at the latest, and he estimates homes will start to go on the market within 12 months and the new neighborhood will be completed within 24 months.

He is expected to make a presentation showcasing the development at the next Planning Committee meeting scheduled for Jan. 16 at 6 p.m. inside Hiawassee City Hall.

Following the Dec. 17 meeting, Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority Board Chair Peggy Gardner reached out to the newspaper to address online speculation that the DDA was involved in the project and/or has been “pushing the City Council” to approve it.

“The DDA is not involved in this private project,” Gardner said. “To learn what the DDA is doing, please visit www.downtownhiawassee.com or our Facebook and Instagram pages.”

Confusion about the DDA playing a role in the project likely stems from the fact that Benton was sworn onto the DDA Board in October. However, Benton is pursuing the project as a private developer, with no crossover in his board member duties, Gardner said.

Asked whether Benton’s position on the DDA Board might amount to a conflict of interest given that his private development is taking place inside the city, Gardner said state law made clear there is “absolutely no conflict.”

“Georgia Code is written such that DDA board members are business owners in the municipality and have to either live in the city or the county,” Gardner said. “The purpose is to ensure DDA board members care about the health of the business environment in which their business operates.”

Benton and his wife Kelly – the “sole proprietors” of the project – describe themselves as full-time Hiawassee residents who are active in various local volunteer initiatives, like the Towns County Lions Club and the Hamilton Gardens.

“His project is not a DDA project, no more than yours would be, should you qualify to serve on the DDA Board,” Gardner said. “Georgia Code does recognize the potential should projects be a part of a DDA program, in which case there are rules and laws similar to those that guide elected officials.”

“Again, no conflict exists, as the Hiawassee DDA has not even been briefed on this project and has no role in it.”



Local law enforcement enjoying an appreciation breakfast for the hard work they do in the community, courtesy of TCHS Student Council.

Photo by Shelly Knight

County Meeting...from Page 1

prices higher, which impacts the budget, but Bradshaw believes the economy is leveling out; if so, then moving forward, the county should enjoy more consistent year-over-year budget figures instead of big increases like in 2025.

There is about a \$1.9 million revenue gap in the increased General Fund budget that will have to be plugged with money saved up by the Commissioner’s Office over the years, which is a common budgeting practice.

For now, the county can absorb the extra expense without raising property taxes due to fiscally conservative budgeting; but if the current trajectory of costs exceeding revenues holds, the tax rate will need to go up eventually; whenever that time comes, it will be the first increase since 2008.

“We go over and we watch everything,” Bradshaw said. “We work very hard to save our taxpayers money and make sure there’s no wasteful spending.”

Bradshaw is also planning some SPLOST-funded “facelifts” for several govern-

ment buildings, including new roofs at three locations, plus multiple facility improvements at the Courthouse Annex that houses the Tax Assessors and the Tax Commissioner’s Office.

Additionally for the new year, the county has budgeted for a new \$400,000 fire engine; \$300,000 is coming out of the 2025 SPLOST Budget while \$100,000 is from SPLOST savings accrued by Fire Chief Copeland, who works hard to come in under budget each year.

The 2025 SPLOST Budget also features a \$330,000 purchase of 30 body cameras and 32 TASERs for the Towns County Sheriff’s Office. Sheriff Ken Henderson was able to negotiate \$22,000 off the final price for the new equipment that is replacing obsolete and outdated gear.

Copies of the budget are available at the Commissioner’s Office inside the Towns County Courthouse, and Bradshaw and his staff – whom he commends for doing “a great job” as usual – welcome questions from the public.